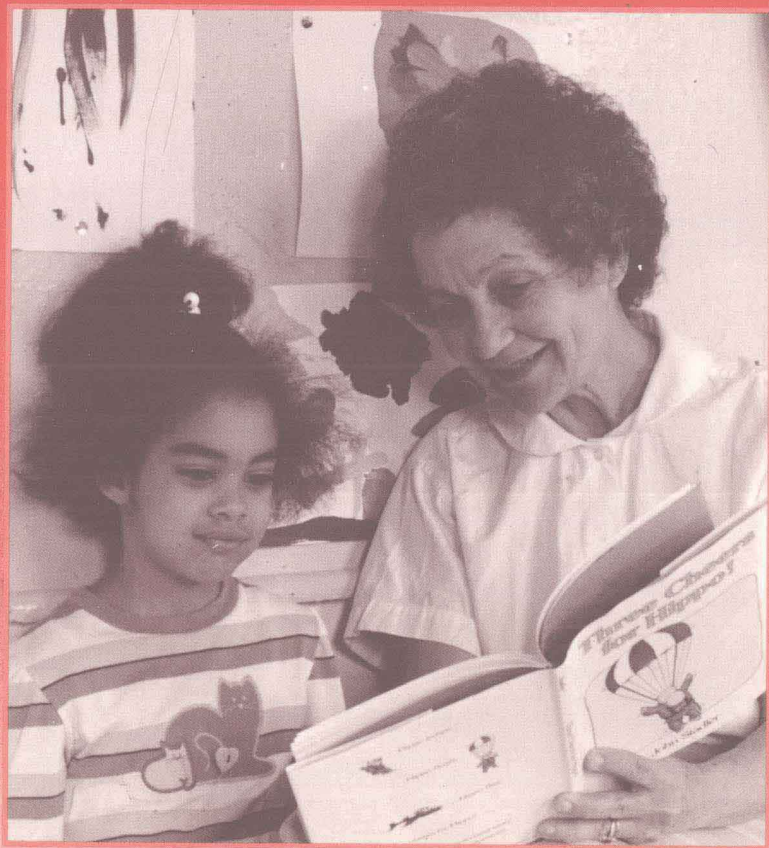


# White Teacher



Vivian Gussin Paley

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# Foreword

JAMES P. COMER, M.D., and ALVIN F. POUSSAINT, M.D.

FEW PEOPLE CAN WRITE about serious subjects from a position of deep personal involvement and remain objective, insightful, entertaining, and wise. But Vivian Paley has done it in *White Teacher*.

Not since Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *Teacher* has there been a book so singularly significant to all of us concerned about quality education. Like Ashton-Warner, Paley understands that children are surging, creative, energetic people who must channel their aggressions and acquire the skills of their society. She recognizes too that the classroom is a template, shaping children for adult life in a changing world. But Paley goes beyond Ashton-Warner.

Paley does not believe in preparing children for a society that is so recognizably imperfect. That would be a task filled with contradictions. In *White Teacher* she examines and challenges society's values as reflected in the classroom, not in a self-righteous and condemning way, but through the examination of her own prejudices, blind spots, and shortcomings that inevitably result from growing up in this society. She does not reject all that is old or traditional or lead a crusade against injustice as young educators are often prone to do. Nor does she discard proven techniques by substituting "mod-

ern" innovations for their own sake. In her microcosm—the classroom—she helps her kindergarteners develop the intellectual and social tools necessary to face the world as it is and to move it toward what it should be. She nurtures them to be able to survive society's hardships and helps them to feel that change can occur—that children can live and grow together despite differences in race and social origin.

There is no more important task in America today. We are disturbed that more than two decades after the Supreme Court decision barring school segregation, schools, particularly in the North, are becoming more segregated than ever before. We bemoan school violence between groups that are racially and economically different. We despair because people who are different cannot live together in peace. But these facts should not surprise anyone. Where in the rearing of children do we ever help them learn to appreciate and respect both differences in themselves and others? Without this emphasis we cannot expect to have a peaceful, stable, and thriving heterogeneous society.

In spite of the urgent need, many of our schools run from discussions of racial and social differences. In the media, stories of racial conflict or even ethnic awareness activities are minimal. And in our classrooms textbooks replete with racial and sexual stereotypes are still being used. Until our own book, *Black Child Care*, there was no comprehensive guide for black parents to help their children grow up with pride in their cultural uniqueness in the

face of negative societal attitudes and practices. Until Paley's *White Teacher*, few writers gave teachers a model for a systematic examination of their own prejudices or provided them with strategies to respond in constructive ways to the natural and healthy inquiries of children from various backgrounds.

Paley is effective in helping people appreciate themselves because she respects human differences but is always mindful of human similarities. It was a relief, and a basis for hope, to discover that she didn't start out that way; that she grew to be comfortable with differences through a personal commitment to fairness and a determined effort to understand herself and culturally different people. The role of the black teacher in this book and Paley's openness in receiving help and insights from her are particularly significant. Too often white teachers ignore or demean the potential assistance they can gain from black parents and teachers in understanding the black child. Paley does not fall into the trap of perceiving differences in black children as deficiencies. Born a Jew in a world controlled by Gentiles, she has sensitivities that may be greater than those of many people. But the fact that she was able to grow and change is what is most significant.

Paley's most beneficent trait is her ability to utilize unspoken questions and nonverbal cues as an aid in understanding her pupils. With the help of games, play, drawing, reading, and writing, she is able to use her perceptions to relieve the children's hidden fears and uncertainties. No area of inquiry

is forbidden. All of the transactional relationships in her classroom are opportunities for social, intellectual, and psychological growth. One can almost feel her pupils gain confidence and pride themselves as the stories unfold with suspense and vitality.

Vignette after vignette tells it like it is for the child, his or her classmates, and the teacher—what they thought and did about it and the outcome. You will laugh at the things which make children all over the world funny and cute—good intelligence limited by the fact that they have not lived as long as we adults, have not gained the kind of understanding of events that we have, but have developed their own “funny” formulations of the way the world works. You will occasionally be outraged by their hostility, threatened by their aggression, and warmed by their humanity and desire to be cooperative. Paley’s understanding that her role is to teach, that love and compassion are not enough, prevents her from losing teacher-child boundaries and slipping into the destructive role of an overaccepting do-gooder who gives all and expects nothing, or who even tolerates abuse to the detriment of the growing child. She remains capable of setting limits and confronting children with misperceptions, misunderstandings, contradictions, and self-destructive behavior. Above all she demonstrates that you can maintain student discipline with a warm, fair-minded, democratic but firm style.

Yet one must be reminded that Paley was teaching in schools that were well-supported, primarily middle-class, and predominantly white. She had the

materials and administrative help to make her work effective. Her classes were not overcrowded and they had a good cross-section of youngsters. Often she was able to enlist the support of parents and other teachers. The physical and social deterioration of an inner-city school might have overwhelmed Paley. This is not said to deny her skills and ability, but to point out that effective teachers function best under conditions that support their teaching efforts. Many more teachers like Paley might emerge in our public schools if adequate economic and administrative support were given to the educational system.

As we read this book we were reminded of how important schools and good teachers are to a child and thus to society. Much of what is called bad behavior and social problems could be prevented or ameliorated if we had more classrooms like Paley's and if a larger number of parents and families functioned in the same way—with patience, understanding, and humanity. This book is not for teachers only, but for everyone concerned about the well-being of children. We hope that many people will read it.



# Preface

"WHY DO YOU TALK so much about the black children?" The question comes from Elaine, who is a student teacher in my kindergarten class. We eat lunch together nearly every day and our conversation usually involves two themes: What does it feel like to be a teacher? What does it feel like to be a child?

Elaine continues: "I'll bet you comment three times as often about black children in this class, even though there are only ten blacks to twenty whites."

"Why do you think I do it?" The direction of authority is always revealed by who repeats the questions. Elaine tells me she doesn't know my reasons, but she thinks I feel less certain in my judgments of black children.

She is only half-right. My uncertainties about labeling behavior and intelligence in general have been exposed by my dilemmas concerning black children. My attempts to help black children feel more comfortable in a white environment have made me more aware of the discomfort every child experiences as he realizes he is being judged by someone who does not know him.

The child has already learned which of his charac-

teristics are seen as weaknesses by those who take care of him at home. Suddenly a stranger called "teacher" is trying to find out not who he is, but what he knows. The further away the teacher is from the child's cultural or temperamental background, the more likely it is that the wrong questions will be asked. The child instinctively knows the questions are inappropriate but soon figures out that *he* must be the one who is inappropriate. Thus he begins the energy-consuming task of trying to cover up his differences.

Each year I greet thirty new children with a clear picture in mind of who shall be called "bright" and who shall be called "well-behaved." Ask me where these "facts" come from and I will probably refer to my professional background. Yet I doubt that the image I carry of the intelligent, capable child has changed much since my own elementary school days. It has been intellectualized and rationalized, but I suspect it is much the same, and that image was never black. The few adult blacks I knew were uneducated laborers and I never played with a black child. During my first ten years of teaching, in a southern city and an eastern suburb, I had a total of three black children.

What then did I bring to this integrated school in which I have taught for the past five years? My luggage had "liberal" ostentatiously plastered all over it, and I thought it unnecessary to see what was locked inside.

The narrative in this book describes my experiences with black children. In the beginning it was

more comfortable to pretend the black child was white. Having perceived this, I then saw it was my inclination to avoid talking about other differences as well. Stuttering, obesity, shyness, divorced parents—the list was long. My awkwardness with black children was not a singular phenomenon. It uncovered a serious flaw in my relationship with all children.

As I watched and reacted to black children, I came to see a common need in every child. Anything a child feels is different about himself which cannot be referred to spontaneously, casually, naturally, and uncritically by the teacher can become a cause for anxiety and an obstacle to learning.

The role of the teacher changes. From the often negative function of judge and jury, the teacher can rise to the far more useful and satisfying position of friend. Strangers hide feelings and pretend to be what they are not. Friends want to know and talk about everything. It is a good environment in which to learn.

It has been useful for me to record my thoughts and feelings during this span of five years. We all have the need to explain ourselves. Teachers seldom have the chance to do so. Yet our behavior in the classroom becomes an important part of the "hidden curriculum." My story, like anyone's story, is a morality tale. You do not share your experiences without the belief that there are lessons that have been learned. And these lessons are invariably obvious ones.

The black child is Every Child. There is no activ-

ity useful only for the black child. There is no manner of speaking or unique approach or special environment required only for black children. There are only certain words and actions that cause all of us to cover up, and there are other words and actions that help us reveal ourselves to one another. The challenge in teaching is to find a way of communicating to each child the idea that his or her special quality is understood, is valued, and can be talked about. It is not easy, because we are influenced by the fears and prejudices, apprehensions and expectations, which have become a carefully hidden part of every one of us.

**1.** THE BLACK CHILD appeared on the second Monday of school. I would be the only teacher in the school to have a black child. I had the feeling I was getting her because I was most likely to treat her properly. This, of course, was ridiculous. Alma Franklin would be in my class because I was the kindergarten teacher and she was five years old.

I had grown up in Chicago, but my first teaching job was in the south. All the years that I lived in the south I taught in white schools. This was before desegregation. I told everyone that I wanted an integrated class. Society forced me to teach white children, I insisted. I became the school radical, and had fantasies about visiting colored children in their homes.

Even so, when I moved back north, it was to a white suburb. I was still teaching white children. The guilt was there. It had to be explained. Look, these kids have to be taught too. It's not as if I was teaching in a private school. This is a public school.

Alma was in my class for two weeks and still she had not spoken to me. She would not look at me, and she would say nothing but "Ysm." She liked the children and their activities from the start. Much

of what we did seemed unfamiliar to Alma, but she watched carefully and copied the other children quickly and well. From the first day, Susan gave Alma the role of baby in the doll corner. "Now, Alma, you be the baby. I'm the mother." Pale blond mother and dark brown baby. It gave me a good feeling to watch. There is no prejudice in this classroom. These children see no color difference.

Alma spoke with the children, but her voice was soft and her speech so slurred I could not understand a word. The children responded as if they knew her meaning. Whenever I approached, Alma stopped talking and lowered her eyes. I was puzzled and hurt. Why is she afraid of me? Nothing I did helped Alma feel comfortable with me. As children do in such circumstances, the others began to interpret Alma's needs for me. "Alma wants another cookie," "Alma can't do the puzzle," "Alma needs more finger paint."

I kept watching myself as I tried to relate to Alma. I knew that the relationship of a white teacher and a black child could be traumatic, but it was intolerable that a black child should fear me. I decided to call Alma's mother. She worked for a Mrs. Rossman.

"May I speak to Mrs. Franklin?"

"Mrs. Fran . . . ? Oh, Louise. Louise! Pick up the phone." A different voice said, "Who could be calling her?"

The extension was lifted. "Hello?" came the soft drawl.

"Mrs. Franklin? This is Mrs. Paley . . . I'm Alma's teacher."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Mrs. Franklin, could I make an appointment to talk about Alma?"

Silence.

"Uh . . . Mrs. Franklin, it's nothing serious. Alma seems so shy." My voice was shaky. "If I knew more about Alma I could help her relax more and talk more in class."

"Ain't Almy bein' good?"

"Oh yes. Oh heavens yes. Alma's very good. She's a lovely child. We all like Alma. It's just that she's so shy with me."

"Miz Paley, y'all tell her what's needed. Ef'n she's bad, she'll get a whippin'."

"No, no, not bad. Certainly not bad. Uh . . . ok, fine. We'll talk again soon. Alma's a very nice child. Yes, indeed. Bye now."

"Yes, ma'am."

I'll give her more time, two weeks is such a short time. I looked up Alma's record. No previous schooling. Age five and three months. Parents separated. Iberville, Louisiana. The report was filled out in a very uncertain script. Alma and her mother live at the Rossmans'. Housekeeper. How did they get to the Rossmans? Should I speak to the Rossmans? No, just wait, see what happens.

"Alma, you look like chocolate pudding." We were all sitting around having snack time. Paul repeated, "Just like chocolate pudding." A few children laughed. Most paid no attention. I became rigid and pretended not to hear. Alma was looking at Paul with interest. She did not seem to feel in-

sulted. Is it an insult or not? I couldn't decide. Do I react? To what? She does look the color of chocolate pudding. But he shouldn't say that! You never say anything like that to colored people.

I continued drilling myself. Why didn't I say something? What am I supposed to say? Say nothing. Alma's already uncomfortable with me. If I say anything to draw attention to her blackness she'll never talk to me. Who can I talk to about this? Never mind, I'll handle it myself. I don't need help.

Monday was the day Alma got hurt. She was watching some boys build with blocks. I had never seen her play with blocks. Suddenly she picked up a block, walked over to the tower of blocks and, with a huge grin, put hers at the very top. The tower came crashing down, one block hitting Donald. Red-faced, he jumped up and pushed Alma as hard as he could into the closet door. He yelled, "You bad brown doody!"

Alma's head caught the edge of the door. She screamed in pain and grabbed for her head. When she saw blood in her hands she began to wail and shake. I ran to Alma and frantically hugged her. I rocked her back and forth as she moaned. I could feel her rage and fear. Poor baby, what was she doing here in this sea of white faces?

The words rushed out of me. "Alma baby, my pretty colored baby. Now hush, y'all. Hush, Alma honey." I heard my voice; it had a sing-song tone that sounded like the Negro women I used to hear from my window in New Orleans. It was soft like Mrs. Franklin's.

Alma stopped crying. She looked up at me and



put her tiny dark hand on my face. Then she put her thumb in her mouth and gently laid her head down on my shoulder while all the children watched.

**2.** I THOUGHT A LOT about Alma that summer. She had left before school was out. Alma told me, "Mama, she miss Mama Bea and Papa." There must have been some Louisiana Cajun influence in Alma's family, because she always used the pronoun after the proper noun ("Mama, she . . ."). Alma and I had become friends. On her last day in our kindergarten she made a card for me on which she printed eight words she had learned to read. She put each one inside a flower.

I did not have my talk with Mrs. Franklin; perhaps we both avoided a conference, and their early departure took me by surprise. I managed quite well to make no reference in front of Alma to anything that was different about her. What I had once blurted out under emotional stress, I could not repeat under the cold light of reason and rationalization.

For example, I got some books about black children. One was called *Whistle for Willy*, by Ezra J. Keats. I wanted to ask the children, does Willy look like anyone in our class? Or maybe ask, would you like to have Willy for a friend? What if someone said, no, he's not the color I like? What if someone said, he looks like Alma, and it embarrassed Alma? What would be my purpose in all this?

I read the book. It's nicely done, and the children