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### Walter, Paley, and Pezzetino

In *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*, Vivian Paley provides an interesting example of teacher inquiry and self-reflection as she recounts her last year teaching kindergarten. Throughout the year, stories of Leo Lionni provide the central thread of story, play, and prompts for writing for her students and herself. One chapter entitled “Walter” provides an example of her method of inquiry and learning. Walter is from Poland and has difficulty with English, which makes him feel inadequate. Reeny, the girl of the title, makes a connection that his box drawings look like Lionni’s *Pezzetino*, where the characters are colored pieces of squares. At the end of the chapter, Walter shares his real Polish name to the teachers, and Paley’s moment of clarity is that Walter shares a piece of himself, a piece she herself is missing (54).

This episode is just one example of the methodology of Paley’s inquiry to look for connections and layers of meanings for herself as she guides students in their learning. Her classroom method is to use story, in this case Lionni, as a context for learning and creation. She writes, “My habit of drawing invisible lines between the children’s images is, I think, the best thing I can do as a teacher (“Must Teachers be Writers”).” Paley uses the tape-recorder and then transcribes in journals to capture the class. The process allows her to step back and re-live the day, but inquiry is actually self-conversation—questions, which lead to ideas for new curriculum (Lindfors). Reflection during transcription allows her to see the different dynamics and “tangled web of interconnections” in the classroom perhaps missed by just going through the actions of the day. She calls it “a running dialogue “ as each tape is transcribed in a series of dated notebooks. Paley’s inquiry is similar to the expectations she has for her students. “Once we stop *playing* out our feelings and ideas, as the children do, writing--personal, private writing--becomes the tool with which we can best tap the vital store of earlier learnings and instincts that enable us to make real connections in the classroom and in our outside lives as well. (“Must Teachers also be Writers”)

In this selected episode of “Walter,” Paley captures Reeny’s connection to Pezzetino in her conversation with Walter. By transcribing this small moment, she then reflects on her own interpretation of the story and makes her own connection of Pezzetino to her own students.

Pezzetino is every child who has ever walked into a classroom. ‘Do I belong here? Does someone care about me?’ Perhaps the lonely island Pezzetino 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? (53-54)

One can see the language of her background and experience of the Dewey Lab School with a focus on the individual and communal spirit of the child and the class.

This connection of story to her own identity of educator then to a larger scope of school and education is an objective for her method of inquiry. She explains that there was something missing in faculty meetings or with conversations with other teachers. The act of writing and reflection provide much more. “You have our own *inner* support of memories, feelings, and instincts. Through these you will find your own questions and follow through

in your own ways. It is quite euphoric, really, to see yourself revealed on paper” (“Must Teachers also be Writers”). In “Walter” she reflects, “Leo Lionni could have put me in his book as the-one-who-remembers, or better yet, the one-with-missing pieces” (54), perhaps new questions or connections with children.

In all of her episodes, Paley is not only writing to learn, but writing to publish. She writes that since the subject is the classroom, the thoughts and reflections should be public anyway. She also explains that the rewriting brings even more clarity (Lindfors). Yet there is some construction in publication. Like Jane Austen, her reflections are a constructed narrative just as her “rebuilding and re-pretending and altering the character and plot and dialogue” (quoted in Lindfors). Publishing is the intent to be read and brought to a larger audience. Just as she uses fairy tales with her students because they lead to open-ended inquiries, she becomes a spinner of tales for other teachers. “It is less spontaneous but, for me, equally useful in figuring out the human dimensions of the classroom.” According to the description of Cochrane Smith and Lytle, she is an example of a teacher-researcher but also a lifelong learner even in the late stages of her career. Her reflections are not dissertations but allow the reader/teacher to learn from her experiences. As she explains Reeny, “Ultimately, uh-huh uh-huh, it is the *reader* who interprets the writer” (42). Perhaps readers of Paley will find their own missing pieces.