

# *On Listening to What the Children Say*

VIVIAN GUSSIN PALEY

*The University of Chicago*

*A growing number of teachers and researchers are collaborating on research projects involving classroom learning; some teachers, however, become their own investigative reporters. Vivian Gussin Paley has developed a method for studying the young child in her classroom that is at the same time a new approach to teaching. In this essay, she explains how the method evolved and describes its effect in the classroom.*

Years ago, when I was a young woman in New Orleans, I led a Great Books discussion group that met at the public library. The participants came from many occupations and educational backgrounds, and they were all older and more experienced than I. Whatever advantage I had was contained in the lists of questions provided by the Great Books people, who also sent along the following directive: There are no right or wrong answers. Get everyone talking and then find connections—person-to-person, person-to-book.

The advice was sound: do the required reading, ask most of the questions, and manage to connect a number of the ideas that arise at each meeting. Unfortunately, I did not fare too well; something was missing from my performance—a simple ingredient called *curiosity*. I was not truly interested in the people sitting around the table or curious about what they might think or say. Mainly, I wanted to keep the discussion moving and to avoid awkward silences.

Soon after leading these discussions, I became a kindergarten teacher. In my haste to supply the children with my own bits and pieces of neatly labeled reality, the appearance of a correct answer gave me the surest feeling that I was teaching. Curriculum guides replaced the lists of questions, but I still wanted most of all to keep things moving with a minimum of distraction. It did not occur to me that the distractions might be the sounds of children thinking.

Then one year a high school science teacher asked if he could spend some time with my kindergarteners. His first grandchild was about to enter nursery school, and he wondered what it would be like to teach the youngest students in our school. Once a week he came with paper bags full of show-and-tell, and he and the children talked about a wide range of ordinary phenomena. As I listened, dis-

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tant memories stirred. "You have a remarkable way with children, Bill," I told him. "They never tire of giving you their ideas, and somehow you manage to use them all, no matter how far off the mark."

"The old Socratic method," he said. "I was a Great Books leader once up in Maine. It seems to work as well with kindergarteners as with my seniors."

Of course. That was exactly what he was doing. He asked a question or made a casual observation, then repeated each child's comment and hung onto it until a link was made to someone else's idea. Together they were constructing a paper chain of magical imaginings mixed with some solid facts, and Bill was providing the glue.

But something else was going on that was essential to Bill's success. He was truly curious. He had few expectations of what five-year-olds might say or think, and he listened to their responses with the anticipation one brings to the theater when a mystery is being revealed. Bill was interested not in what he knew to be an answer, but only in how the children intuitively approached a problem. He would whisper to me after each session, "Incredible! Their notions of cause and effect are incredible!" And I, their teacher, who thought I knew the children so well, was often equally astonished.

I began to copy Bill's style whenever the children and I had formal discussions. I practiced his open-ended questions, the kind that seek no specific answers but rather build a chain of ideas without the need for closure. It was not easy. I felt myself always waiting for the right answer—my answer. The children knew I was waiting and watched my face for clues. Clearly, it was not enough simply to copy someone else's teaching manner; real change comes about only through the painful recognition of one's own vulnerability.

A move to a new school in another city and an orientation speech given by Philip Jackson shook me up sufficiently to allow the first rays of self-awareness to seep in. He described a remarkable study done by two Harvard psychologists, Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson, who deliberately supplied several teachers with misleading information about their students.<sup>1</sup> In random fashion, children were labeled bright or slow by means of fictitious IQ scores. The teachers, I was shocked to find out, consistently asked more questions, waited longer for answers, and followed up more often with additional comments when they were speaking to a "smart" child.

I was shocked because I knew that one of those unsuspecting teachers could have been me, although certainly I listened more to myself than to *any* of the children in the classroom. Suddenly, I was truly curious about my role in the classroom, but there were no researchers ready to set up an incriminating study to show me when—and perhaps why—I consistently veered away from the child's agenda. Then I discovered the tape recorder and knew, after transcribing the first tape, that I could become my own best witness.

The tape recorder, with its unrelenting fidelity, captured the unheard or unfinished murmur, the misunderstood and mystifying context, the disembodied voices asking for clarification and comfort. It also captured the impatience in *my* voice as children struggled for attention, approval, and justice. The tape recordings cre-

<sup>1</sup> Rosenthal and Jacobson, *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectations and Pupils' Intellectual Development*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968).

ated for me an overwhelming need to know more about the process of teaching and learning and about my own classroom as a unique society to be studied.

The act of teaching became a daily search for the child's point of view accompanied by the sometimes unwelcome disclosure of my hidden attitudes. The search was what mattered—only later did someone tell me it was research—and it provided an open-ended script from which to observe, interpret, and integrate the living drama of the classroom.

I began using the tape recorder to try to figure out why the children were lively and imaginative in certain discussions, yet fidgety and distracted in others ("Are you almost finished now, teacher?"), wanting to return quickly to their interrupted play. As I transcribed the daily tapes, several phenomena emerged. Whenever the discussion touched on fantasy, fairness, or friendship ("the three Fs" I began to call them), participation zoomed upward. If the topic concerned, for example, what to do when all the blocks are used up before you can build something or when your best friend won't let you play in her spaceship, attention would be riveted on this and other related problems: Is it fair that Paul always gets to be Luke Skywalker and Ben has to be the bad guy? And, speaking of bad guys, why should the wolf be allowed to eat up the first two pigs? Can't the three pigs just stay home with their mother?

These were urgent questions, and passion made the children eloquent. They reached to the outer limits of their verbal and mental abilities in order to argue, explain, and persuade. No one moved to end the discussion until Justice and Reason prevailed.

After the discussion, a second, more obvious truth emerged. If the tape recorder was left running, what I replayed later and dutifully transcribed became a source of increasing fascination for me. The subjects that inspired our best discussions were the same ones that occupied most of the free play. The children sounded like groups of actors, rehearsing spontaneous skits on a moving stage, blending into one another's plots, carrying on philosophical debates while borrowing freely from the fragments of dialogue that floated by. Themes from fairy tales and television cartoons mixed easily with social commentary and private fantasies, so that what to me often sounded random and erratic formed a familiar and comfortable world for the children.

In fact, the children were continually making natural connections, adding a structure of rules and traditions according to their own logic. They reinvented and explained the codes of behavior every time they talked and played, each child attempting in some way to answer the question, What is going on in this place called school, and what role do I play?

"Let's pretend" was a stronger glue than any preplanned list of topics, and the need to make friends, assuage jealousy, and gain a sense of one's own destiny provided better reasons for self-control than all my disciplinary devices. A different reality coexisted beside my own, containing more vitality, originality, and wide-open potential than could be found in any lesson plan. How was I to enter this intriguing place, and toward what end would the children's play become my work?

The tape recorder revealed that I had already joined the play. I heard myself always as part of the scene, approving, disapproving, reacting to, being reacted to. The question was not *how* would I enter but, rather, *what* were the effects of my intervention? When did my words lead the children to think and say more

about their problems and possibilities, and when did my words circumvent the issue and silence the actors? When did my answers close the subject?

Once again, the decisive factor for me was curiosity. When my intention was limited to announcing my own point of view, communication came to a halt. My voice drowned out the children's. However, when they said things that surprised me, exposing ideas I did not imagine they held, my excitement mounted and I could feel myself transcribing their words even as they spoke. I kept the children talking, savoring the uniqueness of responses so singularly different from mine. The rules of teaching had changed; I now wanted to hear the answers I could not myself invent. IQ scores were irrelevant in the realms of fantasy, friendship, and fairness where every child could reach into a deep wellspring of opinions and images. Indeed, the inventions tumbled out as if they simply had been waiting for me to stop talking and begin listening.

Later, teaching at a nursery school, I found that the unanticipated explanations of younger children bloomed in even greater profusion. The crosscurrents of partially overheard talk lifted my curiosity to new heights. It was similar to watching the instant replay of an exciting baseball moment. Did the runner really touch second base? Did Frederick actually say, "My mother doesn't have no more birthdays"? What does a four-year-old mean by this odd statement made in the doll corner? The next day I am pressed to find out.

"Frederick, I'm curious about something I heard you say in the doll corner yesterday. You said your mother doesn't have birthdays any more." (Frederick knows my tendency to begin informal conversations in this manner, and he responds immediately.)

"She doesn't. How I know is no one comes to her birthday and she doesn't make the cake."

"Do you mean she doesn't have a birthday *party*?"

"No. She really doesn't have a *birthday*."

"Does she still get older every year?"

"I think so. You know how much old she is? Twenty-two."

"Maybe you and your dad could make her a birthday party."

"But they never remember her birthday and when it's her birthday they forget when her birthday comes, and when her birthday comes they forget how old she is because they never put any candles. So how can we say how she is old?"

"The candles tell you how old someone is?"

"You can't be old if you don't have candles."

"Frederick, I'll tell you a good thing to do. Ask mother to have a cake and candles. Then she'll tell you when her birthday is."

"No. Because, see, she doesn't have a mother so she doesn't have a birthday."

"You think because your grandma died your mother won't have any more birthdays?"

"Right. Because, see, my grandma borned her once upon a time. Then she told her about her birthday. Then every time she had a birthday my grandma told. So she knew how many candles to be old."

I turn to Mollie. "Frederick says his mother doesn't have any more birthdays."

"Why doesn't she?" Mollie wants to know.

"Because," Frederick answers patiently, "because my grandma died and my mother doesn't know how many candles old she is."

"Oh. Did your grandfather died, too?"

"Yeah. But he came back alive again."

Mollie stares solemnly at Frederick. "Then your grandma told him. If he whispers it to your mother maybe it's already her birthday today."

"Why should he whisper, Mollie?" I ask.

"If it's a secret," she says.

"I think Mollie has a good idea, Frederick. Why don't you ask your grandfather?"

"Okay. I'll tell him if my mommy could have a birthday on that day that they told her it was her birthday."

Why not just tell Frederick the truth: "*Of course* your mother has a birthday; everyone has a birthday." Tempting as it might be to set the record straight, I have discovered that I can't seem to teach the children that which they don't already know.

I had, in fact, made this very statement—that everyone has a birthday—the previous week in another context. I had brought a special snack to school to celebrate my own birthday, and Frederick and Mollie seemed surprised.

"Why?" they asked.

"Why did I bring the cookies?"

"Why is it your birthday?"

"But everyone has a birthday. Today happens to be mine."

"Why *is* it your birthday?" Mollie insisted, attempting to give more meaning to her question by emphasizing another word.

"Well, I was born on this day a long time ago."

The conversation ended and we ate the cookies, but clearly nothing was settled. Their premises and mine did not match. What, for instance, could it possibly mean to be born on *this* day a long time ago?

A week later, Frederick made cause and effect out of the presence of one's own mother and the occasion of a birthday. The matter is not unimportant, because the phenomenon of birthday looms large. It is constantly being turned around and viewed from every angle, as are the acts of going to bed, going to work, cooking meals, shooting bad guys, calling the doctor or the babysitter—to name just a few of the Great Ideas present in the preschool.

Every day someone, somewhere in the room, plays out a version of "birthday." Birthday cakes are made of playdough and sand, and it is Superman's birthday or Care Bear's birthday or Mollie's birthday. "Birthday" is a curriculum in itself. Besides being a study in numbers, age, birth, and death, it provides an ongoing opportunity to explore the three Fs—fantasy, friendship, and fairness.

"You can't come to my birthday if you say that!"

"You *could* come to my birthday, and my daddy will give you a hundred pieces of gum if you let me see your Gobot."

Any serious observation made about a birthday is worth following up, not in order to give Frederick the facts and close the subject, but to use this compelling material as a vehicle for examining his ideas of how the world works. If I am to know Frederick, I must understand, among many other things, how he perceives his mother's birthday and his grandfather's permanence.

As the year progresses I will pick up the threads of these and other misconceptions and inventions in his play, his conversation, his storytelling, and his responses to books and poems. He will make connections that weave in and out of



imagined and real events, and I will let my curiosity accompany his own as he discards old stories and creates new ones.

My samples of dialogue are from the kindergarten and nursery school, the classes I teach. But the goal is the same, no matter what the age of the student; someone must be there to listen, respond, and add a dab of glue to the important words that burst forth.

The key is curiosity, and it is curiosity, not answers, that we model. As we seek to learn more about a child, we demonstrate the acts of observing, listening, questioning, and wondering. When we are curious about a child's words and our responses to those words, the child feels respected. The child *is* respected. "What are these ideas I have that are so interesting to the teacher? I must be somebody with good ideas." Children who know others are listening may begin to listen to themselves, and if the teacher acts as the tape recorder, they may one day become their own critics.

Reading between the lines is both easier and harder when the setting is preschool. It is easier because young children rehearse their lines over and over in social play and private monologues, without self-consciousness; older children have already learned to fear exposing their uncommon ideas. On the other hand, the young child continually operates from unexpected premises. The older student's thinking is closer to an adult's and easier to fathom: the inevitability of birthdays is not an issue in the third grade, and the causal relationship between age and candles has long since been solved. Yet, third graders and high school students struggle with their own set of confusions, fantasies, and opinions that need to be listened to, studied, compared, and connected.

The fact that the thoughts of the teacher and student are furthest apart in preschool makes it a fruitful place for research and practice in the art of listening to what children say and trying to figure out what they mean. My curiosity keeps me there, for I still cannot predict what children of three and four will say and do. One must listen to them over long periods of time. Being their teacher provides me the rare luxury of living with my subjects for two years. Like a slow-motion Polaroid developing its images, piece by piece, over many months, the children's patterns of thought and speech need much time to be revealed.

An early conversation with a group of three-year-olds convinced me that these were the children who would best prove my assumption that the first order of reality in the classroom is the student's point of view, for here the pathways to knowledge lead directly through the doll corner and the building blocks. For me this is where the lessons are to be found.

Carrie has her own version of hide-and-seek, in which she pretends to hide and pretends to seek. She hides a favorite possession, then asks a teacher to help her find it. She pretends to look for it as she takes the teacher directly to the missing item. "Oh, here's my dolly's brush!" she squeals delightedly. All these games resist the unknown and the possibility of loss. They are designed to give the child control in the most direct way.

Sometimes, however, the child has no control; something is really missing. Then the threes are likely to approach the problem as if the question is "What is *not* missing?" This is exactly what happens when I try to direct the children's atten-

tion to an empty space in the playground. Over the weekend, an unsafe climbing structure has been removed. The doll corner window overlooks the area that housed the rickety old frame.

"See if you can tell what's missing from our playground?" I ask.

"The sandbox."

"The squirrely tree."

"The slide."

"But I can *see* all those things. They're still in the playground. Something else was there, something very big, and now it's gone."

"The boat."

"Mollie, look. There's the boat. I'm talking about a big, brown, wooden thing that was right there where my finger is pointing."

"Because there's too much dirt."

"But what was on top of the place where there's too much dirt?"

"It could be grass. You could plant grass."

Libby and Samantha, four-year-olds, see us crowded around the window and walk over to investigate. "Where's the climbing house?" Libby asks. "Someone stole the climbing house."

"No one stole the house, Libby. We asked some men to take it down for us. Remember how shaky it was? We were afraid somebody would fall."

The threes continue staring, confused. I should have anticipated their response and urged that the structure be dismantled during school hours.<sup>2</sup>

If my words contain more stories than theories, it may be that I have taken on the young child's perspective, which seems to be organized around the imperative of *story*. I am still listening to what the children say, but since the younger children disclose more of themselves as characters in a story than as participants in a discussion, I must now follow the plot as carefully as the dialogue. School begins to make sense to the children when they pretend it is something else. And teaching, in a way, makes sense to me when I pretend the classroom is a stage and we are all actors telling our stories.

We do more than tell our stories; we also act them out. The formal storytelling and acting that often arise out of and run parallel to the children's fantasy play have become a central feature of our day. The children's stories form the perfect middle ground between the children and me, for they enable us to speak to one another in the same language. Much to my surprise, when I moved from the kindergarten to the nursery school, I found that the storytelling and acting were accepted with equal enthusiasm as the natural order, for nearly everything there takes on more recognizable shape in fantasy.

If, in the world of fantasy play, four- and five-year-olds may be called characters in search of a plot, then the three-year-old is surely a character in search of a character.

Place this three-year-old in a room with other threes, and sooner or later they will become an acting company. Should there happen to be a number of somewhat older peers about to offer stage directions and dialogue, the metamorphosis will come sooner rather than later. The dramatic images that flutter through their

<sup>2</sup> Vivian Gussin Paley, *Mollie is Three* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 69–70. Many of the excerpts from *Mollie is Three* do not conform to the original text. The author has taken the liberty of adding a word or phrase to clarify the extracted passages.

minds, as so many unbound stream of consciousness novels, begin to emerge as audible scripts to be performed on demand.<sup>3</sup>

Possibilities for connecting play and outside events are fleeting, but the teacher who listens carefully has many opportunities to apply the glue. In the following episode, Mollie joins the older girls for a pretend valentine party in the doll corner. Here the play is more real to her than the actual event to come. My task is to help Mollie connect the doll corner reality to the classroom celebration — quite different from the usual procedure of connecting *my* reality to a classroom celebration. This is the doll corner version of the holiday.

“Ding-dong. Ring-ring.”

“Come in. Who is it?”

“Trick or treat valentine.”

“Don’t say trick or treat to our house. The baby is sleeping. Don’t ring the bell.”

“I’m making valentines for the baby. ‘I love you.’ This spells ‘I love you.’ ”

“Teacher, can you write ‘I love you’ on my baby valentines? This is my valentine to get married and have a baby. This is Valentine’s Day.”

“Are you having a valentine party?” I ask Mollie.

“It’s the baby’s birthday valentine. I’m giving everyone whoever is nice a valentine.”

When Valentine’s Day arrives Mollie is surprised that her picture valentines are meant to be given away.

“But Mollie, that’s why your mother bought them. You’re supposed to give one to each child.”

“No, it’s for me,” Mollie insists, starting to cry. “It says M-O-L-L-I-E.”

“Mother wrote your name so the children will know they’re from you.”

She cries vigorously. “I have to bring them home. My mommy said.”

“Okay, Mollie. Let’s put them back in the box.”

Instantly the tears stop. “I’m telling a valentine story and it has a monkey climbed a tree. Then he fell down on a cushion. Then another monkey came.”

“Which is the part about Valentine’s Day?”

“The part about the monkey climbed a tree.” Mollie looks at her box of valentines, then at the table filled with lacy red hearts. Today’s event is controlled by others; she can think only of a monkey climbing a tree.

The image of the doll corner valentine party suddenly fills my mind and I gather the children around me. “I have a valentine story for us to act out. Once upon a time there was a valentine family with a mother, father, sister, brother, and baby. They were all busy making valentines because it was Valentine’s Day and the baby’s birthday also. ‘We have to write “I love you” and give them to all the nice animals who ring our bell,’ they said. Ring-ring. Who is it? It’s the four bears. Good. Here’s your valentines. Ring-ring. Who is it? It’s the four squirrels. Oh, good. Here’s your valentines. Ring-ring. Who is it? It’s the four elephants. Oh, very good. Here’s your valentines. Ring-ring. Who is it? It’s the four rabbits. Oh, very, very good. Here’s your valentines. And all you animals must bring your valentines to the baby’s birthday valentine party.”

Mollie jumps up. “Wait a minute. I’m the sister. I have to get my valentines. I’m supposed to give them to the animals.”

Mollie has an entree into the holiday. Moments earlier she was an outsider, just as she was, in fact, to school itself during the first few weeks. She worked her way

<sup>3</sup> Paley, *Mollie is Three*, p. xvi.



to an understanding of school through the same doll corner fantasies that now illuminate Valentine's Day. And I, the outsider to three-year-old thinking, am learning to listen at the doll corner doorway for the sounds of reality.<sup>4</sup>

A month later, Mollie tells her own valentine story. "Once a time the valentines came to a little girl that was Fire Star. It was her birthday that day they came. Her real birthday."

"And was it also the real Valentine's Day?" I ask.

"It *was* the real valentine's birthday and also the real Fire Star and also the pretend Fire Star."

Mollie struggles with the idea of a real and pretend Fire Star. She will attempt to explain this enigma to herself and others as she acts it out, and my questions will not always be of help. Often, in fact, my questions fall flat or add to the confusion. At such times, my expectations and those of the children may be too far apart—or the children *think* they are too far apart.

The children cannot always figure out the adults' relation to fantasy play. What powers do we possess that might affect the outcome? Can we, for instance, hear the children's thoughts?

"Why is Leslie doing that?" Mollie asks me. Leslie is her baby sister.

"Doing what?" I ask.

"Crying in my head. Did you listen?"

"Mollie, I can't hear the sounds in your head," I reply.

"Margaret, can you hear Leslie crying in my head?" Mollie asks.

"Yeah, I hear her crying in your house," Margaret says.

"She wants milk from her mama, that's why," Mollie informs her.

"I already knew that," Margaret nods.

I must have misread the question. Did Mollie want me to imagine that Leslie was crying? What do the children think about adults' literal approach to events? . . . Such is the concern, I think, when I unexpectedly appear at the door of the doll corner during a hospital drama.

"Come here, nurse," Libby says impatiently to Mollie. "Come here and undress the baby."

"Are you the mother?" Mollie asks.

"Yes, and Peter is the doctor. I'm sick too. Hurry, put the medicine on me. I cut my knee. Put on the stitches, doctor. Look in my mouth. Say you see bumps. Put us in the x-ray."

"Sh! There's the teacher." Mollie points to me as I pass by. "What if she calls this the doll corner?"

"She can't see us. We're in the hospital. It's far away downtown."

"Sh! She'll think it's the doll corner."

"Get inside the hospital. We're getting far away so she doesn't know where the hospital is."<sup>5</sup>

The vivid image of her sister crying and the equally graphic hospital scene present Mollie with a similar worry. Does the teacher understand the nature of the fantasy and, if not, to what extent do the fantasy and its players exist? When Mollie was two, she did not perceive the boundaries of these internal pictures; by the time

<sup>4</sup> Paley, *Mollie is Three*, pp. 92-94.

<sup>5</sup> Paley, *Mollie is Three*, pp. 102-103.

she is six, she will know what can be seen and heard by others. But now she may sometimes flounder in doubt between her reality and mine.

So often I drift around on the edge of their knowing without finding a place to land. Here, for example, is a peanut butter and jelly tale that continues to perplex me.

Of the eight children at my snack table, six ask for peanut butter and jelly on their crackers, one wants plain peanut butter, and one, plain jelly. My question: What did I make more of, peanut butter and jelly or plain peanut butter? The children stare at me blankly and no one answers.

"What I mean is, did more people ask for peanut butter and jelly or did more want plain peanut butter?" Silence. "I'll count the children who are eating peanut butter and jelly." I count to six. "And only Barney has peanut butter."

"Because Barney likes peanut butter," Mollie explains.

"Yes, but did I make more more sandwiches that have both peanut butter and jelly?"

"Because we like peanut butter *and* jelly," Fredrick responds patiently.

My question has misfired again and this time I can imagine several possible reasons. Since everyone is eating peanut butter and/or jelly, the entire group is included in the peanut butter and jelly category. In addition, "more" could refer to those who asked for more than one sandwich. Perhaps the word "plain" is the stumbling block or they may think I want to know why they chose peanut butter with or without jelly.

Another possibility: Peanut butter and jelly may be akin to Peter and the Wolf, in that the words are not easily separated. Thus, "peanut butter and jelly" also represents plain peanut butter or plain jelly.

. . . I anticipate the obvious response, but the children do not follow my thinking. Perhaps at another time they might have accidentally linked their images to mine. Of one thing I am certain: had I put my inquiries into dramatic form and given us roles to play, I would have been understood.<sup>6</sup>

Tomorrow we *will* act it out, but probably not with peanut butter and jelly. Images tend to stay fixed for a long time in the young child's mind. No matter. The proper message has come across: confusion—mine or theirs—is as natural a condition as clarity. The natural response to confusion is to keep trying to connect what you already know to what you don't know.

Next time the children and I may be on the same track, and meanwhile we are getting valuable practice in sending signals. As anyone who attends the theater knows, clues and signals are given all along the way, but the answers are never revealed in the first act. The classroom has all the elements of theater, and the observant, self-examining teacher will not need a drama critic to uncover character, plot, and meaning. We are, all of us, the actors trying to find the meaning of the scenes in which we find ourselves. The scripts are not yet fully written, so we must listen with curiosity and great care to the main characters who are, of course, the children.

<sup>6</sup> Paley, *Mollie is Three*, pp. 91–92.