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Making Art Education Count

Art Education Awareness in Schools

More than ever, art education must promote social awareness in order to establish recognition and respect in the education system. Efland (1976) points out that this is a very important factor that is inhibiting the success of American art education. Today this issue continues to divide the arts from math and reading, causing standardized testing to become the number one priority for education and curriculum planning. His fictional account in 1976 is an actual reality today. Art class is considered as the inferior subject to core focuses, due to its impact on school-wide performance on standardized testing in most public schools. Efland challenges us to recognize the importance of art education and its power on social reform and awareness.

In art education our manifest functions have to do with helping students become more human through art by having them value art as an important aspect of their lives. The typical art program operates in a school where students are regimented into social roles required by society (as cited in Efland, 1976, p. 40).

This statement is why it is important to recognize how society plays a crucial role in the developments and demands of school curriculums. What I found to be an interesting statement in Efland's (1976) article is the last line of the article; "we have been trying to change school art when we should have been trying to change the school" (p. 43). We need to address the whole school and on a deeper level we need to address the community. The reality is, that without the support of the community it is challenging to make social change.

As an example, Delacruz, Ballengee-Morris, Blandy, Chapman, Chung, Congdon, Farris, Gude, Knight, Minner, Sanders, Stuhr, and Willis, address racial implications in their *Position Statement Regarding the Use of Race Base Mascots in Educational Settings* (2010), "NAEA considers race-based Mascots in educational institutions to be representations that can be seen as derogatory. Visual art educators are encouraged to support their communities in addressing how such images impact all lives." With the example given in the passage, I cannot help but think of my own experiences as a Montville Indian. I grew up in Connecticut where the Native American heritage was a huge part of our community culture. We were taught to embrace their heritage and celebrated it by attending Pow-Wow festivals, joining school workshops, and participating in

activities that revolved around the history of our area. To me being an “Indian” made me proud and I was inspired as a child growing up near two reservations - that today are the homes of two of the largest casinos in the world. In reading this statement, it saddens me to consider the thought of Montville losing their mascot because of the derogatory connotations that are associated with the name. Never did I consider the name to represent “savages” or did I think it contained cruel intentions or innuendos. However, in reading the statement I am now aware of the conveyed meaning of the mascot and how it represents racial implications. It is something that is important to investigate as a school and as a community. Just as the phrase “sitting Indian style” has changed to “crisscross apple sauce,” we must consider the impact this mascot has on the community and how it falsely represents the heritage of the Mohegan tribe through visual misrepresentations.

By shedding light on this issue, art educators and school board members can educate the community on how visual imagery plays a large part in the continuation of unjust patterns of derogatory connotations. We cannot make exceptions to the rules, but we can embrace awareness of how cultural norms and abilities to see how we actively participate, unknowingly, in degrading cultures and ethnic groups. The process of changing our perceptions will be slow, but knowledge is power and power promotes change through leadership and social reconstruction.

Community Engagement

Freedman (2011) suggests that in order to have success in art education leadership, we must first

connect the visual arts to a variety of societal aims as well as educational goals. It must renew an emphasis on creative thinking and behaviors in the face of increased standardization. And, it must guarantee learning, using appropriate student assessment as proof of achievement (p. 41).

By addressing these aims through creative leadership, the goal is to transform social conditions through promoting active participation for lasting change in a democratic society. Public engagement is essential to changing the sociocultural conditions that inhibit student learning. “Art education can lead students from personal expression to cultural engagement through the capacity of art to act as a social mediator” (Freedman, 2011, p. 42). Through community engagement, students have the ability to work in collaborative environments which promote the sharing of information and personal experiences. It is through these activities that students learn

to make meaningful connections to their communities by supporting just causes for the greater good. Community involvement also encourages service-based projects. “Through service projects, students can take on public roles that illustrate the many benefits of art education by...organizing art experiences that help their community or protect [their] environment” (Freeman, 2011, p. 42).

Engagement through Art Education

Furthermore, community-based projects can turn into stronger and more powerful messages when social groups are challenged to address social, political, economic, and financial issues. Groups like the Occupy movement and Park(ing) Day, challenge people to recognize how communication is crucial to understanding the whole story. In order to promote awareness about issues, we must communicate and share our message in a positive way in order to make significant social change. Sometimes all it takes is to open up opportunities to talk about things to address each party’s ideas and interests. The use of art in community-based projects can provide visual meaning and can enhance the experiences of others when they are confronted by powerful visual messages created by student artists.

To me a social issue that should be addressed in the city of Atlanta is the significant divide between public and private schools. Students in both schools are independently working on community issues, but are failing to notice that the schools are ignoring an important social divide. I would like to challenge the city of Atlanta’s schools (public and private) to come together and create a mural at Centennial Olympic Park in downtown Atlanta. In this way, students from different ethnic groups, social classes, faiths, and backgrounds can come together to collaborate on a city mural that represents social change. Through this collaborative effort students will have the opportunity to engage in creative leadership and community awareness through visual representation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by engaging students in conversations about social issues, I believe service based projects will help students learn the creative powers to becoming leaders in the larger community. These opportunities connect students to their local community in a more dynamic way. Their commitment and dedication to community issues at a young age, better prepares them to address public needs as they get older. The skills gained from their active involvement helps train them how to express their personal concerns in a positive way through their increasing

awareness of self and their community. By providing students with a range of opportunities in art education to connect through community-based art projects, students will gain the ability to engage in challenging issues that are relevant to the world in which they live.

References

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