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Unit 2.14 Paley

Everything you need to learn about life you learn in kindergarten; however, the easy going days of play, sharing, and fun that use to take part in kindergarten is now changing to a more structured atmosphere with formal lessons. Children spend the first five years of their life playing make believe and investigating the world through imagination; then comes kindergarten and they are told to stop playing and listen instead. Vivian Paley, a writer and teacher, believes that early childhood learning should concentrate more on storytelling and make believe--especially when learning to read--because that is what the children are familiar with. Paley also believes to become an effective teacher; a teacher should invest their time in teacher inquiry. Teachers that record and reflect on a day's events and conversations will be able to learn more about their students; which in turn will allow the teacher to become a better learner themselves. The best way to learn about children is while they are playing because that is when young children are the most engaged. An affective approach to teacher inquiry would be to follow Paley's method which could be characterized in two words: "sense" and "sensitivity."

Paley spends a lot of her classroom time listening to children and dictating the stories they tell. However, to catch all the dialogue that flies through the classroom and make "sense" of it can be nearly impossible. Therefore, Paley makes sure a tape recorder is present to catch the conversation nuggets she may have missed. This is where "sense" falls in place. Paley first needs to find the "...logic, reason, and coherence in the operations of the mind (Unit 2.6), in other words make "sense" of the dialogue. This tape recorder will "train" the teacher to re-think how they asked a question or to understand what a mumbling child has said (Wally's Stories: Appendix) and to uncover the logic of what the child is trying to say. Once the "sense" is in place connections can be made between dialogues and "sensitivity" can come into play.

The next characterization of Paley's teacher inquiry strategy is "sensitivity." Sensitivity opens the door and lets emotion and feelings play a role in helping Paley understand the child on a deeper level. The tape recorder again plays an important role in Paley's classroom. In one scenario Paley connected a sad story that Jamal made up to her being impatient with him earlier in the day (Reflections of a Kindergarten Teacher). Paley was able to make "sense" of the story and identify Jamal's feelings portrayed in that story. After Paley listened to the story on the tape recorder that evening she made note to talk with Jamal the next day about it. Thus, seeing the logic of the child's story is not enough to understand what a student is trying to convey; understanding that feelings and emotion play a role also helps make the connections between the child and the story they tell.

Teacher inquiry plays an important role in helping Paley become a better teacher in her classroom. By using "sense" she is able to see the logic of what her students are trying to tell her through play and storytelling. Then by adding "sensitivity" she is able to connect the feelings the children are experiencing in their stories to what is actually happening in the classroom. Every child has a story to tell, they just need someone, like Paley, to listen to their story and what better place to listen than in a kindergarten classroom.