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"Well, I'm thinking about horse poverty": Teaching and Learning about Social Justice and the Arts with Elementary School Students

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"Well, I'm thinking about *horse* poverty": Teaching and Learning about Social Justice and the Arts with Elementary School Students

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Abstract

This paper analyzes a social justice arts program that I developed and taught to third, fourth, and fifth grade students at one school in the Poughkeepsie, NY area. I begin this project by considering my own experiences in art class as an elementary school student, and analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of my school's art curriculum. Next, I take a multidisciplinary approach to evaluate the current literature on social justice arts education. In this section, I define the characteristics of a high-quality social justice arts program and analyze commonly-available arts education resources for teachers. I continue with an outline of the development of my particular curriculum, as well as my methods for selecting schools and evaluating my program. Finally, I analyze the impact of this project on both myself and my students. I ultimately argue that social justice education of any form takes time, strong relationships, communication, and support from multiple actors.

Keywords: social justice education, social justice art, multicultural education, inclusion, positionality, curriculum

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Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction

Some of my own childhood art

As a child, I adored art class. Although I usually found success in my academics, I enjoyed the opportunity to enter a new classroom space and do things that I genuinely thought were *fun:* experimenting with color, composition, and materials, learning new techniques to create lines, shapes, and texture in my art, and entering a conversation about where my classmates and I fell into the greater world of art history. Only now, as an adult, do I realize how exclusive and restrictive that world of art history is and how formulaic our art-making process was.

When I think back to the works of art that I created in elementary school, here is what I remember:

1. A self-portrait in the style of Picasso, in which we divided our face into four different sections and painted each a different color

2. "Primary Poles," or paper towels tubes decorated with primary colors

3. An exercise on creating depth in drawings, during which we drew three-dimensional cubes, spheres, and other objects

4. A study of an animal, during which we did a watercolor painting of an animal of interest

5. "Hot air" balloons, crafted out of plaster, to be hung in the lobby of my elementary school as a welcoming display

After reading this list, one could argue that my school's art program was strong. We studied multiple techniques, vocabulary, and artists, and produced a variety of different projects to be displayed and admired. However, my school missed a few major factors. First, most of our art came out looking the same. If a student deviated from the assignment in any way—for example, adding secondary or tertiary colors to our Primary Poles—the teacher would "correct" them. By

inhibiting our creativity in this way, our teachers prevented us from seeing our contributions to the art world as unique or noteworthy. Instead, they taught us to emulate our predecessors, resulting in consistency, uniformity, and dullness. (Of course, my art teachers would be horrified to hear this. I imagine that they in no way intended to halt the creativity of me and my peers, but rather sought to develop in us the technical skills required to produce more complex art in the future. And I will say that I thoroughly enjoyed each of the aforementioned projects. However, I still find the negative outcomes indisputable.)

My teachers also centered our conversations around art history solely through the canon of Western art, which consists primarily of old, White, male artists. This art was typically apolitical, irrelevant to the lives of me and my classmates, and problematic. I was in elementary school during the War on Terror, Occupy Wall Street, and the 2008 presidential election, all of which lead to the production of complex, relevant art. Did we discuss it? Of course not. We looked at the work of Paul Gauguin, but did not discuss his voyeuristic approach, nor his sexual relationships with young girls. Likewise, it wasn't until college that I learned that Van Gogh mimicked the characters of Asian languages in his writing, but didn't take the time to learn or write them accurately. Moreover, our classes lacked a critical discussion of *why* the work of these artists was so well-known. Why are these artists all White and male and dead, and where are the artists making current, pertinent, and anti-oppressive art? We were left to wonder.

In my project, I sought to rethink the way art is taught to elementary school children. I aimed to challenge the notions that young children are incapable of critical thought, too sensitive, fragile, or naive to learn about oppression, and unable to produce authentic and meaningful art. Instead, I sought to analyze ways in which children make meaning of their experiences and

environment. Likewise, I wanted to consider how educators can take advantage of students'

localized knowledge in their teaching. I wanted both teachers and students to view art as a mode

of expression and a method of liberation.

My desire to become an elementary school teacher led me to channel my musings on art

education into something that dealt with the practical, day-to-day challenges that teachers face.

In order to understand the teaching process in full, I decided to both write and teach a curriculum

on art and social justice. In my curriculum, I decided to center and name social justice to

explicitly push back against hegemonic art curricula. Through this process, I hoped to change the

way both my students and I think about systems of pedagogy, art-making, and activism.

The realness of my experience—that is, the creation and teaching of a particular

curriculum for a particular group of students and by a particular teacher—provided a rich

challenge for me. Though I didn't initially consider the implications of working with authentic

individuals and communities, it inevitably came up in my work. This project forced me to

consider not only how to develop a social justice arts curriculum, but one that would work for

these specific students in these specific places. Likewise, I had to navigate my own positionality,

considering how my identities as a White, queer, female college student interacted with those of

my students. In this way, my project transformed from being merely an exercise in curriculum

development to a process of questioning my own relationship to my students and understanding

my role as an educator—lessons that I will take with me as I enter the classroom as a teacher in

the future.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature on Social Justice Arts Education

"The process of painting for me slows down the barrage of images pulsing in my

consciousness. Art allows me to take some things in deeper, imagine the consequences,

and dream of alternatives. It allows me to make a 'statement' in ways that words do not,

to empathize with strangers, to struggle with my role in issues of social injustice

(Beyerbach, 2011, p. 3).

"The underlying theme in my classroom is that the quest for social justice is a

never-ending struggle in our nation and world; that the vast majority of people have

benefited from this struggle; that we must understand this struggle; and that we must make

decisions about what to be involved in it" (Peterson, 2012, p. 55).

This literature review explores what forms social justice arts education has taken so far. While conducting my research, I researched the following questions:

- What constitutes a high-quality social justice arts education?

- What resources are available for teachers looking to teach art for social justice?

- How do educators develop an inclusive social justice arts curriculum?

To explore these topics, I've considered 1) the intersections of social justice and the arts, 2) hegemonic arts education, 3) social justice arts education, 4) inclusive arts education, and 5) challenges to doing social justice work with children. To analyze existing curricula and resources, I use an interdisciplinary approach, combining educational theories, Critical Race Theories, child development theories, and feminist theories. Although my project focuses primarily on the visual arts, I also consider literature that addresses social justice poetry and music.

The Intersection of Art and Social Justice

You may be wondering why I chose to bridge these two concepts. Why use the arts to teach about social issues? How can each topic supplement the other? My first answer is personal. I love the arts, and I am passionate about social justice. I use the arts to communicate, to express myself, and to make meaning of my surroundings. A bit of research has shown me that my relationship to art is not uncommon. Beyerbach (2011) argues that the arts are a vital way for people to process information from the world around them, which can ultimately lead them to a greater understanding of social issues. She says of her personal experiences creating art:

The process of painting for me slows down the barrage of images pulsing in my

consciousness. Art allows me to take some things in deeper, imagine the consequences,

and dream of alternatives. It allows me to make a 'statement' in ways that words do not,

to empathize with strangers, to struggle with my role in issues of social injustice (p. 3).

Thus, as Beyerbach (2011) demonstrates, the personal, reflective act of creating art is well-suited

for exploring social justice.

Love (2019) builds on the ideas of Beyerbach (2011), speaking to the importance of arts

education particularly for children of color. According to Love, art offers a way for children of

color individuals to imagine a better world, which is the first step in creating change. She states,

"For many dark children, art is more than classes or a mode of expression; it is how dark

children make sense of this unjust world and a way to sustain who they are, as they recall and

(re)member in the mist *[sic]* of chaos what it means to thrive" (Love, 2019, p. 100). In this way,

Love imagines art and arts education as a method of healing, resistance, and survival for children

of marginalized racial identities. Thus, as Love (2019) and Beyerbach (2011) have shown, the

arts have a unique contribution to social justice education that cannot be ignored.

Hegemonic Experiences in Elementary Art Education

Think back to your elementary school art class. What artists did you study? Whose work

was displayed on the walls of your classroom? You're probably thinking of Leonardo DaVinci,

Michelangelo, Pablo Picasso, and Claude Monet. A few women may have come up, namely

Mary Cassatt, Frida Kahlo, and Georgia O'Keeffe. Nevertheless, the artists studied in most

classrooms are overwhelmingly White, Western men. Aside from the lack of representation of

artists of color, artists from the global South, and those of other marginalized identities, your

teachers probably didn't discuss the sociopolitical contexts in which these artists work. Arts

educators frequently ignore the social and historical forces that influence the work of these

artists. Likewise, they fail to address the challenges faced by artists of marginalized identities. As

such, teachers leave children with the false understanding that the only people who can engage in

the arts White, wealthy, and Western.

Quinn (2006) terms this pedagogy "Discipline-Based Arts Education" (DBAE), in which

aesthetics is taught without historical or social context. The aforementioned "aesthetics" usually

refers only to those valued in the canon of Western art. An example DBAE may be the teaching

about different Western art movements, such as Renaissance art, Romanticism, and

Impressionism without critical conversations about the history and culture of the period. In

DBAE, educators do not encourage their students to question why some art movements rose to

prominence over others, why some are memorialized and institutionalized in museums and

schools while others are not, and what structural forces privilege some artists over others. In this

way, DBAE posits a very homogenous group of artists and styles as the norm, discouraging

students' critical consciousness and erasing the experiences and work of artists who fall outside

this canon.

Many curriculum developers have sought to push back against DBAE by writing

multicultural art education curricula; however, many of these resources have been widely

critiqued. Chin (2011) found that most online or pre-packaged curricula on multicultural art

education lack historical context and depth. Likewise, they typically judge non-Western art by

Western standards. Acuff (2014) adds to Chin's (2011) research by contributing the following

critiques of commonly available multicultural arts education curricula: 1) they homogenize and simplify diverse and complex cultures, 2) they misrepresent cultures, and 3) they only supplement existing curricula, practicing tokenism rather than true inclusion.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality supports the ideas of Acuff and Chin. Crenshaw initially used the term intersectionality to describe the experiences of Black women, whose oppression cannot be attributed solely to racism or sexism. Rather, Crenshaw argues that the intersection of race and gender combine to form unique identities. The theory of intersectionality applies to more than just race and gender. When Chin (2011) and Acuff (2014) argue that multicultural arts curricula simplify and homogenize complex cultures, they may also say that these resources lack an intersectional approach. In other words, these resources present all individuals of a particular country, religion, or ethnicity as identical. As such, they ignore the other identities that affect an individual, such as gender, class, or ability. Undoubtedly, a quality social justice arts pedagogy will take an intersectional approach by considering the experiences of multiply-marginalized groups and working against the essentialization of a particular identity in an artists' work.

Social Justice Education for Elementary-Age Students

So then, what does a successful art for social justice pedagogy look like? First, it's important to define "social justice pedagogy." To determine this, many educators look to Paulo Freire. Freire's (1970) concept of liberating or "problem-posing" education encourages students to question their own positionality within structures of oppression and dominance while working toward liberation. In a problem-posing classroom, students and teachers engage in dialogue,

investigation, and creation together. Freire contrasts this approach to education with "banking" education, in which teachers consider students to be empty-vessels that they must fill with information. According to Freire, banking education reinforces systems of oppression by preventing students from engaging in critical thinking and action.

While many scholars hailed *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as revolutionary, I hesitate to adopt Freire's liberation education in my own practice. Throughout his work, Freire creates a binary between the oppressor and the oppressed. This dichotomous approach obscures the experiences of individuals who exist as both oppressor and oppressed (as most of us do). As a result, Freire forces readers to think only along one axis of their identity, rather than utilizing an intersectional framework. These binaries—oppressor vs. oppressed, wealthy vs. poor, White vs. non-White—do not reflect the lived experiences of people.

Likewise, Freire takes a universalist approach, claiming that his idea of liberation education will work everywhere. Freire fails to address how the implementation of liberation education must change depending on the specific people involved. Undoubtedly, the identities and experiences of students and teachers will shape their relationship to oppression. Rather than encouraging educators to consider the particular ways in which this happens, and how they can adjust or refine his liberation pedagogy to meet their particular needs, Freire posits liberation education as a universal goal. As such, I am not using Freire's concept of liberation education as my definition for a quality social justice education. Instead, I define social justice education as one that 1) works toward the liberation of all individuals, 2) draws from the unique experiences and identities of both the students and teachers, and 3) encourages students to develop their understanding of their positionality within systems of oppression and privilege. Nevertheless, I

recognize and appreciate Friere's contributions to education, namely his dedication to centering the experiences of oppressed populations.

　　Many educators have built on Freire's work to make it relevant to their particular schools and classrooms. Peterson (2012) created a social justice pedagogy specifically for elementary school students. According to Peterson, there are five characteristics of an elementary-age social justice classroom. First, the teacher must encourage students to make connections between their own lives and the curriculum. For example, a teacher may have students make a timeline with their own birthdays, the birthdays of their parents and grandparents, and historic events to see the relationship between them. Second, Peterson states that teachers and students must engage in dialogue together (a classic tenant of Frierian liberating education). Next, teachers must take a questioning, problem-posing approach. Here, teachers allow students to drive the curriculum by encouraging them to investigate issues of concern to them. Fourth, Peterson contends that social justice education must emphasize a critique of bias. This practice would include conversations on different perspectives and stereotypes, and the identification of these biases in literature, the media, and each other. Finally, Peterson calls for teachers to center social justice in all their curricula. He states,

>　"The underlying theme in my classroom is that the quest for social justice is a
>
>　never-ending struggle in our nation and world; that the vast majority of people have
>
>　benefited from this struggle; that we must understand this struggle; and that we must make
>
>　decisions about what to be involved in it" (Peterson, 2012, p. 55).

In this way, Peterson notes that social justice cannot merely supplement existing curricula. Instead, teachers must consider social justice in all that they do, questioning how *all* their materials and lessons reinforce or undermine systems of oppression.

Wilmore and Papa (2016) developed an elementary-school social justice curriculum similar to that of Peterson (2012), but with a few additional components. First, they critiqued the idea that any one curricula or program could work in all classrooms. Instead, they argued that teachers need to draw on the unique needs and experiences of their particular student body. They recommend that teachers consider their students' demographics to determine what will work best for them. For example, a topic such as homelessness may be extremely relevant and accessible to students in a low-income, urban area, but not for students in affluent suburbs. If an educator wanted to teach about homelessness, then, they would need to adjust their teaching to meet their students where they are.

Gloria Ladson-Billings' (2009) concept of culturally relevant teaching supports Wilmore and Papa's approach. Ladson-Billings (2009) states, "Culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 20). Specifically, this might take the form of finding texts about students' culture, teaching about notable historical figures from that culture, and exploring the history of that culture accurately. Because the demographics of students will vary from district to district, year to year, and classroom to classroom, teachers must constantly be thinking about the culture of their *particular* students, and adapt their curriculum to meet their needs. Because Wilmore and Papa (2016) believe that social justice

education must be relevant to students' lives, similar to culturally relevant teaching, no two

successful social justice curricula could look the same.

Next, Wilmore and Papa (2016) discussed the importance of self-knowledge. According

to Wilmore and Papa (2016), students must understand their own positionality in relation to

systems of privilege and oppression before they can enact meaningful change. This knowledge

allows people to better engage in conversations with others, and to understand their strengths and

limitations as an activist. Judy Katz (1978) notes the importance of this process for White

people. She writes, "Because United States culture is centered around white norms, white people

rarely have to come to terms with that part of their identity. White people do not see themselves

as white. This is a way of denying responsibility for perpetuating the racist system and being part

of the problem" (pp. 13-14). In other words, until White people understand the significance and

implications of their Whiteness, they cannot be active changemakers. It's important to note that

this process is not only applicable to White people, nor just to individuals of privileged identities.

People of marginalized identities can also benefit from considering the ways in which oppression

has played out in their own lives, as well as strategies to resist that oppression (Derman-Sparks,

Higa, & Sparks, 1980). As such, teachers must take time to develop students' understanding of

their identities and experiences before engaging students in whole-class social justice work.

The education of children plays a unique role in developing self-knowledge. Peter

London (1994) argues that we must go beyond the development of self-knowledge to the

development of self-esteem. He writes, "People who esteem themselves as positively engaged

more frequently and successfully with their world than do people who have poor self-regard who

consequently experience themselves as alienated from the world and its rewards" (p. 43). Art

education, London argues, can play a unique role in the development of a child's self-esteem. The inclusion of the child's life—in the form of the places, people, and experiences of their community, in addition the history of their people—allow children to develop positive self-esteem. This model lays the foundation for social justice arts education.

Arts Education for Social Justice

Social justice arts education is a broad topic, but a few scholars have worked to define its primary characteristics. In general, they have followed the definitions of Peterson (2012) and Wilmore and Papa (2016), but add art as an additional component. Dewhurst (2010) asserts that a quality arts for social justice program would include the following: 1) students must be encouraged to make connections to their own lives and analyze how they are implicated in structures of oppression, 2) students must question societal systems and structures, and 3) the intention of the lesson or program must be to challenge oppression.

Beyerbach (2011) adds to Dewhurst's (2010) definition by claiming that students should choose the topics that they explore to draw on their own unique perspectives and passions. According to Beyerbach (2011), when students are interested in their topics, "They are quicker to identify patterns and understand issues and are less inclined to construct walls of resistance" (p. 6). She also adds that the end goal of a social justice pedagogy must be to inform a larger audience about the issues. In this way, Beyerbach's views on social justice education are truly tied to producing widespread social change, not merely educating a small group of students about systems of oppression. Finally, Garber (2004) contends that social justice education must be ongoing. Thus, one lesson is not enough; instead, it must consist of a process over time.

Ciardello's (2010) definition of social justice arts education—though initially intended to apply to poetry education for social justice—can apply to arts of any form. First, Ciardello (2010) claims that social justice education must not be politically neutral; that instead, it must uphold anti-oppression values and give voice to those of marginalized identities. Next, it must be intentional, not frivolous. In other words, teachers must think critically about their choices and interactions with students. Finally, Ciardello (2010) believes that the process of creating social justice poetry must be an act of humanizing for both the writer and the reader by working toward a more democratic society. She states, "social justice poetry speaks to the heart as well as the head, calling for empathy as well as rights" (p. 466). Here, Ciardello (2010) is calling upon teachers to value students' emotional intelligence as well as their academic knowledge. She believes that teachers must foster their students' emotional growth through units on social justice.

The practice of social justice poetry education—that is, the particular lessons, assignments, and curriculum it consists of—vary greatly. Linda Christensen (2017) offers many suggestions to teachers looking to bring social justice poetry into their classroom, one being the "Where I'm From" poem. These poems allow students to reflect on their personal history, their concept of home, and the experiences, people, and places that have shaped their life. Christensen begins this unit by showing students examples of other "Where I'm From" poems, intentionally including writings by diverse authors. These poems usually begin with the repetition of the phrase "I'm from…," and include various memories or things that the author finds important. By having students write about themselves, Christensen argues, teachers can show students that they matter. Their lives are, quite literally, the subject of the curriculum. In this way, the content of the

curriculum can contribute to the development of the classroom community as well as students' self-esteem.

Of course, the "Where I'm From" poem, and poetry in general, are not the only forms that social justice education can take. As I will discuss next, music similarly has much to offer to the field of social justice arts education. However, Christensen's work in particular speaks to me because it allows students to determine which parts of their lives they bring into the classroom. In this situation, the teacher doesn't teach about a particular identity or history. Rather, the student has the power to decide what is or is not relevant to them. In this way, it provides teachers with an opportunity to get to know their students, learning about parts of students' lives that were previously unknown to them. As such, Christensen's work remains relevant to any teacher who aims to incorporate social justice into their classroom.

Palmer (2017) and Rashid (2016) both focus specifically on music education for social justice. Like visual arts, music curricula are extremely Western, teaching the works of Bach, Beethoven, and Chopin. Palmer encourages music teachers to decenter Western Art Music (WAM) from their curriculum and include music from non-Western cultures. She recognizes a tendency for teachers to stereotype or generalize the music of non-Western cultures, and, to prevent those mistakes, recommends that teachers engage students in extensive conversations on the music's history and social context. Palmer (2017) states, "This [the inclusion of a music's historical and social context] opens the opportunity to explore music's complexities, regardless of genre or country of origin, while presenting varying genres of music with equity" (p. 28). Thus, it is vital to teach the specific context of music alongside it's sonic qualities.

Palmer (2017) fell short in her analysis of non-Western music. Palmer's approach did not address the tendency for educators to portray art from non-Western cultures as oppositional to art from Western cultures. This trend reinforces a Western/non-Western binary that posits Western music as superior. Likewise, it also groups a diverse group of music and musicians together under the category of "non-Western." A more nuanced approach, in which teachers and students think beyond the Western/non-Western binary, would perhaps result in a deeper understanding and appreciation of non-Western music.

Rashid (2016) focuses on hip-hop music's potential to teach students about social justice. Many hip-hop artists use their music to critique systems of oppression, such as poverty, the war on drugs, the war on terror, and race relations. Rashid (2016) recommends that students unpack the lyrics of hip-hop music to study oppression through the perspective of the artist. Rashid (2016) specifically highlights "Start the Revolution" by Capital D and "Tatuduhendi (Boogie Man)" by Primeridian as works with a strong social commentary. Furthermore, Rashid (2016) argues that students' familiarity and identification with hip-hop music add to its' value in the classroom. Specifically, by including hip-hop music in their curricula, teachers show their students—particularly urban students of color—that they value their cultural capital. Although hip-hop music alone can not build positive classroom communities, it can lay the foundation for strong relationships between teachers and students.

Inclusive Arts Education

The writing of Dewhurst (2010), Beyerbach (2011), Ciardello (2010), Palmer (2017), Rashid (2016), and Villalpando (2018) fail to address one key component of curriculum:

accessibility. Most curricula are designed with able-students in mind; however, students of all learning needs and preferences must be able to engage with the materials. Many educators look to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for guidance on developing inclusive curricula. UDL consists of three main principles: multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). Simply put, teachers must not assume that one method will work for all students, and instead, provide diverse opportunities for students to undertake their learning. Meyer, Rose, and Gordon (2014) encourage teachers to consider the different ways in which their students process and engage with material, and to respond accordingly. This may take the form of delivering instructions both verbally and writing them on the board, providing illustrations and graphs to accompany texts, or providing movement breaks. Ultimately, teachers must embrace flexibility, multiplicity, and responsiveness in their teaching.

In "Beyond Accommodations: Designing for Nonverbal/Nonauditory Learners in the Inclusive Art Room," Wexler and Luethi-Garrecht (2015) narrow the scope of inclusive education. They focus specifically on how visual arts teachers can make their physical classrooms accessible to students with Autism. To begin, they recommend adjustable chairs and movable tables. They write, "For an inclusive art room, a table and work- space that is adjustable in height with the addition of inclining and expanding surfaces permits for more bodily freedom and variation of bodies" (Wexler and Luethi-Garrecht, 2015, p. 17). The authors also recommended non-reflective surfaces to prevent strain on their students' eyes. Ultimately, Wexler and Luethi-Garrecht (2015) argue that art teachers must not assume that all bodies have the same needs and account for that diversity in their classroom design and materials.

Almqvist and Christophersen (2016) also explored the relationship between dis/ability

and arts education, but instead focused on the practices of successful inclusive arts education

programs. Through a study conducted at two Scandinavian primary schools, they found that

successful inclusive arts education programs had the following elements: 1) the school viewed

arts education as a right of all students, 2) inclusion was connected to larger practices of

cross-disciplinary teacher collaboration, 3) students were allowed access to different modes of

expression and communication, 4) the schools met several "preconditions," such as highly

qualified teachers and physical and technical resources, and 5) if students' needs were not met in

a traditional, inclusive arts classroom, the arts teachers would provide them education in a

different setting. More than anything, Almqvist and Christophersen's (2016) findings

demonstrate that the development and implementation of high-quality, inclusive arts education

programs is extremely challenging and requires coordination between multiple committed and

knowledgeable school personnel.

Challenges Facing Social Justice Education

Garber (2004) investigates the challenges to implementing a successful program in her

article "Social Justice and Art Education." Garber (2004) first points to neoliberal logics of

individualism and personal responsibility that prevent students and teachers from recognizing

problems in their communities as social, not merely personal. Likewise, she notes that funding

inequalities result in some schools—typically those that serve low-income students of

color—lack of financial resources to allocate to arts education. Finally, she states that messages

about social justice and oppression can become lost during the teaching process if teachers focus too much on the aesthetic aspects of art.

The standardization and regulation of public school curricula also prohibits educators from bringing social justice into the classroom. While some teachers may desire to teach social justice in their classrooms, they are constrained by the greater system in which they work. For example, as Villalpando (2018) notes in "Battling the Big One," some states, such as Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Mississippi, and Arizona have passed legislation prohibiting teachers from discussing queer issues in class. Thus, if teachers in those states do bring up queerness in their classrooms, they risk losing the respect of their colleagues, or even losing their jobs. Here, Villalpando (2018) exemplifies Garber's (2004) claim: "It is not possible [...] to achieve emancipatory education if institutional structures constrain the identities of teachers, their imagination, and their practices" (p. 13). Thus, while social justice work can be undertaken by an individual teacher, they will struggle to sustain their work and have a lasting impact if policymakers are not supportive.

Finally, many people don't believe that children are capable of discussing social justice. When I tell my friends that I'm teaching social justice to third, fourth, and fifth graders, many react with surprise. "Are they old enough to learn about oppression? Won't that be too hard for them? Isn't that more appropriate for older children?" While these responses frustrate me, more challenging is when I hear similar statements made by educators. Contrary to these beliefs, children of all ages have the ability to learn about complex social issues. For example, Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010) note that young children recognize racial differences between themselves and others, and have many questions about those differences. Adults who

silence children's questions about race teach them that that subject is taboo, inhibiting their

growth and learning. Instead, Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010) argue that educators should

instead teach explicitly about race and allow children the space to question their own

assumptions and make mistakes. Unfortunately, the fear that many educators have around talking

about race, and other social issues alike, prevents them from engaging in these conversations

with their students. As such, social justice education is often non-existent in many schools.

Readily Available Arts Education Resources

To investigate what resources are readily-available for teachers who engage in social

justice arts, I turned online to two educational websites. The first, KinderArt, specializes in art

education for the primary grades. They offer lessons on a variety of art-related topics, from

architecture to art history to crafting musical instruments. I looked at lessons focused on social

issues. One, titled "A Box of Crayons," stands out to me. This lesson embodies the tokenism and

lack of historical context that Chin (2011) and Acuff (2014) described. Intended to be taught on

Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the lesson has students listen to a poem about different colored

crayons getting along. Next, students draw pictures of themselves on a crayon-shaped paper,

which the teacher will glue to a piece of paper. While the lesson's goal is for students to

recognize and appreciate the diversity within their classroom, it fails to provide the social context

within which that diversity exists—a common problem, according to Chin (2011). Likewise,

students are never asked to discuss power and oppression or question their own role in such

structures. Thus, this lesson doesn't meet Dewhurst's (2010) criteria that social justice art

education must have students consider their own role within systems of dominance and

oppression. Furthermore, though this lesson is supposedly about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., his name is never mentioned. Finally, the lesson is just that—one lesson. As Garber (2004) notes, students cannot be expected to gain much from one, singular lesson; instead, social justice education must be a continuous, ongoing process. Relegating social justice education to just one lesson sends the message that "diversity" is only acceptable on one day of the year, not something to be integrated into the curriculum daily. This lesson exemplifies what is problematic about common resources that supposedly teach art for social justice.

Next, I turned toward the website Teaching Tolerance, an organization that provides resources for K12 educators on social justice and anti-bias education. Many of their lessons focus on the arts; lesson titles include "Art and Social Justice: What is a Portrait?," "Picturing Accessibility: Art, Activism and Physical Disabilities," and "James Baldwin: Art, Sexuality and Civil Rights." I focused on a unit for K-6 students titled "Art and Activism." Over the course of this unit, students investigate what it means to be an activist and what activist art looks like. The unit culminates with students collectively painting a mural that they will present to their families and communities. This unit outline has many strengths. It follows Beyerbach's (2011) rule that the unit must culminate in the education of a larger audience. Likewise, it aligns with Dewhurst's (2010) idea that students understand their own position in systems of oppression and dominance as well as question the world around them.

Despite these assets, the unit has much room for improvement. To begin, their discussion of specific marginalized groups lacks an intersectional approach. For example, the unit outline has a day dedicated to LGBTQ issues, another day to disability rights, and a third day to African-American art. While it does address a variety of identities, by relegating particular

groups of identities to particular days, students are not encouraged to think about individuals who exist at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities. Likewise, the authors provide no recommendations on how to meet the needs of students with diverse learning preferences and needs. For instance, a student may prefer or need to work independently, and not with others. This unit outline lacks a discussion of how teachers may include those who aren't able to work on the final group project. That being said, Teaching Tolerance's curriculum possesses many strengths, namely its commitments to activism, educating a larger audience, and community-building.

<div align="center">***</div>

The theories, research, and resources outlined in this literature review have solidified my views regarding social justice arts education. While writing my curriculum, I understood that it was going to change. Lessons can be cancelled due to a fire drill, students may already know everything you are trying to teach them, or they may stare blankly at you with every question you ask. However, the knowledge I've gained from this literature review greatly informed my thinking about curriculum development and social justice education. In order to ensure the strength and success of my curriculum, I have made sure that it does the following:

1. Provides multiple opportunities for students to discuss their lives and experiences

2. Features the work of artists and activists of diverse identities

3. Allows students to explore their own identities and positionality

4. Avoids the "essentialization" of different cultures and artists

5. Through choice, allows all students to be able to access the material

6. Seeks to educate a larger audience through a display of student work

In this way, the process of research and revision has been invaluable to me as I both wrote and taught my curriculum.

Chapter Three: Curriculum and Project Development - Goals, Process, and Methodology

Drawing by Nora, third grade

My project had a few goals: 1) work with educators to develop a curriculum, 2) teach the curriculum at a few different elementary schools, and 3) reflect upon and evaluate my work. In this chapter, I outline my process, resources, and methods of evaluation.

I determined the schools with which I collaborated purely based on availability. I began by emailing the principals of local schools to gauge interest and availability. The first school to respond to my query was Haley Lane Elementary,[1] a small, suburban school serving primarily middle-class students. According to the district website, 69.9% of students are White, 15.5% are Hispanic or Latino, 7.1% are Black or African American, 3.5% are Multiracial, and 3.4% are Asian or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (NYSED Data Site). The district has an 88% graduation rate (NYSED Data Site). At Haley Lane, I was able to teach my curriculum in full to three groups of students: third, fourth, and fifth graders, respectively.

I had plans to teach it at Todds Learning Community, the second school that responded to me, as well. Todds resides in an urban, low-income community that mostly serves students of Color. Districtwide, 50.7% of students are Black or African-American, 34.2% are Hispanic or Latino, 7% are White, 7% are Multiracial, and 1% is Asian or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (NYSED Data Site). The district has a 54% graduation rate (NYSED Data Site). Initially, I planned to teach my entire curriculum to a group of fourth graders at Todds, working alongside the art teacher in her classroom. Unfortunately, that teacher ended up needing to cancel some of our scheduled sessions to make time for other activities, and my class schedule made it impossible for me to reschedule. As a result, I was only able to teach one lesson at Todds.

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[1] The names of both schools are pseudonyms.

To develop my curriculum, I began working independently, using my literature review to guide my decisions. After developing an initial draft, I sought out feedback from numerous sources, including my advisors at Vassar, the principal and art teacher at Haley Lane, and the art teacher at Todds. Cumulatively, their feedback consisted of suggestions on the content, resources, pacing, and logistics of my lessons. Furthermore, the educators from Todds and Haley Lane helped me develop a curriculum that would draw on the knowledge and interests of their respective students. The time I would have with students proved to be a major challenge to my curriculum development. At each of these schools, I initially asked to have ten one-hour periods with the students. While I was still in the process of brainstorming and building connections, the administrators and teachers at each school supported my initial plan. However, once it came time to actually schedule my lessons, they cut my time. Ultimately, I had five 30-minute periods at Haley Lane and one 40-minute period at Todds. As a result, I had to reword my curriculum to make it doable in such a short time frame.

The teaching conditions varied between each location. At Todds, I worked alongside the art teacher in her classroom. While I acted as the lead teacher, she supported me throughout the lesson by redirecting students during whole-class conversation, clarifying instructions, and guiding small-group conversations. At Haley Lane, my teaching was much more independent. The schools' administrators placed me in the STEAM lab, a room not used regularly by any one person. I had no full-time support from another teacher or school member during my time there. Occasionally, paraprofessionals would enter the room with a class, but their presence was irregular. As such, I had much less support during my time at Haley Lane.

I used a few different methods to analyze the effectiveness of my lessons. First, I used the work that students generated throughout the project. This method proved challenging in that I struggled to find a way to analyze student learning rather than their work. In other words, I was more interested in their process rather than their final products. Ultimately, I ended up analyzing the art that students produced as well as their written responses and comments. I created one assignment specifically for the purpose of evaluating student learning. This assignment asked students to complete the following sentences: "When I started the art and activism project, I was thinking about ___. Now that I've finished the art and activism project, I'm thinking about ___." By gathering students' thoughts on what they learned over the course of the project, I was able to assess their learning and growth without judging their work.

In order to protect the anonymity of the students, I chose to neither record nor videotape the classes. As a result, I was not able to capture direct quotes from students. Instead, when a student made a noteworthy comment, I paraphrased it in my journal. In one exception, the principal at Haley Lane videotaped some conversations among her fifth grade students, unknown to me. Later, she shared one of these videos with me. I was able to use this video to observe student conversations I wasn't otherwise privy to.

Finally, I asked the community at Haley Lane to provide me with feedback on my project. The principal distributed a survey that I created to teachers, paraprofessionals, and parents (Appendix). The survey uses a combination of open-ended questions and multiple choice questions so that the participants' responses would be on topic, but allow for interpretation. Combined, these evaluation methods provided me insight on the outcomes of my project.

Chapter Four: A Social Justice Art Curriculum for Upper-Elementary School Students
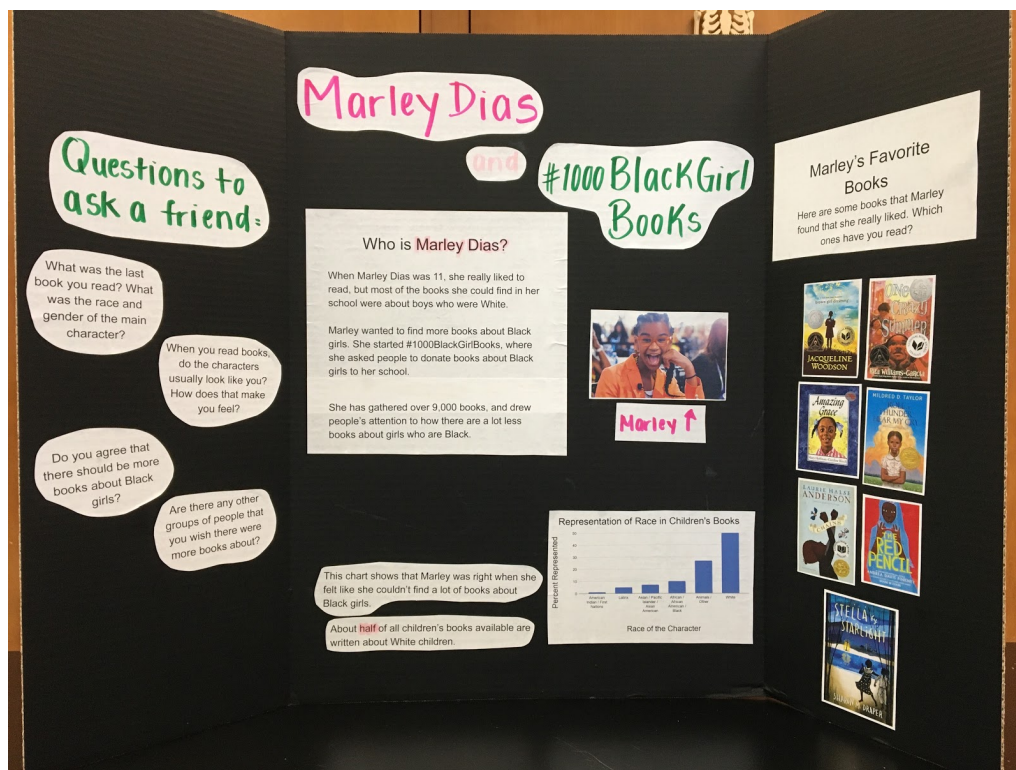
An example of one of the stations students explore on Day One: Issues in Our Communities.

This curriculum, geared toward students in grades 3-5, seeks to:

1. Introduce students to a variety of social issues, particularly those in their schools and community

2. Encourage students to think about their own lives and experiences, particularly in relation to the social issues previously discussed

3. Expose students to examples of activist art

4. Empower students to think about ways in which they can create change

5. Allow students freedom to explore topics relevant to them and provide them with the opportunity to create their own work of activist art

Day One: Issues in our Communities

Common Core Standards: Grade Four

1. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative

   discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 4

   topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

2. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.4.6: Acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate general

   academic and domain-specific words and phrases, including those that signal precise

   actions, emotions, or states of being (e.g., quizzed, whined, stammered) and that are basic

   to a particular topic (e.g., wildlife, conservation, and endangered when discussing animal

   preservation).

3. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.7: Interpret information presented visually, orally, or

   quantitatively (e.g., in charts, graphs, diagrams, time lines, animations, or interactive

   elements on Web pages) and explain how the information contributes to an understanding

   of the text in which it appears.

Objectives

1. Students will understand the meaning of the word "activism"

2. Students will identify issues that are present in their community

3. Students will analyze the work that other youth activists have performed in their own

   communities

Materials

1. Whiteboard with markers

2. Materials for the different stations:

    a. Statistics about gender stereotypes

    b. Statistics about poverty in Poughkeepsie

    c. Text: *I'm New Here* accompanied by a brief paragraph outlining experiences of immigrants and English Language Learners in schools

    d. Information on Marley Dias and #1000BlackGirlBooks campaign

Introduction: Introduce myself (name, where I am from, and why I am here). Take a few questions that students have for me. *3 minutes.*

Procedure

1. Objective: *Teacher brings the group back together, and states today's objective.* "Thank you for filling out that form. It will help me as I plan our lesson for the rest of our time together. Today, we will spend some time talking about changes that people can make in their communities to make them better." *1 minute.*

2. Word web:

    a. "First, I want to start by looking at the word activism." *Teacher writes the word activism on the board.* "Together, we're going to make a web about this word. Has anyone made a word web before?" *If yes, allow the student to explain. If not,*

provide them with a definition. The teacher facilitates a class conversation on the word "activism" while taking notes on the board. 6 minutes.

b. *Teacher brings up the presentation so that students can view the definition.* "Thanks so much for sharing your thoughts! I would like to give a definition of the word activism that I like a lot. Here it is: Activism is work done by people who want to make their community better for other people. Does anyone have any questions about that definition?" *Take and answer all questions. 5 minutes.*

3. Exploring Social Issues:

a. *Teacher passes out the worksheet for students to keep track of what interests them.* "Next, we're going to do some independent exploring of issues around the world. There are different stations set up around the classroom that you can visit. At each station, you'll be able to read a little bit about some issues in the world, or what some people have done to change those issues. Does anyone have any questions so far?" *Take all questions.* "In one minute, you can start moving to stations. Please visit at least two stations in total. You will have 15 minutes to work, and I will provide you with reminders every five minutes to move to a new station. You may begin!" *2 minutes.*

b. *As students move around the room, the teacher circulates and engages students with questions about the different stations. After five minutes, the teacher provides a reminder for students to move to a new station. At the end of the 10 minutes, the teacher brings the class together and asks them to return to their seats.*

4. <u>Discussion:</u> *Pose the following questions to the whole class.* "Has anyone heard of some

of these issues before? Did anything surprise you? What stood out to you the most? What

are you interested in learning more about?" *5 minutes.*

Closure: Students have the opportunity to share out what was most interesting for them. What

issues did they choose to write down on their paper, and why? Before they go, have one student

provide a definition of activism for the class. *1 minutes.*

Evaluation: While students are working in small groups, the teacher will come around and ask

students to explain, in their own words, what activism means. The teacher will provide

clarification as needed.

Day Two: Our Identities and Experiences

Common Core Standards: Grade Four

1. VA:Cr1.2.4a: Collaboratively set goals and create artwork that is meaningful and has purpose to the makers.

2. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 4 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Objectives

1. Students will consider the ways in which self-knowledge allows them to engage in conversation about social issues.

2. Students will think about their own identity and what they bring to the class.

Materials

1. Copies of my "I am" poem

2. Blank templates of the "I am" poem format

3. Blank paper

4. Colored pencils, crayons, and/or markers

5. Slideshow with images of self-portraits

Introduction: A game! We will divide the space into sides (will depend on the set-up of the classroom). I will call out two things (ex: vanilla vs. chocolate, cats vs. dogs, summer vs. winter). Students who like the first item will go to the right side of the room, and students who like the second item better will go to the left side of the room. After I call out a few, I will give students the opportunity to think of some. *5 minutes.*

Procedure

1. Objective: "Over the next few weeks, we're going to be spending a lot of time thinking about problems that face us and other people in our community. An important first step to that is understanding who we are, and what makes us who we are. Why do you think that is?" *Take a few responses.* "To start that process, you have two choices: make a self-portrait, or write an I am poem. *If any students have, allow them to describe it. Otherwise, describe it yourself. While discussing, pass out handout. 1 minute.*

2. Example Poem: "I have a model that I used to help me write my poem. Let's go through part of it together." *Read aloud the first few sentences of my poem, explaining why I chose to fill in the blanks with the words that I did. Make the connection between my mentioning of books that feature people that look like me with Marley Dias's struggle to find books that feature people that look like her. 3 minutes.*

3. Example Self-Portraits: "So, not all of you may like writing. If you would rather draw a picture of yourself, called a self-portrait, instead of writing a poem, that's okay too. *Pull up slideshow of self-portraits. Ask students to consider what makes each self-portrait unique, and what the artist wants you to know about them. 4 minutes.*

4. <u>Independent Work:</u> *Students work on writing their own poems or self-portraits. During this time, the teacher circulates around the room providing support and redirection as needed. The teacher should ensure that students are paying specific attention to what their poem or drawing says about them, and how they want to convey themselves. 15 minutes.*

Closure: One or two students may share their self-portraits to the class. Students should talk about why they characterized themselves in a particular way. The teacher may ask prompting questions, such as: "I noticed that you drew your face much bigger than your body. Can you tell me why?" "Why did you decide to put yourself in those clothes?" or "I heard you mention books in your poem. Can you talk more about why books are important to you?" *2 minutes.*

Evaluation:

1. Students will participate in or listen actively during a whole-class conversation on identity and activism. Alternatively, the teacher may ask the students to discuss this topic as a pair during the independent work period.

2. Students will complete an original "I am from" poem or self-portrait describing their upbringing, beliefs, and values. Students will explain their decision-making process to the teacher during one-on-one conversations.

Day Three: Art as Activism

Common Core Standards: Grade Four

1. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative

   discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 4

   topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

2. VA:Re7.2.4a: Analyze components in visual imagery that convey messages.

3. VA:Re8.1.4a: Interpret art by referring to contextual information and analyzing relevant

   subject matter, characteristics of form, and use of media.

Objectives

1. Students will use Observe, Reflect, Envision to analyze Jacob Lawrence's "Migration

   Series"

2. Students will brainstorm social issues about which they would be interested in creating an

   art project

Materials

1. Observe, Reflect, Envision blank sheet for note-taking

2. Print-outs of select works from Jacob Lawrence "Migration Series"

Introduction: *4 minutes.*

1. "Let's think back to the work 'activism' that we discussed a few days ago. Who can remind me what that means?" "Why do you think someone might choose art as a way to do activism?" Prompting questions:

    a. Do you like to do art? Why or why not?

    b. What can art do that other things, like writing essays, can't do?

    c. *Take responses until the students have a clear understanding of why people use art to do activism. Can provide a personal example if necessary:* "For me, art lets me express myself well. So I would find it easier to describe an issue that I'm passionate about through art."

Procedure

1. <u>Process of Observe, Reflect, Envision:</u> *4 minutes.*

    a. *As the teacher begins talking, pass out the "Observe, Reflect, Envision" question sheets and images of the Migration Series.* "Today we're going to look at an artist who did activism. His name is Jacob Lawrence. His art focuses a lot on what Black people faced during the beginning of the 1900s. Let's look at one of his paintings using the process of Observe, Reflect, Envision."

    b. "Who can tell me what observing means?" *Take 1-2 responses.* "Great! So some observations of this are that there are a lot of people, they are Black, and they are traveling."

    c. "Next, we'll reflect. Who can tell me what reflect means?" *Take 1-2 responses.*

       "Absolutely! So to reflect, I might ask, 'What does this mean? What does this

       remind me of?' For this work, I think it's saying that Black people had to do a lot

       of traveling, and that their race was an important factor. I also looked at the

       caption at the bottom to draw this conclusion."

    d. "Finally, we'll envision. For this step, you'll think about what questions you're

       left with, or what you might change. I'm left wondering why these people had to

       leave and what their journey was like."

2. <u>Group Analysis</u>: "Using that process, let's look at the next panel of Jacob Lawrence's

    Migration Series together. What do you observe here? What is happening in this image?"

    Take a few responses. "Let's reflect together. How does this make you feel? What is the

    author's message?" *Take a few responses.* "Finally, we'll envision. This part is always a

    little harder. Let's start by thinking about what we can learn from this, and how it changes

    our perspective. Will that change your actions?" *Take a few responses. 5 minutes.*

3. <u>Independent Work</u>: *13 minutes.*

    a. "For the rest of our class today, you will continue to look at the Migration Series.

       You're going to think about the following questions *[write them on the board].*

       Why did they make these images? What were their intentions? What can we learn

       from them? Start by using the Observe, Reflect, Envision process to gather your

       thoughts." *Hand out Observe, Reflect, Envision sheets.* "On these sheets, you can

       write down your thoughts. You may work alone or with a partner. You will have

       about 10 minutes to work, and then we'll share out."

       b.   The teacher will lead the class in a conversation about the following questions:

       What was the intention of these artists? What can we learn from their work?

Closure: *Students will fill out a sheet stating what their ideas are for their final product. I will collect it at the end. 5 minutes.*

Evaluation

1. Students will engage in a whole-class conversation and/or small group conversations about activism and art, and/or record their thoughts on Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series.

2. Students will contribute to a whole-class conversation about issues that they've observed in their schools or communities.

Day Four: Creating Activist Art - Part I

Common Core Standards: Grade Four

1. VA:Cr1.1.4a: Brainstorm multiple approaches to a creative art or design problem.

2. VA:Cr1.2.4a: Collaboratively set goals and create artwork that is meaningful and has purpose to the makers.

3. VA:Cr2.2.4a: When making works of art, utilize and care for materials, tools, and equipment in a manner that prevents danger to oneself and others.

Objectives

1. Students will consider different social issues in their schools and communities.

2. Students will thoughtfully and carefully choose a topic to explore in their final project.

Materials

1. Whiteboard with markers

2. Students' paper from Day Three to log topics in which they are interested

3. Various art materials

Introduction: Pass out students' papers on which they wrote their ideas for the final project. "What do you remember from our conversation yesterday on ideas for your art project? What other topics would you want to add to this list?" Facilitate whole-class conversation on different topics that students could choose, while reminding them to record their ideas on their paper. The

teacher should also mention ways and encourage students of how these topics could be represented in art. *8 minutes.*

Procedure

1. Objectives: "Now that we've come up with a lot of different topics that we're interested in, it's time to begin working. At this point, you should decide on what topic you want to do your project about. Remember that you can work by yourself or with a group."
   Provide instructions on materials: what is available to students, and how they can use them [depending on location]. Ask for and take any questions about the assignment. 3 minutes.

2. Independent work time *(13 minutes): Students work on their projects. During this time, the teacher should circulate the room, providing support and clarification as needed. The teacher should ensure that:*
   a. *All students have chosen an appropriate topic.*
   b. *Students have come up with a message surrounding their topic.*
   c. *Students have or are developing a plan for how they will represent that topic through art.*

   To do so, the teacher should ask follow-up questions, such as: "What do you want people to know when they look at this work of art?" "Why is this topic important to you? Where did you first learn about it?" "What made you decide to use paint instead of markers or crayons?" "What are you planning to do next?"

Closure: Students have the option to present their work-in-progress to the class. Their discussion

of their work should include a) what their topic is, and b) what they are trying to say about that

topic. The teacher may ask them to clarify these points as needed. The student may ask for

feedback or suggestions from their peers. *3 minutes.*

Evaluation:

1. Students will be engaged during a whole-class conversation on social issues (collective

    brainstorming for the final project).

2. Students will begin to work on an art project that explores social justice.

Day Five: Creating Activist Art - Part II

Common Core Standards: Grade Four

1. VA:Cr1.2.4a: Collaboratively set goals and create artwork that is meaningful and has purpose to the makers.

2. VA:Cr2.2.4a: When making works of art, utilize and care for materials, tools, and equipment in a manner that prevents danger to oneself and others.

3. VA:Cr3.1.4a: Revise artwork in progress on the basis of insights gained through peer discussion.

Materials:

1. Students works-in-progress from the last session

2. Art materials

3. Reflection papers

Objectives:

1. Students will continue to explore their chosen topic from the previous class period through art.

2. Students will consider the message that their artwork conveys about their particular topic.

3. Students will reflect on what they've gained from this experience as a whole.

Introduction: Welcome the students to class and provide brief instructions on where their materials and projects from last class are. Remind students of what materials are available and how to care for them. *1 minutes.*

Procedure:

1. Independent Work Time: *Students will continue to work on their final projects. During the time, the teacher will make sure students are on task and ask them questions about their project to deepen their understanding of the material. Example:* "Why did you choose to use those colors? What do they represent?" "Why did you draw the figure so small/big on the page?" "Can you tell me more about what's happening in your picture?" *The teacher will provide reminders when students have only two minutes left to continue working. 15 minutes.*

2. Share Out: *Students have the option to share their work to the class. Students may continue working on their own projects while someone is sharing as long as they remain quiet and respectful. 4 minutes.*

3. Reflection: *5 minutes.*

   a. Objectives and Instructions: *Give the following instructions while passing out the papers:* "Now that we've spent five days learning about and making activist art, it's time to reflect on what we've learned. This paper asks you for two things: first, what you were thinking about when you started the art and activism project, and second, what you're thinking about now. Your responses can be about what you knew about activism before and after the project, what you thought the

project was going to be about and how it did or didn't meet your expectations, or

something else. Does anyone have any questions?" *Take questions.*

    b. <u>Independent Work:</u> *While students are working, circulate the room to make sure*

that they're on task. Ask prompting or clarifying questions as needed (ex: "What

did you think the word activism meant before you started this project? How did

that change over the course of the project? *Or* "When you started this project,

what did you think the purpose of art was, and has that changed?"

Closure: *5 minutes.*

1. The teacher will discuss next steps for the project:

    a. Where they can put their work if they want it to be displayed, as well as where it

       hang

    b. When during the regular school students could continue to work on their art if

       they have not yet finished.

2. Students should take a few minutes to clean up their materials and put their work in an

    appropriate storage place (either to be displayed or taken home with them).

3. The teacher will also thank them for the time and effort that they've given to this project

    over the past few weeks.

Evaluation:

1. Students will create a work of art (painting, drawing, poetry, etc.) that explores a social

    issue. The work does not need to be finished by the end of the day.

2. Students will articulate why they've made certain choices and what the significance of
    their artwork is to the teacher during one-on-one conversations.

3. Students will complete a reflection handout to be collected by the teacher.

Chapter Five: Analysis

Drawing by Jackson, 4th grade

In this chapter, I analyze my students' learning throughout my course. I observed the emergence of the following learning themes during my teaching: 1) identity and positionality, 2) understanding of oppression, 3) expression through art, 4) focus on animals, and 5) desire to learn more. I also consider my own growth as an educator, as well as areas for growth in my curriculum and teaching.

Student Learning and Growth

Identity and Positionality

Over the course of this project, I hoped that students would develop their understanding of their own identities and positionality. On Day Two, students explored their identities through self-portraits or "I Am" poems. To make these activities meaningful, I had students consider my intentions behind them. "When we talk about activism, why is it important to know about ourselves?" I asked. In each class, many students readily volunteered answers. I believe Sadie, a fourth grader, put it best: "When we know who we are and what we're good at, we can know how to help other people better." With this in mind, students began exploring their identities through art and poetry.

To the left is a self-portrait by Gracie,[2] a fifth grader. Her self-portrait shows her challenges with expressing emotion, depicted in her tears and eyes—the only color on the page—as well as the tape over her mouth. As she
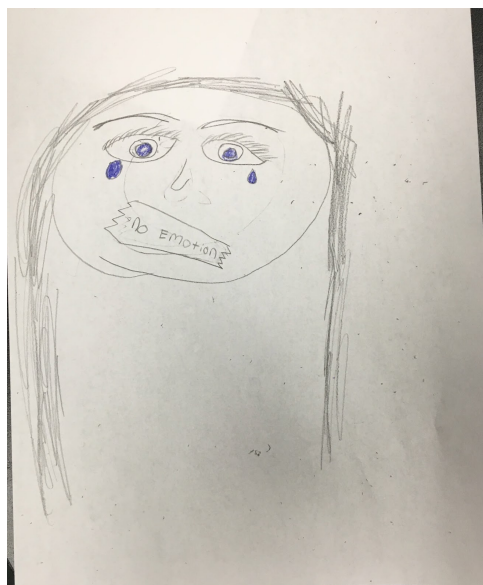
described to me, even though she feels a lot on the inside, she doesn't really know how to express it.

Hannah's (fifth grade) self-portrait *(right)* may appear superficial. To an outside observer, the cartoon-style figure may not carry any special meaning. However, my conversations with Hannah revealed that her choices were intentional and thoughtful. Hannah told me that she struggles to express herself and believes that other people overpower her quiet demeanor. She represented "feeling small" by drawing the figure so small on the page. Though an uninformed eye may find her work perfunctory, for Hannah, it is laden with meaning.
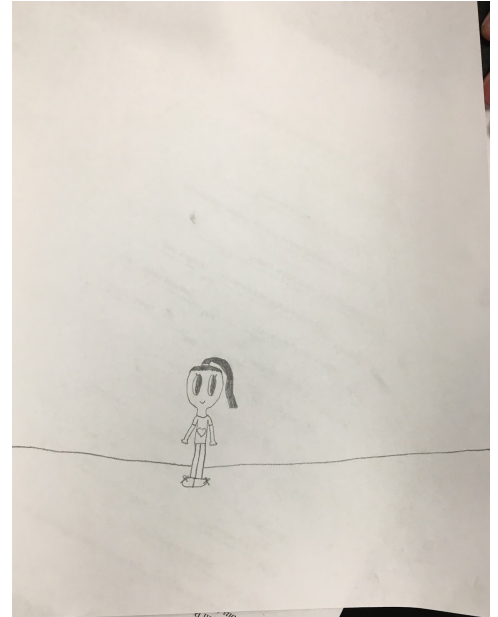
Not all students used this opportunity to explore their inner feelings and emotions. Dylan's (third grade) drawing *(left)* focused on what he liked: color. Only a few other students in the class chose to use color in their self-portraits. In doing so, Dylan set himself apart from the group. He also explicitly told the viewer of his love of marbles. This indicates Dylan's developing sense of self and personal identity.

Nathan, a fourth grader, uses his "I Am" poem to discuss his life. Though brief and unfinished, Nathan provides his readers with a snapshot of his daily experiences. He writes:

"I am from school.

From pizza and paper.

I am from the gray house with blue door."

The self-portraits of Dylan, Hannah, and Gracie and Nathan's "I Am" poem represent the

class as a whole in that they describe personality traits but lack an analysis of their social

identities. Very few students explored their social identities, such as their race, gender, class, or

ability. Upon reflection, I realized that my examples of poems and self-portraits lacked an

analysis of social identities. While discussing van Gogh's self-portrait, I asked the students to

consider his color choices. "Why do you think he used so much blue in this painting?" I asked.

Most students replied, "He must be feeling sad." In this way, I encouraged them to think about

their emotions and personality more than other aspects of their identities. The effects of my

emphasis on emotions are seen most clearly in Hannah and Gracie's self-portraits, but the lack of

discussion on social identities was true for most students.

Of course, self-knowledge on the topics that students explored—personality, emotions,

likes and dislikes—are extremely important. I am proud that my students were able to identify

these identities in themselves. However, if I were to do this project again, I would encourage

them to think more about their social identities, such as their race, gender, class, or sexuality. I

believe that the recognition of these social identities is particularly important for students of

dominant identities, who often are never taught to recognize those identities because they are

normalized. From my own experience as a White person, I can say that I was never encouraged

to think about Whiteness until college. My experience in my college-level Education and

Sociology courses have pushed me to think more about what being White has meant for me and

how it shows up in my life. I found these experiences incredibly valuable. I wish that I could have provided my students with the opportunity to do a closer analysis of their own social identities as well.

Understanding of Oppression

Initially, the students seemed to understand oppression and activism as situated solely in the past. Specifically, they associated "making change" with race and the Civil Rights' Movement. When I asked what the fourth graders at Todds thought when they heard the word "activism," they came up with the following: Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, boycotts, Malcom X, and segregation. I was impressed with their familiarity with these people and events. However, I was curious as to why their associations with the word "activism" were only historical. My assumption, based on my own educational experiences as well as the time I've spent observing in different classrooms, is that teachers only discuss historical racism, and do not teach about what racism looks like today.

It's noteworthy that I taught these lessons around Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Both schools had done special lessons around him and his work, which may have primed students to think of him when they thought about making change. In other words, their focus on the Civil Rights Movement may have had more to do with the time of year than their curriculum. However, I still wanted to push them to think about what racial injustice looks like today. During a whole-class conversation about issues in the world, I encouraged Evan, a Haley Lane third grader, and his classmates to think more about what racism looks like today.

Evan: In some countries, people still judge people on the color of their skin.

Sophie: Okay, great. Does that only happen in other countries?

Evan: No, sometimes, it still happens here.

Sophie: Yeah, it looks different here now than it did a long time ago, and it looks different

than it does in other countries, but it still happens.

Unfortunately, that conversation ended there, as students were eager to jump in with other ideas.

If I could go back to this conversation, I would encourage students to think about what racism

looks like today. I wish that I had them consider the following: what race and racism looks like

in their school, what they hear their parents say about race, when they first learned about race,

and what they hear about race on the news. I believe that these prompts would have allowed

students to better understand their own relationship to race and racism, and encouraged them to

think of racism as present in their own lives and communities.

During our conversations about race, some students discovered their own biases. The Day

One station on Marley Dias prompted many students to consider their books in a new light.

Gracie, Peyton, and Ethan, all White fifth graders at Haley Lane, had the following conversation:

Ethan: Now that I think of it, I see more of these White books than any other books, of

other gender or of other races.

Gracie: When I was reading the question, 'What was the last book you read? What was

the race and gender of the main character?' And now that I think about it, even

though my books don't really have colored pictures, I think of the characters as

White and I don't really think of them as Black because it's just more, it's kind of

like what usually, what I usually do. I don't usually think of that being, like, being

rude, it's just I don't usually think about that, and how books can be different

things.

Peyton: I also looked at that question, and I also realized I agree with [Gracie]. I read

Matilda, and she's White in it, and I never really read books with Black people in

it.

Gracie: I never usually even think about it when I'm reading it.

Here, Ethan, Gracie, and Peyton recognize the lack of representation of girls of Color in books.

More importantly, they admit that they had never considered that before, implicitly attributing

that to their own Whiteness. Gracie's comment that she always thinks of characters as White

reveals her internalized biases and assumptions that posit Whiteness as a norm. I was impressed

with her ability to recognize this in herself vocalize it to her peers. In this way, students were

able to recognize racism on a personal level, and even within themselves.

Finally, students developed their understanding of their communities' positionality. One

parent responded to my survey by saying that their child expressed surprise at learning that the

rate of poverty in Poughkeepsie was higher than the rate of poverty in New York state as a

whole. I am thrilled that one of my students truly reacted to the material in this way, and took the

initiative to share that with a parent. Since the parent didn't elaborate on what meaning the child

made from this fact, I am not able to definitively say how the child's views have changed or

expanded. However, I can say that this child is thinking about poverty, what it looks like, and

how it relates to them more than they were beforehand.

Expression through Art

I knew that some students entered this course confused about what we were doing. Many

of them had never heard the word activism before, didn't know what it had to do with art, and

didn't know why they were doing art outside of art class. However, by the end of my five days

with the Haley Lane students, they had developed strong abilities to express and communicate

social issues through art. A few students expressed this during their end-of-class reflections:

Aubrey (fourth grade): Inn the beginning I though you can just write down your feelings.

At the end I've learned that you can express your feelings not just by writing your

feeling's down you can also draw your feelings.

Elijah (fifth grade): I knew what the word activsm was but I was like what does this

mean? Now you can show activism wich is protest and you can also draw that

with art.

Tyler (fourth grade): [There are] a lot of ways to exspress your feelings in art.

The students demonstrated their abilities to use art as a mode of expression through their

final projects. I was impressed with the range of topics that students explored. While the fourth

graders primarily discussed animal abuse (as I will analyze later), students' responses focused on

everything from educational inequality to littering to homlessness. I've chosen a few to feature

here:

Grayson's (fourth grade) illustration *(above)* deals with the challenges of having ADHD.

Grayson told me that he has ADHD himself, and gets frustrated when people don't understand

what that is. Here, the figure on the left has ADHD. He is covering his ears and crying because

there is too much noise in his environment: people yelling, laughing, and crying. Grayson is

calling upon others to be more sensitive and understanding of people with ADHD.

Three third graders, Harper, Jayla, and Amy, worked together to create this piece *(left)*. Their juxtaposition of "homeless vs. rich" forces viewers to consider inequality. Their use of the ball gown and crown associate wealth with royalty, a poignant message.

Working together, fifth graders Sophia and Priya quite literally dealt with the whole world *(below, right)*. Though difficult to see in this image, each continent on this map has a different word: rights, feelings, town activities, education, bullying, protest and poverty. Sophia and Priya draw the viewer's attention to a variety of issues. Their work encourages viewers to think about how these issues are related, and the role that the global community can play in addressing them.

While fifth graders Anna and Charlotte didn't want their work displayed or photographed, their topic is still noteworthy. Both girls are athletic, and *love* playing sports. Last year, Charlotte tried out for the baseball team, but wasn't allowed to play because she was a girl. Instead, she was forced to play softball, even though she found baseball to be more fun and interesting. Charlotte worked with Anna to illustrate her anger at her experience. Their drawing depicts a girl being turned away from a basketball event because of her gender. Through this

piece, they ask viewers to consider the challenges faced by female athletes. They also showcase the girl's feelings of anger and sadness at not being able to do what she loves.

For these students, art became a way to express themselves, to process their experiences and the world around them, and to draw attention to social issues. I was particularly impressed with the vulnerability that students brought to their art and to the class as a whole. Grayson not only did an illustration of his experiences with ADHD; he also told the entire class about his ADHD, as well as his Autism. The vulnerability demonstrated by Grayson, as well as others, rendered this a valuable learning experience.

Focus on Animals

The fourth grade class at Haley Lane had an affinity for animals. On my first day at Haley Lane, a small group of students and I were looking at graphs about poverty. "Now that you see these images, and you know that there are more people in poverty in Poughkeepsie than in New York as a whole, what are you thinking about?" I asked. Sadie responded that she was thinking about horse poverty, and proceeded to tell me about a charity that she wanted to create for homeless horses. Later, during our whole-class discussion, both Sadie and Cadence shared their interest in learning more about problems facing animals. Cadence spoke particularly passionately about the abuse toward dogs. By the end of the project, almost all students in the class had, in some way, expressed their love for animals and animal issues.

A part of me expected this. I knew that students would bring up issues that they were more familiar with, such as littering, pollution, and animals. However, I was certainly *not* expecting to hear the phrase "horse poverty," nor was I expecting the entire class to be so passionate about this issue. Of course, animal homelessness and abuse are real, important, and

valid concerns to discuss. However, I knew that students could go deeper. I wanted to challenge them to think of issues that were new to them, issues that were more challenging to discuss (such as race), and topics that they wouldn't necessarily study in their regular classrooms.

For the first few classes, the fourth-graders engaged in conversation on other topics when prompted. We had wonderful conversations around Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series, identity, and expression in art. However, I knew that for their final projects, students would likely choose to do a project on animals. Though I struggled with how to handle this (as I will discuss later), I ultimately decided to encourage students to choose a different topic, but didn't force them to. However, after I spoke to students about the importance of pushing yourself out of your comfort zone and trying something new, animals remained the primary topic for the fourth grade class. As Sadie said, "I spend a lot of time thinking about animal homelessness, but not animal abuse, so I'm going to do my project on animal abuse."

I observed that some students' interest in animal abuse grew over the course of the project. The following excerpts from end-of-class reflections reveal this development:

Chloe (fourth grade): I leanred that art can help actavisam and about animal abus.

Noah (fourth grade): [I went from thinking about] art and problem in the world [to thinking about] animal abuse.

To me, this reveals the impact that students can have on each other. Sadie, Cadence, and other students who vocalized their strong feelings about animals caused others to care about this issue as well. Though this was not the topic I hoped they would choose, this was exactly the kind of communal growth and learning that I desired. As such, I consider Sadie and Cadence's ability to inspire and educate their classmates a success.

I am also interested in the language that these students used to talk about animals. In their end-of-class reflections, a few students used the word "slavery" to describe the experiences of animals today:

> *Liam (fourth grade):* [I was thinking about] how rude people are to their dogs. Dogs are
>
>> not slaves!!!!!!!!!!!
>
> *Rahul (fourth grade):* [I was thinking about] animal abuse most of the world is slaved
>
>> with animals.

I was curious why students associated animal abuse with slavery, a term that is tightly interwoven with racism and colonialism. They used language of slavery lightly; in other words, I don't think that they seriously considered the legacy of slavery nor its racial implications before using it in this context. To me, this incident reveals another area in which students can continue to grow. I believe that these students need to spend more time considering the language that they use when talking about different issues. The legacy and connotations of different words may be lost on children, especially when educators do not discuss them regularly or explicitly. As such, I wish that I could have continued this conversation with them over an extended period of time.

Despite these challenges, I remain impressed with the work that students put into their project. Though I wish they had chosen a different topic, these students are clearly passionate and dedicated to animals. Some of their work is pictured below:

Jordan (fourth grade) created a sign *(left)* to be used at a protest. His message is clear, colorful, and thorough. I appreciated that he asked, "Why do people abuse?" This question indicates his desire to truly understand the issue.
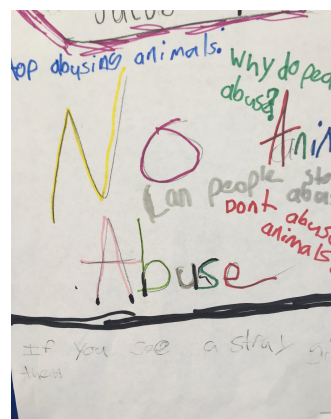
Cadence made a painting *(left)* about her hopes for the future of human-animal relationships. The human and dog are taking a walk together and appear to be completely happy and safe. She used bright, bold colors to symbolize the contentment of the human and dog.

Desire to Learn More

Across the board, students expressed a desire to learn more about activism and social issues. At the end of each Day One class at Haley Lane, I had students pose questions that they had to the whole class. Here are a few of their questions:

- Why are some people in poverty and other people aren't?

- Why are there more good books about White children than Black children?

- Where do stereotypes come from, and why do people believe them?

Their curiosity extended into their final projects as well. I had multiple students ask me if they could use the computers to do more research on their topic. Their desire to continue their social justice education made its way into their end-of-class reflection sheets as well:

Arnav (third grade): I want more classes! It goes by so quickly!

Abbie (fifth grade): At the beginning of the class I did not know what activisem ment.

Now I want to kintinue learning about activism.

Rahul (fourth grade): [I'm thinking about] doing more of project for animals.

I, too, wish that I could have spent more time with them! I believe that many of the challenges that I faced during this project would have gone much smoother if I had had more time with the students. The way things were, I unfortunately didn't have time to answer their many questions. Likewise, they didn't have time to finish their final projects. Though I believe both my students and I still grew a lot from this process, more time would have been wonderful.

My Own Growth as an Educator

I believe that I grew just as much as my students throughout this project. The processes of both planning and teaching these lessons has challenged me to become a more thoughtful, purposeful, and deliberate educator. Not only was I challenged to improve upon my classroom management and decision-making skills, I also experienced first-hand the challenges of teaching in public schools.

My desire to work with public school children limited my curriculum from the very beginning. As the educators with whom I've worked described to me, public school teachers work hard to prepare students for tests and make deadlines, and don't have ample time to dedicate to outside projects. As such, administrators reduced my proposal, which consisted of ten one-hour sessions, to five 30-minute sessions. Moreover, the art teacher at Todds Learning Community asked me to make sure that my curriculum met certain Common Core requirements for art. After receiving this feedback, I struggled to meet the needs of the educators at each of these schools. Developing a shortened version of my original curriculum proved useless. I went from developing a meaningful, substantial curriculum to one that felt rushed and confusing. I soon realized that in order to meet their time constraints, I would need to start from scratch. This

was the first of many large-scale changes that I would make to my curriculum over the course of

the project.

During the process of curriculum development, I began to notice that different

stakeholders held different expectations for me. For example, after looking at the same initial

proposal, the Haley Lane's principal thought I should spend more time teaching explicitly about

social issues, while Haley Lane's art teacher thought I needed more time for art-making. *How*

can they expect me to do both? I panicked. The art teacher at Todds similarly rattled me when

she asked that I remove any LGBTQ+ content from my curriculum, claiming that it was not

appropriate for students of this age. The following question, from a journal entry dated January

2nd, expresses my frustration: "How can I balance valuing feedback from experienced educators

while maintaining this as *my* project on a personal and academic level?"

Initially, I found the process of accepting (or not accepting) feedback to be daunting. I

worried that I would be overstepping my boundaries if I refused to take a suggestion that I didn't

like. However, the conflicting feedback I received from various sources required me to do so. I

did see potential in some suggestions; as the Haley Lane teacher suggested, I decided to teach

more explicitly about social issues. However, in order to make that happen, I had to cut out a lot

of other artists and activists I had hoped to highlight. Ultimately, the process of revising my

curriculum forced me to think about what I wanted and what I thought would be best for myself

and the students. Despite my initial hesitation, I was able to develop a curriculum that reflected

my research, desires, and goals, and went into the classroom on Day One feeling prepared.

Nevertheless, my time in the classroom came with just as many challenges. I struggled to

learn what classroom management practices worked best with these students. My first days at

both Todds and Haley Lane were hectic, to say the least. Students arrived to class up to 15 minutes late, none of the clocks in the room matched each other's time, and other people frequently walked into my room, confused as to why I was there. However, I soon discovered strategies to help the days go smoother. I started writing the daily agenda on the board to keep students focused. I noticed that other teachers used clapping to get students attention, so I did too. I created plans for what to do if students arrived late. I also continued to revise my lesson plans during the project based on my observations of the students. For example, I initially dedicated one day to art-making, but ultimately changed it to two once I realized how much time it took the students to put their ideas down on paper. These adjustments, though small, made the classes go much smoother, allowing more time for student learning.

Haley Lane's fourth grade class and their love of animals posed the greatest challenge to me as a teacher. While I was tempted to disallow students from doing a project on animals, I worried that they would respond poorly. When I was a child, if a teacher told me that I couldn't do a project on a topic that I truly loved, I would have become disappointed and angry. Those feelings would have prevented me from exploring a new topic. With this in mind, I decided that I would encourage students to choose a different subject, but not ban it altogether. However, my decision was wrought with concern, as demonstrated in this journal excerpt from January 17th:

> "When should I say no to students? Would it have been better if I had explicitly banned students from doing projects on animals and the environment, or would that have made them resentful toward me and my project? Was my decision to not explicitly ban it truly based on my pedagogical beliefs, or was I just afraid of them not liking me?"

Although my decision to provide students with total control over their projects ultimately

backfired, I believe that the process of thinking my choices through and reflecting on my own

actions was extremely valuable.

Room for Growth in Curriculum and Teaching

As my idea to encourage students to choose a topic other than animals, didn't work, I'm

left considering how else I could have handled this situation. Since my time with the students has

ended, I've been thinking about what I could have done differently to have them choose a

different subject. The first thing that I can think of is more: more time, more exposure to social

issues, more exposure to activist art, more conversations with peers, and more processing and

reflecting of the new information. Unfortunately, due to my limited time with the students, this

wasn't an option.

I've also considered narrowing down my focus from social justice to something more

specific. If I had limited the subject to only gender, for example, we could have considered the

role of gender in their school community, discussed examples gender-based activism, and looked

at works of art that focused on gender. A limited subject matter would allow students to gain a

deeper understanding of that particular issue, rendering them experts on that particular subject. In

my curriculum, I discussed many different topics and identities because I wanted students to find

something that they were interested in. However, looking back, I recognize that this may have

been overwhelming for them. It's likely that some students didn't have the tools to do a project

on a topic other than animal abuse even if they had wanted to.

Another unexpected outcome of my curriculum was actually the *development of*

stereotypes in students. Because we didn't discuss any one issue in depth, and instead previewed

a variety of different topics, students did not have a full picture of any particular subject.

Naturally, this caused students to generalize their understanding of issues, assuming that

everyone experiences them in the same way. One example of this is the English Language

Learners (ELLs) station on Day One. At this station, students read the book *I'm New Here,*

which features many immigrant children and highlights their experiences finding a place in a

new school. There's a lot that I like about this book: it is told from the perspectives of the

immigrant children, it features their first languages, and it features children of a variety of

different races. However, all of the children in this book are immigrants. The characters

frequently compare and contrast "back home" with "here," creating a dichotomy between where

English supposedly is and is not spoken.

During my conversations with students, I soon realized that this caused them to believe

that all ELLs were immigrants, and that everyone born in the United States speaks English. I

worked to counteract this narrative by questioning them: "How did you learn to speak English?

Does anyone here speak more than one language? Does everyone in the United States speak

English? Can you be born in the United States and not speak English?" I left most of these

conversations feeling that students had challenged their conception of ELLs as foreign. However,

I wasn't able to have this conversation with every student.

This situation provides one more reason why a general social justice curriculum may not

work well in short-term settings. In order to prevent the development of stereotypes, students

must consider multiple perspectives and experiences. As such, they need ample time to process

and digest this wide range of information. Once again, it appears that I may have done better to focus my curriculum on just one topic, unless I had much more time to teach it.

Finally, I recognize I had much room for growth in my delivery of lessons. I remember a few moments when I forgot what I was going to say, became flustered by an outside distraction, or wasn't sure how to handle student behavior. I remember one day when the fifth grade class simply would not stop talking. I asked politely, gave individual reminders, and used the school's clapping routine, but they continued talking. Eventually, a paraprofessional in the room yelled at them (something that I avoid doing). I worry that if he had not been in the room, I would not have been able to gather the attention of the students.

Unfortunately, a parent heard similar things from her child. In the end-of-project survey, the parent wrote:

"The instructor of the course needs more support in delivering the lessons. Students at times felt that: there was a lot of talking by the instructor, it was not very engaging, and the follow up learning activities lacked structure. Given that a student teacher was delivering the lessons, a certified teacher being in the room would have improved the learning experience for both the elementary students and the student teacher."

This parent is absolutely correct in that I had no support delivering the lessons. While the principal of the school occasionally walked in, she never stayed for more than a few minutes. Likewise, the paraprofessionals were often too busy focusing on their individual students to offer me advice. In this way, I was extremely isolated during this process. It would have been helpful for me to have another teacher in the room or to be able to record myself. If so, I would have been better able to reflect upon my teaching and improve it in future lessons.

I believe that greater communication and involvement between different school personnel—teachers, parents, administrators—would have made it more successful. Through the survey, one parent informed me that their child had asked questions about the project which they did not know how to answer. They regretted that they weren't able to answer their child's questions. While the students' classroom teachers did not identify this as a problem, I assume that they similarly lacked knowledge on my project. A few steps could have changed this. Before my project began, I could have sent out information to teachers and parents about my intentions and background. I could have allowed teachers, parents, and students to reach out to me then to answer any questions. I also could have met with interested parents or teachers in person to brief them on my project. These steps would have allowed my project to go beyond the walls of my classroom by involving more stakeholders. Likewise, it would have enhanced my students' learning by giving them the opportunity to access the material at multiple locations.

Finally, I'm left wondering if I could have done more to incorporate students' lives into the curriculum. I made a few intentional choices to build the curriculum specifically for these students: teaching about activists who were around their age, showing statistics about poverty specifically in Poughkeepsie, and asking them to consider what changes they would like to see in their schools. However, after the program ended, I questioned how well I knew my students at all. Elizabeth Barbian (2017) writes,

> Social justice curriculum is grounded in students' lives. Yet what are our students' lives?
> How do we know them? How can we push beyond our own unspoken assumptions—for
> me, white and middle class—to see and listen and learn and create space to understand
> the lives of students? (p. 230).

Barbian (2017) contends that home visits are a vital way for her to understand the lives of her students, thereby allowing her to make her curriculum more meaningful. Reading her discuss the topics that came up at these visits opened my eyes to how little I knew about my students. I don't know what languages they speak at home, who they live with, and what their interests and hobbies are. It was only on the last day of teaching that I learned that two of my students were siblings. Of course, this isn't true for all students; some willingly shared stories about their families and personal life. However, I wish I had done more to learn about my students' lives. While I did tailor my curriculum to them, I focused on what they had in common: their age, their geography, and their school. If I had gotten to know these students better and earlier on in the process, I could have developed a stronger curriculum.

Chapter Six: Conclusion
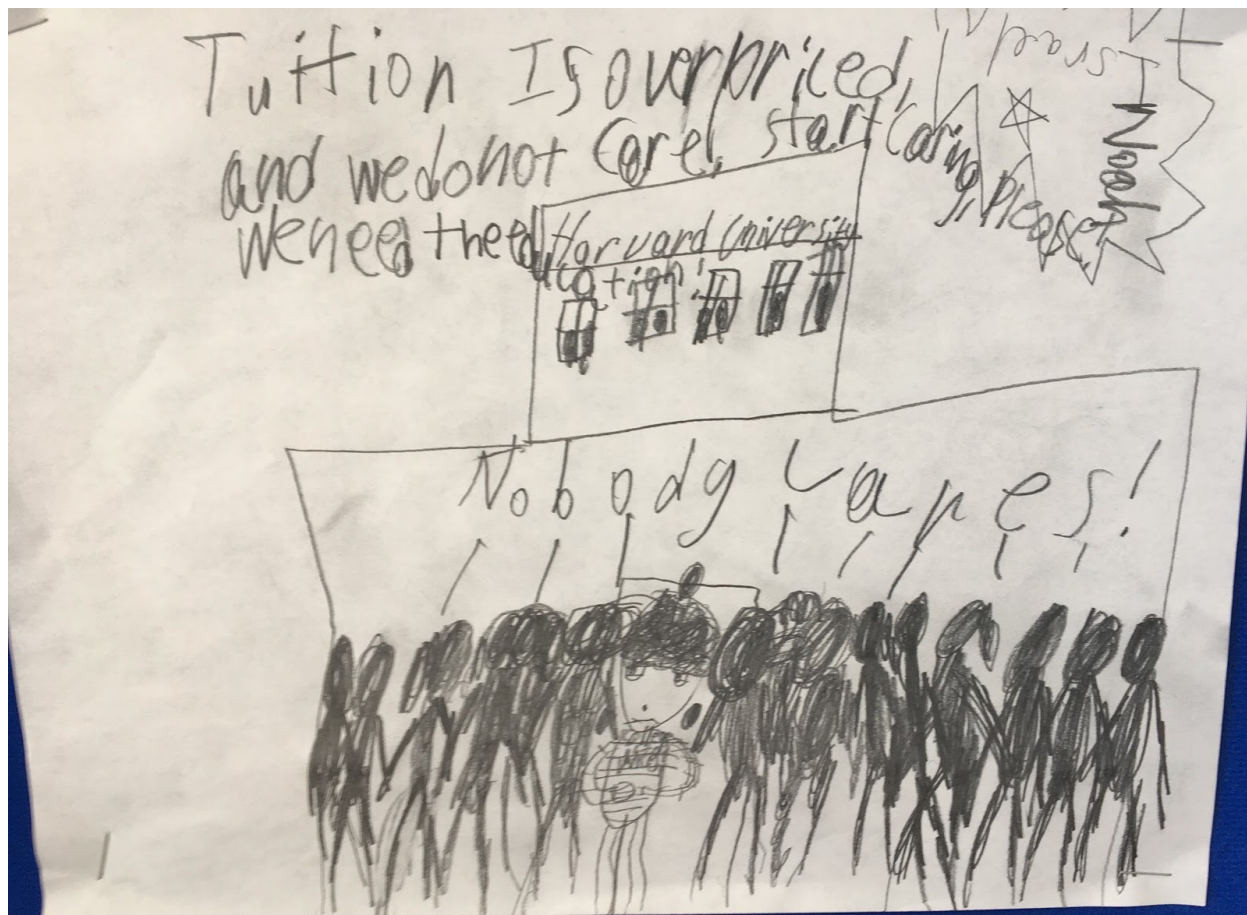
Drawing by Ethan, 5th grade

This project has both strengthened and challenged my original notions regarding social justice arts education. My work has reinforced my belief in Beyerbach's (2011) claim that the arts have much to contribute to social justice education. During my project, I witnessed my students find new, creative ways to express themselves through art. While I don't believe that the arts are the only or best means through which to teach social justice, I do believe that they allow students to bring more creativity, reflection, and expression into their work. Ultimately, I would encourage teachers to consider what methods of learning work best for their students, which may or may not lie in the arts. However, as my project has demonstrated, the arts are a powerful means through which to explore social justice with students.

Likewise, I still firmly support Dewhurst's (2010) argument that social justice education must be intentionally and explicitly anti-oppressive. Whenever I had a tough decision to make—how to respond to an insensitive comment made by a student, which activities to prioritize when I was running out of time, which feedback I should incorporate into my lessons—I would think back to Dewhurst's writing. *"What choices do I have? Which ones would challenge oppression, and which would uphold oppression?"* I would ask myself. Of course, the answer to these questions wasn't always clear; most likely, each option did a little bit of both. However, by constantly considering the effects of my choices, I remained conscious of and intentional in practicing anti-oppressive education.

I didn't anticipate the important role that collaboration, support, and cooperation would play in my teaching. I greatly appreciate the commitment of Haley Lane's principal to social justice and anti-racist education. During our many conversations, she shared with me the challenges that she faced in doing social justice work as an educator. According to her, many

parents, teachers, and other members of the school community consider this work to be controversial and push back against her efforts. I appreciated that those with whom I worked encouraged me. Neither the principal nor art teacher at Haley shied away from difficult conversations. On the contrary, they supported my desire to have those conversations with students. Our mutual understanding about the importance of social justice education made me feel much more comfortable entering their school.

This situation speaks to the importance of having confident and supportive leadership. While Haley Lane's principal was enthusiastic about social justice, many others may be apathetic or even aversive to it. Even if teachers and families at those schools were interested in doing social justice work, fear of job loss and administrative pushback may prevent them from doing so. Furthermore, Haley Lane's principal knew how to do social justice work with children. She helped her teachers develop the same skills by leading equity meetings and encouraging professional development around this topic. The necessity of her experience was clear to me through her suggestions and feedback on my lesson plans, as well as her observations on my teaching. In this way, in order to create successful social justice programs in schools, school leaders must be more than enthusiastic about the topic. They must also have experience and knowledge to be able to implement these programs successfully.

Though I appreciate the support I received from Haley Lane's principal, I found some places in which additional collaboration would have strengthened my project. Ideally, students would be able to learn social issues throughout their school day, not just in one isolated setting. The incorporation of social justice issues across subjects and over a longer period of time would have strengthened students' learning. I wish that I had been able to spend more time with Haley

Lane's third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers to discuss their views on my project and their role in it. Ideally, they would have been willing to expand on my project in their classrooms. However, even if they weren't, our conversation may have given me more insight on how I might connect my project to what they've studied in their regular classrooms. I believe my experience indicates a broader need for conversations across divisions. To achieve its greatest potential, social justice education must not be undertaken by only one teacher in one classroom, but by the greater school community together. Teachers of different subjects and grades, families, and staff members must all work together to develop a social justice pedagogy that works for their students. Likewise, they must consider what each of them personally can offer, and how the experiences and skills of others can build upon each other. I know that my project would have been greatly improved had I been able to collaborate with other teachers.

Finally, social justice education is extremely personal. The process of teaching and learning about social issues brings together the identities and experiences of students and teachers, requiring all to possess some level of vulnerability. While I know that I had a lot to share with my students, I could only speak from my own limited perspective. Undoubtedly, my students would have benefitted hearing from other people in addition to myself—people of different identities, people who have different relationships to activism and have done different activist work, and people who have experienced oppression and privilege differently than me. This is particularly true for the students at Haley Lane, because most of them shared my identities of White and middle-class.

<div align="center">***</div>

First, to the artists and musicians, the dancers and poets—those who challenge assumptions, make us uncomfortable, and dream of a better world—thank you. I am remiss that I was unable to include more of your work in my curriculum. Tatyana Fazlalizadeh, Faith Ringgold, Jacqueline Woodson, Ai Weiwei, Alvin Ailey—you give me hope. This curriculum would not have been possible without your inspiration and teaching. Continue making art that galvanizes me and millions of other viewers!

To the teachers who are looking to engage in more social justice education, please, please do! This work is not easy, but I can personally attest to its benefits. This project has tremendously strengthened my comfort and confidence in teaching about social issues. After each lesson, I learned a little bit more about my identities, my abilities as a teacher, and my role in social justice education. Likewise, the growth that I saw in my students gave me courage and hope to continue this work in the future. Find teachers and administrators in your school to support you, keep reading and learning about the work that other educators have done, and show compassion to yourself and your students. It can be done!

To school administrators: as a leader in your school community, it is your role to ensure that teachers have the tools and resources and to teach social justice successfully. Provide teachers with ample opportunities to reflect on their teaching, their identities, and the meaning of social justice in their own lives. Recognize that your teachers will make mistakes, and create a supportive community to foster their growth. Create opportunities for teachers to share resources and experiences. Expose your teachers to different activists and social issues. Honor your teachers who are already doing social justice work. If you are unsure where to start, ask your teachers what they need.

To the educators who worry that these topics aren't appropriate for elementary school children, remember that social issues affect each and every one of your students. Regardless of our particular identities, we are all involved in structures of racism and sexism, capitalism and ableism, and many more. Ignoring these realities harms *all* students. Furthermore, it's likely that your students are already aware of many social issues. They notice racial differences. They hear about homelessness and poverty on the news. Any five-year-old can tell you which toys are "for girls" and which are "for boys." When children hear adults say that "Our differences don't matter," or that "Some things are for adults to worry about," they become confused and frustrated. Our students need an education that tackles these issues head on. They need an education that challenges their assumptions and biases. And they need you to lead the way.

Finally, to the educators already doing social justice work, please know how indebted I am to you and your work. Liz Kleinrock, Marit Dewhurst, Linda Christensen, Bettina Love, and all the other educators referenced in this paper: you constantly inspire me to be bold, creative, and compassionate in my teaching. This project has shown me just how challenging social justice education can be. I'm left with an even greater respect for you and other teachers who do this work regularly. Thank you.

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Appendix: Survey Questions

1. What is your role at Noxon Road Elementary?

2. Before participating in the Art and Social Justice Project, how often did students bring up social issues or discuss activism?
    a. Often
    b. Sometimes
    c. Rarely
    d. Never

3. After participating in the Art and Social Justice Project, how often do students bring up social issues or discuss activism?
    a. Often
    b. Sometimes
    c. Rarely
    d. Never

4. What topics have students brought up to you or other students? Select all that apply.
    a. Poverty
    b. Homelessnes
    c. Stereotypes
    d. Gender
    e. Animal rights/abuse
    f. Disability
    g. The environment
    h. My students haven't brought up any of these issues
    i. Other _____

5. Specifically, what have students said about these issues?

6. Based on what you've heard or observed about the Art and Social Justice Project, what changes would you make to it?

7. Is there anything else you would like to share?