

Imagination Running Wild

By Amber Miller

As a child I would pretend to be a princess in a faraway land waiting for my prince charming. I would stack chairs up in neatly organized rows and grade my sibling's papers as I pretended to be their classroom teacher. My imagination ran wild, and there was nothing that was going to tell me that I was wrong. Just like Vivian Paley she also used that same imagination as a child stating, "On the intimate landscape of make believe we invented community and discovered one another's true identities" (Before There was School, there were stories, 38). It was in that child like ability that Vivian found herself, just as I did. But through years of growth we somehow lost ourselves again, like many people today.

The most significant scene that takes place in *The girl with the Brown Crayon* is when Vivian Paley goes to the library to find out more information about Leo Lionni. Diligently she searches for the answers behind why the author wrote *Inch by Inch* the way he did, and the parallels between his own life and the inchworm. Like many researchers she finds the answers to her questions, yet it only raises more questions of how the students will perceive it. "What will the children make of *Inch by Inch*, hearing it only within its own picture context? Will they sense a deeper meaning than the author himself understood, as they did with *Little Blue and Little Yellow* when Reeny was compelled to challenge its message?" (The Girl With the Brown Crayon, 44). It is in those pages that Vivian Paley finds that human beings connect deeper with a text when they don't have the author's commentary, and when they are free to determine the meaning and challenge the message all on their own. Though Paley lived in a classroom for

many years, she said, “The more I listen to and read the children’s fantasies and explanations, the easier it comes to bring out my own” (Talking to Myself in a Daily Journal: Reflections of a Kindergarten Teacher, 119). Throughout the entire book Vivian Paley struggles with finding her own voice. Her own inner voice has become so convoluted that her thoughts are society’s construction of what is right and what is not right. In following society’s construction we lose our inner voice, and become the “expectation.”

It wasn’t until Paley had a chance to interact with Reeny and her classmates that she began to be critical of her own thinking and learning. She never thought that kindergarteners could extend their thinking to higher realms before the experiences which occurred in the classroom. When Paley explains her inquiry and her work she says, “We are not, any of us, to be found in sets of tasks or lists of attributes: we cannot be defined or classified. We can be known only in the singular unfolding of our unique stories within the context of everyday events” (Talking to Myself in a Daily Journal: Reflections of a Kindergarten Teacher, 116). Paley’s way of inquiry allows for self discovery through verbal storytelling and written story telling. It is through words that children and adults alike can experience knowledge beyond that which they know. Just as Jane Austin wrote to share her life where she and her “sisters, nieces, cousins, and friends transmitted their expectations and disappointments to one another by daily post” (Talking to Myself In a Daily Journal: Reflections of a Kindergarten Teacher, 117) we also must do the same. Through inquiry Paley found that people should be given opportunities to become vulnerable with one another. Only when students are free to be themselves, to think, talk, live, and breathe, just as the imagine in their unique little heads will they discover their voice.

As teachers our classrooms need to an open and safe place for vulnerability, for students to be humbled, for students to look at texts and their lives more critically, and to find

alternatives. In regards to our classrooms Paley says, “They are not carefully constructed societies. They are cultures in the making, we and the children inventing new rules for ourselves every day. We never discover how all the pieces fit together or whatever behavior means, and the stories we tell of classroom life must, of necessity, end in question marks and untied threads” (Talking to Myself In a daily Journal: Reflections of a Kindergarten Teacher, 116). Our classroom culture needs to be rich in literacy and authentic experiences with that literature. We don’t have to have socially constructed truths, nor the author’s truth, but we can make our own, and through making our own that is when we find our voice, and consciously allow for others, whom we come in contact with, to find their voice as well. In any classroom the culture is shaped by the teacher’s experiences. If we have teachers that do not constantly write and verbalize the world how they see it, than we risk raising a generation of students who will do the same. It is essential that teachers are dialoguing about their experiences, making sense of them, challenging them, and extending them. In *Beyond the Predictable: A viewing of the History of Early Childhood Education* Leslie Williams and Doris Fromberg say, “And, clearly, I want to enable teachers to lend their lives more and more passionately to poems and novels and stories, viewed as works of art to be discovered through leaps of imagination, through allowing imagination to play over what is perceived” (Williams & Fromberg, 38). We weaken the child’s imagination if we neglect to do this. Gene Cohen remarks that “One of the most fascinating findings comes from the discovery that when we challenge the mind, the brain responds in positive ways-both physically and chemically-regardless of age” (Cohen, 51). One can never stop growing, unless we stop using our minds.

Essentially, Lio Lionni’s books were not meant to be read for the pleasure of isolation, but rather an opportunity to construct, and in constructing to find our voice. Each reader takes

partial ownership and accountability for that which they read. They decide their fate, and it is only through the revelation of critical analysis that students find and rediscover their inner voices.