

**ART FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: EXPLORING SOCIAL JUSTICE
ART IN THE SIXTH GRADE CLASSROOM**

An Action Research Project in Art Education

by

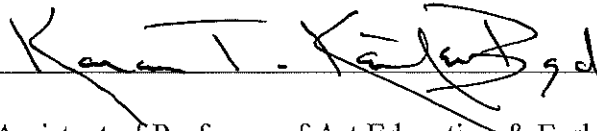
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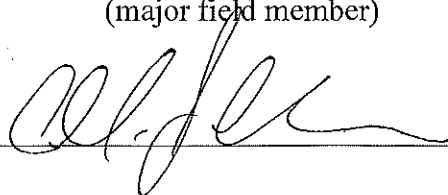
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative action research examines processes to move students from dialogue about current social issues to creating activism-based art in response to critical social concerns. As an art teacher, I observed students engaging in conversations about social issues, but these students did not appear to believe their artwork could have an impact on the issues they discussed. To develop a more effective art activism curriculum, I led 18 sixth-grade students through an art activism lesson in which they studied professional activist artists and then created a piece of artwork that raised awareness, questioned, or attempted to correct an injustice. The issues students chose ranged from air pollution to women's rights and in many cases connected to the students' interests or experiences. Students had autonomy over the materials and processes of making their artwork. Students were encouraged to pick a medium that reflected their issue, for instance a student who created a sculpture about recycling elected to make it out of waste paper in the school. Once all the pieces had been created, they were displayed for the school community in hope of raising awareness of issues facing our society.

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Statement of Problem and Context: Disconnect Between Student Recognized Social Issues and Agency to Create Change

Working as a sixth-grade art teacher, I have noticed that students in my classes are aware of what is happening in the world and frequently discuss current social issues but do not appear to see themselves or their artwork as playing an active role in addressing social concerns. Surrounded by a seemingly endless stream of information, whether through television, the Internet, social media, or conversations with family and friends, the students in my classes continually converse about current events. Even though these students are only 11 and 12 years old, they build strong opinions about the world and verbalize their beliefs to classmates and friends. I have overheard conversations in class about the local news, human rights, LGBTQ rights, bullying, world news, politics, and more. But the students discussing these issues have not expressed to me a sense of their own agency or power to influence any of the issues they witness or experience and feel compelled to address. While the students appear to understand that art can be a means of expression, they do not seem to be aware of how their artwork can create social change.

As an adult, I engage in many conversations regarding the same topics, but I know that we each have a great deal of power to spur change in our community and in the larger world. As an artist, I have seen this change be created through artwork that challenges people's beliefs or expresses one's feelings, fears, or biases. For example, artist Titus Kaphar creates works of art that reconfigure historical paintings to include African-American subjects, as a way of combatting racism. I wonder if the reason students do not consider using art to comment on society and social issues is because they are not usually given the guidance, examples, resources, and encouragement to do so in sixth-grade art classrooms in the United States (Wagner, 2014).

Background of Problem: Need for Art Education Pedagogy to Incorporate Social Justice

The institutions for schooling children in the U.S. have not changed much over the past several decades. Many educators recognize that schools are not changing in part because “there is no consensus about what types of changes are needed or might work” (Wagner, 2014, p. xiii). Creating change in school and school curriculum is not only challenging but opens debate concerning what changes are needed. Many art educators recognize the need for art education programs to address social issues such as cultural diversity, poverty, censorship, equity, and gender violence, to name a few. However, most do not indicate incorporating social justice issues into their lessons (Milbrandt, 2002). Likewise, as a society we understand that the “connection between society and education is found early in general education” (Dewey, 1899, p. 142), but educators seldom encourage students to question social practices. There is a disconnect between what students recognize to be important and their sense of agency to transform critical concerns into impactful actions that address what they deem significant to change. This study addresses the process through which educators move students from thinking about an issue to acting in response to that issue.

Research Questions and Sub Questions

Main Question: *How do students engage with social issues through their artwork?*

Sub-Questions:

- i. When given the opportunity to create artwork about social injustice, how do students select an issue?*
- ii. How do students communicate their message through the artwork?*

The main question I focused on is how students respond to social issues in their artwork or use art to address social injustices. The two sub questions dive deeper into how students

choose an issue important to them and the ways in which they communicate social injustices through visual means. These research questions guided my analysis of the students' decision-making processes in creating art to engage in social activism, which included selecting a social issue and communicating their message.

I use the phrase 'social issues' as an umbrella term to reference concerns that exist within the community or public spectrum. Social concerns deviate from personal concerns when they become shared by a larger group or community. For instance, the "Me Too" movement started with the expression of a personal concern, which became a social issue when it was recognized as experienced by a larger public group (Burke, 2006). Activism is the act of engaging with social issues in a way that can institute change (Milbrandt, 2002). In this study, I facilitated an art unit in which each student addressed a social issue, challenged an assumed norm, or addressed ways to correct an injustice. The pedagogical approach fostered social justice student artwork.

Literature Review: Social Justice Art and Education

As educators, we have recognized for more than 80 years that "education ... must ... face squarely and courageously every social issue, come to grips with life in all of its stark reality, and establish an organic relationship with the community" (Counts, 1932, p. 195). We must teach students how to question and critically examine (Brookfield, 2000) their lives, "not only to promote knowledge for students' personal gains, but to engage students in thinking about knowledge as a part of social life" (Freedman, 1994, p. 153). The arts have a long history of providing a platform for social commentary and storytelling about personal experiences. In *Graphic Novels, New Literacies, and Good Old Social Justice*, Gretchen Schwartz (2010) describes graphic novels *Maus* and *Maus II*, which tell the story of author Art Spiegelman's

Jewish parents during the Holocaust, as examples that “examine the human condition fraught with conflict” (p. 72). Choosing an art form that best conveys ideas that are relevant to contemporary times is as important as choosing a form that reaches the intended audience. From graphic novels to graffiti, artists make selective decisions about the mode through which their message will best be conveyed.

While graphic novels, which some artists create as visual literature, reach a wide range of literacy levels and language speakers, graffiti artists use the public access of the streets to reach a wider audience than a gallery or museum exhibition might reach. Graffiti has not only altered our view “stylistically, politically and socially[;] it has inspired, challenged and changed people's lives positively across the world” (McCarthy, 2017, para. 14). In addition, graffiti has provided an alternative place to visually discuss current events, make contextual statements, and conduct “cultural jamming” as activism (Carducci, 2006; Darts, 2004). This was not always the case; graffiti art has evolved through time and across continental regions to form a street art movement. Similarly, tapestries have evolved over time and are being used by contemporary artists, such as Linda Stein, to address current social issues. In her series *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females*, Stein (2016) uses tapestries and sculpture to generate discussions about upstander actions toward social justice by depicting heroic women during the time of the Holocaust.

Art educator Lynette Henderson (2013), along with students, examines the human condition and challenges social practices through artwork by located themselves “within the larger sphere of humanity” (p.20). The students addressed personal experiences and current events through sculpture and installation. Two students in her class created small-scale sculptures communicating experiences of homelessness through juxtaposition and placement of figure and

subject. One student positioned a faceless homeless woman outside a closed building with a sign indicating it was available for rent. In an effort to address the closing of food pantries, another student sculpted a homeless woman sitting in front of a locked door holding an empty bowl. Both students' artwork raised awareness about the issue of homelessness and those affected by it. According to Dewhurst's (2015) explanation of social activism art, which she describes as works that "draw attention to, mobilizes action towards, or attempts to intervene in systems of inequality or injustice," student's art in Henderson's course drew attention to the topic of inequality.

While Henderson's (2013) socially engaged work draws attention to an issue or topic, she does not focus on the ways that art can create change, disrupt social norms, or correct injustice. Garber (2004) offers an even more inclusive explanation of who and what social activism art can be about by stating that "concern for social justice education brings together feminist studies, race and multicultural studies, disability rights, identity studies, environmentalism, community based, critical pedagogy, performance pedagogy, social reconstruction, visual culture, and other areas" (p. 4). She believes that social justice education can take many forms and relies on the intersection of all socially driven concerns. The overlap created by Garber's (2004) and Dewhurst's (2015) explanations yields a conclusion that socially engaged work addresses an issue, causes society to question common practices, or helps to correct an injustice by addressing concerns of underserved, minority, or socially vulnerable groups. In my research, I examined how students think about and create work in this vein. I believe that Dewhurst's (2015) explanation touches on complex thinking strategies in education. She explains that initially students respond to an issue or draw the viewer's attention to a topic. As their thinking becomes more sophisticated they consider ways to *mobilize* viewers to act in order to counter injustice.

Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2004) takes a different approach to social justice in the classroom. Rather than focusing on how students or those involved in the social justice process engage with the issue, she examines how teachers are prepared to engage themselves with social justice education. This raises the question: When examining social justice in an educational setting, are the students or the teacher engaging with social justice? Are both necessary for this process to be effective? Cochran-Smith (2004) makes the argument that contemporary teacher education programs do not outfit teachers with the tools necessary to combat social justice issues in the classroom. She claims that as educators move toward an educational model that teaches only content, based on test scores, these educators are not focused on helping students to become conscientious and critical members of society but rather citizens that abide by the practices of society. Cochran-Smith (2004) writes persuasively about the need for change in the educational system. I agree that the educational model needs to change in order to better serve the students and help them to become change-makers in their communities. After all, the role of youth in a progressive, collaborative, and social justice-based curriculum is one that will teach students to influence the world around them (Dewhurst, 2014).

Many art educators advocate for the inclusion of social activism in art education, but this practice has not been adopted by the mainstream art education community (Milbrandt, 2002). Frequently K-12 public schools do not include social activism in their curricula. So where is the disconnect between theory and practice? Students relate the events happening in the world to their own lives but do not connect their artwork to injustices that they witness or issues within society. My hope is that with more research and resources on social justice art education, students and teachers will examine art as social activism, which may not be a product-based curriculum.

Significance of the Study: Importance of Including Social Justice Art Education in K-12 Curriculum

Martin Luther King Jr. (1965) summarized the importance of activism when he said,

A man dies when he refuses to stand up for that which is right. A man dies when he refuses to stand up for justice. A man dies when he refuses to take a stand for that which is true. (para. 3)

The purpose of my research is to examine how sixth-grade students use art to visually communicate thoughts, feelings, and opinions about social injustices they witness, learn about, or experience. The data from this research will inform how I teach activism in art making and will help me to better prepare the students I work with to be active members of not only the art community but also the world in which they live.

By asking powerful questions to those around you, you can start exploring worlds other than just your own. Your world will open up and you will see things you did not see before. ... Moreover, from that place we can begin to make a difference. (Wise, 2017, p. 246)

My goal is that through an activism-based art education curriculum, students will develop not only an awareness of the power art can have in the world but an appreciation for their own voice in society.

By better understanding the process middle school students use to create activist artwork, we as educators can better plan curriculum for social justice art making. The results from my research provide a lens into the ways students select a social issue that is meaningful to them, engage with this issue through their artwork, and communicate their message. My action

research provides other art educators with an approach for integrating social justice art into their art education curriculum.

Action Research Study Design: Creating Social Justice Art with Middle School Students

I conducted my action research project with 18 sixth-grade students at the Milltown Middle School.¹ The students participating in this research were from a range of backgrounds and ethnicities proportionate to the population of the school. Milltown Middle School is a rural school and in the 2018-19 school year had 810 students in grades six through eight. According to Public School Review (2018) the population is predominately White with the student body being comprised of 78% Caucasian, 11% Asian, 5% two or more races, 3% Hispanic, and 3% Black. Only 15% of the students qualify for free lunches and 2% qualify for reduced lunch, which is much lower than the Pennsylvania state average of 44% free lunch and 3% reduced lunch. Each student, in my study, created a piece of artwork based on a social issue of their choice. Students looked at artists, who create socially charged work that comments on society or helps to solve a social problem, prior to designing and creating a piece of their own activism artwork. Students chose a range of social issues and injustices including endangered species conservation, global warming, LGBTQ rights, bully culture, pollution, etc. Students had access to a variety of materials including paints, markers, pencils, pastels, paper, cardboard, and recycled materials as well as autonomy over how they used these materials in their artwork. As the teacher, I encouraged students to select their medium based on their message. These choices over process provided the students the opportunity to create work that best questioned or raised awareness about their chosen issue.

¹ The title of the school is a pseudonym.

I used three qualitative sources for data collection: observational notes, images of student artwork, and interviews.² The students and I began by discussing activism and how it relates to artwork. Next, we brainstormed social issues that exist in the world. This process prepared students to select an issue that was important to them and to create a message to guide their artwork. These messages were written in their sketchbooks and revisited throughout the project, as a way of focusing their art. Some of the messages were “ocean pollution: keep the oceans clean,” “women’s rights are human rights,” and “spread the smile campaign: make school a happier place.” Once students had developed a message, they planned their artwork by sketching it in their sketchbooks and considering which mode, media, and materials would best convey their message. I shared with students several artists who create activism artwork and we discussed how these artists use materials and the location of their art to help convey their message or correct an injustice.³ Some of the artists we examined were Jason deCaires Taylor, Titus Kaphar, Vik Muniz, and Linda Stein. I selected artists whose backgrounds and frames of reference were diverse (e.g., race, gender, nationality) who create social justice art with different materials and messages.

I gathered observational notes and photographs of student artwork as they discussed, planned, and created their works of art. Once students completed their artwork I discussed the process with each of them and they answered several reflection questions⁴ about the process and their thinking. Because I am both the researcher and teacher, I assumed the role of participant observer “recording and reflecting on observations and interactions in which the participant observer role is frequently part of the action” (Keifer-Boyd, 2013, p. 247). I observed the

² See Appendix A for IRB.

³ See Appendix B for Art Activism Presentation

⁴ See Appendix C for Reflection Questions

students' interactions with each other, their art making processes, and allowed them autonomy over their project. As the teacher, I was involved in designing the activism project and leading the whole class discussions. The students and I frequently brainstormed ways of improving and clarifying their artwork and message.

Data Collection and Analysis: Addressing Social Justice Through Art

On the first day of the project, all of the students came into the art room and sat at six large wooden tables. A picture by street artist Banksy was on the projection screen with the words 'Art Activism' below it. The image, which had been spray painted on a brick wall, showed a man, who appeared to be homeless, with a knit hat pulled down to his eyebrows and a blanket draped over his legs. A paper cup was sitting in front of him and he was holding a sign that read 'KEEP YOUR COINS I WANT CHANGE.' I started by asking the class "What is activism?" A few hands went up and students offered ideas and definitions.

"Action about something," one student answered.

"That's a great definition of the word. Anyone want to add to that?" I asked.

"Activism, it means taking action about something [that] change[s] the way we think," another student thoughtfully stated.

"What do you think the artist means when he says, 'keep your **coins**, I want **change**'?" I asked.

"He means that he doesn't want money. He wants the world to change," one student said.

"Maybe he wants not to be homeless?" a student thought aloud.

"I think that it isn't just change for himself but for all homeless people," another student added.

"So, maybe he wants to change what leads people to become homeless," I suggested. A few students nodded.

As we progressed through the presentation I described each of the artists and their artwork, emphasizing the ways each artist used art to create change or question issues in society. When we viewed Titus Kaphar's artwork, I described the work briefly and then showed a TED Talk of Titus explaining how he combats racial divides in historical art by amending famous pieces. As I pulled up the TED Talk of Titus Kaphar, a student exclaimed, "he looks like a rapper." Initially this statement caught me off guard because Titus looked to me like an artist. He is a Black man in his early 40s with short hair and a thin mustache. He was wearing a blue T-shirt with a paint stained sweatshirt and jean jacket overtop, jean pants, and black shoes. The video opened to him standing on a stage with red light coating the background and dark silhouettes of figures sitting in the audience as he began to speak about museums. I wonder if this student made the connection between Titus and a rapper because he had only seen Black men on stage in rap videos. Does this particular student have any experience watching a Black male artist give a speech about his artwork? No other students made comments about Titus's appearance, but everyone watched the video quietly and several students 'oohed' when he revealed his beautifully crafted painting.

After the class examined and discussed several of the artists in our presentation, including Titus Kaphar, Jason DeCaires Taylor, Vic Muniz, Banksy, and Linda Stein, each student brainstormed injustices that exist within the world and issues that need corrected. The premise was 'what would make the world a better place?' In their sketchbooks, students listed issues and possible positive changes, changes that would improve society (see Figures 1).

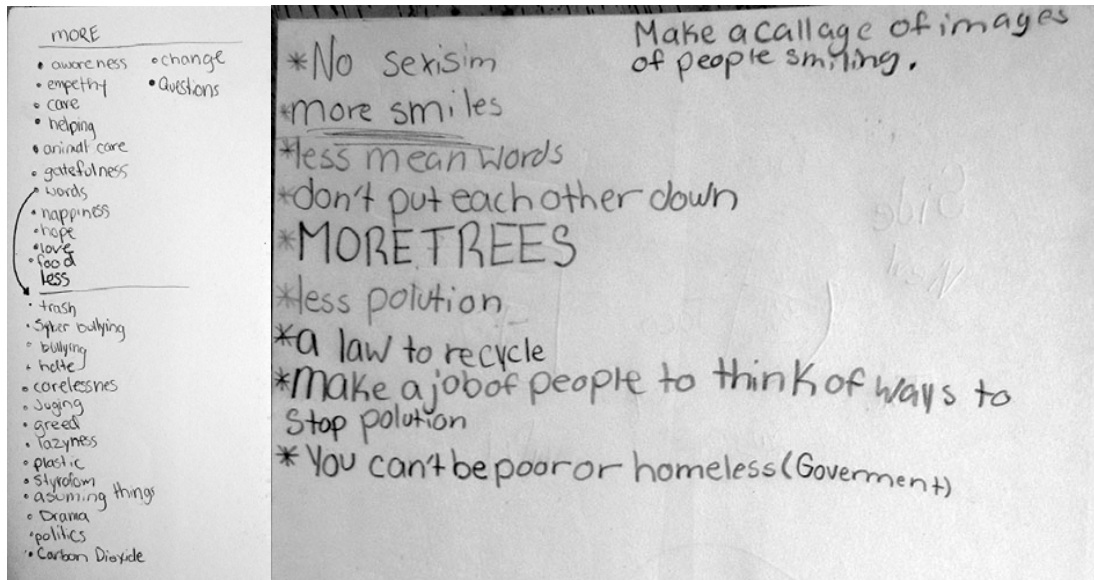


Figure 1: Students' brainstormed lists of social issues or areas of positive change.

Some students had an easier time than others brainstorming a list of injustices and changes to improve the world. One student in particular struggled to come up with any ideas at all. I prompted her by asking:

“What do we need more of or less of in the world? Would the world be better if we had more kindness, more tolerance, less discrimination, less bullying? Would it be better if the environment was protected? If there wasn't any animal poaching?”

She listened as I listed a few ideas and then nodded and said more confidently, “OK, I get it.”

She started writing down ideas in her sketchbook as I walked around to check on the other students.

After this five-minute brainstorm session, we regrouped to discuss their ideas as a class. I was surprised by the very long and comprehensive lists students shared. Some students even came up with new ideas as they heard their classmates' suggestions. The ideas ranged from ‘use less plastic’ to ‘more equal rights’ and included issues like bullying, war, tolerance, religious freedom, recycling, climate change, racism, deforestation, poverty, and sexism. I was impressed

and slightly surprised by the level of seriousness students gave to these topics. Several students referenced specific topics like no border wall, prevent war with North Korea, and end gun violence but most were in general terms about overarching issues (see Figure 2).

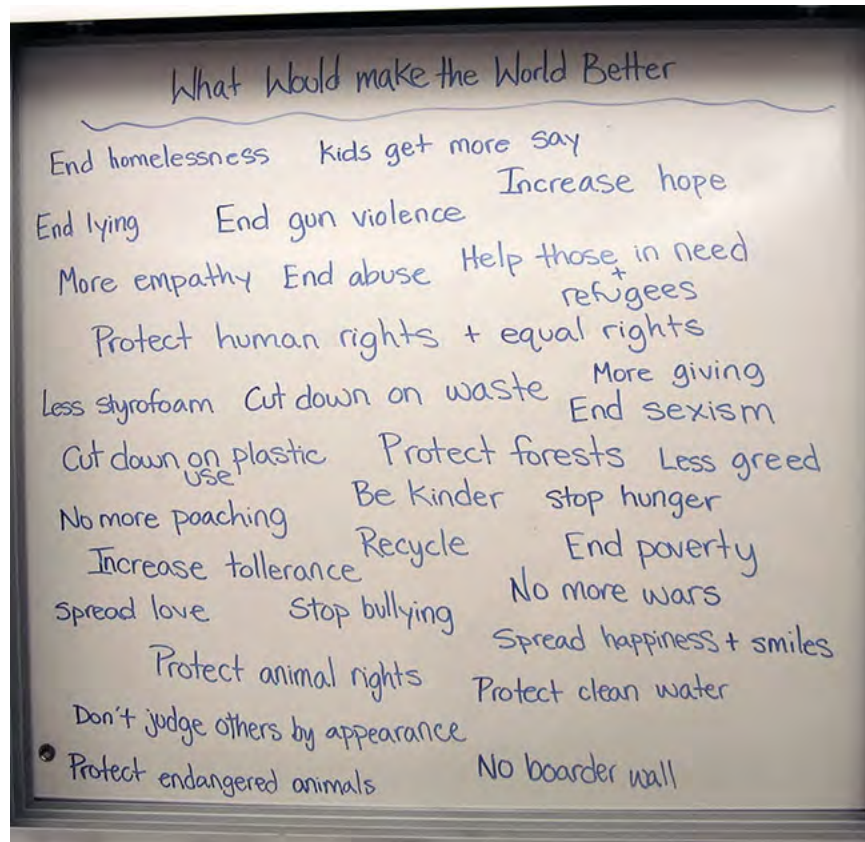


Figure 2: List of injustices, issues, and potential positive changes suggested by students.

Once we compiled a list of ideas, I asked each student to pick a topic and determine their message. This message would be a statement summarizing the meaning of their artwork. Messages might raise awareness about an issue, question a common viewpoint or practice, or try to correct an injustice. Students wrote their art activism messages in their sketchbooks to revisit while they made their artwork. This ensured that their final work of art accurately conveyed what they wanted to say.

Students approached the process of making their artwork in multiple ways. Abigail⁵ formed an idea relatively easily and developed two clear messages she wanted to address. Once she had her messages, she began planning her artwork. In her sketchbook she drew a few thumbnails for her final project prior to discussing each option with peers and me (see Figure 3). After receiving feedback on her ideas and finetuning her practice sketch, she began to make her finished piece of artwork, a painting of a sea turtle with the phrase ‘Plastic kills so recycle’ next to the turtle.

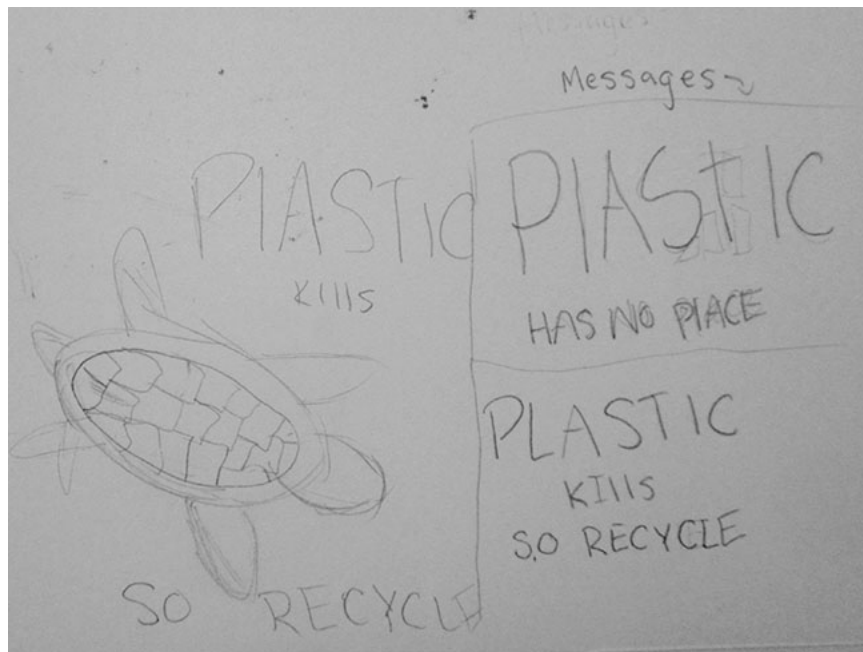


Figure 3: Abigail's initial thumbnail sketches in her sketchbook.

Even though she had put much thought and planning into her practice sketch (see Figure 4a), Abigail altered parts of her artwork as she constructed it. The most notable alteration was made near the end of the project when she decided to layer plastic on top of the painting (see Figure 4b). She felt that using real plastic would help to convey her message, so she cut a piece

⁵ Student names are pseudonyms.

of plastic to fit over top of the turtle and then added additional plastic pieces to the letters in the word 'plastic'.

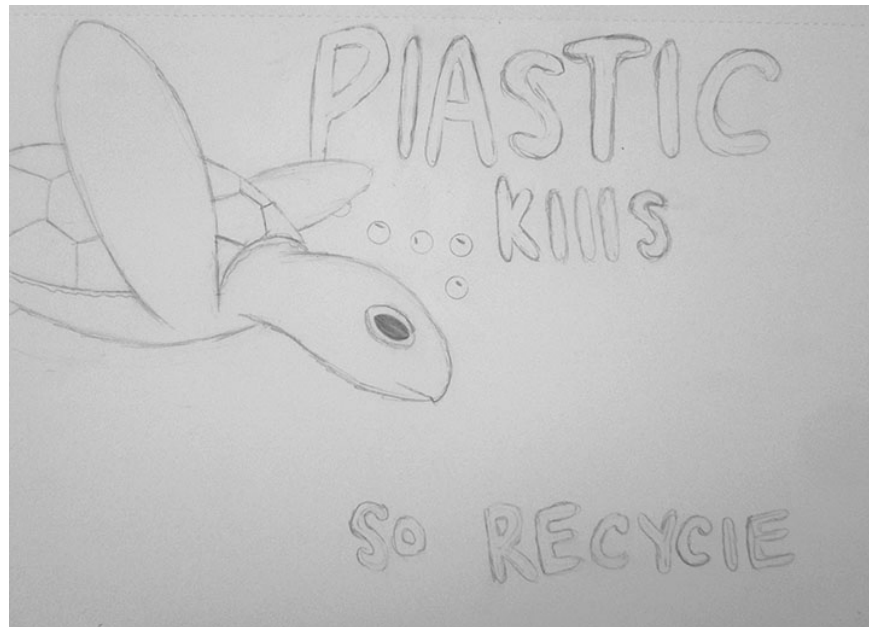


Figure 4a: Abigail's practice sketch.



Figure 4b: Abigail's final artwork.

Many other students progressed through the project in the same linear fashion as Abigail. Alice, Katie, Charlie, Logan, and Lexi developed an idea during the brainstorming section of the project and created a plan for their artwork based on their chosen message. These five students appeared to have a relatively easy time deciding on the image and medium for their artwork. Alice decided to create her artwork based on the message ‘women’s right are human rights.’ She then chose images like a female symbol and dove to represent her message. Inside the wing of the dove is written, ‘No matter what gender you are your dreams are still valid.’ She chose to paint the symbol in the background pink because she thought it would help to represent women (see Figures 5a & 5b).

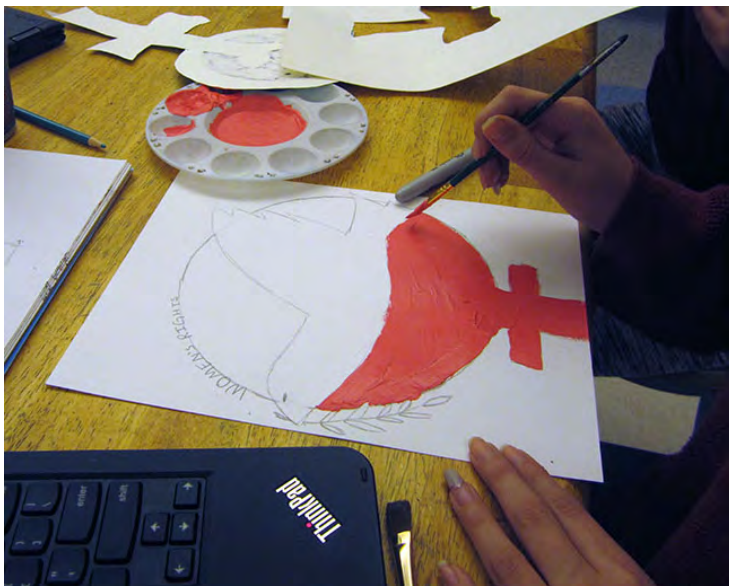


Figure 5a: Alice's in progress artwork.



Figure 5b: Alice's final artwork.

Katie sat next to Alice and had a similar idea. She also created a painting supporting women's rights. Like Alice, Katie also used the female symbol but inside was a raised fist (see Figure 6). When I spoke to her about her artwork, she indicated that the fist looked powerful and she wanted the artwork to be a powerful message supporting women. In her written reflection of the project she states, "It's a big issue to me and a lot of other people." She goes on to explain

that she hopes people will see the artwork and realize that this issue is larger than they may realize. If she can raise awareness about the injustices facing women, Katie hopes people may change their actions or beliefs. “It's one step at a time with this type of situation,” Katie writes. If this issue were to be corrected she believes that “woman would be happy and want to do the job they always wanted to[,] without getting paid less and they wouldn't have to worry about getting catcalled on the streets.”



Figure 6: Katie's final artwork

Charlie wanted to create a piece of artwork that helped to raise awareness about the importance of voting in local and federal elections. He explained to me that voting was important because it allowed people to make positive change by choosing officials that support important issues. During our conversations he referenced the 2018 midterm elections and explained that

every vote is important and can make a difference. He felt that more people should become involved and vote in every election, not just in presidential elections. He created block letters of the word VOTE and then drew different images that represent voting in each of the letters. He turned the right part of the letter ‘V’ into a hand and created a ballot inside of the letter ‘O’. The letter ‘T’ has blocks filling in the holes to symbolize pieces coming together to form a whole, like how people come together to form the USA. Inside the letter ‘E’ are many words and phrases that Charlie felt represented important issues at stake in the midterm election, including ‘Black lives matter, women’s rights are human rights, no human is illegal, science is real, and love is love.’ He also chose a red, white, and blue color scheme with a white background, red stripes, and a blue star, to emphasize that he is referencing voting in the US elections (see Figures 7a & 7b).

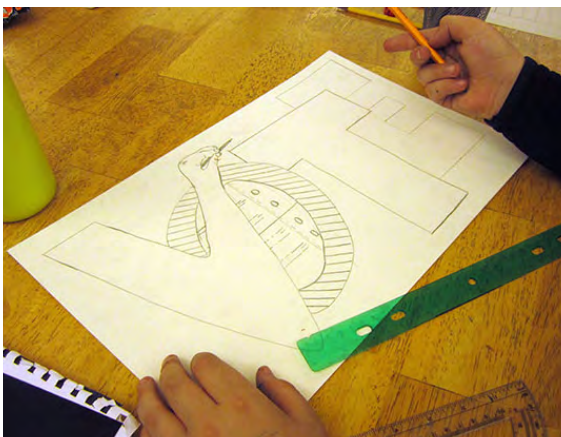


Figure 7a: Charlie's in progress artwork.

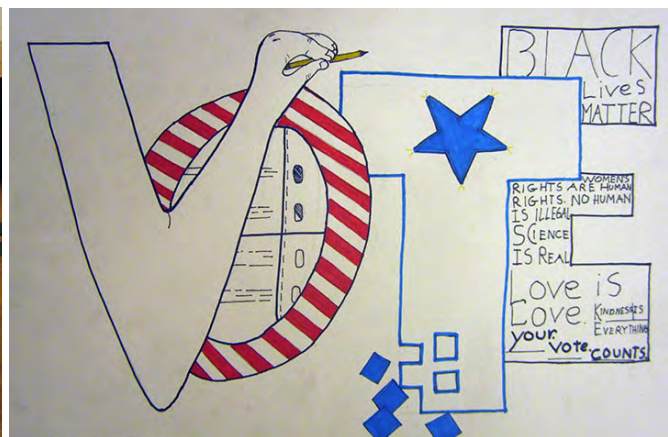


Figure 7b: Charlie's final artwork.

Logan chose equal rights and freedom of expression as his message. He wanted to draw Martin Luther King Jr. as a figure to represent his message because he felt that King was a recognizable symbol for equal rights. After he drew King, Logan and I spoke about clarifying his message by adding an additional word or phrase. He decided to include the words ‘independence’ and ‘freedom’. Logan used his Chromebook to find resource images of fonts that

he felt complemented his image (see Figures 8a & 8b). Logan finished his artwork early and decided to make a second work of activism art about a different topic. For his second work of art he chose to focus on pollution and created a drawing of a fish inside a plastic water bottle holding a sign that reads 'help' (see Figure 9).



Figure 8a: Logan's in progress artwork.



Figure 8b: Logan's final artwork.



Figure 9: Logan's second piece of artwork.

Lexi often chooses to draw animals and seems to have an interest in animal preservation, so her choice to create a piece of artwork about saving the endangered tiger species was relevant to her concerns. In her written reflection about the project, she explained that choosing a tiger as her subject was easy. She knew that she wanted to focus on endangered species and when she “looked up on the internet ‘endangered animals’ a tiger popped up.” She knew as soon as she saw it that she wanted to use a tiger as her subject. Lexi wanted to show both the beauty of the tiger with a cautionary image of where they could end up if poaching and decreased habitat continue. As a result, she chose to create a merged drawing, half a normal tiger and half a tiger skull. Because she wanted to capture a more realistic representation of both the tiger and skull, she chose to use colored and graphite pencils for her drawing. She has a lot of experience and confidence using these materials and was able to create a realistic effect. In her written reflection of the project, Lexi answers the question, ‘Do you think art can make people think differently? How so?’ by stating “Yes it can because people could look at art a second time and think about the piece then it opens up another thought about it and maybe someone will do something about it.” She goes on to explain that if the artwork were displayed in a public place, people might recognize that their actions are contributing to the tiger species becoming extinct and may alter what they are doing to protect the species (see Figures 10a & 10b).

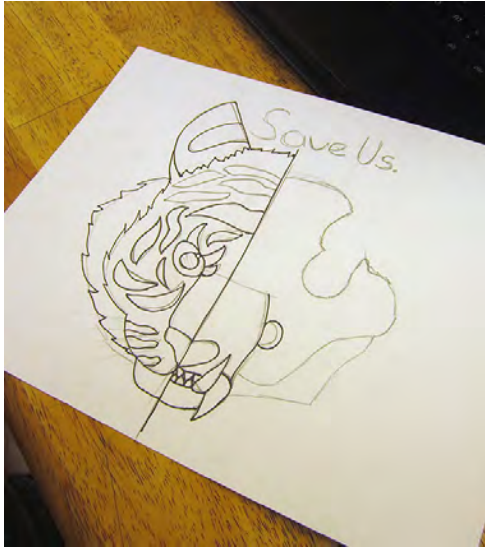


Figure 10a: Lexi in progress artwork.



Figure 10b: Lexi's final artwork.

While most students worked through the process of choosing an issue, determining a message for their artwork, creating a practice sketch, and then making their final piece of art, a few students did not follow this model. Emily was a student who came to class already knowing what she wanted to create. She expressed to me a fondness for sloths even before starting the activism project and explained on day one of the project that sloths are endangered because of poaching and the depletion of their habitats. She wanted to create an artwork using the slogan S.O.S. – Save Our Sloths. She had a sketch in her sketchbook that she wanted to base her final work of art. She added to her sketch as she fine-tuned a plan for her project. She added ‘buy shade grown coffee’ to her design because she wanted to share how people could support a company that is helping the environment (see Figures 11a & 11b). When I asked her how shade-grown coffee was supporting the environment, she explained that they do not use chemical fertilizers or pesticides and the coffee is grown in the shade of the trees, hence the name. Because the coffee is grown under the canopy of trees, the forest does not need to be cut down and this protects the animals living in this habitat.

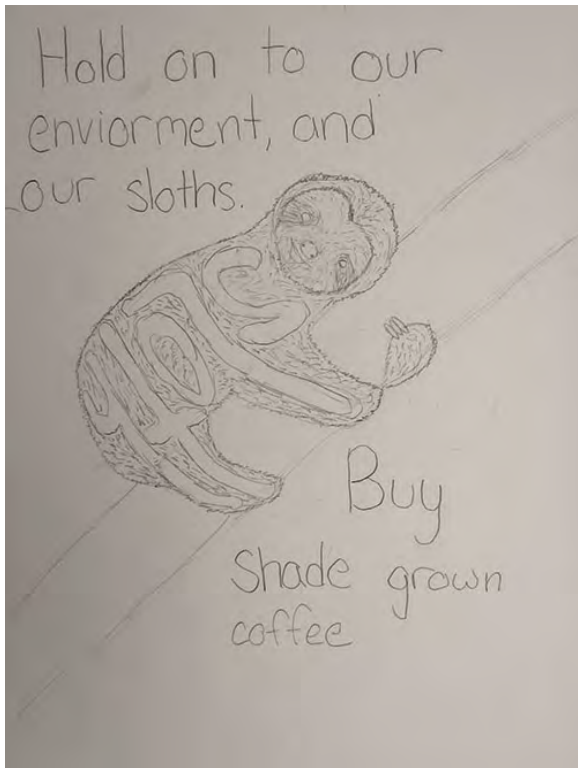


Figure 11a: Emily's practice sketch.



Figure 11b: Emily's final artwork.

Other students had powerful ideas of what they wanted to create but struggled to refine those ideas into a cohesive plan for artwork. Victoria and Zoey asked to work together because they both had a similar vision for their project but struggled initially to transfer that vision into concrete images and materials. Victoria and Zoey explained to me that they wanted to create a piece of artwork that illustrated how individuals can be judged based solely on what they eat. Zoey and Victoria passionately described that our assumptions regarding someone's health and fitness can be incorrectly made by simply looking at one meal one individual eats. Victoria said that someone might assume one individual eats "salads" because they are thin and another eats "fries and burgers" because they are heavier and, likewise, might assume that a heavier individual is not as healthy as a thin person. These assumptions are often inaccurate and can be harmful to those individuals being shamed for eating certain foods. We talked about multiple

ways to convey this message through sculpture, drawing, and comparative images. Both girls settled on a sculpture of two plates, one that had stereotypically healthy foods and one with stereotypically unhealthy foods. Both plates would sit on a paper placemat with the phrase ‘Don’t judge a person by their plate’ written between the two plates. It was not until after they pitched their idea to me that I found out one of the girls was being bullied because of these same inaccurate assumptions regarding food and appearance. It seems to me that she took the bullying experience and used it to create artwork to address the injustice she faced.

I encouraged students to choose materials that reinforced their message and connected to the issue they were raising awareness about, questioning, or trying to correct. Miray chose to create a sculpture that showed how much wasted paper she was seeing at school printers and in trash cans. She explained to me that people in the school were printing more than what they needed and leaving the extra paper behind or throwing it away. She felt it was important to show what this paper could be turned into so she decided to create a sculpture made from the paper left behind at school printers. She collected this wasted paper and reformed it into origami and beautiful paper sculptures. She then took all of the small paper sculptures she made and put them together on one piece of recycled cardboard. She added the word RECYCLE to help convey her message of recycling and reusing materials instead of throwing them away (see Figure 12a). She and I spoke about the best place to display her sculpture and I suggested displaying it next to the printers from which she gathered the paper. I explained that the placement of her sculpture would be very important because it would help people to make the connection between their own action of over printing and wasting paper and her message of recycling. She agreed and explained that she had gathered most of the paper from the 6th grade printer, so we decided to display the sculpture next to the printer in the 6th grade hallway (see Figure 12b). She wrote a short

description to hang with the sculpture conveying the importance of conserving materials and not wasting paper (see Figure 12c).



Figure 12a: Miray's final artwork.



Figure 12b: Miray's artwork on display.

All paper in this sculpture was collected from the 6th grade printer. There is so much wasted paper near the printer **THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU PRINT, DON'T WASTE PAPER!**

Figure 12c: Description displayed with Miray's artwork.

Lucy also chose materials based on her social justice topic. Like Miray, Lucy connected her art to waste and recycling, but Lucy chose to focus on plastic waste across the world instead of paper waste in the school. Lucy explained to me that she wanted to create a sculpture showing how much plastic was being dumped in the oceans and landfills and how this was affecting the planet. Initially, she contemplated making a globe out of recycled plastic she found in the school recycling bins but struggled to troubleshoot keeping the globe circular and recognizable as a globe. She and I problem-solved several options and she finally decided to use an actual globe and cover it with colored plastic. She wanted to keep some of the globe's appearance so she used blue plastic for oceans and green plastic for land masses (see Figure 13a & 13b). Then she created a banner to put across the pedestal that read 'Our world is made of plastic... keep it green' (see Figures 13c).



Figure 13a: Lucy's in progress artwork.



Figure 13b: Lucy's final artwork.



Figure 13c: Lucy's pedestal banner explaining the message of her artwork.

Anna created a piece of artwork raising awareness about the invisibility of homelessness. It was not until she and I discussed the process and her piece that I became aware of my own bias surround homelessness. As an educator, I believe it is important to remain open to the possibility of your own views and biases effecting how you teach and the meaning or assumptions you draw from student artwork. It is also important to be open to altering your views and opinions as you become aware of misconceptions you may have. Just as we expect the students we work with to grow during the learning process, so should we as educators. Anna was in the planning stage of her artwork when we first spoke about the topic of homelessness.

“What are you thinking of doing?” I asked her.

“I want to do something with homelessness. I’m thinking of having a girl sitting against a brick wall and she has her umbrella over her pet and it’s raining. To show how people care more about their pets than themselves.”

“That sounds interesting. How are you going to show us that she is homeless? Right now ... your sketch looks great but this could be any girl just sitting. Are you going to have her dressed a certain way or have her belongings next to her?”

You know, in a bag or something to help the viewer know she is homeless?” Anna’s face scrunched, and she hesitated to answer. As I watched her reaction, I realized that I was describing a very stereotypical homeless situation and not one that was authentic to true homelessness or to the individual people who face homelessness each year. Anna seemed to realize this as well and as she thought about my comments her face grew more concerned.

Quickly I added, “Or do you want to show that homelessness can be invisible and often people who are homeless look like everyone else? We might not even realize that they are homeless?”

“Yes,” she said nodding with a smile, “That is what I want to do.”

“Then maybe you need a phrase or some kind of word that helps the viewer understand your message. What if you put ‘homelessness can be invisible’? Or find a statistic about how many people face homelessness each year and add that in. I don’t know, you will have to decide what best conveys your message.”

As Anna returned to her artwork and continued planning her piece, I walked away with the realization that I am unaware of the biases I hold. I had planned this activism art project in part to help students engage with social issues and develop a deeper understanding of the issues faced by individuals but had unexpectedly experienced the same type of transitional thinking myself.

Anna altered her project multiple times as she worked on it and finally created a drawing of a young girl with the phrase ‘Be You-nique. Everyone else is already taken’ next to the image (see Figure 14).

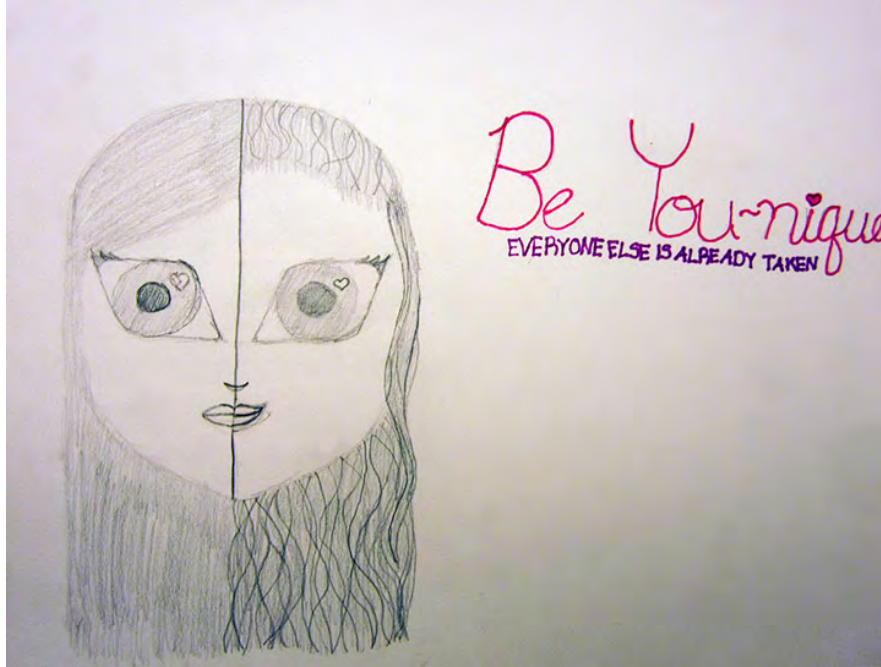


Figure 14: Anna's final artwork.

While most students chose to raise awareness about an issue, Karly and Sophia wanted their artwork to not only raise awareness but actively make change. When we initially spoke about the plan for their artwork, both girls explained that they wanted to make a painting exposing common myths about certain dog breeds (see Figure 15). Karly volunteers at PAWS and has seen certain breeds of dogs stay longer than others because they are thought to be more dangerous than other breeds. She explained that pit bulls are often thought to be extremely aggressive dogs when in fact they are no more aggressive than any other type of dog. She also explained that frequently adult dogs are brought in because their owners adopted them as puppies and did not realize how much energy they would have or how large they would become. Sophia and Karly asked if in addition to their artwork they could organize a donation drive for the local PAWS. I told them that I loved their idea, but we would need to receive approval from the principal prior to holding a drive in the school. They researched and compiled a list of items needed by the local PAWS, and we sent a proposal of the donation drive to the principal. Once

we received the principal's approval, both girls scripted a message to be read on the daily announcement. Their message included pet food and supply items needed most by PAWS. They also shared information about how and where students and staff could donate these items. Karly and Sophia created a donation box and placed it in the main office (see Figure 16) and then Karly transported all of the items to the local PAWS on one of the days she was scheduled to volunteer.



Figure 15: Karly and Sophia's final artwork.

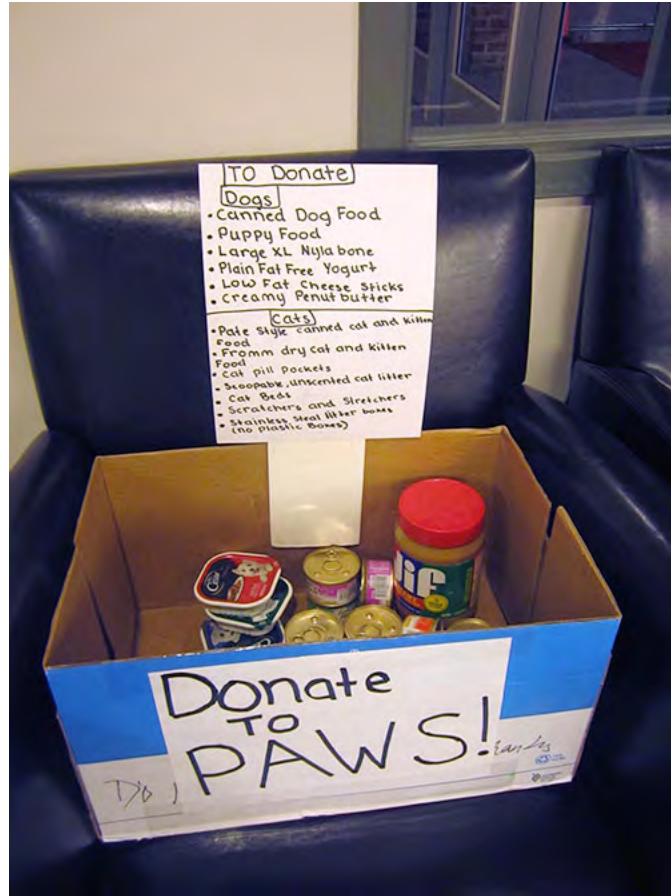


Figure 16: Karly and Sophia's donation box for PAWS.

I was impressed by the way Sophia and Karly recognized an issue existed and designed a piece of artwork to raise awareness about that issue, as well as better inform the viewer. Then they built upon the artwork by actively working to provide resources to an organization, helping the animals affected by these misunderstandings.

Most students created artwork that raised awareness about an issue, like Lexi's cautionary drawing describing the endangered tiger species. Several students questioned common norms, like Victoria and Zoey's sculpture asking us to rethink our assumptions of people's health based on what we see them eat. A couple students even created art that called others to action, like Charlie's word art encouraging people to vote. And two students, Karly and Sophia, used their artwork as inspiration for organizing positive change in the community with

their donation drive for PAWS. Overall students were excited about the activism art project and appeared to understand quite well how art can be used to engage with social issues. The completed artwork was displayed in the school to help spread awareness and encourage other students and staff to correct injustices they witness or experience (see Figure 17).



Figure 17: Activism Art Display

Conclusion: Implementation of Social Justice Art Education Curriculum

Art educators have a responsibility to teach students how to think critically, use art to create positive change, and engage with complex social issues.

Rather than accepting intellectual and moral complacency, art educators must possess the courage and the skills necessary to initiate art programs that engage students in critical inquiry, connect learning to authentic and meaningful issues in

life, and inspire responsible intellectual and moral action. (Milbrandt, 2002, p. 153)

If we value each student's ability to engage critically with civic issues or injustices than as educators and school administrators, we should ensure that our art curriculums reflect those values. I believe students should have the opportunity and guidance in their art education programs, to impact injustices they witness or experience. I am hopeful that through guided social activism art lessons, students will develop a lifelong sensitivity to civic issues and a motivation to positively change society. Through my research, I found that students created activist artwork to achieve one of four results.

1. Raise awareness about an issue or injustice.
2. Question a common stereotype, misconception, belief, or action.
3. Call others to change their opinions or actions.
4. Initiate change to correct an issue or injustice.

Similar to the students in Dewhurst's class (2015), the students in my classes moved through the stages of raising awareness, questioning, calling to action, or implementing change, depending on the level of sophistication their thinking achieved. Most students stayed within the raising awareness and questioning stage and only a few raised to the level of initiating change.

While recognizing an issue and raising awareness about that issue require less sophisticated thinking, according to Bloom's taxonomy, they are equally as important. Questioning our lives and society is an important step toward positively impacting our communities and the larger world (Greene, 1978). Art education curriculum and pedagogy should reflect the importance of connecting artmaking to issues that students feel are important. Autonomy over the subject of their artwork can help students to build experience identifying an injustice and allow them to engage in art that is meaningful.

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Appendix A: IRB Exemption



PennState

Office for Research Protections
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EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

Date: November 9, 2018

From: Julie James, IRB Analyst

To: Nicole Packard

Type of Submission:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	ART FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: EXPLORING SOCIAL JUSTICE ART IN THE SIXTH GRADE CLASSROOM
Principal Investigator:	Nicole Packard
Study ID:	STUDY00010969
Submission ID:	STUDY00010969
Funding:	Not Applicable
Documents Approved:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview Protocol.docx (1), Category: Data Collection Instrument • Nicole Packard Protocol (3), Category: IRB Protocol • Observation Checklist (1), Category: Data Collection Instrument

The Office for Research Protections determined that the proposed activity, as described in the above-referenced submission, does not require formal IRB review because the research met the criteria for exempt research according to the policies of this institution and the provisions of applicable federal regulations.

Continuing Progress Reports are **not** required for exempt research. Record of this research determined to be exempt will be maintained for five years from the date of this notification. If your research will continue beyond five years, please contact the Office for Research Protections closer to the determination end date.

Changes to exempt research only need to be submitted to the Office for Research Protections in limited circumstances described in the below-referenced Investigator Manual. If changes are being considered and there are questions about whether IRB review is needed, please contact the Office for Research Protections.

Penn State researchers are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual ([HRP-103](#)), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within CATS IRB (<http://irb.psu.edu>).

We would like to know how the IRB Program can better serve you.
 Please fill out our survey; it should take about a minute: <https://www.research.psu.edu/irb/feedback>.

Appendix B: Art Activism Presentation



Art Activism

**Plastic Entanglements
Exhibition at Palmer Art Museum**



Vik Muniz
Wasteland - images made of garbage.



Jason deCaires Taylor

Taylor is creating sculptures as artificial reefs in an effort to help to coral reefs recover and increase marine life that relies on the reef.



Banksy

Banksy is an anonymous street artist who often creates images that challenge the way people think.



Titus Kaphar

Kaphar is an American painter whose work reconfigures and regenerates art history to include African-American subjects.





Andy Warhol

Warhol created an endangered animal series to help raise awareness about the animals close to extinction.



Linda Stein

Bullyproof Vests - Stein creates symbolic vests to protect people from harm like bulletproof vests protect people from harm.



Appendix C: Reflection Questions

- What social issue did you choose?
- What were you thinking when you chose your social issue?
- Was it difficult to choose? How did you decide?
- Why do you think this issue is important?
- If this injustice is corrected, how do you think it would affect society?
- If this injustice continues how do you think it will impact people's and/or animal's lives?
- What do you hope people will take away from your artwork?
- Is there anything you haven't already told me that you think I should know about your artwork?
- Do you believe art can make people think differently? How so?
- If we put all of our artwork in a public place, how do you think people would react to it? Is that how you would like them to react?