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# Letter from Leah: Editor's Note

BY LEAH VAN BELLE

This is an issue of firsts—the first *Michigan Reading Journal* issue of a new year, the first issue for me as the new editor, the first issue with our newly redesigned cover, and an issue filled with the work of first-time-published teachers, scholars, and writers. Beginnings are energizing and hope-filled opportunities and I'm excited to be stepping into this new role with the journal.

As I look forward in planning the journal, I find myself also reflecting on my early days as a teacher.

Those first days as a new teacher can be exciting,

terrifying ones, yet some people step into the classroom quickly at ease in the role of teacher and with a seemingly effortless rapport with students.

People often say beamingly of them, "He's a natural teacher!" or "She's a natural in the classroom!" During my years of working with novice and experienced educators in teacher education programs at Oakland University, The University of Michigan, and now Madonna University, I've seen how easy it can be for us all to frame teaching as something that one does *naturally*. This framing is something that teacher education programs and professional development organizations generally push back at because, after all, what does it mean to be a "natural" teacher? It implies that

professional competence rests largely on innate, vague qualities instead of a set of learned professional skills. To frame it in a different light, one doesn't often hear "She's a natural dentist!" or "He's a natural corporate tax accountant!" In fact, those statements sound almost absurd because dentistry and accounting are such highly skilled professions. An affinity for and ease with teeth or a balanced spreadsheet does not a qualified dentist or accountant make. No, dentistry and corporate tax accounting are professions that require extensive training, specialized funds of knowledge, effective mentorship, and evidence-based practices. In these fields, one has to attend to outcomes and use professional judgment to determine the efficacy of interventions and initiatives. Clearly, it's not simply about being a natural, but about being a highly competent professional.

In the same manner, teaching is a skilled profession, requiring its practitioners to draw on their extensive training, skill sets, professional judgment, and

ongoing informal analysis of evidence of learning to implement effective teaching practices. Clearly, this is not just about being a natural, but about being a

highly competent professional. It is my hope that the *Michigan Reading Journal* will not only help us all celebrate the things we love about teaching, but also challenge us to reconsider the roles that rigorous professional growth, research, and evidence-based practice can play in continuing to support effective teaching and learning in our classrooms and schools.



van Belle

This year's Michigan Reading Association's Annual Conference theme, *Literacy in an Age of Rigor, Relevance and Reform*, and the Research-to-Practice Pre-conference emphasize evidence-based, data-driven instruction. In a sense, all teachers are expected to be researchers now: we're kid-watchers, keenly

observing students' needs and growth, and using our professional judgment to decide what this evidence means for subsequent instruction and assessment. We're being asked to move away from things like swathing our fluorescent overhead lights in colored plastic wrap (because we heard that someone, somewhere, at some point in time said it helped kids learn better) to wanting *evidence* for the efficacy of programs before we spend large sums of money on materials and training and large amounts of time on implementing something in classrooms. We're being asked to draw on research and evidence-based practice to inform our teaching, and *Michigan Reading Journal* readers have taken up this call to professional rigor.

In this issue you'll find an article by classroom teachers who dug into research literature to explore alternatives to round robin reading in order to better support reading comprehension. Another group of

teachers explores the ways in which multicultural children's literature enriches students' lives. Family literacy is a topic a third group of educators explores in their article on the importance of collaborating with families as partners in literacy education. Understanding how texts are leveled for classroom reading instruction is explored by another group of teachers. All of these articles represent the scholarship of classroom teachers who are publishing their work for the first time, and their contributions will be of great interest to our readers.

As editor, I would like to invite you, as classroom teachers, literacy specialists, and teacher educators, to share the ways you have investigated and inquired into teaching practice and students' learning. This might take the form of a case study, survey research,

a traditional intervention study, or another kind or investigation. Research comes in so many different forms, and because it helps us all dig into the puzzles of teaching and learning in order to improve professional practice and students' learning, it's work worth sharing. If you're interested in writing for the *Michigan Reading Journal*, or in reviewing books for the journal, please visit me at my session on the topic at the annual Michigan Reading Association conference in March—hope to see you there!

With warm regards,

Leah


Note: Due to increased leadership responsibilities at Madonna University, Hakim Shahid has chosen not serve as co-editor of the journal.

**SAVE THE DATE FOR MRA**

# Research-to-Practice

## Changing Practice-Changing Results

Friday, March 9, 2012  
DeVos Place Convention Center  
Grand Rapids, MI  
Morning Session with Dr. Mike Schmoker



Dr. Mike Schmoker is a former school administrator, English teacher and football coach. He has written five books and dozens of articles for educational journals, newspapers and for TIME magazine.

Dr. Schmoker has keynoteed at hundreds of state, national and international events and has consulted for school districts and state and provincial education departments throughout the US, Canada and Australia. He now lives in Tempe, Arizona with his wife Cheryl.

Afternoon Breakout Sessions:

- ELA Lesson Study: The Power of Reflective Practice
- Using Data to Really Change What We Do
- 21 Things: Technology Every Student, Teacher, and Administrator Should Know
- MDE Updates and Perspectives
- Parents and the Common Core Standards: Making the Connection... Making the Difference