Review Articles

The Girl with the Brown Crayon

Vivian Gussin Paley. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997, pp. 99. ISBN 0-674-35442-7.

“When the word ‘curriculum’ is used, and the picture flashes before your mind, it should be shimmering with intensity” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p.7). In Vivian Gussin Paley’s book, *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*, the richness of curricular themes is both complex and many. This book takes us into Paley’s kindergarten classroom and their exploration and extended study of author Leo Lionni. This is Reeny’s story, a 5-year old curriculum leader who guides her teacher and classmates alike in this intense study. It is her last year of teaching and Paley reminds us that, “stories do proceed as if nothing else is going on” (p. viii) despite their complexity. Paley’s brilliance as an author lies in her ability to capture the complex nature of curriculum making in the telling of “simple” stories.

Intentional in its organization, Paley has written this book in 26 short chapters that initially seem like disconnected pieces, perhaps reflecting Paley’s view of the fragmentation of mandated curriculum. Upon closer examination, we realize that each piece is essential in developing an understanding of the connections between them. Of the many curricular themes in this book, there are three that resonate most honestly with us.

The central theme is an exploration of the role of teachers and children as curriculum makers and leaders. Connected to this theme is the development of a shared, lived experience, where students and teacher are involved in an ongoing negotiation of curriculum. In the first 13 chapters, Paley’s central focus is to develop a learning community within the safety of the classroom. In the second half of her book, Paley illustrates how the combination of these two themes in turn offers an opportunity for what we call an *opening up* of the definition of curriculum. This review is an analysis of these three themes within the organizational framework of Paley’s book.

The theme of children and teachers as co-creators of curriculum is established in the first chapter when Paley says, “Each year I wait to be reawakened by a Reeny ... something to ponder deeply and expand upon extravagantly” (p.10). Reeny responds to this call by asserting herself early on as a curriculum leader in Paley’s classroom. Because children themselves are curriculum makers and leaders, curriculum cannot be imposed upon the learner. Paley informs the reader of this concept through a delightful and playful chapter titled *Going Fishing*. In this chapter, Reeny’s father (Mr. Willens), a competent storyteller, comes in to tell the class a story about a fishing trip he took with his father. However, because Mr. Willens does not understand the role of children as curriculum leaders, his patience is strained. It is obvious through his attempts to tell his story that his curriculum objective does not match that of the students’ objective. His goal is to tell the story about a fishing trip; in direct contrast, the children’s objective is to discover why Mr. Willens’ grandfather is in heaven.

Upon repeated attempts to tell his story, he is continually interrupted by the curriculum that the children are making:

“Why is your grandfather in heaven?”

“He passed away a long time ago. Anyway, we drove through Missouri and Arkansas and finally we got to a place called Yazoo – .”

“He’s dead?”

“Yes. Now, I kept saying, ‘When we gonna get there, Daddy?’ and he kept saying, ‘In a little while, son.’”

“How did he die? Was he shot?” (p. 81).

Paley’s message is clear: it is children who understand best what they need and what they know.

A related theme explored by Paley is the development of a shared, lived experience in the classroom context through the co-creation of curriculum by students and teacher. This theme is illustrated early on in their Leo Lionni author study. Both children and adults alike discover that “the shapes and colors and words of a single author have unaccountably put us in rhythm with one another.” A particularly moving example is the story of Oliver, a student who communicates primarily through drawings of rabbits. It is through this shared, lived experience in the Leo Lionni author study that he is “removed from the hum drum of psychological categories and accepted as an artist” when Reeny acknowledges the validity in his art. Paley observes that it is amazing “how easily Leo Lionni brings us together. Even Oliver cannot escape the net” (p. 30).

The combination of these two themes presents an opportunity for what we call an opening up of the definition of “curriculum.” Although Paley does not offer an explicit explanation of the phrase “opening up,” we use this phrase in the context of this review to explore alternatives to the teaching of mandated curriculum. Central to this idea of an opening up of curriculum is an inherent respect for children’s intelligence. In Paley’s kindergarten classroom, she notes that, “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” (p. 8). She compares her observation of the children’s thinking with the complexity of the great epic, the Ramayana, and realizes that she thinks “children need stories like these to bring up their deeper feelings and questions” (p. 20). This inherent respect for the depth of children’s intelligence contrasts with the nature of curriculum one would normally find in a kindergarten classroom.

Ultimately, this opening up of the discussion of what curriculum means is established by Reeny in the last lines of the book when she announces: “But I’m thinking, why don’t you stay and we’ll talk about it. Don’t fly away. See we can keep talking about it, okay?” (p. 99). It is in Reeny’s utterance that we understand—the curriculum conversation must necessarily begin with students’ voices.

References

Connelly, F.M. & Clandinin, J. (1988). *Teachers as Curriculum Planners: Narratives of Experience*. Toronto, Ontario: Teachers College.

Lori Friesen and Marlene McKay
University of Alberta