

Module 2

Vivian Gussin Paley has definitely been an innovator for teacher inquiry. While her beliefs do not support the current trend in education with standardized testing and using only methods that have been scientifically tested to be effective, Patricia Cooper says it best—Vivian Paley’s methods are effective in teaching her kindergarten students the critical components of early literacy development—which is exactly what policy makers are looking for! However, Paley does this in her own way through inquiry.

There are many parts of Paley’s process of inquiry that has evolved from Dewey and is similar to other figures in education like Frobel. Paley is concerned with the “whole child” and exhibits both the logical and emotional needs within her methods. Paley gave her students the “proper context in which to demonstrate and fine tune their natural gifts.” Children were learning through play and in turn gaining the values from their deep understanding of the texts they were reading.

What makes Paley unique within her own inquiry? Other than her co-teacher, Paley made inquiry a very personal experience for herself and for her classroom. Action research and cooperative learning groups are the models for the current movement in education. Paley was concerned with the individuals in her classroom. Her curriculum was developed by the conversations from minute to minute during a day. There is no way to collaborate in this fashion. Conversations and deep connections are extremely personal. There is no way to genuinely recreate these scenarios from classroom to classroom. The whole idea behind the effectiveness of her method is that because these connections are made on such a personal level, her students were actively engaged in the material and students had a desire to learn. In *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*, Paley told such detailed accounts of many different students. Paley was learning with her students. When *Inch By Inch* became “Bruce’s story,” Bruce was able to communicate his frustration with writing and Paley reflected how she was negatively affecting his relationship with writing. She used that learning experience to give him time until he was ready.

Paley’s form of inquiry is an art form, really. Her spontaneity allowed the conversations to occur, but she knew how to direct the conversations without dominating and discouraging items that might be deemed as “off topic” and could make connections in her own practice as she did with Bruce. She had a way to create this environment of sharing ideas and having discussion of values and relationships with six year olds! The art form comes with being able to react and direct the learning as it happens. Experience and confidence are necessities and we saw it build within Paley herself throughout the school year.

Paley’s dedication to her inquiry must also be noted is something that is innately unique. In order for her classroom format to be effective and for Paley to gather information, she transcribed the conversations from her classroom on a daily basis. She was also reflecting and analyzing over again—where she could hear every part of the dialog in class. Within her writing from the day, as a teacher must also be a writer, she argued with herself over what she did and said.

Paley’s form of inquiry is undoubtedly unique. The personal nature of her classroom is individualized to her as a teacher and to the needs, personalities, and experiences of each of her students. She “tends to her private garden” on a continuous basis.