

Jaimee Gillon
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Unit 2 Essay

Teacher-inquiry is meant to improve an educator's understanding of her students and practices. This is not always an easy process because, as Kathleen Kesson discusses, it demands that a teacher "take on an expanded professional role that involves systematic, self-reflective, intentional inquiry into aspects of classroom practices." There are varying views on what is characteristic of good inquiry; however, for veteran teacher and writer Vivian Paley, successful inquiry necessitates the use of writing as is evident by several episodes shared within her book.

Paley's use of writing as a means of inquiry is two-fold because it involves scribing her students' stories as well as journaling her own thoughts. Within her appendix to *Wally's Stories: Conversations in Kindergarten*, Paley describes her rationale for scribing by stating, "I record their stories...because I too have found a literary process by which to follow relationships and realities in a classroom...I want to know how these perceptions affect learning and teaching" (1981). In this excerpt it is apparent that Paley believes the process of writing down the student stories offers her a deeper understanding of the ways in which her students interpret the world. The usefulness of this effort can be seen on an immediate level as Paley remarks that questions often arise in her mind while scribing and she poses these to the student in order to clarify or ask for expansion.

Within *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*, Paley describes a session of scribing with Reeny. During the episode, she attempts to affirm her understanding of the story's details: "'Shouted, full of joy,' I repeat as I write it down. 'That's what Pezzettino does?'" (1998). Reeny's reply of "I know" is all Paley needs to ensure that she has indeed captured the correct essence of Reeny's story. This episode details how seriously Paley takes her role as a scribe; every detail is carefully verified because Paley understands the insight the words of her students can lend. This assertion of understanding will later play a large role in Paley's reflections on what Reeny's narrative choices have to say about her thought-processes.

In a larger view of how scribing strengthens Paley's inquiry, writing down student stories is a part of collecting the evidence which Paley uses as a means to formulate ideas on how students make sense of the world around them. It is apparent that in order to write *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*, Paley revisited her students' stories and made judgments on best-practices and student thought-processes based on their story elements. If she had not documented these stories, she would have little evidence with which to form her theories.

Paley's method of inquiry is also considered unique because of her strong advocacy for writing in the form of teacher-journaling. Journaling appears to be Paley's preferred medium for self-reflection and assessment after interacting with students. She remarks upon the necessity of this task when she states, "Only as we

write down our thoughts and observations may we question and argue with ourselves about the things we do and say” (1981). It is obvious that Paley considers the process of writing to be one in which teachers formulate questions about the success and failures of certain actions or choices made in the classroom. She continues to stress the importance of the teacher journaling when she says, “Let us resurrect the daily journal to help us study the most complex society ever assembled in a single place: a school classroom.” Any educator can attest that a school day is a whirlwind of endless conversations, interactions and choices; journaling is viewed by Paley as a means of providing educators with a space for debriefing the moments which might otherwise be lost or forgotten.

Within *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*, Paley’s inclusion of a single journal entry sheds light on how journaling can help educators question, critique and improve her teaching practices. The entry comes just after her students have read and discussed a Lionni book called *Tico and the Golden Wings*. In the journal, Paley debates the warring views of Tico held by herself and Reeny. She also explores questions she would like to pose to the author and, in the end, she is so inspired by this new train of thought that she has a “sudden desire to examine other Leo Lionni books” (1998). It can be inferred that the thought-process sparked from this entry should be credited for her innovative idea to spend the entire year focused on one author. Paley truly uses her writing as a birth place for new ideas; she is even willing to take a large risk based on an idea created from her journaling. This small exhibition of Paley’s journal enables readers to see how the act of writing permits new questions to arise and new ideas to be implemented.

Paley’s method of inquiry is distinctive because of her intense focus on writing. She firmly believes that writing is an inescapable part of inquiry and it is easy to see within her various accounts how journaling and scribing do indeed allow for a deeper reflection. Through embracing their role as inquirers, teachers are able to harness a deeper understanding of their students and practices. This should ultimately translate into more confident teachers and a better quality education for students (Kesson). In the end, however, no matter which methods one chooses inquiry of any sort is a positive step towards becoming a more thoughtful and refined educator.