

Book Review

The Girl with the Brown Crayon:
How Children Use Stories To Shape Their Lives
by Vivian Gussin Paley
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997

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There are many critiques of *No Child Left Behind* and its effect on teaching and learning (Meier & Wood, 2004). I agree with those who argue that privatization and the high-stakes testing movement have significantly narrowed the curriculum in the urban public schools.¹ I taught in Los Angeles public schools for 20 years before I became a university professor in a teacher education program. Yes, we actually utilized direct instruction and our students produced the “right answers” on standardized tests. We also incorporated holistic curricula that promoted civic awareness, critical thinking, and a love for learning. The methods used were significantly different from what K–12 students are experiencing today, and as a teacher educator, I want teacher candidates to explore alternatives, and critically analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of current approaches. I am not advocating a lock-step return to the past, but I do feel it is important to acquaint beginning teachers to teaching methods that have been discarded. I want teacher candidates to explore the reasons why many of these practices are absent today. I want to empower teachers so that they can choose to modify their practices to include the best of the past in their teaching. As a teacher educator, I feel it is important for teacher candidates to not only question why things are the way they are, but also to explore possibilities.

The Girl With The Brown Crayon: How Children Use Stories to Shape Their Lives shows teacher candidates something different than they are

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experiencing in their classrooms today. Do not be fooled by the title. This is not children's literature, although it is difficult to define the genre of this three-time award-winning book.² It is a book for adults who are interested in education and society. Vivian Gussin Paley gives readers a clear picture into a philosophy and method of teaching and learning that has virtually disappeared from urban public school classrooms. Many of us who are now approaching retirement used to teach in the ways that Paley brings back to life in her book. Although I worked in budget-strapped schools most, if not all of my career, I knew I was a decision-maker, who enjoyed a great degree of curricular control. Most of today's beginning teachers, especially those teaching in schools of poverty, experience only scripted, paced, and narrow curriculum (Kozol, 2005). *The Girl With The Brown Crayon* offers readers a glimpse into the pre-*No Child Left Behind* classrooms, where teachers were able to create inquiry-based activities for communities of learners and who were engaged in constructing their own teaching and learning.

A published author, as well as an exemplary teacher, Paley shares with her readers her anxieties as she approaches retirement. As the end of her career in the classroom draws near, Paley expresses her concerns about what "miracle" will sustain her when she no longer will "follow the children into unexplored territory" (p. viii). She describes Reeny, a five-year-old Black girl, whose excitement and outspokenness would qualify her for a special education referral in today's restricted classrooms. Reeny leads us into an in-depth exploration of life through the lens of Leo Lionni's children's books. She and her classmates fall in love with a mouse named Frederick. "Guess what, guess what!" Reeny declares, "This is Leo Lionni we doing" (p. vii). Paley's short book allows readers to witness a Kindergarten class fully embrace Leo Lionni's books, as they create murals and role plays, engage in deep discussions, and write letters to the author.

When I am with teacher candidates, I structure our discussions and projects around guiding questions, beginning with the over arching question, "How can *The Girl With The Brown Crayon* engage us in an exploration of alternative possibilities for teaching and learning?" We conduct a compare and contrast between open forms of schooling and those that are tightly controlled. We ask, "What are the costs and benefits when schooling is organized in ways that minimize the amount of control students and teachers have on classroom activities?" We list and describe activities and learning centers in Paley's classroom that are no longer commonly found in contemporary urban public school rooms. We analyze the structure of Paley's daily agendas against those found in today's classrooms. Paley's structure promotes arts-based, hands-on,

whole body activities, derived from children's real-life issues. This is very different from what teacher candidates report as their daily experience. They tell me it is common for them to have the same agenda five days a week, characterized by whole group instruction where children sit and respond to teacher-directed prompts from teacher's manuals. In my teacher education classes, we deconstruct passages from the book. For example, we use the following quote to show how students' interests can drive curriculum. "I look up to see five children drawing mice; by some unspoken agreement they are following a new curriculum" (p. 6).

When Paley writes, "In the course of a morning, the children have taken up such matters as the artist's role in society, the conditions necessary for thinking, and the influence of music and art on the emotions," we are intrigued by these outcomes and compare them with what we know about data-driven learning outcomes. Each of Lionni's heroes confronts the same theme—the conflict between individual rights and group responsibility. Paley has her kindergarteners critically explore this theme from all perspectives, and I discuss with teacher candidates how teachers can nurture learners like Reeny, in their first year of schooling by, "looking for a Frederick, a *something* to ponder deeply and expand upon extravagantly" (p. 10). Paley asks, "Is it possible for a Kindergarten class to pursue such an intensely literary and, yes, long-term intellectual activity, one that demands powers of analysis and introspection expected of much older students?" (p. 18).

Paley proves it is possible, and I assert that this kind of teaching and learning is *essential* for *all* children and necessary to our survival as a society. An inquiry-based, equity pedagogy, such as the one illustrated in Paley's book, can help children and adults develop core common values. Schools that focus on a narrow, test preparation curriculum leave no time for the development of human values, creative experiences, instruction in conflict resolution, and/or civic engagement. If children's school lives focus on little else than responding with the right answers, how can we expect to develop a populace capable of making the commitment and sacrifices necessary to tackle the big challenges of our times, like reversing global warming? Our future depends on our ability to re-examine how we support public services and how we promote the common good. *The Girl With The Brown Crayon* shows how a teacher can create a classroom community where learners support and care for each other. This simple, short book will not change the world, but it engages us in conversations aimed at exploring new possibilities, and helps us facilitate the development of critical perspectives of learners of all ages. For some of us, *The Girl With The Brown Crayon* will also remind us of the deep relationships we had with students and their families. I have

warm memories of students and parents telling me how much they appreciated the time we spent together. These memories give me strength as I confront the challenges and expand the possibilities with teacher candidates.

Notes

¹ For an in-depth discussion of the effects and implications of privatization on teacher education, see the Spring 2007 issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly*, (Volume 34, Number 2) around the theme “The Growing Nexus between Education and the Private Sector: Implications for Teacher Preparation and Development” (pp. 3-204).

² 1999 David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English of the National Council of Teachers of English. 1997 Winner of the Virginia and Warren Stone Prize, Awarded annually by Harvard University Press for Outstanding Book on Education and Society. Best Parenting Book of 1997 by *Child Magazine*.

References

- Kozol, J. (2005). *The shame of the nation: The restoration of apartheid schooling in America*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Meier, D., & Wood, G. (Eds.). (2004). *Many children left behind: How the no child left behind act is damaging our children and our schools*. Boston: Beacon Press.