

Say It Enough...They Will Start to Believe It

By Amber Miller

As I look at critical literacy and my own learning experiences I realize that growing up there were so many ideas, notions, and misconceptions which were fed into my brain that I believed. I was a child, even at sixteen and seventeen and the information I learned from my teachers, from my parents, and even from my church members was received without question. I was not taught how to question. Heck if I did question then that meant I was scheduling a revolt to their very being, and that surely couldn't be compromised. So I just went along with it, being docile, compliant, never questioning, always wondering what if, but never speaking it into existence. As I look back on my growing up I realize that for many people this was also their exact upbringing. The problem with receiving any information without questioning means that the validity of that information is never compromised, it's just accepted and by doing so we continue to perpetuate the cycle of misinformation.

At the age of 5 and 6 many students come into the classroom already with a set of knowledge that in many ways is hard to break. From the girl who shouts at her teacher because that is acceptable behavior at home, to the girl who does her work meticulously because she has a parent who helps her day and in day out. No matter how students come to school they always come with something and that something is a knowledge base which they have already acquired. Salch, Marino, and Vasquez (2001) state, "They also come to school with rich repertoires of narratives, resources from popular culture, sports, and so on-stories that deal with who/what's powerful, who/what's cool, who the good/bad guys are. In other words, they've already had many opportunities for examining real and imaginary worlds in terms of how relations of power

work" (Salch, Marino, & Vasquez, 2001, pg 1). What students already come to school with in combination with the material they learn while there becomes their foundation. My foundation on the topic of slavery was not something solidified with true facts, and too often this happens within the classroom. I learned that slavery was something bad, something taboo, and people only talked about it when they were forced to talk about it, not because they were really pressed about the issue.

So of course I grew up not really caring to delve into figuring out that information for myself, and in doing so there were many misconceptions which I learned in the process. Whenever a teacher talked about the African race they always started at slavery. They never once talked about Africans thriving in their native lands, being kings and queens, helping to build architectural icons. The voices of black people were always shunned, cast out, and thrown out with the trash, never to be brought back in. Learning that my own race started at slavery made me believe that it wasn't their fault, yet at the same time, that it was natural. However, as most of know there was nothing natural or okay about slavery. It never gave me hope on what my race could be, only confirmed the hate crimes, and experiences of other African American people I had currently known.

Another misconception I learned was that slaves were only taken from Africa and shipped to the US. I had never known about slaves coming from different regions of the world and being forced to submit to Europe, the Caribbean Islands, Canada, etc. Slavery was something that was local, not foreign. In addition, a third misconception that I learned was that slaves were docile creatures that only fought back when they actually reached their destination through running away. Yet, years later I learned that there was one successful slavery revolt in Haiti and other revolts took place on certain Caribbean islands as well though they were not

deemed “successful.” Without the knowledge of those revolts it helped to add to the misconception that my race was weak, compelled, and brought into the world for the sole purpose of serving someone else against their own will.

Another misconception was surrounded by a key figure in which I always thought helped to free the slaves **willingly** and that was Abraham Lincoln. How ironic for a man who had slaves himself, and only elected to help free the slaves because he was forced to. A man who said horrible things in relation to their being. One of his quotes being, "I have no purpose directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so" (Randall, 1). As a child I even thought that the Emancipation Proclamation freed all of the slaves but that was also not true. They only freed the slaves in non-union states. So in essence, many of the things I believed when I was younger was essentially false, and by just accepting that information I only added to that falsehood. Building a foundation of knowledge grounded in misconceptions.

As I got older I started clearing up those misconceptions when I got to college. However, that did not take away from the fact that it took about 19 good years for those misconceptions to be cleared away. Now it leaves several questions in my mind. What about those individuals who didn't have the opportunity to go to college? Or the individuals who didn't have the opportunity to come in contact with influential people who would change their beliefs? In reading from *Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, it helped to clear up a lot of misconceptions that I didn't even know still existed in my own mind. I never knew that ships carried slaves over to the New World from 1518 until 1865. The way that slavery was presented to me as a child seemed as if slave owners and auctioneers completed the slave trade in a couple of trips or at most a couple of years and then called it a day. I almost feel ashamed for that lack of knowledge

now, but the way slavery was presented to me in a way made it seem less cruel, less brutal, less unethical.

Even in terms of geography I never knew that Florida belonged to Spain until 1819 and was considered a land of freedom. Nor was I aware that slaves went to the Great Dismal Swamp and escaped in Virginia. I was also unaware that it was Frederick Douglas who had a meeting with the president so that blacks could fight in the Civil war. I always thought blacks were forced to fight, considered reasonable casualties at war, and if they were less than it was no big deal. All of this learning just makes me think of how much I didn't know, don't know, and how much more I still have to learn.

The way Lester presented slavery was in a humanitarian type of way. He said, "They took the sick and the dead and dropped them into the sea like empty wine barrels. But wine barrels did not have beating hearts, crying eyes, and screaming mouths" to "No one knows how many millions died. Except the sharks" (Lester, 2000, pg 6). The way he asks questions and dares us to get out of our narrow minded ways of thinking. All of the things this book does are critical. It addresses critical literacy on so many different levels. From asking questions about what the old man is looking at, to statements which make us imagine that we are the victim and the aggressor and how we would feel in the situations uncovered within the book. In the module six word document titled, *What is Critical Literacy*, the author states that critical literacy is a way of analyzing. "It shows us ways of looking at written, visual, spoken multimedia and performing texts to question and challenge the attitudes, values, and beliefs that lie beneath the surface" (1). Therefore, essentially the meaning and the impact one topic has on one person can differ greatly from the meaning and impact which it has on another person, and that's okay. For when we let

those different views collide and meet in the classroom teachers can truly begin to enhance their instruction through those perspectives. This book does that through the use of questioning, role play, and most of all choice. We choose to be active or passive readers and learners, and we must show our students strategies by which they can be active readers. We, as teachers, give things meaning by how we represent them. Werner (2000) says, “Inevitably every choice both opens and closes possibilities for learning; certain meanings are encouraged while others are foreclosed. But as long as these selective judgments and emphasis remain unrecognized, students read text as unproblematic ‘tellings’ of the way things are our happened, not realizing that representations are ‘made’ and not ‘given’ particular as opposed to universal, perceptible rather than a God’s-eye view, partial instead of complete” (Werner, 196).

Just this past week I have been intrigued with the number of photos I have come across which tell the stories of so many lost people. I started thinking that photographs can also be looked at in the form of critical literacy. Photographs tell their own stories yet without the voice to be able to do so. Yet, even in that silence a story is being told. Segall says, “For silences are as informative as are the utterances surrounding them” (Segall, 1999). Essentially, every time we look at a photo we look at it through our eyes, and despite the author's true intention or meaning for that photo if the author is not present then we are left to make our own meaning. Yet, too often we take the captions for real life accounts when in actuality the people writing those captions are humans as well, with opinions, with feelings, with their own misconceptions. We too should take this theory on critical literacy and start questioning, putting ourselves in their shoes, and imagining a world that is free of barrier. A world free to make choices.

Works Cited

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