

Review of the "The Girl with the Brown Crayon"

Description

The Heart: What Vivian and Reeny Love the Most

At the heart of *The Girl with the Brown Crayon* is the love of storytelling, identity, and self-expression. Reeny, a young Black girl, finds herself through literature, particularly in the works of Leo Lionni. Her heart beats with an innate connection to characters who challenge norms, like Frederick, the poetic mouse, and Tico, the bird with golden wings. Paley, her teacher, follows Reeny's lead, recognizing that children use literature to navigate their identities. She reflects, "Stories do proceed as if nothing else is going on, and it is Reeny's story that is told in these pages" (Paley, 1997, Preface). Reeny's connection to Frederick is immediate and deeply personal. When she sees the brown mouse, she exclaims, "That brown mouse seems to be just like me!" (Paley, 1997, p. 5). This moment is not just a child identifying with a character; it is a powerful assertion of selfhood in a classroom where racial identity is subtly present and powerfully formative. Her insistence on using a brown crayon to draw herself, rather than a marker, is a clear declaration: "Because see? It's the same color like me" (Paley, 1997, p. 1).

Vivian Paley allows Reeny's interests to guide the classroom, recognizing that children use literature to understand themselves. She follows Reeny's lead, allowing her to explore her identity through storytelling and art. This is a powerful break from the way I experienced traditional education, where books were something we had to read, not something that reflected who we were or how we saw the world. The heart of this story, then, is a love for learning that emerges from recognizing oneself and the ideas that shape one's understanding of the world.

A visual representation of the heart with books, a mirror, and colored crayons represents Reeny's evolving self-awareness and expressions.

The Backbone: What Drives Vivian Paley?

Paley's curricular backbone is a commitment to child-centered learning. She believes that the stories children tell are as valuable as the ones they read, and her pedagogy is built on the idea that students should shape their own learning. She writes, "Why not, in a manner of speaking, invite Mr. Lionni to spend the year in our classroom? He's right here, inside these books on the table. We can ask him anything we wish and, if we become persuasive enough, he cannot withhold the answers" (Paley, 1997, p. 17).

This constructivist approach aligns with learner-centered education, where students build knowledge through experience and dialogue (Ellis, 2003). However, Paley also questions whether this deeply intellectual engagement is possible for young children: "Is it possible for a kindergarten class to pursue such an intensely literary and, yes, long-term intellectual activity, one that demands powers of analysis and introspection expected of much older students?" (Paley, 1997, p. 18).

A visual for Paley's spine is a path leading from the classroom to unknown destinations, symbolizing the open-ended nature of her teaching philosophy and building knowledge that connects across disciplines.

The Feet: What Vivian Paley Stands On

Paley stands on a foundation of progressive, constructivist education, which values child-centered learning and inquiry-based exploration. Her approach aligns with Dewey's philosophy of

experiential education, where students learn by engaging deeply with ideas that matter to them and the idea that learning is most powerful when it emerges from lived experience (Dewey, 1938).

Paley's work also resonates with critiques of traditional schooling's limitations. In *Why Don't More Indians Do Better in School?* Brayboy and Lomawaima (2018) argue that Native American students often struggle in school because their knowledge systems are not recognized as valid within colonial schooling structures. Paley, in contrast, makes room for students like Reeny to bring their full identities into the classroom, emphasizing the need for inclusivity and recognition of diverse perspectives.

A visual representation is feet standing on roots growing from them into the earth, symbolizing a firm grounding in literature and the growing nature of her curriculum.

The Hands: What Vivian Paley Holds

Vivian Paley offers her students the tools of storytelling as self-definition, a way for children to construct meaning. This is particularly evident in Reeny's evolving narrative about "Brown Baby," an imaginary character that only she can see: "Then Brown Baby saw Tico and he was crying because his friends didn't like him anymore. But Brown Baby liked his wings that was golden. So they played until the little girl came out and then Tico went back into his book. And she took Brown Baby home" (Paley, 1997, p. 93). Here, storytelling becomes an act of self-creation, a process by which children make sense of their emotions, relationships, and the world.

A visual representation of Paley's hands includes a brown crayon, tools, and puzzles, symbolizing her role in providing tools that nurture inquiry, deep thinking, and self-expression through literature. Her hands are not just for guiding, but for equipping her students with the means to express themselves.

Quotations: Three Key Quotes Summing Up Paley's Pedagogy

- "That brown mouse seems to be just like me! Because I'm always usually thinking about colors and words the same like him (p. 5)" Reeny sees herself in Frederick, the brown mouse, recognizing a connection between them.
- "I need the intense preoccupation of a group of children and teachers inventing new worlds as they learn to know each other's dreams (p. 50)" Reflects Paley's belief that learning is most powerful when it emerges organically from students' passions.
- "To invent is to come alive. Even more than the unexamined classroom, I resist the uninvented classroom (p. 50)" Highlights her commitment to imaginative, self-driven learning. Paley reflects on the importance of imagination and creativity in the classroom. Emphasizing constructivist learning and play-based pedagogy

Final Reflections

Vivian Paley's *The Girl with the Brown Crayon* made me rethink what education should truly be: a space where identity, imagination, and self-expression take center stage. Watching Reeny find herself through storytelling reminded me that kids do not just absorb knowledge; they create meaning. Moreover, as educators, we have to be willing to step back and follow their lead. I deeply resonate with Paley's commitment to student-driven inquiry, particularly in how she validates children's voices and identities. Her approach reminds me of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), where students are not passive recipients of knowledge but active participants in meaning-making. However, as powerful as it is, I wonder if this method risks neglecting structured literacy skills. While storytelling is a profound tool, how can we balance it with other academic foundations? Paley's approach invites us to consider: What if all classrooms allowed students to shape their learning through identity, storytelling, and play? Education could truly serve the whole child.

In creating my view of curriculum, I am most aligned with the principles of learner-centered progressivism, emphasizing individual growth, self-discovery, and the importance of creating a supportive and stimulating environment. This resonates deeply with the belief that curriculum should be a vehicle for personal meaning-making and social connection. Learning should be an ongoing exploration and understanding journey driven by the learner's interests and experiences. Rooted in child-centered progressivism and constructivism, emphasizing the importance of play, narrative, and social interaction in fostering children's learning and development (Ellis, 2003). Learning is most effective when it is active, engaging, and grounded in the learner's experiences. Play and social interaction are essential to this process, allowing children to explore, experiment, and construct their understanding of the world.

Reeny's understanding of Leo Lionni as "Frederick" (Paley, 1997, p.8) reveals something profound not just about storytelling, but about the way children make sense of relationships. She blurs the line between author and character, showing how stories are not just things we read but experiences we connect to on a personal level.

Later, when Reeny declares, "Friendship is everything" (Paley, 1997, p.90), she captures one of the most important lessons from their shared literary journey. Learning is not just about knowledge; it is about connection. Through storytelling, Reeny and her classmates build relationships, navigate emotions, and create a sense of belonging. This moment highlights how friendship, shared experiences, and honest self-expression are just as essential to learning as the lessons in any book. In many ways, education thrives when students see themselves reflected in literature and the relationships they form along the way.

Again, Paley paints a picture of a classroom where learning is deeply personal, shaped by students' voices and identities. It is not always easy to let go of traditional structures, but her work is a powerful reminder that the most meaningful learning happens when students see themselves in what they read, write, and explore.

References

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Category

1. Uncategorized

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