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Final Reflection

The goal of this course has been to seek out the multiple ways that teachers (and others interested in education) can participate in educational inquiry, separate from the inquiry we so often encourage our students to contribute to in the classroom. We have investigated inquiry in philosophical themes through John Dewey and his interest in progressive education and cultivating what is unique and natural about the child; in psychology and learning theory through Howard Gardner and his search for an education that is developed around what is true, beautiful, and moral; in the content and organization of the curriculum through the great debate led by Gardner and E.D. Hirsch (whether an education should focus on several concepts in depth or a great many ideas and facts layered in sequence); in biography and history through an comprehensive study of the commonalities of the educations of prominent Americans; in international experience through Mary Catherine Bateson's eyes as she traveled abroad in Iran, Manila, and Israel; in ethnographic participant observation through a visit to the Maorian tribe of New Zealand in *Whale Rider*. Although this list may seem exhaustive, there is one more form of inquiry we have studied that has had a profound influence on the way many teachers choose to approach their own investigations into educational inquiry: teacher experience. As we encounter first-hand through Vivian Paley's *The Girl With The Brown Crayon*, teacher experience as a form of inquiry is the most individually reflective, is essential in developing ideas about educational problems, and its results allow direct access by other teachers and administrators to the needs of students.

Vivian Paley introduces us to a form of inquiry through *Brown Crayon* that is by far the most personal and reflective of those studied in this course. Paley approaches inquiry not just through direct observation of her students, but also through her reactions (or non-reactions, in some cases) to them. Instead of researching philosophies or testing psychology as Dewey and Gardner through their own inquiry-related pursuits, Paley is and always has been a teacher first. She is not interested in pedagogical theory or multiple intelligences (at least not directly) – her focus is on her students; what topics interest them, which conversations teach them. Arming herself with nothing other than a tape recorder and a journal, Paley tackles the essential questions of what makes an education successful. She deeply listens to what Reeny, Bruce, Walter and her other students have to say, and she alters her own curriculum based on their needs as individuals. In fact, had it not been for Paley's willingness to listen, she would not have decided to create the curriculum around which the book is based, that revolved entirely around one author and his set of books. It is obvious when Paley revisits with Reeny some years later that her teaching style was quite influential. This would not have been possible without her constant focus on inquiry, and her continued persistence in making the education of her students more successful.

There are many different educational problems and issues in the world we live in today, and almost everyone is willing to contribute their thoughts about how we could make the system more beneficial

and productive for our students. While Gardner and Hirsch may argue over big picture ideas of what an education should involve, Paley quietly and unassumingly digs into her research in the classroom. She does not comment in *Brown Crayon* about what she feels the goals of education should be, nor does she state what she believes students should learn – she simply shows us how she and her students grew together throughout the course of a year, and how she was able to reflect upon what happened and why each day. Although she may not be able to back up any of her findings with statistical evidence, and in no way does she claim to have any answers for the big questions in education today, Paley certainly has a place to start. In effect, Paley's way of inquiry, and teacher experience in general, while seemingly useless to the big picture on its own, is fundamental to exploring major educational issues because of its proximity to students. Researchers and educational philosophers propose theories and models in labs, while Paley is refining her practice on a daily basis in the classroom, allowing one day's discoveries to lay the plans for the next. In some ways, her teacher experience method of inquiry may itself be a piece of evidence for other, larger ideas about the problems and issues in education. For example, through her work it is obvious that Paley strongly believes in forming an individualized, unique curriculum that meets the needs of her students, and in this way she may support Howard Gardner's thoughts about an education that creates deep thinkers and well-rounded adults. Mary Catherine Bateson may enjoy Paley's forms of participant observation through which she describes her students at play (and although Paley herself did not travel out of the country, one could argue that kindergarteners often have a society of their own to which she was privy). Teacher experience may not be the form of inquiry that will ultimately lead to direct answers of the questions involved in education, but it is dependable, firm ground for both novice and veteran teachers to learn more about themselves and their students.

In today's society, it is not just teachers who wish to take part in educational inquiry. There are administrators, scholars, politicians, and families in each community who desire to have their voices heard in decisions that impact our nation's children. Often, research is done and evaluations are made without any input from those who would see the fruition of such decisions first-hand – the teachers themselves. Although her book *Brown Crayon* is not necessarily in the most accessible format for large-scale decisions in that it is not backed-up by foundational research, Paley's (and undoubtedly countless other teachers') accounts of daily classroom activities and interactions between students and teachers should be heard and deeply considered by the public. Her inquiry demonstrates the dedication, passion and commitment that teachers have to bettering the lives of their students, and if any major changes to the educational system we have created are to truly and effectively be implemented, it is ultimately through the daily work of teachers that such change could take place. Administrators have often already spent much of their career as teachers, and they usually understand the persistent inquiry that must take place in order to create a successful classroom community as Paley has done. However, other stakeholders in the community need to become aware of the experiences of a teacher. If teachers like Paley could continually generate evidence of the ground-level inquiry that is necessary in developing an effective teacher, and thus producing more competent, well-rounded students, perhaps politicians and scholars would be more supportive in listening to and providing for teacher's requests. On a much more foundational level, the products of inquiry through teacher experience allow for excellent ways to share best practices between teachers and cultivate productive teams. Paley herself shows us this as she communicates regularly with her co-teacher, both through explicating her own ideas as well as asking

provoking questions to learn more about her co-teacher's thoughts and methods. It is apparent that teacher experience as a form of inquiry can and should be more widely recognized as an accessible and useful form of inquiry in education.

The type of inquiry we have explored in this course can be defined as, "the ways that people search for knowledge of teaching and learning," as well as several other educational pursuits. Vivian Paley very clearly presents her methods of investigating ways of teaching through the product of her teaching experience, *The Girl With The Brown Crayon*. Her process is deeply introspective and reflective, and even she admits that it is not as simple as it may seem, "Apparently I needed classroom after classroom of young children demanding to be heard before I could identify my own voice and imagine my own questions." Inquiry through teacher experience is most suitable for developing foundational questions about education because teachers are most aware of problems that arise with their students, and although it may not be terribly effective in solving big-picture issues immediately, it provides the basis through which teachers learn to problem solve on a small scale within their own classrooms. Finally, while teacher experience can lead to productive forms of collaboration, it needs to be a much more publically accessible form of inquiry, allowing active stakeholders in education a deeper understanding of how changes in the educational system impact our nation's children at a fundamental level.