requires some patience with methodological masquerades, a strategy which North does not seem to understand. Most new research communities go through a period when evolving researchers try out various methodological masks in an attempt to find one that fits. Furthermore, K-14 research requires journals which can oversee a dialectic among teacher researchers. Finally, neither K-12 nor community college institutions appear to have the vaguest idea why their teaching functions must include research.

North assumes that the problem is to identify our methodological commitments. But the problem for K-14 is to institutionalize inquiry itself (see Quarterly, July 1987). This means institutionalizing portfolios in each room, establishing portfolio committees to review and assess programs as reflected in portfolios, establishing subject-centered review and accreditation committees, organizing research projects around state and local mandates, funding research grants to teachers, and so forth. North ignores the problems of institutionalizing the K-14 research of teachers by labeling practice as a form of research, and then, after introducing the topic, ceasing to investigate its complexities, turning once again to a methodological community he understands better.

Despite his problems with K-14 research, we are indebted to North for a book which helps us understand the methodological limits and commitments of composition researchers. I came away with my respect deepened for those who are criticized—Odell, Dyson, Flower-Hayes, Emig, and others. One cannot help but whisper, "There but for the grace of God go I." All of the mistakes are easy to make. Some are not mistakes but simply different perspectives. The details of North's review reminded me of the tough, labor-intensive, difficult task of doing composition research and the debt that all of us owe to Odell, Dyson, Flower-Hayes, Emig, and others. They have done great work for us. The book should have been dedicated to them.

**Barbara Grant**

**IN THE MIDDLE: WRITING, READING, AND LEARNING WITH ADOLESCENTS**
by Nancie Atwell
Boynton/Cook 1987

Nancie Atwell, who is a founder of the Boothbay Writing Project, teaches eighth graders English in the tiny coastal town of Boothbay Harbor, Maine. She is also my hero. Not only is she a successful junior high school teacher without being particularly tall or having a staggering repertoire of bad jokes—listen to this: When students leave her class for high school and find that the writing process approach is considered cheating, they're such full participants in the writing process that responding to rough drafts becomes a form of underground activity! This is successful teaching, successful reworking of theory into practice, practice into theory.

With In the Middle, Nancie Atwell shows us how she did it, how she turned her eighth grade English classes into communities of writers and readers. We learn the story of how her courses changed into reading and writing workshops, places where students have the freedom and responsibility to create meaning in their encounters with written language. Her lesson to the students, that reading and writing are not only meaningful in themselves but can create meaning in one's own life, is invaluable, and in her book she shows how important this process of growth as members of a literate community is to her students.

It requires courage to step aside from the seeming imperatives of classroom culture and find the authority to give children time to learn. Harried by curriculum goals, by accountability, and by our own need to give what we can, we short-cut the learning process, we say it for them, imagining that what we have learned can be the same as what they learn themselves. Atwell gives the children time, time to develop uniqueness as well as competence. This uniqueness and

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competence are enacted within the context of the literate community in which the children develop, given the time to do so and given Atwell’s non-invasive yet supportive teaching.

One of the problems English teachers face is the question of how to respond to the individual needs of students and yet create a sense of community within an often extremely heterogeneous group. Atwell says the options have seemed to be an individualized SRA kit program in which the child marches forward but alone, or a watered-down lit crit course in which children read selections of the least difficult literary classics, learn some terminology (“setting,” and for the advanced, “foreshadowing”) and respond with book reports, essays, or answers to comprehension questions. Like the baleens of whales, teachers filter out those yummy tidbits to fill the presumably eager maw of students’ ignorance.

According to Atwell, even curricula incorporating more interesting texts and more appropriate assignments fall into this second category. This is because the teacher remains in charge of the discourse. Atwell at one time followed the latter model in her reading courses and found it to be inadequate. No matter how profound her insights, she felt she was force-feeding them to her students.

One of the most exciting aspects of her teaching is the way Atwell used what she learned from transforming her writing classes in order to re-think her reading classes. Four chapters of the book are devoted to describing the evolution, organization, student and teacher roles, methods of response, and theory behind her writing classes. Her work is based on that of Donald Graves and his associates and follows the writing process model. Its success can be measured by the marvelous examples of student writing which she presents throughout the book. Once the writing process was in place, she began to view reading in a similar way—from the standpoint of how literate people behave.

Atwell is a sublimely literate person, and using the lens provided by the work of Frank Smith, she saw that she herself chose her own reading and responded to it in literary chat with friends, in echoes in her writing, and just in the flow of consciousness of everyday life. She therefore began to allow her students to choose their own reading from the wonderful books written for adolescents. Response to reading is elicited in dialogue journals through which the students engage their teacher and one another in thinking about books. Atwell finds that not only are her students inspired to read, they are enabled through the journals to construct more complex and profound readings, and begin to read like writers ready to criticize and emulate.

Although she continues to present her favorite literature, to discuss genre and language issues in reading mini-lessons, Atwell individualizes her curriculum by granting the students ownership of their learning. This ownership of course changes the role of the student. In order for this individualization to work, students must commit themselves to the processes of literacy, must begin to act and feel and think like readers and writers. Atwell’s students succeed remarkably well in this enterprise. In view of this success, it would be nice to know more about them.

Although Atwell has been giving workshops in varied settings and finding that her approach works very well, in considering the possibilities for translating Atwell’s approach into their own classrooms, teachers might find more contextualization useful. We learn that these students are rural, not wealthy, and that their teachers have been creating the Boothbay Writing Project since the students were third graders. We learn from the students’ writing that they are interested in nature, social issues (such as nuclear proliferation), sports, animals, and in the problems of growing up. Atwell does include a wonderful chapter on adolescents, but I doubt whether adolescence is the same in all sub-cultures. These children, for instance, are so eager to succeed that on the first day of
class they lie about the numbers of books they normally read. I know of other students who are more likely to minimize their reading, fearing disgrace in front of their peers. The students I know need Atwell's approach, need ownership of literacy. More awareness of the particularities of the Boothbay community might help teachers become more sensitized to the particularities of their own students' lives. This awareness can enable teachers to plan ahead for their students, to make use of cultural differences while at the same time trying to avoid certain pitfalls these differences can create. For instance, in the way of pitfalls, although the issue of censorship came up only once for Atwell, in some social contexts, issues of overt and covert censorship must be addressed.

In other settings, granting the students the freedom to choose their own books and writing topics often means that inevitably "things" will come up. Crime, for instance, may be a salient topic for those non-college-bound students looking for non-military, non-welfare roll careers. We may not be ready to read what some children could write if we urge them to "write what you know." Do we really want to know why a clique of girls at a local high school is accessorizing with purse-size guns? Published writers discuss taboo subjects, including volatile social issues. This is one of their powers. They, however, are not minors under our guidance, and in the classroom, Reality and Niceness must negotiate. However, if Reality loses too much ground, students may never learn that literacy is a tool which can be used to illuminate and transform personal and social realities.

In yet other social contexts, even if students are avoiding problematic revelations, teachers who allow students to read adolescent literature and who encourage literary experiments may find their methods censored by the community. In an age when Little Red Riding Hood makes it to the Supreme Court as a potential corruptor of the young, teachers may, like the wolf, find themselves hiding away their large ears and eyes, abandoning their methods in order to avoid conflict.

Atwell's teaching practices involve such dangers because in her classroom the student's role changes through acquiring ownership of the reading and writing processes. As a result, the teacher's role must change as well, through relinquishing overt control of the discourse. However, covert control is maintained. One indication of this is that Atwell's students writing resembles her own, just as Kenneth Koch's students sound like him, and no doubt Bereiter's students sound like Bereiter.

Atwell keeps her eyes on the prize; she knows what it is and where to find it. Her internal sense of authority comes from her own commitment to reading and writing, and this enables her to put first things first. For instance, during in-process writing conferences, Atwell never looks at the student's draft, for she knows she will be mesmerized by errors which will be taken care of later. Instead, the students present their work and its problems, and she guides towards solutions, helps find options. Like a mother with young children, she provides scaffolding for students' learning. This type of scaffolding does not rely on teaching language routines so much as following and assisting and elaborating the learner's train of thought. In fact, in some ways this book can be read as the story of how Atwell learned to learn from her students.

Atwell can learn about her students' uses of literacy because she allows them to read and write for their own purposes; their responses are not preordained by the structure or content of their assignments. Knowing them as she does, she is then empowered to nudge her students in appropriate directions. This valuable knowledge cannot be discovered through any other method (such as testing) simply because it evolves only in the course of the social interaction that is a large part of the process of literacy.

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For many teachers, the most problematic role they must play is that of gatekeeper. Teachers wish to evaluate students on the basis of what is actually taught, but are foiled by standardized testing. Evaluation should be allied to teaching, but it in fact sometimes determines teaching practices and labels students in ways harmful to their self-esteem and place in the social and learning hierarchy of the school. Atwell, quietly revolutionary, circumvents these problems.

Atwell's classes are heterogeneous; eighth graders are not tracked for English classes. Within the class, she does not rank the students in terms of one another's work; rather, grades are based on the individual's participation and progress toward negotiated goals. This system, taken in conjunction with student ownership of reading and writing processes, partially circumvents the sorting and classifying process which sociologists and anthropologists have been telling us is the essential function of schooling. Although grades are just the tip of the iceberg of this process, they can be important in determining life chances. However, though accepted by the enlightened administrators and colleagues of Atwell's school, I wonder whether many schools would or could tolerate Atwell's grading system.

But this is just one more reason why Nancie Atwell has joined Vivian Paley and Dorothy Heathcote in my personal array of teaching heroes. She is a teacher who gives students credit for being thinking human beings. And with her faith in the power of literacy she moves them to think about good writing.

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