

**Part A**

“Culture and Inquiry”

Like many other urban cities in the United States, Miami is rich in cultural diversity. Its constituents represent a whole range of ethnic bases, with Hispanics and Caribbean islanders comprising the two largest groups. Not surprisingly, the large majority of my students are first generation Americans whose parents immigrated to the U.S. in hopes of better opportunities for themselves and their progeny. In particular, they hail from the West Indies, from the islands of the Bahamas, Haiti, and Jamaica. From my personal understanding, I can observe that education is given a high regard in the West Indies. For example, my mother, a native Trinidadian, speaks proudly of the rich island education she received, a fact confirmed by my West Indian colleagues and many of the parents I’ve spoken to. However, there seems to be a disparity between the parents’ views of education and some of their children’s view of education, especially as it relates to reading and writing. From casual observation, I have gleaned that many students are content to just “get by” and do not place a similar premium on the value of education. My questions, then, result from this framework. What, specifically, are these parents’ views of education? How has cultural influences shaped approaches to literacy? What sets apart first generation Americans who strive to succeed in the classroom from those who do not? Do these students who engage in self-directed inquiry in relation to literacy always produce the best results? Essentially, this topic revolves around culture and literacy, examining to see the correlation (if any) between the two at my middle school in Miami, Florida.

Considering her interest in ethnographic studies, the writings of Mary Catherine Bateson are a good place to start in identifying methods of inquiry into this project. In order to first examine a culture’s effect, one should probably examine the culture itself. To start, Bateson’s culture learning is examined through a series of short stories reflecting actual situations and the philosophical implications arising from them. Her approach is not necessarily chronological or fixed, but rather it is reflective and idea-based. In her book *Peripheral Visions* she writes, “One can define a human being by DNA or by the physical traits of the species, but I prefer to use the word *person* for the focus of a pattern of relationships” (62). In the same way, I must remember to move past the endless statistics dictating how “minority” students think and act and feel, and instead provide the opportunity for each one to be his or her individual *person*. As Bateson experiences her different cultural journeys, she notes that her approach walks hand-in-hand with a sense of the unknown. There are cultural customs unfamiliar and foreign to her American-bred ways of thinking. She learns as shared experiences teach her and those around her. Likewise, in order to really learn about a culture, I must also be prepared for new, but shared experiences and perhaps differing views of how one culture’s educational approach to literacy might differ from a traditionally American approach.

Once I have established a cultural foundation from which to build, the methods of Howard Gardner have special interest. Gardner was interested in pursuing educational disciplines, those that seek after truth, beauty, and morality. From the outset, he recognizes the potential problems this raises, stating in *The Disciplined Mind* that “education must *continue* to confront truth (falsity), beauty (ugliness), and goodness (evil), in full awareness of the

problematic facets of these categories and the disagreements across cultures and subcultures” (35). Consequently, before examining what hinders a students’ literacy growth, it may be helpful to investigate whether or not both the parent and teacher are along similar foundational lines of what constitutes truth, beauty, and goodness. One of the best ways to study this relationship would be through student discussion of these three topics. Do their cultures influence their understanding of these concepts? Perhaps I am a pessimist at heart, but it would be my suspicion that most of my middle school students have not thought past upcoming homework assignments. Then, once this is being explored, it would be interesting to see if students who do strive to succeed have set standards of truth, beauty, and goodness in their own lives.

Lastly, the idea of simply talking with students ties in very strongly to the mode of Vivian Paley’s attempt at student-led inquiry. As *The Girl with the Brown Crayon* illustrates, she spend most of her time talking with students and allowing them to talk with each other. Paley had students from all walks of life and from a variety of ethnicities present in her classroom, learning and making connections together as they reasoned and deliberated over picture book characters. One cannot help but be moved by the powerful simplicity of Reeny’s closing statement in her book, “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?” (99) The art of discussion here becomes crucial as students link socially- and culturally-based ideas with literature and literacy. Of course, Paley’s “talk” doesn’t have to be limited to students. In the same work, she spoke with Reeny’s grandmother, a woman who initially wanted Reeny in a school with fewer white people. After their conversation, though, both come away with a better understanding of Reeny and her student-led inquiry into cultural and race issues.

With any topic, inquiry has the potential to take on more than one role. For the purpose of my culturally-based project, the works of Bateson, Gardner, and Paley seem best in providing the foundation for what can be a very rewarding (for both teacher and student) investigation into issues of culture and literacy. Certainly, the project is one that will take place over time. All three cited scholars conducted their inquiries over extended periods of time as well. However, it is important to remember that when a “conclusion” is reached, self-directed inquiry (for both teacher and student) still doesn’t end. As teachers, it is imperative that we continue to ask questions and continue to seek answers.

## Part B

### “Vivian Paley’s Student-Led Inquiry”

For most of my undergraduate life, I gave no thought to working in education. My intent was to join those working behind-the-scenes in the television industry, climbing the rungs of the proverbial career ladder. Consequently, when the idea of teaching became firmly fixed in my mind in my final semester, I had taken no educational courses. Thus, when I began my first year as a middle school English teacher a few short months later, my teaching philosophy was (perhaps unavoidably) set in an unimaginative default mode: to teach as I had been taught. Beginning the MAED program a year and a half later, though, has subsequently opened up uncharted educational territories for me to explore. Although all of the coursework covered in TE 891 has both been useful in encouraging critical thinking and has given me much to reflect

on, it is the work of Vivian Paley that has most garnered my interest and challenged my pre-constructed views of education.

In *The Girl with the Brown Crayon* specifically, Paley presents a type of student-led inquiry previously foreign to me. For example, growing up, my secondary teachers generally lectured from the front of the classroom. Granted, there were times for discussion and projects were assigned, but most of the teaching was approached from the “sage on the stage” method discussed in the course’s introduction. Little of what I can recall was done in the way of Paley’s student-led inquiry. Rather, we generally sat, listened, and regurgitated, and my teaching framework was beginning to form. One could argue that this is to be expected in higher levels of secondary education and that Paley’s method worked best because she was dealing with children. However, I’m inclined to believe that her approach can be modified in many classroom settings. For example, she deftly uses storytelling and student self-involvement (both of which go hand in hand) to *engage* her students. For me, most significant is that she is not talking *at* them. She is talking *with* them. As a result, she learns with them as well, reformulating her opinions as new insights, provided by her students, becomes available. For instance, when discussing Leo Leonni’s, Paley finds herself becoming angry for Tico. Reeny, then, offers a different understanding for Tico’s actions, forcing Paley to reexamine her initial thoughts.

Of course, Paley’s method of student-led inquiry cannot be employed without looking at her concept of play and storytelling intertwined to create student-constructed frameworks of understanding. I was intrigued by this model, knowing that an application of this from the kindergarten level to the middle school grades would certainly have to be modified. Fortunately, as a reading teacher, I have plenty of opportunity to explore grade-appropriate literature (much like Paley). In this way, her approach to student-led inquiry forced me to examine the opportunities I allowed for my students in directing their learning. For example, when turning an honest and critical eye to my own teaching methods, I realized that in moderating a discussion, I would tend to lead it in such a way that would result in the answers *I* expected and the answers that *I* thought were right. Now, there are certainly occasions when a student discussion may veer off track and requires teacher guidance in the right direction. However, I fear that my pendulum had swung too far in this direction, which could only serve to stifle my students’ curiosity and independent thought. Instead, as Paley did, I became stirred to use the telling of stories as entryways for discovery and the uncovering of truth. I wanted to go beyond Freytag’s Pyramid create a format that allowed for safe investigation into what may otherwise be frightening or intimidating topics. This approach has required much reconsideration on my part on better ways to communicate more complex ideas to my students and to spur on their cognitive thinking.

Finally, Paley’s emphasis on teachers as writers resonated deeply with me. *The Girl with the Brown Crayon* is a perfect example of how teacher-writers encourage student-led inquiry. For one, it is essential in building good models of communication, an idea reflected in the very fact that I have read her book and have subsequently been more determined to highlight my students’ cognitive abilities. Secondly, writers allow for self-reflection. Something about putting words on a paper makes the earnest author focused on properly communicating the intended meaning. As Paley demonstrates, recording her narrative continuously provided ample opportunity for teacher-led and student-led inquiry to build upon one another. This is exhibited in the chapter entitled “Geraldine.” She notes that “an extraordinary sense of excitement” comes over here, as an epiphany about the girl mouse reveals that she and all of her students (and perhaps all of us) have “something” inside that comes out through storytelling (73). Recording

such events better allows Paley to understand what is taking place in her classroom, no doubt furthering her resolve to continue such in-class methods.

As illustrated, Vivian Paley has spurred my thinking on educational practice in several ways. However, I do take Paley's approach with caution. In the final sentence of the chapter entitled "Little Blue and Little Yellow," she writes that "ultimately...it is the reader who interprets the writer" (42). Here, she and I separate in philosophy, knowing that in some situations, the author's intent is crucial in understanding, no matter how the student feels about a particular topic. Nevertheless, she documents time and time again when students are responsible for understanding breakthroughs and connections. In addition, throughout her book there is a sense of humbleness that cannot be mistaken. Vivian Paley is well-aware that she does not know everything, and she is open to learn from the insights of her students. It is this approach to student-led inquiry that has made her approach so successful and has prompted a reflection on my personal educational philosophy.