

Book Review

***You Can't Say You Can't Play* by Vivian Gussin Paley. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992, 144 pages.**

Attending to Invisible Doorways into Children's Worlds of Play

The classroom that allows children to evict others from play is like a castle with no doors. Those inside the castle are invested with magical powers and the outsiders are forced into the role of unlovely monsters. (Paley, 1992, p.117)

As a preschool and kindergarten teacher for over 30 years, Vivian Gussin Paley understands the importance of imaginary play in the lives of children. Recognizing that children enter the world and try to understand it through play, she honors play and the stories children share as an invitation into their worlds as they imaginatively live and make sense of their experiences alongside others in the classroom. Paley believes strongly that play and stories are central in children's ongoing narratives of how they are living and developing their sense of belonging.

Paley wrote that children "know they have come into this world to invent stories...they're here to play and to find out where they belong in a group and how that group creates a community" (2013, p. 47). However, at the age of sixty, Paley is awakened to the booming echoes of loneliness and rejection among young children upon hearing the words "you can't play" from their peers. She decides she can no longer allow this pervasive phenomenon to continue within her classroom. In her book, *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, Paley (1992) narratively invites readers to journey alongside her and the children's experiences into the social and moral dimensions of exclusion and rejection. She is aware that some children continually prevent others from entering their world of play. She experiences tensions and affirms this to readers in her opening paragraph, "hearing the words 'you can't play' suddenly seems too overbearing and harsh, resounding like a slap from wall to wall. How casually one child determines the fate of another" (p. 3). Paley shares the above image of a castle as a way to illustrate, through story, how she and the children in her kindergarten classroom experienced the tentativeness of entering into other's worlds of play by either living out the role of having magical powers and inviting others into play, or rejecting them, knowingly or unknowingly, therefore condemning some children to live on the borders as outcasts.

As a former primary school teacher, now doctoral student, I recall times when I, like Paley, had a time-out chair. I now see through her lens how that chair was telling the children with whom I spent my days that they "can't play" in my classroom. Paley awakens me to how the children might have seen the chair. For those who were sent to the time out chair, they knew they could not play. For those who were not sent they lived with the knowledge that not playing was always a possibility. How had I missed understanding from the children's vantage point what I was doing? Other memories surface and my mind slips back to how I smoothed over those moments when children in

my classroom rejected others by telling them they could not play. I often sent them to the office, smoothing over the hard questions of belonging and not belonging, making them invisible in my classroom. Paley makes me face myself and what I was doing by practicing my own version of “you can’t play” with the time-out chair and sending those who rejected others out of sight. This self facing, this difficult process of seeing myself in the complex relations within the classroom, is captured by her words “real change comes about only through the painful recognition of one’s own vulnerability” (Paley, 1986, p. 123).

Guarding the Castle Door: The Insider/Outsider Phenomenon on School Landscapes

Paley observes this social phenomenon taking shape as early as nursery school and gaining momentum while children move forward in schools, where they either develop a habit of rejecting and/or a habit of being rejected. I now see that rejection was part of the way I lived my practice in teaching; even though I experienced rejection and never knowingly would have practiced its opposite, yet somehow I did. How did I fall asleep to how my practices shaped spaces of belonging and not belonging?

As children move into the public realm of the classroom, Paley notices that most often it is the same children who are rejected year after year and are made to feel like strangers in schools. She notes, “although we all begin school as strangers, some children never learn to feel at home, to feel they really belong. They are not made welcome enough” (1992, p. 103). She introduces the terms “insider/outsider” to her understanding of her classroom; where those identified as “bosses” and “owners” are seen by their peers as a ruling class who “will notify others of their acceptance...[while] outsiders learn to accept the sting of rejection” (p. 3). Paley views schools as public places where the beginning of exclusionary play is significantly shaped, manifested, and continues to reverberate throughout the lives of children. She writes that “exclusion is written into the game of play. And play, as we know, will soon be the game of life” (p. 20). As a woman of Métis/Cree heritage I know those feelings of insider/outsider, for these experiences often shaped my life in schools as a child.

Paley connects children’s lived experiences of play in schools with the notion of “insiders/outsiders,” and I was reminded of my experiences in an early landscape when an early story to live by¹ shaped my experiences.

I grew up in a place where the notion of insider/outsider was embedded within the community landscape between those who lived in the community and those who bordered alongside it, shaped by racial undercurrents deeply rooted in social, historical, and political contexts. When I entered kindergarten I do not remember having a sense of the phenomenon of insider/outsider although it existed. It was only as I moved forward through the primary grades that I began recognizing separate clusters forming both on and off the school landscape. Over time, I learned from those who lived in the community and those who lived outside of it; insiders and outsiders existed within both groups. Insiders were those who created the rules to live and play by, while outsiders hovered on the edges, waiting for invitations by the insiders to be accepted. Sometimes I was able to negotiate entry into both communities; however, there was always a sense of

uncertainty as I tried to earn my status as insider and full acceptance into either world. Most often I teetered on the edges, rarely having been granted complete participation, particularly during my earlier years.

Much like Paley when she was a child, I too never felt a sense of ease or comfort on the school landscape and experienced “the loneliness of [being] an outsider” (p. 10). It was not until I entered Grade 2, when I began to imagine becoming a teacher, that my early stories of school began to shift. It was in this grade and for the first time on the school landscape where I came alongside a teacher who did not treat me as ‘outsider’ in a community rife with multiple tensions far too complex for a young child to understand. Perhaps she sensed my uncertainty as I tried to navigate the multiple landscapes and in doing so provided a disruption to my earlier stories of school. Through imaginary play as “teacher” in my home, I began creating a belonging place for myself as I imagined being her, my beloved teacher, outside of school. By becoming her outside of school, the experience shaped my desire to teach those who were often considered outsiders, children positioned on the boundaries.

Unlocking the Invisible Door: Inquiring into the Life-Making of Children and Play

Paley views the kindergarten classroom as an opportunity for teachers to assist children who are first entering public landscapes to develop a strong sense of inclusion and friendship through play. In an attempt to disrupt the developing pattern of exclusionary play, Paley announces a new rule to the class and posts a classroom sign, which becomes the title of her book: *You can't say you can't play*. She wonders if perhaps classrooms can become “nicer than the outside world” (p. 100) and seeks to develop a counterstoryⁱⁱ (Lindemann Nelson, 1995) to the exclusion phenomenon. Rather than following the dominant narrative of helping outsiders develop characteristics of fitting in and waiting to become accepted by the insiders, Paley proposes the whole group must shift their behavior and actions to welcome those who are often placed on the boundaries of the community. The rule quickly becomes a questionable and much debated topic by children, particularly among those who regularly prevent others from entering their world. One child, Lisa, wonders, “But then what’s the whole point of playing?” (p. 4).

Shaped by the children’s experiences with loneliness and rejection, Paley uses the preferred language of children, that is story, to “reach the soul of [such] a controversy” (p. 4) through storytelling and story acting. Paley notes, “Surely the children are too innocent to understand the consequences of telling others they cannot play with them. Yet they reach out easily to those who are hurt or sad often more tenderly than I. ‘Hurry up,’ they call to me. Clara is crying” (p. 14). She weaves together both fantasy and reality as she co-composes, alongside the children’s experiences, a story about a magical bird named Magpie who helps those who are frightened or lonely by uplifting their spirits through the gift of storytelling because, like Paley, “he knew all about loneliness for he had been alone and lost while still in his shell” (p. 28). As a teacher, reading her words and engaging in my autobiographical narrative inquiry, I wonder if Paley’s words call to me as I recognize the children’s experiences as akin to my experiences and yearned to

have known a character like Magpie in my lived stories as a child. I wonder if I had had a Magpie would it have been different for me.

As Paley's story of Magpie and the children characters of the story unfolds over time, the characters she introduces to the children in her classroom often mirror and are shaped by the children's experiences with loneliness and sadness, as well as the power of rejecting others. As Clara and Angelo, two children in her class, are continually rejected, Paley weaves what is reality in her classroom and her fantasy play together as she creates a story to teach the children about the power of loneliness and as well, the power of kindness to strangers.

The Door Becomes More Visible Over Time

As Paley and the children are trying to make sense of the new rule, over time she records their conversations for further inquiry. Guided by the children's experiences and conversations, she readily admits she "cannot hear everything the first time around" (p. 18) in the moment. Yet she readily captures her and the children's voices in the book, bringing to life the tensions of implementing this rule. Interested in how the new rule may be viewed in the older grades, Paley engages in conversations alongside children in grades 1-5 and poses two questions to each class: Is the new rule fair, and can it work? What Paley notices is that across all the grades the children were able to recall earlier experiences with rejection in vivid detail and with strong emotion, as though the experience of being rejected had *just* happened to them. The younger children in grades 1 and 2 readily identified with the notion of "bosses" and "owners." As she engaged in conversations with children in Grade 3 the habit of rejection became more public, and the children quickly identified those who were most often rejected. Some children in Grade 4 noted that exclusion is more noticeable and practiced more often among the female children in the class as one girl admits, "the boys accept themselves much more...we're definitely meaner to each other. A girl is more likely to tell another girl she can't play" (p. 59-60). Many of the children in Grade 4 believed for such a rule to be effective it needed to begin in the early grades; as a few noted, "it's too late to give *us* a new rule" and, "if you want a rule like that to work, start at a very early age" (p. 63). In doing this research, Paley is convinced of two certainties: first, the rule is critical, and second, it must begin in the early years, such as kindergarten.

Engaging in conversation with children in the subsequent grades also confirms the powerful and progressive social hierarchies that are often developed, supported, and maintained in public realms of school. After much conversation with the children, Paley then introduces the new classroom rule, and again is met with resistance by Lisa as she argues, "I thought we were only just *talking* about it. I just want my own friends" (p. 82). Paley notes that Lisa has become the barometer in the classroom to see how the rule is working. At times Lisa reminds children of the new rule and other times wishes for the old order to return. Although Paley does not share the length of time over which the implementation takes place, we know it happens over time, as many children experience exclusion of others and multiple conversations and debates regarding the rule take place.

Opening the Invisible Door

Over time, the children begin applying the themes of kindness, rejection, sadness, and belonging and find ways to live and act differently in their own worlds of play with others. It is through inquiring into the experiences of the children and the Magpie stories Paley constructs based on those experiences that begin to shape how the children act toward each other as they begin to identify with the characters Paley creates. As she shares her developing Magpie story with the children, Lisa, appears to identify with one of the characters, a witch named Beatrix, asks Paley, “Who’s nicer, me or Beatrix?” (p. 68).

Beatrix heard the girls from behind the tree and she was jealous. “I hate those girls,” she told Magpie.

He was troubled. “But Beatrix, they’ve done nothing bad to you.”

“Yes, they have,” she snapped angrily. “They love each other and pretend things together and I have no friend but you, Magpie, which isn’t the same. Those girls make me mad. I just know I’m going to do something mean.” (pp. 69-70)

Or perhaps Paley created Beatrix in the shadow of Lisa as she wonders, “I am certain she [Lisa] wants me to be more like Magpie and not allow her to be mean even when she is jealous of playmates or uncomfortable with strangers” (p. 68). As Paley nears the end of her book she reminds us, “It is the *habit* of exclusion that grows strong; the identity of those being excluded is not a major obstacle” (p. 118) as she notices Lisa invite those she often rejects to join in her play. Paley witnesses that Lisa and the children are “learning that it is far easier to open the doors than to keep people out” (p. 118).

“Hurry up, get in,” Lisa whispers. “The monster is coming! This castle has no doors so the monster can’t get in but we can get out because we’re magic.”

“Are we the only magic ones?” Hiroko asks.

“Just us. No one else is alive yet. Only us are born. Pretend that.”

Jennifer runs into the classroom. “Mrs. Wilson said I could come in,” she tells me, and Lisa welcomes her in royal fashion.

“Oh, there comes another magic princess just born out of the shell! Crawl in this invisible door, quick, Jennifer, because there’s no doors to this castle so the monster can’t catch us.” (p. 117).

Just as Paley found ways to open the door in her classroom, I too begin to search for ways to open the door in my classroom.

Searching for ways to keep the door open: Creating spaces in my classroom

Paley’s book has been a powerful force in helping me reimagine my classroom practice. I link what she is doing with the words “you can’t say you can’t play” with what it means to create a liminal space. It seems that Paley creates a liminal space with the children as an inquiry space. Heilbrun (1999) explains liminality as “a state of necessary

in-betweenness...never designed for permanent occupation...[but as a place] between destinies...the place where one writes their own lines and eventually their own plays (p. 98-101). Greene (1993) speaks to the importance of giving children time and space to begin telling stories of “what they are seeking, what they know and might not yet know, exchanging stories with others grounded in other landscapes, at once bringing something [self] into being that is in between” (p. 218). The “in between” Greene speaks about is the meeting place that allows us to unfold who we are and who we are becoming, but do not yet know, alongside others through interwoven “webs of relationships” (Arendt, 1958, p. 182).

The spaces I began to create were shaped by the sharing circle I gradually co-made with the children in my Grade 2 classroom. I too wanted to make sure that everyone could play and that everyone’s stories were shared. And I knew, as Paley did, that these spaces were spaces where otherwise was possible; they were not spaces of prediction or certainty. There was no recipe to follow but only spaces where the underlying classroom narrative was one of belonging, of not excluding, of bringing the wholeness of who we are into visibility. The door was unlocked and everyone was invited in.

I arrived early on the first day of school to prepare the area for our first peace candle gathering.ⁱⁱⁱ I carefully laid out the Pendleton wool blanket in the centre of the room with an unlit candle, a basket of rocks, and smudge^{iv} material resting in the middle. I wanted to start our circle in a good way, and an Elder was joining us to speak about coming together in a circle and smudging protocol. With the lights dimmed, Kokum^v and I sat visiting around the blanket and waited for the children to trickle in. As they arrived, I could tell some children were unfamiliar with entering a room this way and were unsure of what was about to happen. I asked the children to join us around the blanket once they hung up their heavy, overstuffed backpacks on the coat hook. Other children quickly made their way over to the circle, with backpacks still strapped on, and were told by other children to put their backpacks away. Some children sat quietly waiting for us to begin, some gave small waves to friends they recognized from Grade 1. Some were whispering about the smudge, telling us they too smudged at home with their families. Kokum shared lessons about respect for one another when coming together in a circle and the importance of listening to what one another is saying without interrupting, as well as the reasons for opening the circle with smudge. I introduced students to the basket of rocks and to the smooth wooden stick I had laying in the centre of the blanket. The items provided two different methods of sharing. With the passing of the basket of rocks, each child would choose a rock and hold it until they were ready to share by placing their rock in the centre of the blanket, back into the basket. The other method was the use of a stick. The stick moved in a clockwise direction around the circle and whoever held the stick was the only one talking. My goal was to create a comfortable space, a space of belonging where children could share their stories of experiences.

It was in this space in our classroom that I began to create a safe place of belonging where we were able to share our storied experiences. I wanted to stop silencing

children and to awaken them, and me, to their stories of who they were and who they were becoming.

In the beginning, some of the 18 children resisted coming together in this way by “passing” their turn, struggling to find their words. Others cautiously spoke about their experiences, saying one or two sentences. Many, however, welcomed the experience and began to openly share small fragments of their lives. In the beginning, circle often lasted only 15-20 minutes. I began to wonder, were these children afraid to tell stories of themselves, alongside others in the class? Were they afraid of how I, or others, would respond to their stories? Did they even see themselves as having valuable knowledge worth sharing? I wondered, perhaps they didn’t want to speak because they knew very little about me, and about each other. I shared more about who I was, and the many roles I played in my own familial stories as granddaughter, daughter, auntie, as well as a graduate student, and teacher. I wondered about the ways children saw themselves in the classroom, and I asked if any of them saw themselves as *teacher*. Very few had. The conversation began with the traditional narrative of teacher and moved into new possibilities where the children began to recognize themselves as *teachers*. They shared their experiences of *teaching* younger siblings, cousins, friends, and older adults in their families and began to see their knowledge as having value and worth.

As relationships grew over time, stories began to develop, growing from the stories others shared, and in my efforts not to silence their stories of experiences, our peace candle gathering circle often lasted 90 minutes. The children began to see themselves as holding knowledge and being knowledgeable by sharing experiences of their familial curriculum-making worlds^{vi} and what they have come to know first. They were eager to tell stories of belonging places, communities they were from, who they lived with, and how, for some, this frequently shifted. Many children shared stories of having different home places and belonging to multiple communities. They spoke about those who were important and less important to them in their families and told stories of living alongside their siblings and/or pets. They spoke about the addition of new family members, as well as the loss of loved ones. Others shared the tensions of traveling great distances and spending up to three hours a day on the bus to attend school.

The children quickly learned the daily routine of circle and were eager to share their experiences. Together, we began to welcome the start of a new day as we met in our peace candle circle gathering, and this became a welcomed routine. Stories of experience were already being shared as I made my way to our portable classroom. Some children excitedly bounced their way towards our door, ready to share new experiences that happened mainly in out-of-school places. The children began setting up the circle space, laying the blanket out and placing the smudge, candle, and matches in a spot they reserved for me. They began to see themselves as knowledge holders and saw our peace candle gathering space as a safe place to share their storied experiences, even those that were tension filled. I no longer sent children out of the classroom or smoothed over the tensions experienced in the classroom or school spaces, because we now had a space to voice our experiences with one another. It was a curriculum of lives in the making. I knew our circles had become a belonging and sustaining space for the children and myself, and I was unable to return to my earlier ways of silencing children and smoothing over moments of tension by ignoring what the children were experiencing.

Moving Forward: Inviting Others In

Paley and the children engaged in a living curriculum where she was openly curious and created conversation spaces that allowed those most often silenced in her classroom the opportunities to express their experiences of being rejected. She engaged in meaningful conversations with the children as she created a belonging space for the children by allowing them to restory their experiences with rejection and belonging alongside Magpie and multiple characters, shaped by their own experiences. What Paley illustrates is the transformative power of story by attending to the lives and stories children live and tell as she unlocked the door and created a space of open access for the children to live differently among one another. It was a space, weaving both fantasy play and reality that allowed the children, as well as herself, to imagine new possibilities in living with one another in the public classroom space and inviting one another to enter into each other's imaginative worlds of play.

Paley nears the end of her book stating the new rule will become *the rule* in her remaining years of teaching; however, she admits, "the real excitement has been in the process of discovery" (p. 129). The process of discovery was challenging, lengthy, and at many times uncertain. As Paley says, through Magpie, "one day, just as I [Magpie] was starting to peck out of my shell, I found myself lost, alone, and partly buried in a clump of moss and pine needles under a tall pine tree. I kept pecking, of course, for once you begin you cannot stop. It is exhausting work, believe me" (pp. 22-23).

The discovery itself and the fantasy play she made space for was born from remaining awake to the words and actions of the children she lived alongside. The journey she guides readers on reminds us that the rule itself is not prescriptive, but rather a relational one and developed over time. Paley attends closely to the lives of children and their worlds of play and understands the act of including others "must in fact be rediscovered each year by each new group...if we are to prepare our children to live and work comfortably with strangers that sojourneth among them" (p. 129). Paley shows us that as children enter a classroom full of strangers, the first step is to unlock the door, throw away the key, and allow all to enter the castle doors if we want children to truly feel as though they belong, beginning with listening to what they have to say.

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Notes

ⁱ Connelly and Clandinin (1999) developed the term "stories to live by" as a narrative conception of identity, which links together experiential knowledge and storied contexts (p. 4).

ⁱⁱ Lindemann Nelson (1995) defines a counterstory as "a story that contributes to the moral self-definition of its teller by undermining a dominant story, undoing it and retelling it in such a way as to invite new interpretations and conclusions" (p. 23).

ⁱⁱⁱ Huber et al., (2003) write of peace candle gatherings "as a way to move forward, to talk about how children were making sense of their experiences, a space for children to speak their stories, to listen to others' stories" (p. 344).

^{iv} Smudging is an act of cleansing and prayer among many Indigenous cultures. Some of the traditional medicines used in smudging are sweetgrass, sage, fungus, and cedar, alone or together. The medicines are burned and the smoke that rises is wafted over one's body to cleanse the body, mind, and spirit. As you smudge yourself, it is believed that the rising smoke carries your prayers to the Creator. The school I worked in served mainly Indigenous children and smudging was common practice in the school, as well as a practice in my personal life.

^v Kokum means "your" Grandmother in Cree, Nokum means "my" grandmother.

^{vi} Huber, Murphy & Clandinin (2011) define the familial curriculum-making world as "parents'/families' and children's lives together in homes and communities where the parents and families are an integral part of the curricular process in which families, children/learners, subject matter, and home and community milieu are in dynamic interaction" (pp. 7-8).

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