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Unit 2

*I have known teachers who were like rocks; nothing could move them or alter their ways.*

Vivian Paley (quoted above) has a captivating way of remaining open and vulnerable while still maintaining a sense of calm and control over her classroom. Paley’s vulnerability is the feature I believe to be most important to her way of inquiry. Having the openness to let events unfold organically lends itself well to meaningful inquiry. As stated by Ann Hulbert, “Perhaps the rare teachers who do manage to make every day at school an unpredictable yet purposeful adventure in mutual education deserve to boast about it” (Hulbert, 1999). Paley, I believe, succeeded tremendously in doing just that: cultivating a school day filled with unpredictable yet purposeful adventures that allowed both she and her students to learn and grow.

The circumstance that highlights this beautifully is a scene that surrounds the Leo Lionni story *Pezzettino*. An excerpt detailing the event, taken from Paley’s book *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*, is as follows:

*Leo Lionni’s skill in portraying the feeling of being “less than” is remarkable. Pezzettino is every child who has ever walked into a classroom. “Do I belong here? Does someone care about me?” Perhaps the lonely island Pezzettino is sent to does in fact represent school, where children are broken into pieces in order that adults may observe, label, and classify them. And, having been so dissected, how does the child become whole again?*

Paley’s reflection on the meaning of this story brings to the fore the idea that children are often being dissected into fragments at school. By connecting this story to a child’s experience in the classroom, Paley is able to articulate how its meaning connects with her own students; specifically, Walter, a student who had recently moved from Poland. Paley states, “Compared to the confident speakers and mouse painters, he judges himself inadequate” (Paley, 1997). Through exploration of the *Pezzettino* story, Paley realizes that it was she who put Walter at unease; meanwhile, his classmates embrace him with open arms. Reeney deems *Pezzettino* “his” book; but it also seems that Walter’s temperament and experience within the classroom situates him fatefully for this pairing. Paley says: “It is as if he has asked [the class], ‘Am I a piece of yours?’ and they have replied, ‘Yes, we need you to make us complete’” (Paley, 1997).

The openness to learn from both Leo Lionni and her students puts Paley at huge advantage as a listener, teacher, leader, and author. Her way of inquiry, as displayed through this multi-layered discovery stemming from *Pezzettino*, rests on the foundation of vulnerability. Paley accepts the suggestion from Reeney to read the book (while Reeney’s enthusiasm for it stems from her connection of the squares within to Walter’s own cubic drawings). Through the critical reading of *Pezzettino*, Paley understands that she may be the one that makes Walter feel like Pezzettino himself, a little square making his own little squares. Meanwhile, the children embrace Walter with open arms—“We need you to make us complete” (Paley, 1997).

Paley states: “My habit of drawing invisible lines between the children’s images is, I think, the best thing I do as a teacher” (Paley, 1989). This, as illuminated by the experience with *Pezzettino*, is a cornerstone to Paley’s inquiry—an innate ability to create connections and expand upon them in meaningful ways. In her essay “Must Teachers Also Be Writers?” she states that her ability to draw these invisible lines is amplified due to her habit of writing down dialogues “before [they] are forgotten and their meaning obscured” (Paley, 1989). Through carving out time to reflect on her daily experiences with students, honesty and truth are reached. Paley says, “It is only with yourself or perhaps a good friend that you can learn” (Paley, 1989). In this, Paley suggests that reflecting through writing (in solitude or to a trusted companion) is a certain path to finding the most important lessons and moments within an experience. By taking the time to write down, meditate on, and articulate subsequent inquiries, the core value of each recorded moment is preserved.

From deep reflection on *Pezzettino*’s place in her kindergarten classroom, to transcribed play and dialogues between classmates, Vivian Paley has an incredible way of capturing moments and finding their essence. Her vulnerability and openness lead to both a depth and breadth of organic discoveries, letting lessons about friendship and belonging shine through. By recording and writing down these moments and reflections, Paley is able to reach a level of inquiry that is admirable as both a teacher and an author.