Social Justice Feature

Provoking Introspections about Freedom and Justice

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Abstract

Too often, aesthetic education is neglected in the school curriculum. When school system budget monies are short, the arts seemingly are shortchanged. Nevertheless, aesthetic education is a necessary, intentional, and simultaneous endeavor within early childhood, elementary, secondary, and teacher education social studies curricula. To nurture students in the arts, while they become informed about themselves, promotes freedom, justice, and equality.

Aesthetics is an awareness of beauty and often an inventive personal action. Our imagination is stirred as Booth (1999) reminds us that “Art is a verb as well as a noun.” Aesthetics is defined as putting things together. The work of an artist is not accomplished simply by putting things together, because the observer of the work also has to engage in making meaning from the work of art. Observers are not passive. They have to put art together for themselves. Maxine Greene (1995) suggests that interaction between the work of art and the perceiver is conscious, wide-awake participation. Energy is exchanged.

Perceiving or attending to works of art often elicits emotional connections within the inner depths of the observer. Physical responses are both cognitive and affective. Merely by exploring artwork, thinking can be remodeled through the encounter.

Art, in its myriad forms, sets our senses into action. We can perceive colors, spaces, lines, and textures at first look. But, in a second experiential and deeper take, we might hear sounds, taste certain effects, breathe in particular smells, and recall sights and memories.

Students engaging in the aesthetics in social studies education can learn holistically through developing uniquely personal inferences from in-depth observations. Inferences can be extended through multiple instructional means, such as researching historical events and people connected to the art works or by analyzing historical contexts in which people and events occurred in order to distinguish the powerful messages. The art and the artist both involve us in learning about the geographical places and spaces represented. Many artists use the medium to convey and embed particular messages within artistic works.
If the painter presents us with a field or a vase of flowers,
his paintings are windows which are open on the whole world.
We follow the red path which is buried among the wheat much farther than van Gogh
has painted it, among other wheat fields, under other clouds, to the river which empties
into the sea and we extend to infinity, to the other ends of the world,
the deep finality which supports the existence of the field and the earth.
So that, through the various objects which it produces or reproduces,
the creative act aims at a total renewal of the world.
Each of them presents this totality to the freedom of the spectator.
Sartre (1949, p. 57)

Sometimes, critical questions sustain aesthetics in social studies education. Each question
begs thought and provocation. Critical questions might be pondered: As human beings, do we
spend time wondering how we came to be born into our respective ethnicities, privileged or not,
or born in our mother countries? The subtleties and taken-for-granted parts of life, of self-
reflection, often lie unobserved. As Langston Hughes wrote about “the poppy-colored faces,”
and “touching each other natural as dew, in that dawn of music when I get to be a composer and
write about daybreak in Alabama” (Hughes, 1932). Do we dare to disturb the status quo or the
comfortable? Do social studies educators challenge learners to do so? Are the “taken-for-
granted” perceptions of freedom and justice ever disturbed, rustled, made uncomfortable, or
moved?

We can’t change the past. Surely, as social studies educators, we can create a better today
and tomorrow. Peace, justice, and equality for our students and ourselves is possible. What
directions undertaken in our lives make a difference? What lives that intersect with ours cause us
to be better human beings? These are genuine questions in life. The mundane hustle and hustle of
our accomplishments really isn’t relevant. Test scores or the traditional rote memorization type
of learning don’t truly matter: These are not learning. In the end, what is really important? If our
accomplishments won’t really matter, but the way in which we treat each other day-to-day will
matter, and the respect that we extend to other human beings along the way does matter, then this
is the profound. This is what lies under the shell (or should I say hood?) of person-hood.

Why haven’t “we come to it” as Maya Angelou (1995) so eloquently wrote in “A Brave
and Startling Truth”? As human beings, “We are the possible, we are the miraculous, the true
wonder of this world.” (Angelou, 1995). Do our students in the social studies know this? Do we
teach it as social studies educators or offer access to this startling truth? Do our students in urban
schools know it? Do our urban students have access to opportunities that privileged students do?
Can the media help us bring aesthetic experiences to our students?

What is equality and justice in education anyway? If we can see and read the world through literature, music, art, and dance, then our lives are enlivened in aesthetic offerings within social studies education. Philosophically, is there equality or justice in offering place and time for learners to release their imaginations and their minds to possibilities within traditional education? Isn’t this what we as educated, privileged folk want for our own children? Isn’t this a means of empowering democracy and justice? If education is the search for information, we social studies educators have license to empower our youth to search for the possible, inquire about our questions, and engage in aesthetics. Social studies is a state of being sedated without the art being added into the social studies curriculum, for the opposite of aesthetic is anesthetic (Greene, 2001). And, aren’t we numb without literature, the arts, dance, and music?

Anesthetic is akin to bondage and enslavement. It is dehumanizing and subjugating because it is deadening. It imposes a state of numbness. Isn’t this what white supremacists spent centuries trying to do to people of color, and many did through religious oppression? As social studies educators, we owe aesthetics to all learners but especially to students of color whose ancestors struggled to regain and relish the aesthetic of life. The aesthetics are liberating, freeing, and offering autonomy. Why do we even consider limiting these human rights in schools?

Justice, freedom, and identity are characteristics repeatedly embedded into art and literature. Each characteristic assists students in dwelling on and developing cultural literacy and awareness as they consider art. Art also is a medium for discussing social issues when social studies teachers implement it as an instructional strategy. Discussions on art works with embedded social issues can lead students to thoughts of freedom and change. Art is just one method of aesthetic education whereby students are fully and actively present in the process of making meaning through an experience that touches the imagination (Greene, 1995). As an active, student centered means of learning, Art generally is a motivating and powerful vehicle for learning. It is a holistic learning experience. Art education acquaints social studies students with places and people through physical, cognitive, and affective engagement.

Experiencing art as images and a means to connect students’ identity to artists and their works as they become aware of other cultural and political messages embedded in
the art is a powerful learning experience. Discussing art in which social issues are expressed and seeing art as a political means to achieve and to speak of freedom and justice. Diego Rivera, Michelangelo, Ancient African Works, Renoir, and DaVinci are just samples of the artists and works that serve as channels through which students can identify the subtleties or subversive nature of art, become aware of historical contexts challenging equality, and evaluate what the art means to them.

Indisputably, all human beings need aesthetic experiences in life. Aesthetics are not just for the privileged. As living, wide-awake, humans, we have to talk about connections and conditions in our world. Empowering others to question and feel, especially our social studies students in less privileged situations, has to be offered. Myriad opportunities to critically think about possibilities of soaring must be introduced. Social studies educators have to support the wings of aesthetics, ending a silence that some of our less-privileged brothers and sisters in the shadows endure. Social studies educators have to cast sunlight upon those living so often in the shadows of numbness without access to aesthetics in social studies education. It is in this making sense of the world through the arts, from one piece of art to another, from text to text, lyric to lyric, from the arts to self and the arts to the world that there is awareness of identity. Experiences that enable us to become aware of identity are aesthetically freeing. The experiences themselves offer equality and justice. This is truly validation of self. Aesthetic education is self-connoisseurship, as Elliot Eisner (1998) declares. The realms of social studies and aesthetic education can be justly freeing.
References

Hughes, L. (1932). The dreamkeeper and other poems.