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Art and Social Justice in Public Schools

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Students in public schools today are at a crossroads. There is an increasing movement away from the arts, towards standardization of core subjects, and teaching to the test. There is pressure from the United States national government, through the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act, to track students, assess ability through standardized tests, and to keep schools regulated, with a focus on math, science, technology and literacy (Bush, 2003, ¶.2). Although all subjects are important, the arts along with the necessary social lessons that arts can teach, are what are being left behind. I see many children that find themselves passionate and excited in art classes, where other areas of school bore them and leave them feeling unaccomplished. It is beneficial and feasible for schools to use art as a vehicle to teach social justice education.

Despite NCLB trends to focus on core subjects, and teach children to memorize information for a test, it is imperative for schools to include more creativity and critical thinking in their curriculum. In our increasingly diverse society students must learn how to work interdisciplinarily, to make connections between the classroom and the real world. Children must find passion in what they do. Social justice is incredibly important for all students, and it is especially crucial that students learn to live in communities of diversity and tolerance. Social justice can be taught in many subjects, including the arts. Art has been a vehicle for social justice throughout history and often still functions with that purpose in mind.

In past eras, and still today, art is used as social commentary. Public school art classes however, often focus on technique rather than using real and inspiring social issues to enhance depth and understanding. Out of 18 requirements for a kindergarten art class, set by the California Board of Education, only one relates to social interaction

(California Board of Education, 2007). The standard that does attempt to encourage community is stated as, “Identify and describe works of art that show people doing things together” (California Board of Education, 2007, ¶.11). None of the standards related to the environment or diversity.

In order to explore social justice through art education, it is necessary to establish a common definition of social justice. The Center for Economic and Social Justice states that,

Social justice is the virtue which guides us in creating those organized human interactions we call institutions. In turn, social institutions, when justly organized, provide us with access to what is good for the person, both individually and in our associations with others. Social justice also imposes on each of us a personal responsibility to work with others to design and continually perfect our institutions as tools for personal and social development. (n.d, accessed November 5, 2007, ¶.7)

Through this definition, it can be presumed that educators can teach social justice as a character trait inspired by the motivation and desire to create and build society in a way that benefits all parties.

Benjamin, co- founder of Global Exchange and Code Pink, explains that, “Social justice means moving towards a society where all hungry are fed, all sick are cared for, the environment is treasured, and we treat each other with love and compassion” (Benjamin as cited in Kikuchi, 2004- 2005, ¶.2). This is a world we can all certainly embrace and that children can be taught as a project for the future. When teaching social justice and community care, it is critical that educators include both the environment and society. For the purposes of this paper, social justice will be defined as a movement that encourages action promoting an equitable and sustainable world. It is inclusive and non-violent, celebrates diversity, and is rooted in a search for peace and sustainability.

Social justice education includes multicultural education and environmental education, as well as requiring that students assume responsibility and ownership for what they are learning. There are many different ways that social justice can manifest in a classroom. It can be seen when a project is organized to help to clean up an area of town or when educators are conscious of the way they speak to and include students in their class.

In an art classroom there could easily be projects included that study art from around the world, not simply pieces related to the dominant culture. A class could be designed to study the richness and variety of people's skin color or students could be asked to draw different family structures. Visual arts classes can actively engage students who may struggle to feel included in subjects where they are asked to communicate verbally. These students may have learning exceptionalities or they may speak English less fluently than another language. It is imperative that art classes include everyone, and give them an opportunity to share a story that may be lost elsewhere. There is such an array of ways that social justice can be incorporated into art education. It would benefit many students to have such an experience.

Student population is becoming more and more diverse. Many students are coming from homes that have varied family structures, some children switching from home to home weekly, for certain periods of the school year, or yearly. For a variety of reasons, schools are wrestling with the issue of transience. Hodgkinson (2002) explains that, "Most school districts cannot even tell how many students are changing schools, districts, or states every year, making research on this issue very difficult" (p.104). It is

through art that social justice can be presented in an exciting way that connects students to the world around them.

Art is a subject that students can be successful at, even in a new setting. I've seen children who feel excluded or unprepared for other classes, be accomplished in the arts. Working and observing in classrooms, I have noticed that one of the most detrimental forces to a child's academic progress is a dislike of school. When students are able to connect their lives to what they study, learning becomes engaging. In order to create community in the classroom, I have seen teachers ask children to make art that is related to their own culture or family life. Students put heart into what they care about and feel is relevant. In turn they are excited and proud of what they have done.

Social justice education, including multicultural education, benefits all students. The purpose is to enrich the lives of all children, teaching them peaceful understanding and acceptance. Banks (2002) explains that,

The major theorists and researchers in multicultural education agree that it is a reform movement designed to restructure educational institutions so that all students, including those who are part of dominant cultures, will acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to function effectively in a culturally and ethnically diverse nation and world. (p.5).

We live in a world that continues to globalize, and life requires that we interact with people from different backgrounds than ourselves. It would be doing students a disservice, if schools were to deny them the right to learn to communicate effectively and peacefully with people who come from a variety of different backgrounds. Art classes are one of many places where ideas of diversity, equality and sustainability can be incorporated into learning. However, their potential is currently being underutilized in most public schools.

Social justice can be taught in a classroom simply by including students in the process of planning their projects. Group work inspires creative solutions to interpersonal problems and can help to build a strong classroom community. When watching a typical art class, I see children working individually, rarely involved in group efforts. However, collectively society creates great wonders, and in some schools this is encouraged.

In La Villetta, a school in Reggio Emilia Italy, classes usually focus around “a long term project that the children have designed themselves” (Fosnot, 2005, p. 212). In 1992, the class of 6 year olds collaborated to create and design an amusement park for birds. The children used visual art, and other processes such as writing and acting, to plan the project together. They worked both collectively and individually to create a lasting addition to their school. “And the children were delighted at the significance of their work” (Fosnot, 2005, p. 221). The children learned to work collaboratively, to create something for a larger community, and they enjoyed the process at the same time.

Unlike Reggio Emilia, in public schools across the United States, art is often seen as a subject separate from the core academic areas. Art is a place to learn to draw, to see, and to communicate through images. Incorporated into the core subject areas, art would be more relatable to children’s lives and needs. The California State Board of Education briefly summarized the purpose of seventh grade art to be, “processing, analyzing, and responding to sensory information through the language and skills unique to the visual arts. Students perceive and respond to works of art, objects in nature, events, and the environment. They also use the vocabulary of the visual arts to express their observations” (The California State Board of Education, 2007, ¶.1). The Arizona

Department of Education articulates their first grade philosophy and rationale for the arts as follows,

The arts are essential in education for they provide students with the means to think, feel, and understand the world around them in ways unique and distinct from other academic disciplines. These skills have been recognized as essential to lifelong success both in and out of school by a variety of education and civic leaders, including the National Association of State Boards of Education, the Education Commission of the States, the Arts Education Partnership, and BusinessWeek. (2006, ¶.1)

Although the arts are noted as important, it is emphasized that they are separate from other subjects. Art for the sake of visual technique once again separates the classroom from the real world; just as separating core subjects from the arts limits children in seeing connections and interdisciplinary solutions.

In order for art to be viewed as an effective method for social change there are two main paradigms that must exist. First, it is imperative that art is seen as an important part of education and curriculum, not as merely an entertaining activity to relax in after a rigorous math class. Secondly, art classes must have a purpose other than to teach technical skills. Gaudibert (1968) touched on both of these ideas, “the optional art classes are often scenes of rowdyism; the teacher’s views carry little weight in the eyes of the administration unless the teachers in question happen to be well-known artists” (p. 141). I find it very sad when art classes become a place of play because they students feel that their disobedience is the only way to express themselves. Rather than positively channeling their energy and creativity into projects, the students I have spoken to sometimes feel that the projects do not pertain to their lives, and thus are not worthwhile. Similarly, in art classrooms where children are given freedom to design their projects and topics that include their interests, I have seen students more actively engaged.

Art is an essential component in education. It cannot be left on the sidelines. If art continues to go unappreciated by both students and administration then there is no way that the social justice elements taught in class will be taken seriously. Furthermore, if art continues to teach little more than technical skills that are only needed for students wishing to go into art related fields, then the class cannot be valued fully. Gaudibert (1968) commented on the purpose of art education, “The essential preliminary for genuine artistic education (in which the old drawing master [sic.] is superseded by the instructor in art education) is a belief in the possible democratization of sensibility and culture by pedagogic means” (p. 142). Art cannot be unavailable to the masses, just as other forms of education cannot. It must be made accessible and pertinent to students while remaining inclusive to all people and respecting the environment. It should not be difficult to integrate these two principles into current art education programs.

There are many ways that social justice and art can be intertwined and there are also many programs that are currently doing so. Working in a preschool, I have noticed that each lesson is interdisciplinary and teaches skills through overarching topics. The children in such classes are able to work on pertinent projects that connect to other ideas they are learning. The children in the two-year-old room recently went on a nature walk. While outside they collected rocks, fallen pinecones, and leaves, while the teachers were careful to emphasize the protection of living plants. The children were able to choose objects from nature that were appealing and interesting to them. After bringing the objects back to class, the children worked as a group to decorate a box. They used paint and their found objects to create a diorama that looked like the habitat they see outdoors. Through this project they children got excited about nature, they worked together to

create something for the good of all in the classroom, and they were proud of their work. It is projects like this that inspire respect for the Earth in young children.

Across the country, people are working to emphasize the importance of art as a vehicle for social justice. Some of the projects that do this include; Art for Change, The Legacy Circle, Project Zero, and The Art and Social Justice Curriculum Project. Some of these programs work independently and use a variety of community resources.

Art for Change is an organization based out of East Harlem in New York City. It is not connected with public schools, but uses art as a way to inspire social justice. Art for Change states their mission as, “Art for Change is an organization that provides a forum for creating innovative art and media programs that inspire people to take an active role in social justice” (Art for Change, 2007, ¶. 1). They focus on working with the community to inspire solidarity and on promoting diversity and providing a dialogue to explore social justice.

The Legacy Circle has a similar mission. They are a group based out of New York City that aims to inspire African American youth. They explain in their mission that they are, “dedicated to empowering African Diaspora youth and adults in New York City through cultural arts education” (The legacy circle, 2006, ¶.1). The Legacy Circle often works with public schools and local art programs to host artists and run workshops. They also organize local music nights and events for the public.

These two organizations, Art for Change and The Legacy Circle, show that art can be used to promote social justice, but still they target a self-selecting audience. There are many children who are not getting this education because for one reason or another

they have not been exposed to it or given the opportunity to seek it out. Thus, it is imperative that art as a means for social justice be integrated into public schools.

Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education is deeply involved in public schools. (The president and fellows of Harvard College [hereafter known as Harvard College], 2007, ¶.3) Project Zero organizes many different programs and aims to integrate art into many different facets of learning. Project Zero's mission is, "to understand and enhance learning, thinking, and creativity in the arts, as well as humanistic and scientific disciplines, at the individual and institutional levels" (Harvard College, 2007, ¶.1). It is through this overarching venture that many sub- projects are formed. These projects include curriculum that works art into the other disciplines K-12 and plans to get students into art museums. Project Zero often works collaboratively with other institutions such as the Reggio Emilia preschools in Italy, Bialik College in Melbourne, Australia and many others (Harvard College, 2007, ¶.1,2,10)

Another project that functions in projects that functions in public schools is The Art and Social Justice Curriculum Project based out of Oakland, California (The center for art and public life. 2007, ¶.1). The Art and Social Justice Curriculum Project is working with the Oakland Public School System and they are, "Developing and implementing curriculum focused on social justice and civic engagement through the arts" (The center for art and public life [hereafter known as The Center], 2007, ¶.1) Through this project students will have a yearly progression in their art curriculum that focuses on sustainability and social justice. For example, the kindergarten classroom will focus primarily on appreciation and preserving nature. They will use art to help record observations they find in the natural world around them and will keep a journal of their

findings throughout the year. The kindergarteners will also use clay to make leaf imprints of what they see. They will use photography to document insects they observe. With all sorts of different art media, these students will learn to appreciate and preserve nature. The curriculum continues progressively (The Center, 2007, ¶.8)

In first grade, the students will still be primarily involved with appreciating the natural world. They will study different habitats and how to preserve them, using art as a means both to learn and to communicate their findings with the community.

In the higher grades, students will focus on diversity issues and issues of equality. The theme of the tenth grade curriculum is, “The Oakland Hall of Fame”(The Center, 2007, ¶.6). The students will look at history, how it gets written, and who decides what makes it into the books. These students will gain understanding of what makes someone a great person and how often these people are not included in history because they do not fit with the dominant groups. The students will then decide who should be in their “Hall of Fame” and use portraiture to commemorate these people (The Center, 2007, ¶.6). These are all great curricula that allow students to learn experientially through art about very important issues, which will no doubt become more and more important in the future. This theme is important for all communities and can be applicable in public schools anywhere.

Prescott, Arizona, is no exception to the need for art and social justice curriculum. It would be easy to implement meaningful social justice education into the art classes. Two of the main focuses of social justice education through art, here in Prescott, could be: environmental sustainability education, and diversity and equality education. When

integrating art, as a means for social justice, it seems equally pertinent to include issues that are real in this area and that students do not see them as someone else's problem, making them personally responsible. Classes can learn about border issues and water issues and issues of sustainability and growth in a town with limited resources. These would all be issues that the students can learn about in a hands-on and local way.

When teaching younger children, it is important to focus on the positive, and foster a love of nature and a true appreciation for diversity. It is important to encourage personal growth through that lens. As students get older, they can explore more critical concepts, as they did in The Art and Social Justice Curriculum Project. These issues could include topics such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, religious persecution, able bodiedness, as well as many other current social injustices. They also could include important water issues, looking at bills and laws. Students could look at local art movements to comment on the situations. A large part of social justice in the classroom would be to encourage students to get involved in the community by doing local art projects as a venue for service learning. Students should be getting out often and interacting with the community.

In conclusion, not only is art an appropriate means for teaching social justice that could easily and effectively be integrated into local schools, but it is also an important way for students to learn to think differently and see issues in an integrated and experiential way. There are many great programs being run now to help children and adults connect social justice and art, but not enough is being done for the masses of children in the public school system. Art can bring a rich array of perspectives to a classroom, while engaging students who may otherwise be turned off to school. It is

because of art that many social movements have been recorded throughout history, because artists and teachers alike got passionate about a cause. Now is no time to back away from pressing issues. It is a time to take initiative and use creativity to bring students into a more equitable and sustainable future.

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