

ED 800 Essay #2: Brian VanDeventer
February 2nd, 2015

The process of inquiry for educators is both vastly complex and unique to the individual teacher. As teachers explore various methods and practices, they begin to shape their identity as a teacher, a process that spans an entire career. Perhaps one of the most important authorities on the subject is Vivian Gussin Paley, a retired teacher and educational researcher who has devoted a considerable portion of her career to the idea of teacher inquiry. One of the most interesting aspects of her work is her use of introspection; in other words, that a great deal of the work of teacher inquiry comes from within and that teachers must be constantly reflecting upon their work to develop their identity. Indeed, Paley asserts that teachers must be introspective in order to make discoveries about themselves and to hone their skills as an educator, which in turn shapes their identity as a teacher.

Chiefly, Paley connects to the idea of introspection throughout her book *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*. Throughout the book, Paley narrates one year in the life of a classroom of kindergarteners whose primary focus is analyzing the work of children's author Leo Lionni. The most revealing sections of the book in regards to introspection occur in the moments when she is discussing Lionni's latest book with the class and has some sort of personal epiphany about what the book means to her as a teacher. A fascinating example of this occurs when she is discussing Lionni's *Inch by Inch*, which tells the tale of a worm required to measure various other animals to survive. Paley interestingly connects the message of this book to her own process as an educator by saying "Lonely or not, some folks, when required to use another person's yardstick, will simply inch their way out of the forest- or out of the faculty room." Here, Paley is discussing an important element of her work of inquiry: she firmly believes that teachers must hone their skills as individuals, rather than as a part of a larger group dynamic as purported by other faculty members or school administrators.

Additionally, she uses her introspective methods as a way of shaping her identity through personal reflection. Specifically, she ponders this concept when her and her students are having difficulty grasping the enigmatic principles behind the "magic mirror" in the book *Mr. McMouse*. She uses this mirror as a metaphor for "reflecting" on her identity as an educator in the waning months of her teaching career: "And what if the mirror that holds my truest reflection is the one that hangs on the classroom wall? When I no longer bear the name 'teacher' will I be left with no name at all?" In this question, Paley illustrates an important element of her process: her method of inquiry shapes a very specific identity as a teacher, one which exists in the confines of her classroom and is primarily formed by

reflecting on past experiences. Thus, Paley's method of inquiry provides her with a unique frame of reference from which to view herself and develop her skills.

Paley's musings on her introspective method of inquiry are further reinforced in her essay "Must Teachers Also be Writers?", in which she expounds further on the idea of introspective learning (specifically through the idea of keep a teaching journal) and states that "*talk* [with other colleagues] *is not enough*" and that teachers "need to know your own ideas more intimately...It is quite euphoric, really, to see yourself revealed on paper." Throughout this essay, she does concede that sharing ideas with other colleagues is a useful starting point (perhaps referring to her own experience with her co-teacher, Nisha) but the true work of teacher inquiry comes from personal reflection and making connections between what each teacher has learned earlier and applying those ideas to the classroom environment. The "euphoria," she emphasizes, comes when the teacher has truly embraced this introspective method of inquiry and used it to hone their craft and shape their professional identity in a positive way.

Finally, while Paley's adherence to the principles of introspective inquiry is admirable, this need not be the only method of inquiry through which teachers refine their skills. Granted, Paley is certainly not isolated from other teachers through this process and is not advocating that teachers must operate within a vacuum, but introspection should be one tool of many that teachers use to enhance their practices and methods. Many teachers prefer being able to share ideas with colleagues to enhance their practices. Nevertheless, through Paley's various writings, she effectively demonstrates the transformative nature of this particular method of teacher inquiry and has clearly reaped the benefits after a lifetime of teaching.