



“But He Looks Like Me. I Never Saw an Artist Look Like That”:

Making Connections to Social Justice Through Art

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“I believe that education is the civil rights issue of our generation. And if you care about promoting opportunity and reducing inequality, the classroom is the place to start. Great teaching is about so much more than education; it is a daily fight for social justice.”

(Duncan, 2009)

“WAIT, WHAT? THAT IS THE ARTIST?”

a 7-year-old student in the 2nd-grade class remarked as he viewed a photograph of an African American artist. “But he looks like me. I never saw an artist look like that.” I replied, “Yes, Johnathon Green is an African-American artist, and he lives not far from here. He grew up around here too, in the Low Country of South Carolina, just like you.” This dialogue took place during a special lesson on a local artist, Johnathon Green, and his bright landscapes. This was one lesson in a series of 10 that I taught as a guest art teacher to a class in a rural Title I school regarding science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM) education. These children did not have an art teacher so I incorporated artmaking in each lesson. This artistic inclusion showed children that making art was their right and that art can be relevant to their lives as a form of speaking to social justice.

Social justice is an issue that public schools in the United States must actively address by valuing diversity while giving equal opportunities for learning across the board at every level of society (Cochran-Smith, 2004). Social justice is a stance claiming that everyone deserves equal economic, political, and opportunities (Flynn, 1995). For children to have a personally meaningful, relevant education, teachers must provide social justice education experiences (Gay, 2010; Grant & Gibson, 2011). As U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated in the quote cited at the beginning of this article, education is a civil right. I would argue

that so should creating art be a civil right. A high quality arts inclusive education ought not be exclusive to some privileged few. It is up to us teachers to promote social justice while creating an artistic environment in the classroom when faced with narrow perspectives created by limited art education and by museums, galleries, and books dominated by the artwork of White men. Groups like Guerilla Girls have brought attention to this issue and we as teachers must likewise change the narrative given to our students. Social justice in art education (SJAE) is about thinking critically, engagement, questioning, and taking action. Creating

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such a change in art rooms can benefit all students. It is essential that children be given the opportunity to recognize the value in the arts, to find value in learning by making personal connections.

When teachers draw from students' culture and community knowledge, they can engage them in the learning process, thereby enabling students to have a personal investment in what is being taught. SJAE, when done well, moves beyond simply showing artwork from underrepresented people. For example, for this lesson I presented relative information, engaged the students in critical thinking, and allowed them to delve into big themes, ask questions, and discuss issues. Then, the students took action—in this case, artmaking. Children should be taught in a way that is relevant to them, their lives, and to what they can relate (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Arts-based inquiries can create a connection to social justice and the possibilities the arts provide for critical thinking through artmaking (Kraehe & Brown, 2011). Teachers who make connections to students' lives acknowledge that they value what their students already bring to the classroom and build from that. This makes the students active participants in the lesson, rather than inactive recipients of information; thus, the students are part of the learning process.

The Culturally Relevant Lesson

I designed this as a STEAM lesson focusing on Johnathon Green's landscapes and the science of the ecosystems in the coastal region of the southeastern United States. We examined nature and the types of animals and plants found in the Lowcountry, which is the geographic region along South Carolina's coast. We discussed the ecosystem, the types of plants and animals found near rivers, and crops that can grow in the area, particularly rice. When I introduced Johnathon Green to the students, I showed

a photograph of him and explained that he was part of the local Gullah culture. People from the Gullah culture are descendants from enslaved Africans and are found in rural communities in coastal regions of South Carolina and Georgia. As illustrated in the opening dialogue, the students were interested in knowing that he was African American (88% of the school's population was African American) and that he was from the area in which they lived. The students felt a personal connection to the artist and, upon further investigation, the artwork.

When the students viewed Green's paintings, which included coastal waters, marsh grasses, trees, shrubs, and rice fields, they analyzed what kinds of plants they could see and what animals would live in the area. Some students made the connection that the paintings depicted familiar-looking areas, as if they had been there before. We then discussed the figures in the paintings. In the foreground of most of his landscapes, Green included strong African American women who represented influential people in his life. All of the people in his paintings are actively working, hanging laundry, or sifting rice while establishing a sense of enjoyment rather than of laboring. This sparked more connection as students made comments such as "my grandma hangs laundry like that," "my cousin makes those baskets," and "I go fishing with my dad." All students were engaged in the discussion of the Gullah culture and how they were descendants from the enslaved people who planted the rice fields. I mentioned that the reason these individuals were brought to the United States was because they were smart. They had special skills and knowledge for growing rice, which is not easy. Once the students seemed to have a good understanding of the landscapes and ecosystems, they made Green-inspired torn paper works of art that replicated the heavily layered look of his brightly colored landscape paintings (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).



Figure 1. Student work, "Rain on the Stono River."



Figure 2. Student work, "The Sunshine Boys."

Observed Connections

Essentially, this art class could have been no more than a well-planned landscape lesson, but adding a local African American artist incorporated a dimension that was undeniably relatable to these children. Through observations, I noticed that the students were more engaged and demonstrated an honest interest that drove them to want to know more. Even as they worked on their artwork, the conversations about the artist, the people in the artwork, or the



Figure 3. Student work, "Love Air."

animals that would live in the landscape continued. I witnessed inspiration, hope, and possibilities for their future. One child in particular, who had an extraordinary talent for drawing but has always chosen to misbehave during studio time in earlier classes, became extremely focused during this lesson. This was very different than the behavior I had observed in the prior lessons. Something had changed as he had made a connection to a person who was relatable, real, successful, and—even more importantly—as he put it, looked like him.

Conclusion

The learning that took place manifested into something more meaningful than just the intended lesson. Dewey (1938) defined collateral learning as the unintentional lessons taught during instructional time. In this case, the collateral learning that took place included that artists can be African American, art can teach us about ecosystems, enslaved people were smart and had special skills and knowledge, and art is a viable way to make a living. Beyond this lesson, research demonstrates that children do not just "do art"; they "employ aesthetic processes to examine, uncover, and voice new, more complex knowledge" (Kraehe & Brown, 2011, p. 507). Children can find much more meaning to learning when they can make a connection to their own lives. They are more likely to have continuing conversations and pursue knowledge through curiosity as intrinsic motivation. Therefore, it is up to the teacher to bring social justice to their classroom to give all children the opportunity to view themselves as artists. ■

Author Note

Permission for all images were obtained through signed Institutional Review Board consent.

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