

## **The Importance of Inquiry and Reflection in Teaching**

Vivian Paley is an influential teacher and researcher who used inquiry as her method of research and as a way to continually improve her teaching and the connections with her students. Although she was not the first person to use this method of research, she had a unique way of conducting her inquiry project. She used storytelling as a way to help children discover themselves and others in their lives. Universal themes of stories such as friendship, teamwork, individuality, leadership, and self-identity and the discussion of these helped children realize not only important qualities among themselves, but also commonalities among their peers and people in general. This is especially apparent in her book *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*.

*The Girl with the Brown Crayon* demonstrates how Paley uses stories, like those in Leo Lionni's books, as the background for her inquiry research. The kindergarteners hear a story, and then they discuss it and act it out. This is how Paley encourages her students to think more deeply about the stories, the lessons they teach, and how it relates to them. Paley invites family members of her students into the classroom to share true life stories. She makes an interesting discovery when Jenny's father tells the story about the easy tree and her grandmother tells the story of their dairy cow. It is because of the connection Reeny makes between the two stories, that no one had thought of before, that Paley reflects in this way:

...I can't help wondering if Reeny's ability to use the easy tree as metaphor is due in part to the practice we've had in analyzing Leo Lionni. Yet, isn't it more likely the other way around? That is, the Leo Lionni stories and the easy-tree stories work so well because the children come to school knowing how to think about such matters. We need only to give them proper *context* in which to demonstrate and fine-tune their natural gifts (*The Girl with the Brown Crayon* 86).

Paley realizes that stories do help children discover themselves and the world around them. But, Reeny's unique metaphor helps Paley conclude that children bring what they already know about themselves and the world around them into the classroom. This early self-awareness and life experience is the open door for a teacher to feed students' ability and give them the "context" in which to grow those talents.

Whether it is Leo Lionni's stories that children interpret based on what they know about people, or whether children make up their own stories and discuss and act them out, Paley found a meaningful and enjoyable way to bring out her students' deeper thoughts, which was the goal of her inquiry project. And, although her students were also her research subjects, she realized the importance of the collaboration between the children and herself:

They are our colleagues in this endeavor. They are the ones who will first show us what makes them different and how they connect to everyone else. They will demonstrate the way they think as they continue to develop new roles and rationales. Our own thinking and studying takes place as we observe ourselves and the children moving in and out of untenable positions.... ("Talking to Myself in a Journal: Reflections of a Kindergarten Teacher" 121).

Knowing and respecting each student, really listening to them, and striving to understand each student's point of view are the foundations of Paley's way of inquiry. Listening to her tape of class conversations each day and writing down her thoughts allowed her to reflect and analyze what exactly took place in the classroom. This allowed her to better understand what a particular child meant or how to go about the conversation the next day. It also helped her to think about how she could improve her role as a discussion facilitator, i.e., perhaps she could ask more

probing questions to get conversations started, or maybe she could clarify students' comments for the rest of the class.

Vivian Paley's research using the inquiry method revealed the abilities of kindergarteners to make deep connections between stories and their own world. She made many important discoveries about her students' thinking during the reflection and analysis of her data, that is, her recordings and transcriptions of class conversations. Through the collaboration of teacher and students, just as important perhaps, was Paley's discoveries she made about herself as a person and a teacher. She used her analysis of class discussions to not only bring out the most in her students, but also to bring out her full potential as a teacher.