

## Teaching Literacy Through Storytelling and Play

Vivian Paley's most important feature of inquiry in the classroom was her belief that children discover themselves through storytelling and play. Teaching what was "natural" was important to Paley, as it was to Dewey and Rousseau; therefore her students learned literacy in the most natural way. In "Story and Play: The Original Learning Tools" Paley states, "Children use the power of storytelling to explain what they do not understand about the physical world around them, to explain physical phenomena, community, fear, safety and love". Through this inquiry she came to the conclusion that children often put their lives into stories, assimilating with characters or objects. Acting out problems in play is their way of dealing with their real-life emotions. Paley states, "When I saw the children acting out their stories I understood their play in a new way. We can't separate this play from the stories they learn to tell. And I think I must not separate both activities from my English lessons" (Paley, 41).

A good example of this feature of Paley's inquiry was found in The Girl with the Brown Crayon in the chapter entitled "forgiveness". In this chapter, Reeny is angry at Oliver when he ruins the collage she made for Leo Lionni. This results in an outburst from Oliver, who tearfully retreats to his classroom hiding spot. Instead of discussing the problem with Oliver, Reeny deals with her emotions by creating a story and asking Oliver to play with her, acting out the role of the baby in the story. " 'Don't forget you have to cover me up then because I'm baby Richard that was just borned' Oliver says. They stand and Reeny holds Oliver's hand. She leads him slowly to the doll corner. Of such is the pathway to redemption" (Paley 78). By acting out their emotions in the form of a story, both children were able to forgive each other and deal with their feelings of anger and sadness. This leads back to Paley's most important feature of inquiry; children discover themselves through storytelling and play.

Paley's daily self-reflection was characteristic of her work in the classroom. Paley believed that only once your observations of your students have been reflected upon through writing, will you be able to make sense of what they say and do, and properly plan for future lessons. She is very introspective in her work and does not believe that working collaboratively with colleagues is the only answer to helping teachers understand their students better.

Paley's daily routine of tape recording her students' conversations and transcribing them into her journal helped her make the most of her reflections, and led to her success in teaching literacy skills through storytelling and play. "The tape recorder trains the teacher... The teacher learns to watch for inexactness in her questions, to repeat a child's inaudible comments, to ask for clarifications and additions" (Paley, 218). Paley believed there was never

anything accidental or random about what her students said, therefore she worked hard to interpret logical meaning out of their conversations. Paley's success in the classroom was due in large part to her daily self reflection. This characteristic of her work helped her identify strengths and weaknesses in not only her students but herself as well. "There is enough good copy to fill any number of journals. It is useful to discuss such matters with colleagues, especially those who work in the same classroom, but talk is not enough. Only as we write down our thoughts and observations may we question and argue with *ourselves* about the things we do and say" (Paley, 120).