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

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Book Review

You Can’t Say You Can’t Play by Vivian Gussin Paley, 1992
£ 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 Chi-
cago Laboratory School, but the problems she writes about
could arise in any classroom group anywhere. The exclusion-
ary 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 every-
one, teachers included, deferred to the leading, confident chil-
dren. 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 class-
room.

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 narrate, 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 edu-
cation, the exceptional receptiveness of young children to adult
moral concerns, the seeming need for young children to intro-
duce exclusion into their play and the distinction between

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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