

“What About Rose?” Using Teacher Research to Reverse School Failure by Smokey Wilson. New York: Teachers College Press, 2007. 199 pp. ISBN 978-0-8077-4788-2.

On the basis of years of my triangular travel between problematic practice, library, and new inquiry, I can with confidence assure classroom researchers that they can trust the research process. No matter how often I stand against the unknown, if I just keep at it, the students help me unveil what was obscure and allow it to make sense. (Wilson, 2007, p. 7)

In this new work, Smokey Wilson, a lifelong teacher of literacy to adult learners, seeks to share a long and fascinating answer to a question she has been asked many times as a teacher of reading and writing in an inner-city community college: “Why are you teaching *that* in college?” The assumption of those who ask is that the students who enter her classroom should already be prepared for the rigors of academia past high school. Wilson was troubled by the fact that so many of her students were not. Spending little time pointing fingers, she decided to use self-study as a way of answering another question that all good teachers ask themselves, “What am I *doing*?” and maybe more importantly in this case, “What am I doing for my students?”

Quite unlike other important books and articles on the topic of teacher research and/or inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Lieberman & Miller, 2001; Maclean & Mohr, 1999; Patterson, Stansell, & Lee, 1990), *What About Rose* is not a collection of a dozen mostly K-12 teachers’ self-studies, with an introduction delineating the importance of such teacher-researcher work to innovation of practice or institutional change. Instead it is *one* teacher’s story—a community college instructor’s, at that—of caring for her students. She cares so much, in fact, that she is willing to take the risk of doing something many teachers dread—scrutinizing her own practice under the microscope of research. Most educators begin sweating profusely whenever a video camera or audio recorder is switched on in their classroom, much less listening to/watching the resulting tapes over and over again to achieve the best transcription and analysis. While some teacher education programs include teacher research projects as a prerequisite for graduation, the idea still hasn’t gained significant institutional traction within higher education or K-12. Wilson’s work may help to change this reality.

The studies and all-important questions she includes in the volume represent 20 years of her life as an adult educator and researcher. The impressive amount of audio transcription, coding, and study of theoretical texts boggles the mind when one takes into consideration her multiple roles over that time as teacher, coordinator, and director for efforts in support of adult literacy on the college’s campus. The vivid portraits of her students, and her willingness to share

her struggles, successes, and failures in living up to their brilliance, expose Wilson as a caring teacher with a voracious appetite to become better at what she does.

Each chapter in the book represents a study and corresponding research question that Wilson endeavors to answer, and takes as its title the name(s) of the student(s) that inspired it. With a few exceptions, each chapter is divided into three sections. The first section, *In Practice*, serves as a snapshot of a classroom experience that inspired a particular research question. The second section, *In Theory*, delineates various theories and studies that Wilson used to shed light on that particular problem. A third section, *In Response*, responds to the points that each theoretical framework puts forth and deliberates their applicability and value. In some chapters there is a short fourth section, *In Retrospect*, which seeks to connect her real lived experiences, and those of her students, with these theories and moments in educational history, in an effort to achieve her self-described “Holy Grail”: to “uncover strategies whereby teachers could learn explicit ways to help student transform talk into written compositions” (p. 93).

As the book is also the story of passing on her experience of the benefits of such research, the chapters are then grouped together in parts which represent different components of the teacher research process as Wilson sees it: *Getting Started*, *Finding a Focus*, *Collecting Artifacts*, *Analyzing Artifacts*, and *Writing It Up*. The book then concludes with a how-to guide in the form of a “*Guide to Classroom Research for Teachers*,” which serves as good introduction to teacher research for any classroom. Beginning with advice and encouragement on how to “find a focus” for a research project, and ending with tips on actually following through and “writing it up,” Wilson weaves in her own experiences with practical research exercises and methodological underpinnings.

Wilson suggests that by conducting research, teachers can “begin to document the actual and not norm-based contours of language use across groups in our classrooms” (p. 146). As most research has focused on her students’ substandard performance and not on their strengths, Wilson seeks to turn the tables. She does this by studying what students bring to the class from their own stock of knowledge, and experimenting with teaching techniques that encourage interplay between standard lists of vocabulary and local expressions as synonyms or antonyms.

Perhaps the most practical suggestions that Wilson makes with regard to the teaching of adult literacy center around the concept of “transforming talk into writing” (p.132). Guided by Vygotsky’s work (1962, 1978) and the premise that social interaction serves as a bridge between the known and the not-yet-grasped, many of the studies focus on the form and content of the conversations that she and other teachers regularly have with individual students in the form of writing conferences. These conversations focused primarily on an attempt to shift from

spoken language (the known) to literate practices (the not-yet-grasped). In this attempt to shift, Wilson observes many miscommunications between her (and other tutors she recorded) and the students. Sometimes these moments resulted in greater understanding and high-quality writing, and many times in misunderstanding and frustration. In fact, Wilson states, "If I had to choose one feature that will do the most toward inviting the student into the student-teacher conversation, I would choose in-the-moment conversational repairs. A corrected misunderstanding is the first step a teacher can take to move past a formal and institutionalized relationship with those who most need simply to be heard" (p. 109). She also feels that "ongoing miscommunication between teacher and student correlates with classroom disengagement. If not repaired, the wall between learner and teacher grows steadily thicker and higher" (p. 6).

If we were to pick an answer to the big question that Wilson sought to answer with this work—"Why are you teaching *that* in college?"—we might have to pick two. The first answer would be a well-grounded critique of public education as an institution which structurally and quite purposefully fails to serve students well, in this case the African-American students Wilson has had the pleasure to teach as a community college instructor in Oakland. The second answer would be one which highlights the incredible potential, on one hand of the teacher to individually rise above imposed constraints and deliver an innovative, inspiring, and strengths-based curriculum and pedagogy, and on the other, of the students to have their unique voices and experiences be clearly heard through the power of their own written words. To go on a journey together in the "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978) where, as Lee and Smagorinsky (2000) put it, "teaching can extend the student beyond what they could do alone, but without breaking the links to what the learner already knows" (Wilson, 2007, p. 142). In Wilson's case, it is clear that conducting classroom research, grounded in theoretical frameworks and an understanding of past and present historical contexts, has made her version of this journey a more fruitful one.

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Reviewer

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