

# **White Teacher Study Guide**

## **White Teacher by Vivian Paley**

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# Plot Summary

White Teacher is a non-fiction book written by kindergarten teacher Vivian Gussin Paley. Mrs. Paley shares with honesty her experiences teaching in an integrated school during a time when racial tensions were at their highest in the world outside of her classroom. Mrs. Paley wanted to be the best teacher she could be to all her students, but was unsure how to address racial differences within the classroom. Advised to ignore race and focus on behavior, Mrs. Paley quickly came to the realization that ignoring race gave the wrong message to both the black and white children. Mrs. Paley began openly acknowledging race in her classroom while at the same time tackling many of her own struggles with race and racial stereotypes that influenced her every action in and out of the classroom. White Teacher is an honest, direct look at the struggle teachers face in their attempts to address these complicated issues and shares her solutions as well as the behaviors and attitudes she continues to struggle with.

Mrs. Paley attended college in the south and therefore her first days in the classroom were in southern classrooms. When Mrs. Paley returned to the Midwest where she had been raised, she found herself teaching in an all-white school even though she believed she should be teaching both black and white children. When Mrs. Paley was asked to teach a single black child in her all white school, she did not know how to address the issue of racial differences. The child, Alma, ignored Mrs. Paley and most of the other children, as though uncertain how to interact with them. Mrs. Paley reached out to Alma and her family, but nothing seemed to work until the day Mrs. Paley consoled Alma after she had gotten hurt, using words that might have been spoken by a black woman. Alma began to trust Mrs. Paley after that incident.

The following year Mrs. Paley had two black children in her classroom. One of these children, a young boy named Fred, was infantile in his speech and often acted out, disrupting the class. These behaviors caused other teachers to suggest Mrs. Paley have the young man removed from her classroom, but they never said anything like that about the other children who behaved in a similar manner. Mrs. Paley went to her colleagues and asked for suggestions about how to deal with the racial differences between these black students and the white students. Mrs. Paley was advised to ignore race and focus on behavior. Mrs. Paley knew this was not the right thing to do, but also knew she had no other suggestions.

Mrs. Paley took a job at a private school a short time after this that was integrated. Many of the classrooms had a mix of white, black, and Asian students. When Mrs. Paley met with a parent, the parent informed her that she did not want her child's race to be ignored. The woman felt that being black was special and should be celebrated. Mrs. Paley began using open dialogue with her students about race, making comparisons between her skin and the skin of another child or telling a child how beautiful his or her skin made them. At the same time, however, Mrs. Paley came across a child who used white as a derogatory term, similar to those used to hurt black people. Mrs. Paley found this uncomfortable and she did not know how to deal with it, essentially ignoring the job.



The child who hurt Mrs. Paley by calling her a white lady had other behavior problems. Mrs. Paley dealt with them by using a new technique taught to her at a seminar. When these techniques did not work, Mrs. Paley punished the boy in a time-out chair, eventually gaining some results. Mrs. Paley also helped this boy stop using foul language by limiting his use of certain words every day. Mrs. Paley was deeply affected by this boy, not just because of his behavior, but because of the sense of being different, of being an outsider, that more than likely caused the poor behavior. Mrs. Paley was raised to be a Jew before anything else. Mrs. Paley knew what it was like to attend an integrated school and to feel as though the Jewish part of her was being ignored by the adults and children around her.

Another year, Mrs. Paley had a young girl in her class who created Jewish club, embracing this fact about herself and rejecting all else. Mrs. Paley reacted to this child and her needs by sharing with the class music from different cultures to show that everyone has something special about them and that no two children or cultures are exactly alike. Another year, Mrs. Paley had a student teacher who was black. Mrs. Paley watched this student teacher closely, learning many ways to deal with the racial difference that often left her unable to decide on a proper course of action. Later, this student teacher went to teach in an all black school, insisting that she was needed there. The student also suggested that Mrs. Paley go to an all black school as well, but Mrs. Paley knew she was not ready to teach an all black class.

Yet another year, Mrs. Paley had a young black girl in her class who did not know how to play. At first Mrs. Paley thought the child might have a learning disability, but she soon came to realize that the child had not been allowed to play with other black children because her father disapproved of the black children in their neighborhood, leaving the little girl with the impression that all black children were bad and not to be played with. Slowly, Mrs. Paley managed to help this little girl feel safe to play with the other children. In the same class there was a strong group of black girls who often played exclusively with one another. Mrs. Paley watched their play, learning that their choice of friends had little to do with race and more to do with personality.

One afternoon, a friend of Mrs. Paley's pointed out to her that she spoke of the children in her classroom in racial terms, often referring to one group of girls as the black girls. Mrs. Paley realized that she still had a long ways to go in her thoughts in regards to race and that she had to change her own thought processes before she would ever be able to make a difference in the classroom for these children. Mrs. Paley had learned a lot about teaching an integrated classroom, but she still had a long ways to go.



# Chapters 1-2

## Chapters 1-2 Summary and Analysis

Mrs. Paley is a kindergarten teacher in a mixed-race school. Mrs. Paley is white and has often struggled with how to deal with the racial differences between her black and white students. Mrs. Paley has used many approaches to this subject and shares her struggles to find the appropriate approach in this book.

In the preface, Mrs. Paley was having lunch with a student teacher who asked why she talked so much about the black children. Mrs. Paley was surprised by this question. The student teacher suggested that Mrs. Paley was less confident in her judgment where these students were concerned and this was why she reacted as she did. Mrs. Paley thought this through and realized she did not discuss other differences among the children as readily. As a result, Mrs. Paley began keeping notes about her classrooms in order to explain herself, if only to herself, in her actions where black children were concerned. In chapter 1, Mrs. Paley's first teaching jobs were all in the south where she taught in white schools. Mrs. Paley always thought she would like to teach in an integrated school. Mrs. Paley had the first black child in her classroom after she moved back to Chicago and began working in a white suburban school. This child, Alma Franklin, was polite and quiet, often spoke only to the children and refused to interact with Mrs. Paley. Mrs. Paley grew concerned and called Alma's mother, but the mother did not understand Mrs. Paley's concern. Finally, when Alma was injured one afternoon and Mrs. Paley comforted her, a trust began to grow.

In chapter 2, Mrs. Paley made a point not to make reference to anything different about Alma in front of the other children. However, when Mrs. Paley read a book to the students with black characters, she was surprised when one student suggested that all black people are poor. The following year, two more black children were placed in Mrs. Paley's classroom. One child named Fred was a rough child with infantile speech that caused many of the other teachers to suggest Mrs. Paley have him moved to a special class. These same teachers never made the same suggestion about other students in the class with the same behaviors and speech patterns. Mrs. Paley went to her colleagues and asked advice on how to handle racial differences in the classroom. These colleagues advised Mrs. Paley to ignore race and focus on behavior, but Mrs. Paley knew this was not the right approach. However, Mrs. Paley did not know how else to deal with the differences. Mrs. Paley noted many comments and behaviors in her classroom that year referring to color, but she did nothing to stop these behaviors except to punish poor behavior.

These first few chapters of the book introduce the theme of racial differences and teaching children of different racial backgrounds. Mrs. Paley is a teacher who wants to teach black children, but has no idea how to deal with the differences in race that these children bring to the classroom. Mrs. Paley is advised to ignore race, but her experiences suggest that ignoring the differences only creates more problems. One little



boy thinks that all black people are poor based on racial stereotypes. At other times, Mrs. Paley noticed a black child rejecting another black child because she wants to partner with a white child. Mrs. Paley is concerned about these occurrences, but does not know how to deal with them without creating a larger problem or hurting someone's feelings. As a consequence, Mrs. Paley does nothing, but she is not happy with her lack of action.



# Chapters 3-6

## Chapters 3-6 Summary and Analysis

In chapter 3, outside the school Mrs. Paley and her friends and neighbors participated in civil rights protests and urged the school district to bus black children into their schools. Mrs. Paley moved during this time and took a job at a private integrated school. Mrs. Paley was excited by the chance she was to have to teach a classroom that more accurately reflected the world outside the classroom. During the first few weeks at this new school, two things happened to open the issue of black children being taught by a white teacher for Mrs. Paley. First was a conversation with her own mother about when Mrs. Paley was a child attending public school where Mrs. Paley recalled being the only Jewish child, but her mother recalled that more than a third of the class was Jewish. The second was a conversation with a black parent who insisted that ignoring the racial differences between her children and the white children in the class was robbing her children of something that made them special.

In chapter 4, a young boy in Mrs. Paley's class uses foul language and refuses to talk to Mrs. Paley because she is white. Mrs. Paley felt that this use of the word white was derogatory and she felt attacked. Mrs. Paley ignored this incident, but the child, Steven, was a constant trouble maker. Mrs. Paley tried to use a new technique she had learned at a seminar, ignoring the poor behavior but praising the good behavior. This technique did not help the poor behavior. Finally Mrs. Paley decided to place Steven in a time-out chair for his bad behavior. The first time, Mrs. Paley had to hold Steven in the chair, but after three days, the behavior began to improve.

In chapter 5, Mrs. Paley began mentioning the differences in race in her classroom. Mrs. Paley would often offer compliments that would point out racial differences among her students. Mrs. Paley's actions encouraged the children to discuss these differences as well. At the same time, Steven continued to use foul language. Mrs. Paley placed a limit on the number of times Steven could use these words and eventually he stopped using them. In the end, Mrs. Paley believed her use of these discipline techniques helped Steven, as well as allowing Steven's parents to recognize Steven's emotional problems and to seek out help for him. In chapter 6, Mrs. Paley recalls early in her career she had a child similar to Steven who made her dislike her job, but she felt comfortable dealing with his behavior because he was Jewish like her. Also in the south Mrs. Paley had no trouble chastising students who used derogatory names for blacks. However, in her new school, Mrs. Paley finds herself unsure what to do when black children use these words.

Mrs. Paley says in these chapters that she always wanted to teach an integrated classroom. However differences in race are beginning to make themselves known to her and she is unsure how to deal with them. Mrs. Paley draws on her experiences as a Jewish child, but comes to realize that her experiences differ from how her mother saw them. At the same time, Mrs. Paley is faced with a black mother who wants her child's



race to be celebrated. However, she does not give any suggestions on how Mrs. Paley might do this. Mrs. Paley stops ignoring race, in fact she begins giving compliments to children based on their racial characteristics, as in the color of their skin. However, poor behavior on behalf of one black child leaves Mrs. Paley with the impression that this is not enough. This troubled child reminds Mrs. Paley of a child she struggled to discipline early in her career, once again highlighting the differences between the all-white classroom and the integrated classroom, especially how Mrs. Paley feels about her actions in these differences.





# Chapters 7-10

## Chapters 7-10 Summary and Analysis

In chapter 7, Arlene was the smartest girl in the class. One day, Arlene and another girl, Mary Anne, discovered both their mother's were becoming doctors. Mary Anne was white. Both children were from the same social background, yet Mrs. Paley found herself deeply pleased with Arlene's intelligence and found herself questioning this pleasure. Two other black girls in that class were from a lower economic background and would often speak ethnic speech. This implied to Mrs. Paley that the girls were not of the same intelligence of Arlene and Mary Anne until she learned one of the girls' sister was the smartest in her own class. This information made Mrs. Paley not only take a closer look at her own personal economic prejudices, but to realize that ethnic speech had little to do with the intelligence of the speaker. In chapter 8, a new school year began and with it came Barbara. Barbara would go around and ask everyone if they were Jewish. One day Barbara organized a Jewish club, but would only allow white children to join. When a parent expressed concern, Mrs. Paley invited the parents to send music their children enjoy to class so the class could explore the music and traditions of different cultures. Mrs. Paley would also have the children share other things, such as pictures and different languages. Not only did these activities help Barbara learn to accept everyone, regardless of religion, but it helped other students feel welcome in the classroom, such as Carol who was embarrassed because her Taiwanese grandmother only spoke Chinese.

In chapter 9, a student teacher named Janet Albright came to work with Mrs. Paley. Janet was a forty-year-old black woman who had already raised her own kids. Janet helped Mrs. Paley with many of the issues surrounding race that Mrs. Paley was unsure how to handle. One of these issues occurred when a black child or a white child would reject a child of the opposite race. Janet treated the situation calmly, simply explaining to the injured child that the other child simply wanted a break and would likely be his or her friend again later. Janet was gentle with the children, made them all feel as though she liked them, and solved difficult situations with simple logic. At the end of her training, Mrs. Paley urged Janet to take a job at her school, but Janet insisted she was needed at an all black school. Janet even encouraged Mrs. Paley to go to an all black school, but Mrs. Paley chose to remain where she was. In chapter 10, two little boys in Mrs. Paley's class became good friends. One was black and one was white, but these seemed to have no impact on their relationship. However, when a loud black boy joined the class, the black boy began spending more time with the new boy rather than his white friend. These boys eventually began playing together again, but their friendship was never the same.

In these chapters, Mrs. Paley begins to explore other differences among her students beyond race. Mrs. Paley notes that she tends to have higher expectations for children of higher economical backgrounds, a fact that has little to do with race. Mrs. Paley begins to explore the religious and cultural heritage of her students when one particular student



begins excluding children from play who are not like her. However, it always seems to come back to race in a multiracial classroom. Mrs. Paley has a black student teacher who helps her to see that honesty is the best way to deal with many racial differences that cause friction between students. This student compliments Mrs. Paley on her concern over race and encourages her to continue her good work in an all black school where the students are predominately poor. The student teacher believes this is where teachers like herself and Mrs. Paley are most needed, but Mrs. Paley continues to believe it is more important to have mixed classrooms, touching on the theme of teaching students of mixed races, so students might learn from one another. To illustrate this, Mrs. Paley shares the story of two young boys who befriended one another even though they were of different races. Even though these boys did not remain best friends, they remained friends and expanded their friendship to include children of all races.



# Chapters 11-13

## Chapters 11-13 Summary and Analysis

In chapter 11, Mrs. Paley began a new school year. This class included Claire Mireau, the young daughter of West Indian parents. From the beginning, Claire appeared reluctant to participate in the activities going on around her, often refusing offers to be included in play. Mrs. Paley questioned Claire's father about Claire's background, but learned nothing that could explain Claire's behavior. As the week continued, Claire continued to refuse to play. Claire also refused to participate in group activities. The first time Claire ever spoke to Mrs. Paley was one afternoon at Boland Pond when another student was injured. Mrs. Paley became so concerned that she contacted a friend who was an expert in learning disabilities. However, Mrs. Paley quickly dismissed the idea that Claire might be disabled in some way. Mrs. Paley called Claire's parents in for a conference and learned that Claire had been forbidden to play with the black children in their neighborhood because her father did not approve of them. Mrs. Paley gave Claire's father some suggestion of activities Claire could do at home and arranged for Claire to stay after school once a week for extra play time.

In chapter 12, Claire began speaking to the other children when she stayed after school for lunch. Claire also began working at the art tables, often painting pictures in a single color. Claire began copying the pictures of other students, beginning to interact with the other students more and more. Finally Claire agreed to play in the doll corner with other girls in the class. One day a visitor came to the class and was curious about a game called take-ball. The visitor asked Claire to play the game. Mrs. Paley thought Claire could not play the game even though she had been shown several times. However, Claire played the game with the visitor like an expert. In chapter 13, Mrs. Paley noticed Claire was watching the other black girls closely, especially Sylvia and Ayana. Sylvia was a trouble maker, always causing conflict and disrupting the class. Ayana, on the other hand, was a mother hen who liked to offer consolation to anyone who appeared to need it. Ayana would often smooth over the hurt that Sylvia would cause among her classmates. Around Ayana, five of the seven black girls in the class that year formed a social clique that was nothing like anything Mrs. Paley had seen in her classroom before.

In these chapters, Mrs. Paley introduces Claire Mireau. Claire was unusual in Mrs. Paley's experiences because she did not appear to know how to play. Claire kept to herself and refused to participate in any type of activity despite repeated encouragement from Mrs. Paley. Mrs. Paley became so concerned that she thought Claire might be developmentally disabled in some way, but soon came to realize that Claire was a victim of her own father's prejudices. Claire's father felt the children in their neighborhood were bad and he refused to allow Claire to play with them. As an only child, this left Claire with no one with whom to develop her imagination. Claire slowly began to develop, however, proving her intelligence when asked to play a game with a stranger that Mrs. Paley was convinced she did not understand. Claire was highly

intelligent, she simply did not believe her father would allow her to play the way the other children in the classroom played, especially Sylvia who was unruly and disruptive. At the same time, a black clique had developed in the classroom, excluding all white children that left Mrs. Paley concerned about the social dynamic in her classroom, a theme of the novel.



# Chapters 14-18

## Chapters 14-18 Summary and Analysis

In chapter 14, a boy in Mrs. Paley's classroom came to class with an offensive t-shirt on. Mrs. Paley was shocked and called the boy's parents to complain. When Mrs. Paley explained that the t-shirt created a difficult situation, the child's parents agreed not to allow him to wear it to school again. This situation added to another in which a young girl called another girl a derogatory name. This causes Mrs. Paley to recognize that despite her efforts, it was the children who were making it easier to say black in the classroom, but also the children introducing the derogatory terms as well. In chapter 15, a white girl's father comes to the classroom to discuss Sylvia's behavior on his daughter. The father wants Sylvia removed from the classroom because she is causing his daughter to have nightmares. However, Mrs. Paley finds herself wondering if Sylvia's race has more to do with the father's concerns than his daughter's nightmares. In chapter 16, Sylvia hit Felice for stepping on her dress and causing her to fall. Mrs. Paley punished Sylvia while wondering if Felice's father had not been right about Sylvia. However, Mrs. Paley came to believe that Sylvia only needed to learn self control from the other students. When Sylvia played with a group of girls and got out of line, the other girls did not hesitate to kick Sylvia out of their game. A short time later, Felice and Sylvia become playmates.

In chapter 17, Mrs. Paley observes the dynamics of the social interaction between the girls who play in the doll corner. That year the doll corner was monopolized by the group of five black girls. Claire was excluded from this group, causing some concern for Mrs. Paley. When Mrs. Paley made the girls include Claire, they made her a maid, further upsetting Mrs. Paley. At the same time, a black girl named Joyce began claiming to be white, explaining that she only had a sunburn. Mrs. Paley helped Joyce by suggesting her white friend liked her just the way she was. Claire began to bloom during this time, making friends with the other kids, especially Joyce. In chapter 18, Sylvia was absent one day and the other students expressed a hope that Sylvia would never come back because of her disruptive behavior. Mrs. Paley felt this reaction reflected a change taking place among the girls who played exclusively in the doll corner. Around that same time Mrs. Paley's opinion seemed to be confirmed when Anna took a group of girls and moved to the blocks corner. This move pushed the boys out of their normal play area, causing the group of girls to combine their play with the boys who often played there as superheroes. This move also segregated the two racial groups within the class.

In these chapters, racial differences, a theme of the book, become clearer to Mrs. Paley and her class. One of these differences revolves around the use of an offensive name used to refer to black people. The blacks used this word both to empower themselves and as a derogatory term for people they are unhappy with. Mrs. Paley notes that as she and her students become more comfortable with using the word black, the children are also becoming more comfortable using words they hear in their home lives. At the same time, Mrs. Paley notices differences in the way students treat one another in her



classroom. A white father is unhappy with the impact a black child has on his own child while black students begin playing in exclusively black groups. Mrs. Paley does not want segregation in her classroom because it concerns her that students will not learn all they can from one another if they introduce segregation, but this isolation appears to be somehow natural to this particular group of students for reasons Mrs. Paley has not yet discovered but hopes to.



# Chapters 19-24

## Chapters 19-24 Summary and Analysis

In chapter 19, Mrs. Paley observed Anna, the leader of the mutiny from the doll corner and came to realize that Anna left the doll corner because she needed to learn to be a follower rather than a leader. At the same time, Anna was always open to new experiences, helping her make friends with Joyce, a child who was characteristically the same. In chapter 20, Mrs. Paley had a conversation with Felice's mother. Unlike the conversation with Felice's father, Felice's mother did not suggest the white children causing Felice trouble should be moved, but instead showed concern over the idea that Felice might have somehow invited the criticism these girls offered. Again, Mrs. Paley believed the color of the children in question reflected the reaction of the parent. In chapter 21, Mrs. Paley recognized during a conversation with a couple of black girls in her class that the black children were hesitant to make comments about the white race as a whole. Mrs. Paley also came to notice that a particular girl, Rena, appeared obsessed with black people. Every picture she drew features black characters, including traditional characters, such as Cinderella. This changed, however, when the mother of one of the black students came to class. The mother was white and she calmly explained to Rena that some black people married white people because they believe love makes a family, not race.

In chapter 22, Claire came to school on picture day dressed as a princess, surprising everyone. Later, the class acted out *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, Claire's favorite story, and then recited the story. This activity appeared to bring the class together as one, big community. In chapter 23, there was a boy named Kenny in Mrs. Paley's class. Mrs. Paley saw Kenny during the summer and he appeared to be a confident, happy young boy. However, in class Kenny was clumsy, insecure, and unhappy. Kenny constantly insisted he could not do things himself, such as creating superhero costumes. Kenny convinced a friend to make the costumes for him, but that boy eventually forced Kenny to make his own. Kenny did, unwillingly, but gained confidence from creating the costumes himself. In chapter 24, a child in Mrs. Paley's class became depressed and uncooperative. Eventually the little girl announced that her father had left their family and that he and his friends did not like the way she dressed. Another girl in the class announced that her father had also left. The first little girl wanted to know if the white girl's father was black and appeared surprised to know that white daddies leave too.

In these chapters, as the children in Mrs. Paley's class continue to develop, they begin to develop in ways unique to their experiences. Some of the children have trouble accepting people who are different from who they are until they come to realize that these differences are usually only skin deep. The parents and their opinions about race appear to have an impact on these children. In some cases the children appear to consciously or unconsciously harbor prejudices that affect the way their children interact with other children, such as Claire's father's prejudice against the black children in his neighborhood or Felice's parents' objections to Sylvia but not to the other, white children

who appear to be harassing their daughter. However, other parents offer positive messages for the children, such as the white mother whose husband is black and who explained to a troubled young girl that families are made with love, not defined by race. In other words, Mrs. Paley has come to the conclusion that events and attitudes outside of the classroom can sometimes influence behaviors inside the classroom.





# Chapters 25-26

## Chapters 25-26 Summary and Analysis

In chapter 25, the black girls began calling each other stepsister as a term of affection, a term of inclusion. However, Claire was not among those referred to as stepsister. The only reason Mrs. Paley could see for Claire's exclusion was that she was not of the same culture as the other girls. Claire was not from the urban American culture and had in fact been excluded from it by her own father. At the same time, a friend of Mrs. Paley's called her out for referring to this group of girls as the black girls, calling her use of this term a form of prejudice. Mrs. Paley recognized that fact and agreed to work on it. In chapter 26, Mrs. Paley wondered if she had made any progress at all, but came to the conclusion that she learned to say the word black, to acknowledge the racial differences between herself, the white students, and the blacks, which was progress.

These final two chapters take place at the end of the five year period over which Mrs. Paley was keeping her notes that later became this book. These final chapters observe the social interaction of the children, touching on a theme of the book, and comes to the conclusion that race is not the only factor in how children pick their playmates, only one factor among many. At the same time, Mrs. Paley comes to realize that even she, despite her open mindedness and attempts at making black children feel as comfortable in her classroom as white children, she still has some work to do on her own personal views and opinions. Mrs. Paley vows to work on these, concluding that everyone has opinions that are formed by our experiences, but everyone can work to change these opinions for the better.



# Characters

## Vivian Gussin Paley

Vivian Gussin Paley is the author of this book. Mrs. Paley was a kindergarten teacher in the fifties and sixties, during the days of the civil rights struggle that defined the era. As a teacher and a Jewish woman, Mrs. Paley felt as though it were her duty to teach black children and to give them a start in their education with an open-minded, caring teacher. However, when Mrs. Paley found herself face to face with her first black student, she did not know how to treat the issue of race in the classroom. Mrs. Paley was advised by fellow teachers to ignore the issue of race and to concentrate on behavior alone. However, Mrs. Paley quickly came to believe that by ignoring the issue of race all together she was giving her white students the opportunity to believe stereotypes and misinformation that they got from television and the adults around them.

Mrs. Paley began acknowledging color, first as an accident. Mrs. Paley spoke to an injured black girl as she imagined the girl's mother would, using the word black for the first time. This word soothed the child and allowed her to begin trusting Mrs. Paley. However, Mrs. Paley discovered that speaking of race felt uncomfortable on her tongue and caused her words to sound false. Then when a black child called her a white woman and said he did not have to speak to her, Mrs. Paley felt as though the child had stabbed her in the belly. Mrs. Paley did not know how to react to the child's anger. Finally, Mrs. Paley was confronted by a parent who was angry that teachers refuse to acknowledge her child's blackness, insisting that being black is a difference that makes her child special and that everyone should make the child feel proud of this difference.

As Mrs. Paley's experiences with black children grew, so did her ability to speak to the children about their differences and to incorporate music and literature of different cultures into their daily lessons. However, Mrs. Paley spoke to another teacher who one day pointed out that her thought process still suggested that she harbored some prejudice against her black students. The teacher pointed out that Mrs. Paley would speak often of a group of girls, but she would always refer to them as the black girls rather than by name or some other descriptive term. The fellow teacher pointed out that this was as offensive as if someone had described Mrs. Paley and a group of Jewish people as those Jews. Mrs. Paley recognized her mistakes and committed to changed her very thought process in her ever expanding attempts to teach black children alongside white children in as pleasant an atmosphere as possible.

## Alma Franklin

Alma Franklin was Mrs. Paley's first black student. Alma came to Mrs. Paley while she worked in a suburban school that was all-white. Alma was a quiet child who kept to herself most of the day, appearing to be skeptical and weary of making friends with the white children in her class. Alma was most weary about Mrs. Paley, often avoiding



contact and direct conversation. Mrs. Paley was so concerned about Alma that she attempted to speak to the child's mother about her behavior, but found Alma's mother unclear on the problem when she learned her daughter was well behaved and did not cause disruptions in class. When Alma was injured one day, however, Mrs. Paley found herself consoling the girl using words she thought the black women in the south might have used to console one of their children. This appeared to work, helping Alma to learn to trust her teacher. After this, Mrs. Paley began to believe that ignoring race was not the answer to the race issue.

## **Valerie Wood and Fred Barton**

Valerie Wood and Fred Barton were the second and third black children to be in Mrs. Paley's class. Valerie and Fred came from a kindergarten in another school that was overcrowded, and remained the only black children in the school where Mrs. Paley taught at the time. Both children came from lower class working families. Both children elicited a lot of curiosity from Mrs. Paley's fellow teachers. Many of them took note of Fred's infantile speech patterns and often violent behavior, causing them to ask if he should not be removed from the class. Mrs. Paley found this to be more influenced by Fred's color than his behavior because other students acted much the same as Fred, but their behavior was never mentioned. When Fred and Valerie came to Mrs. Paley's class, Mrs. Paley sought advice from other teachers about how to deal with the race question. Mrs. Paley was advised to ignore race and focus on Fred's behaviors. This made Mrs. Paley uncomfortable because she knew it was not the answer, but did not know what else to do.

## **Steven Sherman**

Steven Sherman was another black student in Mrs. Paley's kindergarten class. Steven was in one of the first classes Mrs. Paley had after taking a job at the Laboratory Schools of the University of Chicago. Steven told Mrs. Paley he did not have to talk to her because she was a white lady, causing Mrs. Paley to feel as though Steven were screaming racial epitaphs at her by using the word white. Steven also used foul language that Mrs. Paley was uncomfortable with and did not know how to deal with. Mrs. Paley was learning new discipline techniques the year Steven was in her class that she tried on him. These techniques required Mrs. Paley praise Steven for the things he did well and ignore the things he did wrong. When Steven continued to use foul language and hit other children, Mrs. Paley finally realized she could not ignore the bad behavior any longer. Mrs. Paley began putting Steven in a time-out chair to punish him for hitting other students. Mrs. Paley also limited the number of times Steven could use foul language. Both these techniques worked, helping Steven to become a better behaved child.



## Janet Albright

Janet Albright was a student teacher who came to work with Mrs. Paley for a time one year. Mrs. Paley was grateful for Janet because Janet was not only black, but she was older and more experienced in dealing with the behaviors of children. Mrs. Paley often struggled with how to deal with one black child who rejects another, or when a white child rejects a black, or vice a versa. Mrs. Paley watched Janet Albright deal with this very situation one afternoon and admired her calm reaction to the injured child rather than punishing either child. Mrs. Paley also liked that Janet would allow the children to play with her hair, allowing them to fulfill their curiosity about black hair. When Janet had finished her training, Mrs. Paley asked her to apply for a job at the Laboratory Schools of the University of Chicago, but Janet wanted to work in an all black school where she believed her training was needed. Janet suggested that Mrs. Paley go to an inner city school as well, but Mrs. Paley chose to stay with her current school and continue to teach in a mixed-race classroom.

## Barbara Marcus

Barbara was a student in Mrs. Paley's class who created a Jewish club. Barbara was a very outspoken child who would often ask students personal questions in front of everyone. Barbara was very bright and would often answer questions, even when they were not addressed to her. Barbara was Jewish. Barbara would push her Jewish beliefs on other students and frequently ask who was Jewish, including asking Mrs. Paley herself. Barbara created the Jewish club out of children in the classroom she liked, regardless of their true religious background, excluding black children because she believed black children could not be Jewish. Barbara was a leader, an outspoken young woman who often left Mrs. Paley speechless.

## Claire Mireau

Claire Mireau was the young daughter of West Indian parents who spoke both French and Cajun. Claire was shy and quiet, a child who often kept to herself. Mrs. Paley noticed almost immediately that Claire rarely played with the other children. At first, Mrs. Paley thought Claire might have a learning disability. However, over time Mrs. Paley came to understand that Claire did not know how to play. Claire had no one to play with at home and was instructed not to play with the black children in the neighborhood because they were bad. Claire was afraid to play with the children in her classroom because she did not want to do something that her father had told her was bad. Eventually, thanks to extra playtime Mrs. Paley arranged, Claire learned how to play. However, Claire would remain an outsider in the classroom for quite a while because it took her time to learn to adjust to the social expectations of the other children.



## Sylvia

Sylvia was a black girl who was in the same class as Claire. Sylvia was loud and obnoxious, often disrupting the class. Sylvia would play with the other girls, but would often be chastised for playing too roughly or for trying to take control of the play. Sylvia was a difficult child for Mrs. Paley, often disrupting the class, but over time Sylvia learned from the things the other children would tell her and became a calmer child. Sylvia soon learned that if she were to fit in with the children in her class she would have to behave in certain ways. Sylvia showed growth in the year in which she spent in Mrs. Paley's class.

## Ayana

Ayana was a leader in the same class in which Sylvia and Claire were in. Ayana was a child who cared deeply about others. Ayana would often be the peacemaker, handing out compliments in order to soothe over hurt feelings. Ayana did not like to see other children crying, so she would do all she could to offer comfort, even sitting next to Sylvia once when she was sent to the time-out chair. Ayana would often lead the play in the doll corner, instructing the children in their roles and suggesting plots they might follow. Ayana kept her group of girls together and even invited other children to join them.

## Felice Simpson

Felice Simpson was also in Claire and Sylvia's class. Felice's father disliked Sylvia because he thought his daughter was having nightmares because she was frightened of Sylvia. Felice's father wanted Sylvia removed from the class because of her disruptive behavior. However, Mrs. Paley believed Felice liked Sylvia and wanted to be her friend, so she told Mr. Simpson to wait it out, that Felice would stop having bad dreams about Sylvia. Later, Felice's mother approached Mrs. Paley about two other girls in the class, two white girls. This time there were no demands, just concern about the behavior of these girls and how it affected Felice. Mrs. Paley noted this difference in parental concern and wondered if it was because Sylvia was black and all the other girls were white, including Felice.



# Objects/Places

## Take Ball

Take Ball is a complicated game the children in Mrs. Paley's class learn to play. When Mrs. Paley and students attempted to teach this game to Claire, it seemed she could not learn it. However, when a visitor came and asked Claire to play, Claire played like an expert.

## The Doll Corner

The doll corner was a corner in Mrs. Paley's classroom where students could play dress up and act out domestic scenarios. This corner was often used by a majority of female students.

## The Blocks Corner

The blocks corner was a corner in Mrs. Paley's classroom where students were able to play with blocks. This corner was often used by boys who would play superhero or vehicle themed games. One year, a group of girls took over this corner when a group of girls took over the doll corner.

## Art Tables

Mrs. Paley had several art tables and easels set up for students to draw pictures and create art projects.

## Apples

Mrs. Paley had her students bring in thirty apples in a math exercise and then they made applesauce out of it for a cooking exercise. During this time, Mrs. Paley recognized a difference in Claire's comprehension of the situation compared to other students.

## Cubbies

Each student in Mrs. Paley's classes had their own cubby in which they could keep their things. Some children would also sit or lie in their cubbies during class time.



## **Time-Out Chair**

Mrs. Paley had a time-out chair in her classroom in order to discipline unruly children.

## **Whistle for Willy**

Mrs. Paley bought several books about and for black children when she first had a black child in her classroom. Among these books was *Whistle for Willy*.

## **The Three Billy Goats Gruff**

The Three Billy Goats Gruff was a favorite story of Mrs. Paley's and she often used it in her classroom for dramatic exercises.

## **Boland Pond**

Mrs. Paley often took her classes to Boland Pond, a small pond near their classroom where they could explore nature and watch the fish in the pond.

## **University of Chicago**

The University of Chicago is a well respected school located in Chicago Illinois. Many of the parents of the students in Mrs. Paley's classes either attended classes at the university or worked at the school in one capacity or another.

## **Laboratory Schools of the University of Chicago**

Mrs. Paley worked at the Laboratory Schools of the University of Chicago. This school was a private school that accepted children of all races, creating classrooms that reflected the society mix of the real world.

# Themes

## Racial Differences

Mrs. Paley grew up in Chicago, the daughter of Jewish parents who was raised to believe she was Jewish before all else. Mrs. Paley received her education both on the East Coast and in the South, creating for her a combination of social beliefs. Mrs. Paley was an eager young teacher who relished the idea of teaching children of different races in order to give to these children the wisdom and equality that she believed she could offer. However, as Mrs. Paley began teaching classes of mixed races she discovered things about herself that left her questioning her own sense of racial equality.

Mrs. Paley found herself unsure of how to address the subject of race. Most of the teachers with whom Mrs. Paley worked did not believe that the subject should be mentioned at all. The teachers believed there was no reason to point out the black child's race and run the risk of embarrassing that child. Therefore, the first few years Mrs. Paley taught black children, she ignored the race issue, pretending as though all her children were equal. However, this quickly became a problem. Mrs. Paley became aware that her white students had certain beliefs about blacks that were not always true. For example, one of her students suggested that all black children are poor.

Later, when Mrs. Paley began working at the Laboratory Schools of the University of Chicago, she met a black parent who was angry that other teachers had refused to recognize the racial differences between her child and other children. As a result, Mrs. Paley began pointing out these differences, bringing into normal conversations such comments as how beautiful a black child's dark skin was. This helped Mrs. Paley deal with the question of race in her classroom and helped her explain to all children the differences between the races without embarrassing a particular child.

## Teaching Children of Different Races

Mrs. Paley began her teaching career in schools that were in all white neighborhoods, therefore she rarely had a child of color in her classes. When Mrs. Paley took a job with the Laboratory Schools of the University of Chicago, her classes were multi-cultural, including children who were white, black, and Asian. In fact, many of her students were of mixed races as well. Mrs. Paley came to this school from schools in all white neighborhoods, therefore she had little experience with such diverse classrooms. This represented a problem for Mrs. Paley.

At first, Mrs. Paley was advised to ignore race and racial differences. This caused many children to get the impression that race was something to be ashamed of and to hide, therefore she chose to change this approach. Mrs. Paley then began integrating discussions of race into her classrooms, as well as exploring the music and literature of



these different races. This approach appeared to help ease racial tensions in her classrooms, but Mrs. Paley continued to notice differences in the social structure of play in her classroom. Not only this, but another teacher pointed out that Mrs. Paley continued to think of a group of her black students as the black girls. Mrs. Paley was advised that this was prejudicial and that she should work to not group these students together by race in her mind to prevent her from thinking in these terms and therefore acting in these terms. Mrs. Paley went out of her way to think of all her children as children who each had their own unique characteristics, helping to create a safe atmosphere in which they could learn.

## **Social Dynamics of Kindergarten Aged Children**

As a kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Paley spent her days observing her students in play. Mrs. Paley began to notice differences in the interactions between white students and blacks, as well as white and blacks among other whites or blacks. Mrs. Paley noticed that when students would chose who they played with, they did not always pick children of their own race. Many children would chose children whose characteristics were more like their own.

One year, Mrs. Paley noticed a group of black girls who tended to play together more often. Mrs. Paley noticed that these students had similar backgrounds and speech patterns. However, there were other students who would fit in with these backgrounds and speech patterns, but they were excluded from this group. Mrs. Paley also noticed one particular black girl did not spend time with other black girls, but preferred the quiet company of a white boy who liked to play alone much like she did. Finally, Mrs. Paley had a young girl in one of her classes who had never learned to play with other children because her father disapproved of the children in their neighborhood. This little girl would not play with the other children the first few weeks of classes and then refused to play with any of the black children because they represented in her mind the black kids in her neighborhood that her father disapproved of. However, as the year progressed, this little girl eventually learned how to play and to play with all the children, regardless of race.

# Style

## Perspective

Mrs. Paley was a kindergarten teacher at the time she wrote this book, therefore her perspective comes from her work in the classroom. The book is based on actual children who were in Mrs. Paley's classrooms through the early years of her career. Mrs. Paley's objective in writing this book was to discuss the uniqueness of teaching children of color during a time when racial equality was still being sought and tensions between races still existed. Mrs. Paley came to this subject through the experiences of a young Jewish woman who had herself suffered the injustices of society and was a student whose differences were ignored in an uneducated attempt at making her feel equal among non-Jewish students.

The perspective of this book works well because Mrs. Paley does not fail to share her personal experiences with the reader. Mrs. Paley also admits to making mistakes as she learned how to deal with the racial differences among her students. Mrs. Paley came into the field of teaching a young enthusiastic woman who believed that she could teach a multi-racial class that would make all students feel welcome and equal. Mrs. Paley quickly learned that teaching such a class would not be as simple as treating the children equally on the surface and therefore went through many years of trial and error before she finally found a way to deal with race without subjecting her students to conscious or unconscious inequalities.

## Tone

The tone of this novel is light. Mrs. Paley, as a kindergarten teacher, has taken on a subject that has a high potential for offense against one group of people or another. However, Mrs. Paley takes on this subject with honesty and the innocence that seems to be an important part of her job. Mrs. Paley makes no apologies to anyone, even when admitting her own inherent prejudice that has caused her to look at race in a way that separates her students into categories. Mrs. Paley does learn, however, to change her thinking and has written this book in hopes of helping other teachers learn from her experiences and treat race with the openness and honesty it deserves.

The tone of this book is appropriate to its subject. A book like this one could easily take on a more formal tone and can be written as more of a textbook rather than a relaxed story based on actual experience. The book could also have taken on an offensive tone that would suggest all teacher who do no deal with race appropriately are wrong. Mrs. Paley approaches this subject with such honesty that it would be almost impossible for anyone to be offended and with such a light tone that the book is almost amusing at points despite its controversial subject.



## Structure

The novel is divided into a prologue and twenty-six numbered sections. These sections cannot honestly be called chapters, though for simplicity they are, because they run together and often begin on the same page on which the last section ended. The book is very short, therefore the sections are also extremely short. The book takes place over a number of years, beginning with Mrs. Paley's first few years of teaching after graduation from college and through her early years teaching at the Laboratory Schools of the University of Chicago.

The book is largely about the recognition and treatment of race in the classroom. Mrs. Paley taught in a school where the racial mix reflected that of the real world. Mrs. Paley, as a white, Jewish woman, did not know how to deal with race when she had her first black child in her classroom. Mrs. Paley was advised to ignore race, but she quickly discovered that this presented a poor impression for all her students, black and white. Later, Mrs. Paley went out of her way to recognize the differences in race and to give students a favorable impression of these differences. However, even when Mrs. Paley thought she was doing well, she soon discovered that she harbored some prejudices herself despite her attempts to approach race without any preconceived notions.



## Quotes

"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." Preface, pg. xiii

"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 the 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."  
Chapter 1, pg. 1

"Our conclusions were these: more than ever we must take care to ignore color. We must only look at behavior, and since a black child will be more prominent in a white classroom, we must bend over backward to see no color, hear no color, speak no color. I did not argue against this position because I could not justify another." Chapter 2, pg. 7

"The outside world was struggling to get in and shake up our comfortable suburb. We organized a Human Rights Committee and had meetings and raised money for civil rights causes. We decried the absence of blacks in our community. We picketed apartment buildings in the center of town that did not rent to black families. Most of us who picketed lived in houses in all-white neighborhoods." Chapter 3, pg. 9

"As a child, I would never have wished to draw attention to my differences before a non-Jewish teacher." Chapter 7, pg. 29

"How much does it matter if a child cannot identify ethnically or racially with a teacher? Does it matter at all? If the teacher accepts him and likes him as he really is, isn't that enough?"  
Chapter 8, pg. 35

"I envied Janet because I believed she was teaching in the front lines. I was back in my old quandary. When I taught white children I said I ought to be teaching black and white. Now I am teaching black and white children and I feel guilty because I am not teaching black children in the ghetto." Chapter 10, pg. 56

"It is often hard to learn from people who are just like you. Too much is taken for granted. Homogeneity is fine in a bottle of milk, but in the classroom it diminishes the curiosity that ignites discovery." Chapter 11, pg. 56



"When Barbara, who organized 'the Jewish club' two years before, said her family ate kosher food, I knew a lot about Barbara and her family. From her comments about meat and dairy dishes I received instant messages about her intelligence that a non-Jewish teacher might have missed. I think I am missing part of the picture presented by many black children by not being familiar with the context within which certain simple statements are made." Chapter 13, pg. 77

"The homogenized white school and the homogenized black school do not live up to the exciting potential of the multiracial society in which we exist." Chapter 19, pg. 104

"Karla's question—'Is your daddy black?'—must have come as a surprise to Ruthie. She probably never thought about her father's color. Or her own. Now she had to visualize 'white' and 'black' and identify her family. She could see a piece of the world through Karla's eyes." Chapter 24, pg. 129

"I had been unable then to speak of color and so I could not be a friend. Friendship and love grow out of recognizing and respecting differences. Strangers cover up. Color had been, for me, a sign of a stranger. I did not look into the eyes of strangers or dare to find out about their feelings." Chapter 26, pg. 138



## Topics for Discussion

Who is Vivian Gussin Paley? What does she do for a living? Why did she write this book? What is Mrs. Paley attempting to discuss through this book? What conclusions does Mrs. Paley come up with? Are these conclusions meant to help others? How?

Discuss Mrs. Paley's ethnicity. How does being Jewish affect Mrs. Paley's approach to the race issue? How does being Jewish affect Mrs. Paley in her opinions and reactions to her students? How does Mrs. Paley compare growing up a Jewish child to growing up a black child? Is this a fair comparison? Does being Jewish make Mrs. Paley more or less sensitive to the needs of her black students? In what way?

What is the intended audience for this book? Why would this audience be interested in Mrs. Paley's experiences? How does Mrs. Paley intend to help? Are Mrs. Paley's suggestions practical for her intended audience? How?

Who is Claire? Why did Claire not know how to play when she first came to Mrs. Paley's first grade class? Why did Claire resist the efforts of the other children to include her in play? Was there an obstacle for Claire that went beyond the color of her skin? If so, what was it? How did Mrs. Paley help Claire overcome her differences?

Discuss race in the classroom. Why must race be addressed in the classroom? What did Mrs. Paley observe was a consequence of her decision to ignore race? Why did Mrs. Paley decide ignoring race was not beneficial to her classes? What did Mrs. Paley do to change her approach to racial diversity? Was this accepted among Mrs. Paley's colleagues? Was this accepted among the parents of the children in Mrs. Paley's classroom?

Discuss Janet Albright. How was Mrs. Albright's teaching ethics different from Mrs. Paley's? Why did Mrs. Albright chose not to work in a school where the classes were mixed rather than filled with black children? Why did Mrs. Albright encourage Mrs. Paley to work in an all black school? Why did Mrs. Paley refuse to leave her school? How did this reflect Mrs. Paley's morals and opinion of black students?

Discuss the setting of this book. In what year was this book written? In what years did the experiences Mrs. Paley discusses take place? What was happening in the world during these years? How do these events impact the subject of Mrs. Paley's book? How would the book be different if it were written in a different time period? Would this book be as well accepted if it were published in modern times? Why or why not?