

“Journal entry, October 15: ‘Reeny’s social reality overwhelms mine. She takes the question of Tico’s rights out of the narrow boundaries I’ve drawn and insists we consider, quite simply, the way people are. Some friends are generous to those who fly off in other directions and some feel deeply offended. On the other hand, certain individuals are more sensitive to the feelings of the group, finding ways to give away some of their golden feathers or perhaps to include their friends more often in their flights of fancy.

‘Even so, I would like to ask Leo Lionni why the others needed Tico to be exactly as they are, which is to say, why has he written it this way. It seems to me that Tico does not represent the author’s personal choices, for how could he have written a single book had he worried about conforming to group standards?’

All of the above is hastily entered into my journal after school. Then, a sudden desire to examine other Leo Lionni books sends me rushing to the library before its doors are locked.”

The Girl with the Brown Crayon, by Vivian Gussin Paley

Throughout “The Girl with the Brown Crayon,” the reader quickly takes note of the intense level of inquiry that Paley not only shares with her kindergarten students, but also within herself. Daily journal writings allow brief visions of Paley’s thoughts and reflections throughout this book and other pieces of her work. If she does not immediately find the answer, she seeks answers not just in her intern, but her students, and the life’s they live, but more importantly within. “Everything is supposed to make sense; if it doesn’t, ask questions, go over it again, find out why the picture is blurred.” (Paley, Must Teachers also be Writers?, Pg 7)

In “The Girl with the Brown Crayon,” we notice that Mrs. Paley’s kindergarten class, with her help, deeply analyzes Leo Lionni books, connects them to their life, and to other Leo Lionni books. But the levels of inquiry and analysis move far beyond simply understanding Leo Lionni children’s books. ‘Everything’ includes why do we teach the way we do? Why do we need to write in journals as teachers versus simply discuss our thoughts in a faculty meeting with fellow colleagues? After reviewing my transcripts, why did I react/avoid that question that Reeny asked today? In “Wally’s Stories: Conversations in the Kindergarten,” Paley writes that “Our contract reads more like this: if you will keep trying to explain yourselves I will keep showing you how to think about the problems you need to solve.” (Paley, pg 223) This quote actually refers to how she reacts to student inquiry, however, the same quote can be applied to how Paley views inquiry within herself. Things do not make sense in the educational field, but Paley set out to “think about the problems.”

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Moreover, the way that Paley chose to reflect on her own teaching is well worth noting. Talking with colleagues, about her teaching style, did not satisfy Paley. Rather, she tape-recorded each lesson. She would then spend time transcribing the lesson and in turn, analyze how she reacted to each situation, question and comment. She would make note of anything that posed questions in her mind, and would even ask the student to clarify a comment that was made the day before, if it did not make sense. The daily notebook entries were vital to the success of Paley's way of inquiry. "Only as we write down our thoughts and observations may we question and argue with ourselves about the things we do and say. Note: question and argue within ourselves." (Must Teachers Also Be Writers?, Paley, pg. 7) Paley firmly believes that writing is the key to understanding the world around us. "The reason for writing about the classroom is because the writing process, and whether or not you use a tape recorder is not essential, explains what I am thinking. In a sense, I do not know what I am thinking until I make it clear on a page." Writing was the only way, for Paley, to make sense of everything that happened in her mind, which proves to be one of the most successful methods to manage the intense level of inquiry Paley participated in, within herself.

In conclusion, through writing, Paley was able to meet the expectations that she had for herself. Paley was never satisfied with conformity and did not accept the fact that in order to be accepted, you needed to conform to others' expectations. Everything was done to make sense of the situation. Whether that situation be why you reacted to something a child said, or why you did not tell students that Leo Lionni passed away, Paley always seemed to have a reason for everything she did. If the reason was not intuitive, she reflected on it. If she didn't know the answer, she would turn to others for help. No matter what, Paley never accepted the first answer given to her, and because of this, she was an incredible progressive educator!