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Unit 8 Paper

Part A:

When addressing the issue of educational inquiry there are several issues that must be addressed. First, one must consider whether the form of inquiry provides useful information that has educational and practical value. Secondly, one must consider the practicality of the form of inquiry. It must be feasible for both the short and long term. Education is full of trends that seem meaningful in the moment, yet over time prove to be either not useful or too demanding.

In light of these issues and the study in this course, I believe that participant observation provides educators with a form of inquiry that satisfies both of these issues. This is comparable to the form utilizing teacher experience, yet it broadens the inquiry with an ethnographic focus. In ethnographic participant observation, the educator is a bystander participating with people of another culture. As the educator begins to communicate and associate with people of another culture, he or she “learns along the way.” The educator is not seen as an outsider, but rather a participant in life within this new culture. It is a chance for the educator to learn from first-hand experience about how this new culture operates.

One of the limitations of ethnographic participant observation is that it requires an educator to assimilate into a different culture. This requires time, money, and the ability to travel and support oneself. Unfortunately, this is often not a practical option for many educators. While many educators seek grants and other opportunities for travel and observation, the resources are sparse and the opportunities are limited.

In our study of ethnographic participant observation, we encountered Mary Catherine Bateson who had several cross cultural experiences including time spent in Iran, Israel, and the Philippines. However, she also addressed the opportunity for ethnographic participant observation during her time at the MacDowell house in New England. “It is easy to imagine the pattern shifting as different groups come and go. Each new arrival is trying to decode the customs of the place, but with so much turnover it is easy to take a chance observation as a sign of ancient custom (Bateson, *Peripheral Visions* 162).

While our approach in this course was cross-culturally across national borders, I believe that this could be seen as a useful approach within the American sub-cultures. Success in schools tends to be linked to the area or subculture where they are located. Many teachers are encouraged to live in the same community with the school where they teach. This is a wise recommendation if you believe in ethnographic participant observation. In order to truly understand the students, an educator must engage with their lives and subculture.

In light of the current focus on the socioeconomic influence within our educational system, I believe that this form of inquiry is particularly useful. It is not helpful to simply know the facts about the socioeconomically poor, but we must understand their circumstances and struggles at a deeper level. We must be able to feel what they feel and think like they think.

Our situation is similar to the encounter that Bateson had in the Philippines with the death of her son. She had lived among those people long enough to understand that their seemingly uncaring and rude approach to grief was actually their way of showing care and concern. Bateson commented that, "If I had not had the preparation of my time in the village, the most caring behavior on the part of Filipino friends, genuinely trying to express concern and affection, would have seemed like a violation (Bateson, *Peripheral Visions* 19)." By living in that culture, Bateson was able to change her instinctive reaction and to readjust her thoughts about their behavior. I believe that these same distinctions and learning experiences might be necessary if we truly want to transform our educational system and create a more even playing field for our children.

Despite the demanding time and money requirements required for ethnographic participant observation, the new information is useful as it is naturally acquired and assimilated. As one learns and experiences a different culture, his or her mindset automatically begins to change and become more understanding. It is not a challenging process for a person to learn how to use what was acquired.

The ease of utilizing newly acquired information is a tremendous advantage to ethnographic participant observation. Along with this, another benefit to this form of inquiry is the ease of acquiring the new information. Time and money is required, but it does not require lengthy writing or recordings in order to observe. Rather, the educator is simply a participant in the culture. The educator moves about the culture in a normal state of life observing through living. This is coined by the phrase "learning along the way". In ethnographic participant observation, the educator is encouraged to learn as he or she engages in the activities of daily life.

While ethnographic participant observation can be a very useful form of inquiry for educators, it is not limited simply to those who teach. One of the great benefits of this form of inquiry is that it can be conducted by all since it simply involves living and learning. Classroom teachers and educational researchers alike can both find success with ethnographic participant observation. Many of the methods studied in this course were geared towards one side or the other, but this method covers both areas. Since this is one of the criticisms in our educational system today, I believe that this is of great value for us. At times teachers feel that the people dictating the standards do not understand the classroom requirements and the educational researchers feel that teachers do not rely enough on theory.

By participating in ethnographic participant observation, we have the opportunity to bridge the gap in education both in the socioeconomic area as well as with mandated standards and issues of control. Along with being useful, the form of inquiry promotes a style of life-long learning which I believe most educators want to develop in their students. By participating in this form of inquiry as an active educator, we have the chance to model life-long learning for our students and often our actions speak louder than our words. I am a firm believer that my students will not always remember the words I say, but they will remember the type of person that I am. I want to model life-long learning and help my students aspire to be the best that they can be. At times it can sound cliché, but I believe that it is essential to the future of our students and our society. Ethnographic participant observation is a successful and useful way to model life-long learning and "learning along the way" for our students in a way that is useful and

practical, whether it be cross-culturally among nationalities or within the sub cultures of America.

Part B:

When I look back over our course I would be remiss if I did not remember the lessons that I learned from Vivian Paley. Of course, part of my attraction to her form of inquiry may have been from the fact that I am a fellow Kindergarten teacher, but I believe that my intrigue was much deeper. As I read *The Girl with the Brown Crayon* I was captivated by the things that she had learned through her students.

From my experience in the classroom, I believe that the longer we teach the more we realize what we do not know. Presently in my fifth year of teaching, I see and glean many pivotal lessons from my students that I never saw before. I have wondered if it was due to differences in class personality or my current situation, but as I read and learned from Paley I realized that it came from a change in my perspective.

Vivian Paley recommends a style of inquiry that is extremely demanding of time and energy from the educator. Many educators love to be in control and if we follow the form of inquiry modeled by Paley, we must let go of our need for control in our classroom. Paley directs her attention fully towards her students. It offers the question of what our purpose is as an educator. Are we merely teachers spouting knowledge for our students to perform well on assessments or are we looking to give our students a deeper sense of knowledge that leads to thinking, questioning, and continual learning? Paley says, "Each year I wait to be reawakened by a Reeny, just as she has entered school looking for a Frederick, a *something* to ponder deeply and expand upon extravagantly (Paley, *The Girl with the Brown Crayon* 10)." As educators we must look beyond the external standards and curriculum and seek to direct our class in a way that meets and teaches our students in the places that they find themselves.

I know what type of teacher I would like to be and if it is truly my goal to teach to my children's lives rather than just their minds, then I have no choice but to attempt to become more like Paley. Paley truly saw herself as copartner in her student's education. She reflects on this as she recounts a story at the end of her career about an interaction about making friends in her classroom. Paley reflects, "These are my friends too. They know my real name. And what if the mirror that holds my truest reflection is the one that hangs on the classroom wall? When I no longer hear the name 'teacher' will I be left with no name at all (Paley, *The Girl with the Brown Crayon* 89)?" Paley allowed her students to interact with her deepest thoughts, feelings, and emotions. She opened herself up fully to them and allowed them to learn from her while also teaching her. They were not teacher and student as much as they were learners together seeking truth.

Paley challenged her students constantly to think, reflect, and challenge thoughts. Yet as she expected that from her students, she expected no less from herself. That belief in reflection drove her form of inquiry as she kept a journal of her own experiences. She wrote to discover her own thoughts so that she could keep up with her students. This is a common form of inquiry today in that reflections are an essential part of many teacher education programs. However, it is a challenge to keep up that habit of reflecting as a teaching career begins. It is demanding both mentally and with time to truly stop and

reflect on the experience of a day in the classroom, but it can benefit both the teacher and the students tremendously.

An interesting part of Paley's form of inquiry as teacher observation is her collaboration with her teacher's assistant, Nisha. Paley was determined to learn and grow as they discussed classroom interactions on a daily basis. This required a great vulnerability on Paley's part. As teachers we believe that we are supposed to know how to teach and what children need. We have taken many child development courses and are experts in the world of children. Yet Paley opened herself up to Nisha with a vulnerability that showed her simple desire for growth both for her and for her students.

Paley was a model for her students both in and out of the classroom of the person that she wanted each of them to be. She was a lifelong learner as she reflected on things that she had learned. Paley never quit and gave up even up to the last day in the classroom. She allowed the needs of her children to triumph her desire for an easy year. "The truth is, I intended to avoid Leo Lionni in this, my last year of school. *Frederick* unexpectedly appeared in a packet of paperbacks, and Reeny immediately brought the book to Nisha to read (Paley *The Girl with the Brown Crayon* 11)." Paley let go of all her thoughts about her last year of teaching and met her students exactly where they were. She released her expectations of her final year and allowed the needs of her students to drive the curriculum.

This of course is a challenging thought in today's world of standards and accountability. However I believe that if we are true to our deepest desires that caused us to enter into the career of teaching, we need to step back from the political side of teaching and reenter the world of our students. I believe that there is a place for standards and accountability in our schools, but I also believe that there can be teachable moments where we as educators must be wise and address our students in their places of need.

So the question comes as to how I can incorporate Paley's form of inquiry of teacher observation into my life and my classroom. I am not sure that I have the stamina and energy to write as much as Paley, but I believe that as I take little steps and begin to record observations the knowledge will come. I may have to start slowly and just spend five minutes reflecting on situations and experiences from my day, but those five minutes can glean thoughts that would never come without the written reflection. Paley is correct that in some way written reflections draw us in to a deeper level than merely reflecting in our thoughts. She was a master of inquiry through teacher observation.