

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications, Department of Child, Youth,
and Family Studies

Child, Youth, and Family Studies, Department of

January 1995

Review of Vivian Gussin Paley, *You Can't Say You Can't Play*

Carolyn P. Edwards

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, cedwards1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/famconfacpub>



Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#)

Edwards, Carolyn P., "Review of Vivian Gussin Paley, *You Can't Say You Can't Play*" (1995). *Faculty Publications, Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies*. 7.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/famconfacpub/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Child, Youth, and Family Studies, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Book Review*

You Can't Say You Can't Play by Vivian Gussin Paley, 1992
Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press 134 pp.
£ 7.95, ISBN 0 674 96590 6 (paperback);
£ 15.95, ISBN 0 674 96589 2 (hardback)

You Can't Say You Can't Play recounts a teacher's attempts to undo the habit of exclusion in her kindergarten classroom. In this case, the exclusion that has come to concern her is that which arises when certain children are consistently rejected from entering the other children's play. A MacArthur Fellow, Vivian Gussin Paley teaches kindergarten in a racially and socio-economically diverse classroom at the University of Chicago Laboratory School, but the problems she writes about could arise in any classroom group anywhere. The exclusionary behavior arouses memories in Vivian Paley of her own childhood. She watched, but did not feel powerful enough to go against, her classmates making outcasts of some children, such as an overweight girl with only one dress, while everyone, teachers included, deferred to the leading, confident children. At the age of sixty, Paley can no longer resist those early memories or her present painful empathy with the outsiders. She undertakes to go beyond the usual practice of making the outsiders more acceptable to the insiders, to find a way to break the chain of exclusion without violating the other chil-

dren's sense of justice or ruining the atmosphere of her classroom.

Several surprising things about Paley's approach to problem-solving with the children make the story engrossing and full of suspense. For one thing, she is genuinely ambivalent and does not know how imposing a new rule ("You can't say you can't play") will work out. She decides to proceed slowly, with a long period of talking and thinking aloud with the children before starting the rule. During this consideration period, she does two more surprising and fascinating things. To add more perspectives and richness of reasoning to the thinking of her group, she goes one by one to the older grades in the school and asks each group of children if in their opinion the new rule is fair and if it could work. She then reports what the older children say to her kindergarten group. In addition, because she believes so deeply in human beings' need to think, feel and communicate through the ancient medium of narrative, she offers the group, chapter by chapter, a long story starring a magpie that she has made up herself, using elements preferred by the children (animals and children with magic powers) and speaking to the moral issues at stake in an indirect, non-linear, metaphorical fashion. Throughout this long preparation period, she documents with a tape recorder much of what her children tell her, so that she can review and reconsider it and, equally important, be the group's memory and give their words back to the children at later moments.

The book speaks to, but does not thoroughly address, issues of the value of storytelling and mythology in moral education, the exceptional receptiveness of young children to adult moral concerns, the seeming need for young children to introduce exclusion into their play and the distinction between

* Published in *Journal of Moral Education* 24:1 (1995), pp. 80–81. Copyright © 1995 Carfax Publishing Company; used by permission.

public and private domains and how that intersects with classroom life.

Although I wished she had, she does not address whether the undesired language of “bosses,” so frequent in her school, might not be an unintended outcome of their routine of storytelling (with storytellers being the ones who select the roles for group storyacting). On a more general level, although exclusion and rejection are seen in the spontaneous behavior of children everywhere, why are issues surrounding exclusion and inclusion so especially painful, poignant and fraught with moral implications for adults in this country, recurring again and again in our history of ideas? Does it have to do with the relative weakness of family and kinship groupings, or the presence of wave after wave of immigrant groups? Whatever the answer, this beautifully written book by Vivian Paley will prove helpful and inspiring to teachers, parents and other readers who want to learn about one teacher's respectful, non-punitive, non-ideological and ultimately successful approach to opening up complex moral issues with young children and encouraging them to look for new language and images for thinking about themselves and others both as individuals and as parts of a larger community.

Carolyn Pope Edwards