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### A Participatory Action Study Investigating Implementing Democratic Teaching Practices in an Eighth Grade Art Classroom Using Critical Pedagogy

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Buffalo State College  
State University of New York  
Department of Art Education

A Master's Project in Art Education

A Participatory Action Study Investigating Implementing Democratic Teaching Practices  
in an Eighth Grade Art Classroom Using Critical Pedagogy

by

Kari M. Achatz

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Master of Science in Education  
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Approved by:

Date:

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative action research study investigated the question “What might an eighth grade art classroom look like in practice? For eight weeks, 20 middle school students participated in a democratic art classroom. Using a theoretical lens of critical pedagogy I employed democratic teaching practices and asked students to create a work of art based on a social issue that they were passionate about. Through the course of this study students used their art as a way to voice their concerns about social issues and social injustices in the world. My research included data gathered from student interviews, student response papers, and anonymous student questionnaires. The data analyzed was placed into three categories. The categories that form the foundation for the study are; student and teacher roles in a democratic art class, art content in a democratic art class, and challenges in implementing a democratic art class.

Incorporating democratic teaching practices in the art room encouraged students to participate in democratic practices such as voting, freedom of expression and speech, and creating a classroom bill of rights. Through my research, I was able to discover that implementing democratic teaching practices in the art room helped students to create artwork that is rich in ideological content and rich in personal meaning, allowing them to connect with themselves and their peers on a deeper level. By creating a safe classroom environment students felt encouraged to share their own personal stories with their teacher and peers. There are many positive effects that come from implementing democratic practices in a middle school art room, particularly when used as a tool to encourage students to have a voice in their learning experiences in the art room.

## **Chapter I: Introduction**

### **Background Narrative**

Walking down the hallway of any middle school in America one will likely hear the words “Why do I have to learn this?” When these words are spoken aloud by a student, teachers may begin wonder if what is being taught is valuable to the student, to the school, and to the community. When students question what they are learning, these thoughts can also make teachers wonder whether students find value in what they are learning. Are students producing results they are capable of, both in and out of the classroom? “Why do I have to learn this?” are words I have said myself as a student in high school and in college. My high school art teacher taught her students technique and how to make formally beautiful pieces of art. Grading in her art class was based on formal techniques and a rubric in which the teacher had the only say. Students had no chance to explain why they chose a particular process or subject matter; if it did not fit the aesthetic style of the teacher, the student usually received a low grade. I cannot help but wonder how often these incidents happen in art classrooms where the teacher has a preconceived notion on what the finished artwork should look like, thus the student is not creating work that is rich in personal meaning or ideological content.

In my first year of teaching K-8 art at Holy Child Catholic School in Western New York, I taught the curriculum that I was given. I felt pressure to make aesthetically pleasing products from the art room as opposed to art products students were interested and vested in making. My students seemed to enjoy the work and tasks that I provided them but I felt something was missing. When a student asks, “Why are we learning this?”

I want to provide them with an engaging answer that will assure students they are learning valuable and meaningful content.

As an art educator I often find myself thinking: How can I make this lesson relevant to what my students want to learn, not only what they need to learn? How can students have some of the control over their education so they can become life-long learners and democratic citizens who know how to search for the answers and not just regurgitate information that the teacher has taught them?

During my second year of teaching, my students began making small choices in the classroom. I was careful not to relinquish too much control to the students in order to avoid chaos in my classroom. Students were encouraged to make choices regarding materials and the design of the finished artwork. Students seemed to enjoy the decisions they were to making in their artwork, which helped them to take greater pride in the completed project. I could not help but think what would happen if I gave my students the option to voice their opinions and concerns and empower them to make decisions, not only over the art making process, but give students a voice in creating the curriculum that they will study in the art room. If students were given the option to choose their own materials and create artwork based around social issues that are important to them, would they become empowered to make decisions outside of the art classroom as well? What if we practiced more shared governance in the art classroom? These questions led me to the purpose of my research.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to learn what a democratic art classroom might look like in practice for eighth grade students at Holy Child Catholic School, and how teachers

and students roles might evolve in a democratic learning environment. A democratic classroom is an engaging learning environment that offers students the ability to be more in charge of their education (Wolk, 1998). Democratic classrooms also help students understand the democratic process of each person having a voice and working towards a common goal. In a democratic art classroom students can investigate the needs of themselves and others through contemporary artwork, giving them a chance to speak freely about issues that are important to them (Gude, 2009). Students are also given the power and resources to search for answers to questions they may have (Wolk, 1998). In democratic classrooms students no longer work directly from textbooks or worksheets, but come together as a classroom community to discuss artworks and other ideas (Brodhagen, 1995). According to Cunat (1996), the overall purpose of democratic education is to engage students in a process that will help them develop the skills and attitudes necessary to become people who will contribute to the making of a democratic and humane society. Gude (2009) noted concerning teachers, “As educators we create citizens of a democratic society, not so much by filling them with ideas or facts about democracy, as by creating conditions through which youth experience the pleasures, anxieties, and responsibilities of democratic life” (p. 7). The art room can be a space to test democratic classroom practices because it already offers freedoms that often are not found in core curriculum classes driven by state mandated testing.

As educators it is our role to challenge our students and provide them with a quality art education so they become better critical learners, knowledge seekers, and democratic citizens. It is important for teachers to involve students in the learning process so that students may experience the responsibilities of a democratic life and learn how to



recall and represent their own experiences in a democratic culture (Gude, 2009).

According to Friere, “Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obligated to respond to that challenge” (Friere, 1978; Berthol, 2005 p. 42). When given the opportunity to take more control of their learning students may produce unlikely results and may surprise their teachers (Friere, 1978).

I hope that by encouraging student voice in the art classroom, students will not only care more about their art education, but will also understand that their choices and actions can make a difference when they take a stand about issues that are important to them. This study may assist art teachers in introducing a democratic classroom to their students and serve as a guide to create an awareness of the challenges and benefits of a democratic art classroom.

### **Research Questions**

This study investigates the implementation of a democratic art classroom looks like with eighth grade middle school art students. Some questions that were considered in this study:

- What might an eighth grade democratic art classroom look like in practice?
- What are the teacher and student roles in a democratic art classroom?
- What types of art content works well in a democratic art classroom?
- What problems might one encounter when trying to establish a democratic art classroom?
- What can I learn from establishing a democratic art classroom?

## **Significance of Study**

This study is significant because it offers many potential benefits to students and teachers in an art classroom. A potential benefit to the students participating in this study is a greater awareness of issues and operations of a democratic classroom environment and how a democracy functions outside of the classroom. Students will focus on social issues that are important to them, and be able to articulate why significant issues should be addressed in artworks. This study enabled students to investigate artworks, take part in classroom discussions, and allowed students to investigate social issues that are important to them within contemporary culture. Students gain confidence in knowing their thoughts and ideas help other students learn. Art teachers can also gain knowledge from this research since it offers suggestions for establishing a democratic art classroom. This study allowed me to reflect on my current teaching practices and how they compare and contrast with a democratic classroom.

## **Limitations**

This study was limited due to the fact that only one grade level at one school participated in the study. Students have art class once a week for forty minutes throughout the entire length of the school year, which limits the amount of time they are able to spend in the art classroom. The results of this study might provide more details about a democratic classroom if the study ran for an entire school year.

The school where this study was conducted does not promote a democratic learning environment, and therefore I anticipated meeting resistance from other teachers and students. Many of the teachers at this school teach in a traditional lecture format, students work from worksheets, and are given projects with strict guidelines from the

teacher. So one teacher attempting to set up a democratic class may run counter to traditional expectations.

### **Definitions**

In this study, the words “traditional classroom” and “democratic classroom” are used. I refer to the traditional art classroom setting wherein the teacher is the giver of all knowledge and students are the receptacles for this knowledge (Laguardia & Pearl, 2005). From my experiences as a student, the traditional classroom can be defined as, but is not limited to, the traditional lecture format or the format where all students model their artwork after a teacher product. Little or no collaboration happens between the teacher and student; the teacher decides what and how content will be taught with little to no input from the students. The teacher had preconceived notion of what the artwork should look like in the end, thus creativity in the art room was not encouraged.

In a democratic classroom environment the teacher acts as a facilitator rather than a giver of information. A student has a voice in what they would like to learn, including artwork and art styles; the teacher assists the student in finding the answer instead of giving answers (Friere, 1978; Wolk, 1998). Teachers and students work together to create the curriculum and assessments. A democratic art class strives to promote democratic principles through a quality art education, so students may better understand the democratic process outside of the classroom (Gude, 2009). Democratic learning as defined by Hoover & Kindsvatter (1997) can be defined as a learning environment which supports democratic principles along with learning outcomes. Students and teachers work together in a democratic classroom to set the standards for learning and assessment, allowing for curricular collaboration (Wolk, 1998).

## **Conclusion**

In this study I investigated how eighth grade students respond to the implementation of a democratic art classroom, through studying artworks that deal with social issues that may address war, poverty, gender and racial inequalities other social issues the students feel are important to discuss. In order to better understand how a democratic classroom functions and its benefits to both students and teachers, one must consider the current research about democratic classrooms. Chapter II reveals an extensive review of literature about critical pedagogy, democracy as a way of life, democratic classrooms, and the development of middle school students. I have included research on critical pedagogy as the theoretical lens for this project in Chapter II as well, because critical pedagogy demands that students use their art and voice to develop a critical consciousness about injustices in the world. Through the theoretical lens of critical pedagogy I was able to establish a democratic art classroom for eighth grade students.

## **Chapter II: Review of Literature**

### **Research Objective**

To provide better understanding of democracy and the benefits of a democratic classroom, this review of literature will examine the work of several researchers who believe that establishing a democratic art classroom benefits students, teachers, and society by infusing democratic processes into a school environment. In this review of literature I examine why teachers adopt a democratic learning environment and what is needed to implement this way of teaching, including benefits and challenges to this type of teaching method. I investigate the differences between democratic teaching and traditional ways of teaching and how this method of democratic teaching might be brought into the art room. Finally, I discuss the needs of adolescent students and how a democratic art classroom might address some of the learning needs of middle school students.

My research objective is to contribute to the current understanding of democratic art classrooms by following the work of authors such as Addison (2010), Wolk (1998), Hoover (1997), Kindsvatter (1997), Friere (1978), Giroux (1988, 2004), Blandy (2009, 2011) and Gude (2007, 2009) to show how the middle-school art classroom can benefit from a democratic learning environment rooted in a theory of critical pedagogy.

### **Critical Pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy aims to help students develop a critical consciousness as they examine concepts of freedom, recognize authoritarian roles, connect knowledge to power, and develop the ability to take constructive action (Giroux 1988, 2004). Critical

pedagogy allows students to question those who have power or control including institutions such as government, churches, educational systems, etc. Critical pedagogy, according to Giroux (1988, 2004), operates on several assumptions: human empowerment, questioning of assumptions, and questioning who is the giver and taker of knowledge. According to Giroux (1988, 2004) teaching using critique offers teachers and students the chance to reflect critically on the subjects they are learning. “Critical pedagogy emphasizes critical reflexivity, bridging the gap between learning and everyday life, understanding the connection between power and knowledge, and extending democratic rights and identities by using resources of history” (Giroux, 2004, p. 34). Through a lens of critical pedagogy students are encouraged to examine why they think the way they do and are encouraged to share their thoughts with others. In the art curriculum, students can look at artwork created in the past that deals with social issues and can compare it to contemporary art being made about social issues (Gude, 2007, 2009).

Though the art of the past may still speak to the present, we cannot hope to understand the present, or the past in its fullness and complexity, without attuning ourselves to our times through contemporary art and related theoretical perspectives (Gude, 2009, p. 10).

Students may then begin to question whether artists are still making art about the same social issues as in the past. Are these social issues still relevant, and if they are what are people doing about them? When students have the opportunity to think, learn, and create art in a critical manner, then examining and questioning the world around them becomes easier (Gude, 2009).

Critical pedagogy is deeply rooted in the writings of Paulo Friere (1970, 2005). Friere wants people to recognize their educational situation and recognize connections between their education and social contexts. Of students Friere noted, the more completely they accept the passive role imposed upon them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is (1970, p. 73).

Typically students in a traditional classroom are not expected to question teachers or authority when information is given to them; students accept what teachers and textbooks say as truths without any investigation on their own (Wolk, 1998). Friere (1970) believes that when teachers enable dialogue between teachers and students in the classroom, the teacher learns from the students, and the students learn from the teacher. When dialogue is open between the teacher and students, students can begin to question and critically examine the world around them (Friere, 1970). Open dialogue between teachers and students creates an atmosphere of trust where students are more willing to listen and accept the information being presented (Wolk, 1998).

Critical pedagogy in the art room allows students and teachers to create dialogue about contemporary works of art, allowing for greater understanding and retention of the material being taught (Yokley, 1999). Through a critical lens teachers can help students recognize values and social processes that will help students develop respect for themselves and other cultures and help foster a sense of social responsibility to help improve the lives of the less fortunate (Yokley, 1999). The art room allows for this social awareness by allowing students to discuss artworks that deal with social issues and to investigate the different ways these social issues are addressed in society and education.

Art education professor Yokley (1999) applied theories of critical pedagogy to a college art class finding, “This democratic process engaged the students and teachers in sometimes oppositional, even uncomfortable critical dialogue where positions were questioned, clarified, and debated in a forum where censorship was the only thing censored” (Yokley, 1999, p. 23). Through open dialogue students can examine art and its surrounding contextual and historical circumstances gaining a better understanding of the world around them. Using dialogue and employing democratic practices encouraged by critical pedagogy, teacher’s break down barriers to help students better understand society, government, the world, and themselves (Gude, 2009). When students become more aware of the importance of what they are doing in the classroom, they can gain better understanding of why the teacher is asking to them to complete a task or activity (Stewart & Walker, 2005). As Stewart & Walker (2005) noted, teachers in a democratic classroom challenge student’s ability to engage in activities that show what they have learned and these activities are not limited to traditional classroom activities such as writing, worksheets, and tests.

Using critical pedagogy, one may find a democratic art classroom will form. Studying artworks helps students question, discern relationships, and understand symbolic meaning hidden in works of art (Yokley, 1999). According to Yokley (1999) studio experiences can be enriched by dialogue among teachers and students. Dialogue can enhance the student’s perception of art work and the student’s art making process (Yokley, 1999). Teachers can use contemporary works of art to engage students by comparing and contrasting artworks to gain understanding of gender, racism, elitism, and ethnicity (Addison, 2010).



Through the use of contemporary artworks and a lens of critical pedagogy students can engage in a dialogue about social issues that focus on the students' needs and interests. Creating works of art based on a social issues will allow students to create awareness by creating works of art that are important to them and relevant to their interests (Gude, 2009). According to Gude (2007), "Students whose work investigates issues of real concern to them are more engaged in the learning process" (p. 8). When students have the opportunity to create works of art based on personal meaning and share this meaning with others it enables them to experience a democratic voice within the art classroom (Blandy, 2011; Gude, 2009). Once students have the freedom to freely reflect and represent themselves in their artwork without fear of repercussion, they can begin to understand the importance of free expression for all (Gude, 2009).

Through a lens of critical pedagogy students are encouraged to take a look at what knowledge is taught, what hidden knowledge is taught, who has power, how it is maintained, and at whose expense power is given (Laguardia & Pearl, 2005). Learning is not only about receiving knowledge and putting it down for a test; it is about teaching students to make critical decisions about human struggles and social justice. Giroux (1988, 2004), Addison (2010), Yokley (1999), Gude (2007, 2009) and Blandy (2011) suggest that democratic classrooms that use critical pedagogy are a way for classrooms and schools to engage students in a democratic lifestyle, allowing students to become empowered to have a voice in their learning and to satisfy their learning needs within an art classroom.

## **Democracy as a Way of Life**

The following section discusses the importance of living in a democratic way and presents several reasons why it is important for students to study and practice democracy within a school setting. According to Laguardia and Pearl (2005), when students are given the opportunity to live a democratic way of life in school they will not only be able to make better decisions as students but also as adults. According to Gude (2009), “People who have participated in quality art education experiences identify the importance of free expression for themselves and others” (p. 11). A democratic art classroom is a place for students to express themselves through their artwork and understand the many voices that make up a democracy.

Traditionally in the study of democracy, students in the United States are asked to memorize facts such as the preamble of the U.S Constitution, the Articles of the Constitution, and the branches of government and their function. Memorizing these words and the functions of our government is often as far as teaching democracy in the classroom extends; they learn about democracy but do not practice it (Hoover & Kindsvatter, 1997). According to Hoover & Kindsvatter (1997) schools not only need to focus on social, moral, and intellectual issues but also issues of democracy and student empowerment. Morrison (2010) also suggests that in order for students to understand democracy they must practice democratic ideals within a school setting. Laguardia and Pearl believe that “the democratic strength of any society is determined by the quality of education the most disadvantaged receive” (2005, p. 10). A democratic way of learning should not be reserved for the rich and elite in the United States; it should be offered to

all students regardless of race, gender, religion, and socio-economic status (Wolk, 1998; Addison, 2010).

When students have the opportunity to practice democratic ideals in the classroom, and investigate social injustices they then can understand the importance of our rights as democratic citizens, allowing each person to have the right to contribute to society. As students have the opportunity to make choices in a democratic learning environment they gain the freedom to understand they have choices in the way they live and learn (Morrison, 2008). According to Gude (2009), “A truly democratic culture must be composed of many voices. Through quality art education, students recall and represent their own experiences; they formulate their own stories and images” (p. 9). In a democratic art classroom each student is a vital part of understanding themselves and their role in a democratic society through active participation in receiving, deconstructing and reconstructing shared meaning (Gude, 2007, 2009). Students in the art classroom are able to generate new insights into their lives and the lives of others through analyzing and reflecting on artworks, giving them the critical skills needed to become citizens of a participatory democracy (Gude, 2007).

As these authors note, democratic classrooms have the ability to create optimum learning conditions and each student is encouraged to take part in the democratic educational process based on his or her interests, while investigating local and global themes. Through a quality art education students can begin to understand the importance of freedom of speech and expression in a democracy that can become a way of life.

## **Democratic Classrooms**

Students learn in many different ways, and bring their personal backgrounds and interests to school with them. Democratic classrooms are places for students and their interests to help fill in the gaps in the traditional school curriculum by allowing students to make choices about their learning environment.

Democratic learning as presented by Hoover & Kindsvatter (1997) can be defined as a learning environment which supports democratic principles within learning outcomes. In a democratic classroom the students work together with the teacher to set the standards for learning and assessment (Wolk, 1998). Students can work with the teacher to create a classroom bill of rights, forms of assessment, projects, assignments and curriculum (Morrison, 2008; Wolk, 1998).

The following paragraph discusses Wolk's book, *A Democratic Classroom* (1998). Wolk describes the challenges and benefits of a democratic learning environment, and what it means to be a critically reflective teacher who views her or himself as a learner and facilitator. Wolk taught third through eighth grade at The Foundations School in the Chicago Public School System where he set up a democratic classroom in Math, Social Studies and English Language Arts. Wolk (1998), believes that democracy is a way of life that embraces the ideals of community, empathy, the common good, responsibility, freedom, equality, thoughtfulness, and critical consciousness. For students to become better learners, thier teachers, parents, and administrators must challenge the current models of teaching. Wolk writes,

every school is different, every teacher is different, every child is different, every class is different, every day is different, and every classroom and school culture is

different. Plug in, learn by numbers, teacher proof schooling will never solve anything, no matter how much time we invest” (Wolk, 1998, p. ix).

Teachers must learn the strengths and weaknesses of students and encourage them to voice their opinions, beliefs, values and concerns. According to Wolk (1998), students learn the “game of school” from the moment they enter through the school doors.

Students learn to sit still, not talk, raise their hand, stand in line, read the textbook, and answer questions presented by the teacher. Students learn how to give the teacher the answer the teacher wants and expects, often finding the answer on a worksheet or in a textbook. Students can handle more information and ways of learning than teachers give them the chance to experience (Wolk, 1998).

Student participation in meaningful decision making does not imply surrendering authority to students. Teachers remain in control. In inviting students to participate in decisions does not undermine leadership; it enhances it. An adversarial teacher-student relationship is replaced by a system of mutual respect and accountability. (Laguardia & Pearl, 2005, p. 19)

These authors imply that when students are given the opportunity to make choices in school regarding their education they may become better critical thinkers who can make better decisions as adults. A democratic classroom offers a possible venue for students to have a voice in their learning, allowing students to feel more engaged in the art classroom (Gude, 2009).

According to Wolk (1998), creating a democratic classroom environment means involving students, on a regular basis and in developmentally appropriate ways, in shared decision making that increases their responsibility for helping to make the classroom a

better place to learn. A democratic learning environment provides an ongoing forum where students' thoughts are valued and where any need of the group can be addressed (Addison, 2010; Cunat 1996; Morrison, 2008). A main component in creating a democratic learning environment is the face-to-face meeting between the students' and the teacher, emphasizing interactive discussion and problem solving (Wolk, 1998). The ideas and concepts taught in a democratic classroom help students become better critical thinkers as adults through the sharing of thoughts and ideas (Laguardia & Pearl, 2005).

In the art classroom many different ideas and concepts can be explored due to the open-ended nature of New York State Learning Standards. One standard for the visual arts says "Students will actively engage in the processes that constitute creation and performance in the arts and participate in various roles in the arts" (The University of the State of New York, 1996). According to Efland, "Learning about art is like learning about anything else. That is, one constructs knowledge of art by encountering artistic problems through personal and social living" (1995, p. 31). Efland believes that students should be offered the chance to explore the visual arts through their own personal meaning and experiences. "Knowledge has no meaning or value except as it is authenticated by the student in his or her own feeling and life experiences" (Efland, 1995).

Teachers can create a democratic learning environment by offering several types of assignments such as drawing, writing, creating skits, and different types of assessment, encouraging students to help the teacher co-construct the course and learning material (Morrison, 2010; Efland, 1995; Morrison, 2010; and Wolk, 1998). When students have the opportunity to choose what they learn and how they are assessed, they acquire greater

understanding of themselves, the importance of education, and a better understanding of how a democratic society works (Morrison 2010; Wolk, 1998). According to Blandy & Congdon (1987), the arts are a vital and necessary part of a democratic society. Through the arts students can learn the skills that are needed to break down ideas and put them back together (Blandy & Congdon, 1987). It is through the breaking down of ideas in the arts that students can investigate and understand contemporary times, by understanding the problems of others and how they relate to the world (Blandy & Congdon, 1987; Gude, 2009). Through investigating contemporary artworks students can learn about the perceptions of others and in turn may become vested in social issues that are important to others (Gude, 2009).

Allowing students the opportunity to participate in a democratic art classroom may empower students to seek out answers to questions they may not usually find when they are only looking for answers in a text book or teacher worksheets. These authors imply that students who participate in a democratic art classroom may feel as though the teacher values their opinion and the way they learning, allowing them to express their particular ideas and fulfill their needs in the art making process.

### **Challenges and Benefits of a Democratic Classroom**

Introducing a democratic classroom to students and administration may be met with difficulty. According to Wolk (1998), a democratic learning environment looks so different from a traditional lecture classroom that teachers and administrators may walk past your room perceiving nothing but disorganized chaos as students are actively involved in their own learning and projects. Teachers often cannot fathom what they may perceive as “losing control” over their classroom and students, making them hesitant

to switch to a democratic way of teaching (Wolk, 1998). When students are helping to construct the curriculum, students may begin to feel as though they are a valuable part of the learning process (Laguardia & Pearl, 2005). Through the challenge of creating a democratic classroom where teachers and students together participate in important decisions, an atmosphere of mutual respect is created that encourages students to place greater importance on their learning in and out of the classroom (Laguardia & Pearl, 2005). Teachers have an opportunity then to show their peers and administration that a democratic classroom is a valid and valuable learning experience for all involved (Wolk, 1998).

According to Wolk (1998), changing student opinions on what an art classroom should look like when changing teaching styles may be difficult. As teachers offer students the opportunity to have a voice in their education and classroom experiences students may become leery at first (Wolk, 1998). Students may question why they have to help facilitate the conversation and seek out answers instead of having the answers given directly to them (Wolk, 1998; Laguardia & Pearl, 2005). Introducing a student led classroom may lead students to perceive that the teacher does not know enough about the subject matter they are trying to teach, therefore a system of mutual trust must be built between the student and teacher before a democratic classroom can be successful (Wolk, 1998).

Democracy in any classroom can be integrated slowly, giving students the opportunity to reflect on the choices that have been given to them (Wolk, 1998). According to Hoover and Kindsvatter (1997), teachers can scaffold, so that not all control is released at one time. By starting with building blocks of how a democratic classroom



can be run, students gradually make larger and more difficult decisions (Hoover & Kindsvatter, 1997). Teachers can offer students small choices, gradually building to larger choices (Wolk, 1998). When students are encouraged to make choices in and out of the classroom they may begin to see and understand the values and foundations on which democratic society is built (Hoover & Kindsvatter, 1997). Through a democratic classroom and a lens of critical pedagogy, students may begin to understand how to reflect critically on the world around them and how choices made in school can allow them to become problem solvers of the world (Giroux, 1988, 2004).

Triggered by classroom discussions and their peers interests, students can learn about social injustices through art created by people of many races, genders, cultural backgrounds and socio-economic backgrounds (Stewart & Walker, 2005). According to Gude (2009), creating art when students are given choices generates deeper engagement with feelings, images, stories, ideas, and forms. “Through making and experiencing art students can generate multiple ways of knowing and being in the world” (Gude, 2009, p. 11). By exploring these differences and important issues in society through their interests, students gain a more meaningful perspective about art and the world around them (Stewart & Walker, 2005; Gude, 2007).

These authors imply that introducing a democratic art classroom may have its challenges and may be met with resistance at first from students. When student voice and opinion is slowly integrated into the art curriculum students may begin to feel as though they have a voice in their education. As teachers and students work together to overcome initial challenges of introducing a democratic art classroom, such as understanding new roles of the teacher and students, they may soon be able to see the benefits of this type of

teaching and learning method. A democratic art classroom also provides teachers and students with assessment methods that may not be found in a traditional classroom setting, to which I discuss in the following section.

### **Assessment in Democratic Classroom**

Assessment in a democratic classroom can take many forms. Students can create projects, give speeches, write papers, and discuss what they have learned with teachers (Wolk, 1998). Not all assessments need to be multiple choice or essay format tests where students must choose between the wrong and right answer; students should be assessed in a manner that best suits their learning style (Laguardia & Pearl, 2005; Wolk, 1998). In a democratic art classroom students can be graded on the aesthetics of their final product; their thoughts, their conceptual basis, and their ability to articulate what they have learned (Wolk, 1998). Sketchbooks, portfolios, conversations, critiques, and notes about thought processes are all valid ways to assess student learning in an art room, which allows each student to showcase what they have learned in their individual way (Stewart & Walker, 2005; Wolk, 1998).

Each student in a democratic art classroom can be assessed on the way he or she learns, allowing for that student to receive the best grade possible. For example Wolk (1998), discusses a student “Sue” who appeared to be learning less than her classmates, and was considered a less than average student based on current grading standards. Wolk (1998) gave students an assignment about ecosystems; students were to create a visual, write a paper, perform a skit, etc. Students were to choose the best medium they could to portray their knowledge learned. Sue, often quiet in class, sketched a large mural displaying all the attributes of a successful rainforest ecosystem, which showed she had

indeed met all of the learning objectives (Wolk, 1998). In a democratic learning environment Sue was able to show the teacher what she had learned through a learning task and medium in which she felt vested.

In a traditional classroom the teacher sets forth the grading policies to be adhered to by all students, whether or not the student views the grading policies set by the teacher as fair. This can cause discord between the students and teachers. Students begin to perform according to a learned habit of what will earn a high grade, not by personal expression or meaning (Wolk, 1998; Stewart & Walker, 2005). According to Wolk (1998), grades are a convenience for teachers and are not always necessary in a democratic learning environment.

Grading children may be convenient, but convenience should not guide how our schools function. Giving children grades is one of those entrenched rules of the dominant paradigm. People can't imagine how you can teach and do school without giving grades, but you can, you [*sic*] just need to see assessment through a democratic and non-competitive lens. (Wolk, 1998, p. 21)

According to Giroux (1988), grades should not be used to discipline students, rather teachers and students should create a dialogue about grades and how grading takes place in the classroom. In a democratic classroom students and teachers can work together to form the foundation on which students may be graded, and these needs may vary per student. The teacher should decide which type of assessment is best based on their comfort level, the needs of the school, and the needs of the students.

Introducing a democratic classroom in an art environment may be difficult at first, but over time students and teachers may see the benefits of a classroom where open

communication exists about subject matter, materials, grades, and classroom policies.

The middle school art classroom may provide an interesting place to implement a democratic art classroom environment due to the age and development of middle school students.

### **Middle School Students and Democratic Learning**

Middle school is a time when most students are developing their identity and the learning habits they will carry with them throughout the rest of their life (Lampert, 2006).

A democratic art classroom is an excellent place for students to form their identity and understanding of themselves through their ideas and class work (Raible & Nieto, 2008).

Middle school students are developing their critical thinking skills, which will help them become more reflective when considering complex problems based on everyday social issues (Lampert, 2006). Students can gain an understanding of themselves and how to question the world around them by looking at works of art and questioning why specific choices were made by the artist, such as why the artist depicted a scene in history or how a scene is differs from what history books tell us (Lampert, 2006; Stewart & Walker, 2005).

Teachers foster critical thinking in students when they urge students to consider many possible resolutions of artistic problems, and also, when in classroom critiques they reflect upon the divergent perspectives of classmates who have resolved the same creative problems with a variety of outcomes. (Lampert, 2006, p. 49)

Lampert (2006) challenges students to discuss artworks that challenge their preconceived notions about themselves and others. As discussion of artworks takes place, students may

gain varied perspectives, which can help students form a higher level of thinking (Lampert, 2006; Nakkula, 2008). Students at the middle school level can improve their critical thinking, and deepen their understanding of visual communication when the art classroom is a place of open communication between the teacher and students (Lampert, 2006).

Adolescents spend a lot of time in school; therefore it is no surprise that schools can help form the identity of students (Nakkula, 2008). According to Nakkula (2008), it is not necessarily the setting in which the middle school student is involved that helps form their identity, but rather the key relationships within that setting that contribute to identity development. Nakkula noted, “The activities and relationships most influential to identity development are those in which youth are most invested and through which they experience the deepest gratification and most meaningful reinforcement” (2008, p. 13). Teachers can give students the opportunity to share their life experiences in and out of the classroom; it is these life experiences that help shape who these young individuals will become (Raible & Nieto, 2008).

A democratic learning environment can help foster a meaningful relationship between the student and the classroom, allowing students to become vested in their education; experiences that evolve from being part of a democratic art classroom may help students develop a respect for each other, the arts and education in general (Laguardia & Pearl, 2005). According to these authors an art classroom can be made into a democratic learning community where each student feels as though his or her ideas are valuable and appreciated, thus students may become more vested in their educational experiences. The art classroom can become an avenue in which adolescents experience

the power of their voices and begin to understand they have a voice through their artwork (Gude, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

Much of the research by Blandy (1987, 2011), Gude (2007, 2009), Hoover & Kindsvatter (1997), Laguardia & Pearl (2005), Morrison (2008), and Wolk (1998) discusses democratic learning in a core subject area such as math, social studies, and science. The art room is an advantageous place to introduce a democratic learning environment since it already offers creative freedoms that may not be found in a traditional classroom setting, where curriculum is driven by state mandated testing (Gude, 2007). Although democratic classrooms may be met with initial resistance from administration and students, like these authors, I find the benefits of initiating a democratic classroom outweigh the challenges of implementing a democratic art classroom. The middle school art room should be a place for students to explore how they come to hold certain ideas about their identity, needs, wants, and interests through the art making process, all the while discussing and exploring works of art that explore such ideas. Studies by Addison (2010), Gude (2007, 2009), and Lampert (2006) showed the benefits of integrating art education with a democratic learning environment. However most examples of a democratic classroom pertain to core curriculum areas, suggesting introducing democratic learning into art classrooms is an area that can be further explored. In my study I plan to investigate the possible benefits and challenges of an eighth grade democratic art classroom, and student roles and my role is as the teacher in a democratic art classroom, while investigating what types of art content work well for eighth grade students within a democratic learning environment. The authors in this

review of literature find democratic classrooms can be implemented in an art classroom. I hope to create a democratic art classroom for eighth grade art students and address the questions for this study by collecting data through observations, questionnaires, interviews, and student artwork. Chapter III will discuss the methodology used in this study.

### **Chapter III: Methods and Procedures**

#### **Qualitative Participatory Action Research**

This qualitative participatory action research seeks to examine what happens when students are given more voice and empowerment over their learning processes by implementing a democratic art classroom with eighth grade middle school students. Participatory action research (Grundy, 1995) is aligned with the theory of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1988, 2004; Friere, 1970; Yokley, 1999) as they are committed to bringing action and reform into the classroom. According to Grundy (1995), action research can be seen as “professional practitioners with a passion for improvement, taking risks, and assessing what happens when they initiate changes” (p. 10). In this study I will become an active participant in the action research process to determine how an eighth grade art classroom may change when democratic teaching practices are introduced. Merriam (2009), states “Action research has as its goal to address a specific problem within a specific setting, such as a classroom, a workplace, a program or an organization” (p. 4). My goal for teaching is to encourage student voice in their learning, encouraging them to become better critical thinkers in and out of the classroom.

#### **Role of the Researcher**

My role as the art teacher who is an active participant during this study will allow me to work closely with the students and help them discuss topics and issues that are important to them. As the teacher my goal is to empower students to look for answers, to seek new information and to question what they are learning, and learn how it will impact them outside of the classroom.



As the researcher I seek to understand what happens when students are empowered to have a voice in their learning through a democratic process, and to record any types of benefits or problems encountered as I establish a democratic art classroom. This study took place in a small catholic school in the suburban town of DeRidder, New York. Holy Child Catholic School is one of five school options for the town's residents and serves approximately 300 of the town's students. The school serves as both an elementary school and a middle school.

### **Description of Context**

Nestled in among several middle-class suburban towns, the town of DeRidder has approximately 45,000 residents. Local shops and national chain restaurants line the streets. Many community festivals are held during the different seasons, such as the town's Winter Daze and Community Days festivals. Families are often seen riding bikes or taking walks after dinner on many of the town's sidewalks. The town offers many amenities for families and promotes a community feeling of togetherness.

Holy Child Catholic School is located in the middle of town on a main road that most town residents travel on a daily basis, often causing traffic to back up in the morning and early afternoon hours. Between the hours of 7:45 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. on a warm spring day, students can be seen and heard playing on many of the schools' sports fields and hills located in the back of the building.

Towards the left of the all-brick building stands the Roman Catholic Church, with a sign out front announcing the mass times and upcoming holy days. The all-brick school building attached to the church was built in 1955; within the last twenty years a gym/parish center was added to the original structure. A large sign out in front of the

brick wall announces the building as Holy Child Catholic School; the words “School Entrance” are etched above the main glass doors through which all students enter in the morning.

The art room is located on the basement floor of the school next to the library and the cafeteria. During lunch times it can be difficult to teach due to the overwhelming level of noise created by the students in the cafeteria. The room is rectangular measuring approximately 28 feet by 22 feet, and has two doors. Students enter and exit the art room through the main door and the second door in the art room serves only as an emergency exit. The room contains one very small window which allows for no view of the outside and little fresh air to enter the art room. Three tables brought down from the old cafeteria are placed in horizontal rows to the far left of the room and each table contains seating for seven students. The art room becomes difficult to maneuver in if there are more than 25 people in the room. A demonstration and materials table is located to the right of the room so that students may get up and retrieve whatever materials they may need to complete their project. The back wall of the art room is lined with cupboards which contain the majority of the art materials for all grades. The only sink for the art room is located near the back cupboards in the corner of the room. Four large bulletin boards hang in the art room; two on each side of the room. The bulletin boards are covered in brightly colored paper and showcase student artwork, along with vocabulary and artworks by contemporary artists. I am the only art teacher in the building for grades Pre-K through 8, so I do not share the art room. Although this room was never intended to be an art room, it suits my needs.

## **Participants**

Parents pay approximately \$2,500 per school year to send their child to Holy Child Catholic School. The total number of students attending Holy Child Catholic School for the 2011-2012 school has dropped from previous years leaving the total student population at 221 students. Ninety-nine percent of the student population is white, while less than one percent of the student population is of another ethnic background. Around fifteen percent of students receive some form of financial aid to help cover the costs of a private-school education.

Students at Holy Child Catholic School receive their entire elementary and middle school art education from the same art teacher in the same art room. All students in kindergarten through eighth grades receive art once a week for forty minutes. Typically an eighth grade class will range from 17 to 22 students. The class that participated in this study was comprised of 20 students with 4 boys and 16 girls. Students are comfortable sharing thoughts, ideas, and opinions about school life and art while they are in the art room and often speak openly about life outside of the art room doors. Because students are very comfortable sharing their thoughts in the art room, they may feel more comfortable during the data collection process which includes open-ended discussion, interviews, and questionnaires.

## **Data Collection and Analysis Methods**

Marshall & Rossman (2006) state that the qualitative data collection process can take place in the form of interviews, observation, participation, and analysis of documents (p. 97). With the qualitative data collection process in mind, I developed five strategies for documenting the process of implementing a democratic art classroom at

Holy Child Catholic School. These strategies included observation with field notes and reflections, anonymous student questionnaires, student interviews, student reflection papers, and documentation of student artwork. Triangulation of data was achieved by analysis of data from these multiple data collection methods and data sources to confirm emergent findings (Merriam, 2009).

During the data collection process findings were coded for easy access and understandability in a field notes and reflection journal. Teacher observations and field notes were kept in a composition notebook titled "Observations." This teacher observation journal was filled with descriptive field notes to reflect on student behaviors and direct quotes taken from students during class conversations. The contents of the field journal provided data for written weekly analytical memos and were color coded to form the categories. Student interview notes were also kept in a three-ring binder under a section identified as "Student Interviews." These interview notes contained the date of the interview along with responses of the students and notes from the interactions between the teacher and student. Each interview was recorded in a notebook for easy reference to student quotes. Margins to the right of the page in both observation field notes and interviews offered a place for me to add reflective thoughts and ideas. This allowed to me analyze and reflect on classroom happenings after I had time to internalize the data that was collected. The analytical memos were color coded to discern categories and themes that emerged from week to week. These main themes became the foundational findings in Chapter IV. Careful observation of students and thorough data collection allows the researcher to become more effective in understanding and interpreting the student's needs and concerns (Almy & Genishi, 1979). Student

questionnaires were also kept in the same three-ring binder located in a section labeled “Student Questionnaires.” All written materials were kept in the same three-ring binder for easy access of all data. Photographs of student artwork and sketches were stored digitally on my home computer as well as printed out and placed in the binder for easy access.

After the data for the study was collected, I coded and analyzed according to emergent patterns (Merriam, 2009). Notable categories that emerged from the data were student response, teacher response, student motivation, lack of student motivation, response to democratic processes, and art content. Data collection and analysis of data happened simultaneously and informed one another creating a triangulation of the data, each informing the other regarding the results of the study (Merriam, 2009). Data collected throughout the study was interpreted and coded in order to assess student learning, student roles, teacher roles, and reactions to a democratic art classroom. “The question of internal validity—the extent to which research findings are credible—is addressed by using triangulation, checking interpretations with individuals interviewed or observed, staying on-site over a period of time, asking peers to comment on emergent findings, and clarifying researcher biases’ and assumptions” (Merriam, 2009, p. 234).

All data and materials collected, including photographs of student artwork, observation notes, interview notes, student reflective papers, and student questionnaires will be kept boxed in my home office for a minimum of three years after the conclusion of the study. In compliance with the requirements of Buffalo State College, permission for this study was formally procured in writing and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

## **Ethics**

According to Merriam (2009), “The validity and reliability of a study depend upon the ethics of the investigator” (p. 228). Throughout the course of this study many ethical concerns were taken into consideration to protect those being studied as well as the researcher. Throughout this study the site and individuals who participated were identified with fictitious names or pseudonyms to assure the safety and anonymity of the participants (Bresler, 1996). Only students whose parents or guardians gave written consent have participated in interviews, questionnaires, or had their artwork photographed for use in the published document (Appendix A), consent forms acknowledge participants rights are protected during data collection (Creswell, 2009). Students were made fully aware they were participating in a study for educational research. The signed consent forms will also be kept with all data collection materials.

This study investigated the implementation of a democratic art classroom at the eighth grade level. A potential benefit to students is they may better understand the operation and functions of a democratic classroom, in hopes of leading them to better understand how democracy works outside of the classroom as well. Students may also become more aware of social issues that impact our country and ourselves on a daily basis. Student participants may also gain a boost in self esteem knowing that their thoughts and ideas have been validated and used in an educational study. Art teachers can gain knowledge from this research since it can offer them the foundations needed to set up a democratic art classroom and insights into the type of content that may or may not work well in a democratic art classroom.

## **Conclusion**

Qualitative data collection methods were used during the course of this study to triangulate data, and back up themes that emerged from the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). All ethical concerns were taken into consideration for the involvement of the students, and no unethical data collection methods were used during this study. I observed and documented the student's responses to a democratic art classroom. These observations that I recorded were confirmed or rejected by student interviews and anonymous students questionnaires. Student interviews were informal and took place in the art room. In order to triangulate the data presented in classroom observations and interviews, students had the opportunity to participate in anonymous questionnaires. The questionnaires allowed students to present their true thoughts and feelings in a way they would not feel judged by the teacher. The final pieces of data that were collected for this study were the student's artworks and the paper they wrote in response to their artwork. Throughout this study students were encouraged to share their thoughts, feelings, opinions, and concerns with the peers and me, allowing for many methods to collect data. The results of the study are presented in Chapter IV.

## **Chapter IV: Results of the Study**

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this action research project was to learn what a democratic eighth grade art classroom might look like in practice. I wondered if students had the opportunity to create artwork based on topics, ideas and art materials that were important to them would they create artwork that was rich in ideological content and personal meaning. As noted by Friere (1978), as students are posed with problems relating to themselves and the world, they will feel increasingly challenged to respond to these problems. Would students use their art to take action about social issues that are important to them? In the fall of 2011, I decided to shift my teaching from a traditional classroom in which I had been teaching for the past two years to a democratic classroom.

Each week students came to art class ready to work; as a researcher I was ready to record their interactions with me, their peers, and their artwork. I walked around art class each week with my observation journal in my hand taking copious notes on student behaviors and writing notes and concerns I had about the democratic art class. As students were engaged in class discussions about democracy and choice I would write notes and questions to myself in my field notes making sure I did not forget to write down important quotes or ideas that were presented by the students. Throughout the course of the study I selected nine students to interview. I chose students who seemed to be engaged as well as disengaged with the democratic art class.

My goal through observing student interactions was to discover how students reacted to their new freedoms in the art room, and how they thought these freedoms would translate to a democratic society. Students who did not have an interview with me



still had the opportunity to share their thoughts, feelings, and concerns about the democratic art class through student response papers and anonymous questionnaires. I choose to give students anonymous questionnaires because I thought if they did not have to put their name on the questionnaire they would provide more honest answers. During the course of my research I taught, studied, and documented the happenings in one eighth grade art classroom over a nine week period with 20 students. The following pages document my analysis of classroom happenings, student interviews, student artwork, and student response papers. Through the analysis of the data that I collected three large categories were formed. The data was recorded and placed into three main categories; the role of the teacher and the students in a democratic art class, art content in a democratic art class, and the challenges that I faced while trying to implement a democratic art class with this group of eighth grade students.

### **The Setting**

The art room is located in the dark, dreary, and green basement of Holy Child Catholic School. The art room is a beacon of bright light and cheer, demanding creativity from all who enter. The wooden art room door boasts a colorful splatter-paint sign that says, "Life is a great big canvas; you should throw all the paint you can on it." The drab tan wall color and brown floors are jazzed up by the bright green paper that lines all four of the art room's bulletin boards. The green is so bright that at times it begins to vibrate off the wall; but it brightens up this art room in the basement that has very small windows and minimal sunlight.

The first bulletin board contains a poster with the words "Art History 101." The poster is labeled 1-10 with each number in the style of a master artist. Alongside each

number I have placed several images of the artist's work along with a portrait of the artist. The poster contains only white male artists, which often leads to colorful conversations about who is included in art history books, and who is not. "Is it fair Mrs. Achatz that women are always left out?" My favorite bulletin board in the room helps students to talk about art in a simple way they can understand. "Thinking, Looking and Talking about Art" bounces across the green paper, standing out brightly in purple letters. Sayings such as "What do you see?" "What do you think the artist is trying to say?" and "What is it about?" line the bulletin board along with several art images. Students are mostly attracted to the image "L.H.O.Q.Q" by Marcel Duchamp. "Why would someone paint a mustache on the Mona Lisa?" can often be heard coming from the art room.

Brinnnnnggg. The bell rings. The hallway begins to fill with voices of excited students coming down to the art room. The student's voices echo off the concrete walls, making it sound twice the number of students. Feet pound down the stairs and I am no longer alone in the dark basement. Students excitedly throw down their books and lunch sacks and begin to take their seats. Students work at large wooden tables in groups of ten, to promote more conversation between and the sharing of ideas with each other. Students can be heard chattering about the day's happenings before class begins. The battered wooden tables are hand-me-downs from the old cafeteria but they serve their purpose. New blue plastic chairs, purchased for the art room in 2009, replaced the old wooden chairs that were splitting down the middle. These new chairs are more and much safer for our students.

A total of 20 eighth grade students fill this art room each week with their voices and creative ideas. In this class the girls outnumber the boys; only four boys belong to

this class making them a tightly knit group that is harder to separate than flies from honey. The boys sit at a table along with six girls. They often tease each about events from the weekend or who made the best goal in soccer the night before. The girls are more boisterous and not afraid to speak out; they are often the first ones willing to share ideas with the group. The ten girls who sit closer to the art room door are quieter and barely make a sound during class. These girls work quietly and need to be prodded to participate in classroom discussions.

Only one student in the classroom is a minority who fits is very into the homogenous classroom. She is often the student who spices up the conversation and brings another point of view. Together this close knit group of students forms the 2012 graduating class at Holy Child Catholic School. This group of 20 students is more like a family than a group of school mates, and many of them have been in the same class since Kindergarten. These students often play practical jokes on each other and hold a familiarity among all of them. They can often been seen running on the soccer fields together after school on a warm fall day, or throwing snow balls at each other during the cold winter months in DeRidder.

As I being the first round of interviews I glance at my list of questions, making sure I have all my questions written down and in order. The interview with Kourtney took place on October 18, 2011 and was the first of several interviews I conducted with nine students. The interview began with casual conversation such as “What do you like about art class?” Even though we have a wonderful rapport, sitting across from any teacher while she drills you with questions can be intimidating and I wanted my students to feel as comfortable as possible. I told Kourtney to take her time and answer honestly and that,

this is a place free of judgment and nothing she says can be used against her. The interview started great and I enjoyed the conversation we had. As we got deeper into the interview I asked, “Why did you choose to create a work of art based on people with disabilities?” Kourtney quickly began to break down. I was shocked as tears streamed down her face. I quickly reached for the box of tissues on my desk. Kourtney began to explain the reason for such an emotional breakdown. “Through my art work I want people to understand that people with disabilities are people too, they did not choose to be disabled and they deserve to be treated with respect. My uncle is disabled and it is a very personal situation for me.” We both sat in silence for a few moments and gathered our thoughts. I grabbed a tissue to wipe away the tears that began to well in my eyes. “I can’t talk about this at home with my family. This artwork about people with disabilities is a way of sharing how I feel. Through this artwork I have a voice and I can share that voice with others.” I looked at Kourtney in disbelief. I had hoped this democratic art classroom would allow students to have a voice in their learning. I did not realize how that “voice” would become so much more.

The interview I had with Kourtney is an example of the trust the students had in me, because they were willing to share deep and personal stories for this study. Because of the open dialogue Kourtney and I had during the interview process she was able break down barriers and critically examine the world around her. Kourtney was able to authenticate her own feelings through her life experiences as described by Efland (1995). Through the interview process I was able to connect with my students on a deeper level and get to know a little more about them and their life outside of school. According to Wolk (1998), open dialogue between the teacher and students creates an atmosphere of

trust. It is through this trust that students are more willing to accept the information they are being presented with in a classroom setting (Friere, 1978). Throughout the implementation of a democratic art class, I soon realized my role as the teacher and the role of my students would change considerably.

### **Student and Teacher Roles in a Democratic Art Class**

In a democratic art classroom the teacher works hand in hand with the students to become a facilitator of knowledge rather than the giver of knowledge. Through a democratic style of teaching the teacher also becomes the student, learning what a student needs to be successful in the art room (Wolk, 1998). Through classroom observations, interviews, and discussions I learned what motivates my students and what they need in order to consider themselves successful in the art room. Students became the teacher for themselves and other students, creating a classroom community where learning happened from everyone involved and everyone's voice mattered.

As a novice teacher I am still figuring out my personal teaching style and how I want to engage my students in the art-making process. Over the past two years while teaching at Holy Child Catholic School I introduced art lessons to my students in the same structured manner. I usually began class with a presentation where we discuss a particular art concept or artist. I found all the information and gave it to my students, expecting them to fill in the blanks as needed with pre-planned worksheets or sketchbook pages. When discussing artworks we would often go no further than the formal elements and principles of art; barely discussing content. After introducing the assignment, students would gather around a table for a demonstration on how to use the specific art materials that I had selected for them to use. While working on their art projects students

would have few chances to infuse their interests into the project; and the end result was projects that looked very similar due to the specific criteria of the project and use of the same art materials. In the traditional structured manner in which I taught, students had no voice in determining the content we learned in the art room.

In the fall of 2011, and at the beginning of this research project, eighth grade students at Holy Child Catholic School were given the opportunity to have a voice in their learning by participating in a democratic art classroom. I changed my expectations for each student and myself. Students were now responsible for seeking out information about new artists, art media, and art styles. My goal was to have students think about art in a new way. I wanted students to use their art to “speak out” about social issues and social injustices while learning from each other. My role as the teacher changed as well. No longer would I stand in front of the class and tell students how to create their art work. My new role was to facilitate students in their learning and to inspire them to do their personal best in the art room. My role was to encourage students to create a work of art rich in personal meaning and ideas, while exploring a social issue about which they are passionate.

On the first day of our democratic art classroom I gave a presentation to students addressing some key terms they would need to know and understand in order to effectively participate in a democratic art classroom (Appendix B). As a class we defined the terms democracy, social issue, rights, and responsibilities. Our art classroom would now function as a democracy and students would have freedom of expression and speech. To ensure order in our classroom democracy, we made a list of classroom rights and responsibilities (Appendix C). This classroom bill of rights was posted in several areas of

the room. It was each student's responsibility to adhere to our classroom bill of rights. If at any given time a right or responsibility needed to be amended the class would vote. If a right or responsibility to the classroom bill of rights had enough votes to become overturned it was amended. Students felt that through the process of allowing students to construct the classroom rules the teacher was listening to their needs and feelings as noted in an interview. Throughout the interviews I refer to myself as Ms. A.

*Danny:* "I liked being able to vote on what our classroom rules were. I feel like you listened to what we really said and put it into words we could all understand. You let us make the rules. I think we all followed the rules much better than in other classes because we helped make them."

*Ms. A:* "So if you make the rules you're more likely to follow them? Why is that?"

*Danny:* "It's not some teacher telling you what to do or how not to do it. You made the rules, you should be able to follow them. Nobody would make a rule they wouldn't want to follow. (Interview with Danny, 9/27/2011)"

Students were more vested in following the rules because they made them. I did not tell them how to behave in class; they told themselves how to behave. With students having a say in classroom rules seemed to be a more effective way of getting students to adhere to the rules rather than posting rules made by the teacher. Throughout the democratic classroom I had less behavior issues with this class than I have had in the previous two years. Each class has individual needs and these needs should be considered during the rule-making process for better class room management (Wolk, 1998). The democratic art classroom and its procedures became a way for me to let students know I was listening to their specific needs and wants.

In this democratic art classroom, and due to time constraints, I choose to focus on social issues and social injustices happening in the world. Critical pedagogy demands that students take action, and by learning about social issues students could use their artwork to spread awareness about issues of real concern to them. I chose the broad topic of social issues but as a class we made a list of social issues that were important to this particular group of students (Appendix D) focusing on their concerns about the world. As a class we looked at images by five different artists who create art about social issues. These artists were chosen by me to expose the students to many different art styles and media such as abstract painting, photography, drawing, etc. I wanted the students participating in this study to feel comfortable producing artwork in an art style they felt most comfortable with, and understand the end goal was not creating works of art with realistic renderings. These artists and works included: Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*; Kathe Kollwitz's *Germany's Children are Starving*; Barbara Kruger's *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)*; Steve Shepard's *Pitcher Plant*; and Soraida Martinez's *What Prejudice Looks Like*. After discussing the artists and their artwork, I asked students to come to the back of the classroom where the majority of the art materials were located. I quickly flung open all the material cupboards open and said, "Take a look at what we have to work with. Whatever I have is yours to use!" At first the students gazed at me with faces that questioned whether I was serious or not. As soon as they realized I was serious, they excitedly began to shuffle through the materials. Student's ideas about their art began to immediately change once they began to see what materials were available to them. From the questionnaires I received responses such as,



- I learned that you can use many different art materials and be as creative as you want.
- I liked being able to use whatever materials and choose what felt right for me to use to express my ideas, [I liked] being able to choose what we want and what feels important to me.
- It [having choices] was a good way for me to express myself in my artwork.”

(Responses from anonymous student questionnaires)

Students had a positive response to being able to choose from the array of materials in the art room, and expressed that they would like to continue to have these choices. One student wrote on their questionnaire, “I really liked using a lot of different and new art materials. I was able to explore my ideas better. I hope we have this chance [to use many different art materials] again in art class.”

As the class began making their artwork and researching different artists and styles, students began realizing how much their roles in the art room were changing. Six out of the twenty students, all girls, thought I should give the students names of artists to research, or tell them which artist to base their artwork on instead of seeking out the information on their own using the “Social Issue Reflection Sheet” (Appendix E) for guidance. As found by Wolk (1998), changing students opinions about how an art classroom should function may be difficult at first. Upon further investigation of why the students attitude changed so drastically, from resistant and hesitant to accepting over the course of one week, I found their reluctance stemmed from the fact they were not quite sure where to begin.

*Ms. A:* “What did you find the most difficult about participating in a democratic classroom?”

*Lara:* “Sometimes I didn’t know where to begin, I was unsure of what I was supposed to be doing. We have never had this kind of freedom in a class before, it was different...”

*Ms. A:* “Different in a good way or different in a bad way?”

*Lara:* “Different in a good way. Once I figure[d] out what I needed to do or asked you a question I was able to get to work. I felt like I had to be more responsible for myself and my ideas. You were there to help when I needed it most but other than that I was in charge of my project. It was cool.”

*Ms. A:* “What did you think about sharing your ideas with the class?”

*Lara:* “I liked it. We all learned from each other. We are individuals with many different views on things. (Interview with Lara, 10/6/2011)

An observation I noted on several occasions was the only students who were reluctant to participate fully and seek out their own information at first were girls. Most of the girls who sat at the table with all female students were quieter than the mixed group.

*Ms. A:* Rachael I noticed you have been much quieter while working on this project than you have been in the past. Is there any particular reason for this?

*Rachael:* My art is about being perfect, the pressure to be prefect that girls feel. I don’t think the boys will get it so I don’t want to talk about it until it’s done. I think when it is done they will have a better understanding of what I am trying to say because they can see it finished. (Interview with Rachael, 10/28/2011)

After analyzing the data I have concluded this group of girls was quieter because they were discussing issues such as self-esteem, pressure to be perfect, and female stereotypes.

Before the study began I was concerned about problems that might arise from disinterest from the four boys who would participate in the study but they seemed very eager and full of ideas. David reflected on his reason for being so motivated in his response paper.

I felt that before most of the projects in art class were for the girls. I don't want to draw flowers and learn about Monet. For this art project I was able to create art about what I wanted to create art about. I wanted to spend extra time in the art room because I really enjoyed my art project. (Student response paper, David, 11/4/2011)

As noted by Gude (2009), when students create artwork about issues than are of concern to them they are more engaged in the learning process. David felt empowered by the choices he was given in the art room. He was more engaged with the art-making process in a democratic art classroom and wanted to spend extra time in the art room.

According to Gude (2009), "People who have participated in quality arts education experiences identify the importance of free expression for themselves and others" (p. 11). Throughout this study most students were accepting of the classroom changes and the new freedoms they had within the art room. Those who were resistant at first struggled with the idea of the amount of freedom they had because it was such a drastic change from the way they had learned how to "act" in school and needed more teacher guidance. From the questionnaires I received responses such as

- I didn't know where to start, I was very confused. After I talked with you [Mrs. Achatz] I was able to start my project.
- I felt very nervous with the new classroom at first. I was afraid you [Mrs. Achatz] would not be there to help me.
- After I talked to you [Mrs. Achatz] about the ideas I had. I knew my project was going to be great. I also liked that I could talk with the people at my table. They had some great ideas about things to make my project better.”

(Responses from anonymous student questionnaires)

Once these six students realized I was still leading the class and available for assistance at any time, they accepted the idea of learning from themselves and their peers, as well as the teacher. In a democratic art classroom, it is students who must trust and respect you as a teacher before a classroom democracy can be successful (Wolk, 1998).

Once students understood their new role as teachers and students they appreciated the process of participating in a democratic art classroom. Throughout classroom observations students made statements such as

- I feel like I learned more in a democratic class. I had you (the teacher) to help me but I learned a lot from the people at my table. We were always talking about our project, sharing ideas.
- I learned so much and had a chance to be more creative. I feel like more teachers should do this; it was better than listening to the teacher talk all class. We should learn more about democracy; we will need to know these things later in life.

(Responses from anonymous student questionnaires)

By the end of this project I began to feel comfortable in my new role as a teacher in a democratic classroom. I enjoyed the process of working with my students on a one-on-one basis and really getting to know what is important to them. I was able to help my students explore new ways of making art and using art materials. I was motivated by the pride and satisfaction they showed in discussing their artwork and knew they took pride in their roles in a democratic art class as well. “Today was a great day. I noticed how engaged the students are when they are making or talking about their art. I think they notice something special is happening art class as much as I do. There is a different feeling in the art room these days. I feel so empowered to continue with this study, and to see exactly where we go as a class” (Notes from observation journal 10/18/2011).

Offering students choices in the art room helped students to engage with art content on a personal level, allowing them to create works of art that are rich in ideological content and personal meaning. Throughout the course of this study I discovered the benefits of discussing social issues with students, and using these ideas to create their artwork. Utilizing the theoretical lens of critical pedagogy I was able to discover what types of art content would work well in a democratic art class.

### **Art Content in a Democratic Art Class**

“Students whose work investigates issues of real concern to them are more engaged in the learning process” (Gude, 2007, p. 8). When the data from student response papers, student questionnaires, and student artwork was analyzed, a main theme that emerged was the idea that creating works of art about social issues helped satisfy the needs of youth. Discussing topics such as social issues in the art room gave students the opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas about what is important to them (Gude,

2007, 2009). The creation of student artwork became a way for students to voice their concerns about our world and its problems. Sarah expressed her concerns about world hunger in her artwork and response paper.

My art project is about the social issue hunger. The plainly painted people are peering into an empty bowl that symbolizes that there are many hungry people in the world. Sometimes people can rarely find all the food they need not only to survive, but to be healthy. The bowl is bright colored to symbolize the false hope of the starving people, the hope that today they will have enough food to eat.

When they look into the bowl they find that there is not a bit of food in it, nothing for them to eat. I was inspired to create this project because there are a lot of people, especially children who are a lot worse off than me. I think more attention needs to be called to this issue in our world. I have decided to volunteer in a soup kitchen to do my part to help. I believe we don't nearly do enough to help people who are starving, and many of us have the resources to help others. I hope with hard work and determination we can all work together to change that. (Excerpt from Sarah's response paper)

Sarah saw an issue that she believed was important for others to become aware of.

Through the creation of this artwork Sarah hoped to spread awareness to others about all the people in our world who go hungry. Sarah decided to take her awareness outside of the art room and volunteer, hoping to make a difference in someone's life. Sarah was able to authenticate her own feelings throughout the art making process; therefore she was able to explore the visual arts with her own feelings and life experiences as described by Efland (1995).

After analyzing all the artwork (Appendix F), I found that the male students in the class mainly created artwork that dealt with violence in some way (terrorism, war, cyber bullying) and the female students mainly dealt with world issues (peace, hunger, poverty, charity). Students wrote about why they chose their particular social issue in a response paper. The information students had to include in their response paper can be found in (Appendix G). The response papers provided the most insight into why students felt passionate about the social issue they depicted in their art work.

For example, the first time since her uncle's accident, Kourtney was able to express how much his disability impacted her life. Kourtney felt compelled to create a work of art about people with disabilities (Appendix H). She did not create a work of art based solely on people with disabilities, but how we as society view people with disabilities as "weird, different and disturbed." The following is an excerpt from Kourtney's response paper (Appendix I):

I know my social topic is very important as well as personal to me. I want people to feel for those with disabilities and illnesses. Put themselves in their place and see how they would feel. Since I talked aloud about this issue it's come to my attention that I care even more about my uncle and this social issue than I ever knew. I am determined to do well on this project to show others how much I really care.

Kourtney used her art as a way to share with others what she had kept bottled up inside for so long. For Kourtney, creating this work of art became a way for her to share with her peers the idea that your life can change in a moment. She seemed to be telling others

not to take what you have for granted and not to judge those who are different from you, as you never truly know their story until you get to know them.

Since the majority of the class was made up of mostly females the social issue of feeling perfect and pressures of society that young women face every day was discussed on many occasions. Although many girls talked about this social issue and how young women need positive role models in their life, only two female students decided to create art related to this issue. Rachael chose to create a three-dimensional (3-D) work of art depicting the drastic measures that young women take to look perfect (Appendix J). Two masks sit side by side, one “before” the transformation and one “after” the transformation, conforming to what society says is beautiful. Rachael wrote in her response paper:

The reason I chose self-image as my social issue is because people (mostly girls) spend too much time worrying about how they look. I want people to understand it’s not about how you look. What really matters is that you are yourself. Our society should not be so judgmental just based on how someone looks. If more people were made aware of this important topic and how it touches girls we can come up with ideas on how to change the way people think.

Rachael confided in me during an interview and said:

I feel so much pressure to be perfect. I am the older sister and I feel like everything I do I am being judged for. I have no desire to change my face but I understand why girls feel the need to change themselves. (Interview with Rachael, 10/26/2011)



Like Kourtney, Rachael's artwork became a way for her to share her feelings with her peers in a way she felt she would not be judged.

When analyzing the artwork created by the four boys in the class, the theme of violence was depicted in 75% of the artwork. School rules prohibit the depicting of guns and violent images in any classroom. Working one-on-one with the boys I was able to help them get their ideas across in their artwork without breaking school rules, as they created artwork about terrorism, war, and bullying (Appendix K). As noted by Giroux (2004), critical pedagogy emphasizes the idea of human empowerment and questioning who is the giver and taker of power. Although I empowered students to create a work of art about any social issue they choose, I was forced to censor some of the topics because they were against school rules such as displaying guns and violence in any assignment. I also had to censor some topics such as abortion because they went against the teaching of the Catholic Church. Throughout the course of this study I was able to empower students, but I still had to limit topics that were not school or age appropriate.

Throughout class discussions we spoke at length about the social issue of bullying and the impact it has on the person who is bullied. Cullen took these discussions very seriously and created a work of art about cyber bullying (Appendix L). In his response paper Cullen described his artwork.

In my art I am trying to show people that cyber bullying does hurt by drawing a fist coming out of the computer and hitting someone. Being punched in the face by the computer shows that it really does hurt to be cyber bullied, it's not just something that happens on the computer and goes away. If we do not stop this problem soon a lot of kids will hate their lives and will become depressed and

may even commit suicide. This is a social issue that has to end sooner rather than later.

When I interviewed Cullen on 10/28/2011, I asked him if he was ever personally cyber bullied and he said he wasn't but his older brother was and it changed the way he felt about life and school. Cullen also stated that because of the incident with his brother he vowed to be kinder in his everyday actions with his peers. "We don't have to be friends, but we all need to learn to get along." During final presentations of the art works students felt deeply connected to Cullen's work. I took a class poll and discovered over 90% of the class had been bullied in some way through the use of cell phones or the Internet. "I never realized how my words could hurt someone. I thought I was kidding when I would say mean things over the computer. I thought people would take them like a joke. I guess I need to think about what I write and how I could hurt people. Maybe I wasn't really funny after all." (Quote from Deborah, taken from my observation journal from 10/25/2011). Through class discussion students realized how often they hurt each other with their words and actions. Students began to understand that although we have freedom of speech in the United States, we need to pause before we speak so that we do not unintentionally hurt others. As noted by Gude (2009), students were practicing democratic principles in art class so they better understood democratic processes outside of the art room.

The most discussed social topics in the art classroom were those that impacted the world on a global level such as hunger, poverty, war and peace, and the aftermath of natural disasters. Through democratic classroom practices students began having an empathetic response to people of different socio-economic backgrounds, races, and

origins (Gude, 2009). Students were able to imagine themselves in the life of another human being, and created a work of art about the issue in that person's life. Lara created a work of art based on natural disasters and hope (Appendix M). In her response paper Lara stated

Natural disasters are a major problem in the world. Nobody can control what happens to the earth, but we all have to have hope and faith. It really touches me when people find the positives in these terrible situations. I hear it on the news all the time; I really wish I could do something to help these innocent people. By viewing my artwork I want people to understand what happens in other states or countries, and encourage people to help out!

Lara created a work of art about the aftermath of natural disasters; something she had seen on the nightly news many times. Lara used her art to spread awareness about this social issue which she felt drawn too. Lara wanted her peers and everyone who saw her artwork to know that there is hope everywhere after even the most horrific events.

Emily created a work about creating equality for all in our world (Appendix N). Through her use of black and white figures she was clearly able to define who is often at a socio-economic advantage. Students were able to take themselves out of their daily lives and create works of art about others and their needs. Students were beginning to understand that as democratic citizens our responsibility is to stand up for those who cannot speak for themselves. Through the creation of their artwork students were able to engage in perception and reflection even when they did not find easy answers to the world's problems (Gude, 2009).

The democratic art classroom gave students a safe place to discuss issues important to them. Students were able to connect with their peers and teacher on a deeper level than a traditional art classroom could offer. By offering choices to the students I was able better understand their needs and wants in the art room. Through open discussion in the art room I was able to understand what is important to my students. When students had the opportunity share their personal stories they were allowing me into a small part of their lives I had rarely seen before. Although all students completed their projects and seemed engaged in the task at hand, implementing a democratic classroom came with many challenges.

### **Challenges in Implementing a Democratic Art Class**

Throughout this study I faced many challenges and surprises while trying to implement a democratic classroom. While sorting through the data I discovered most of the challenges stemmed from the lack of time spent in the art room. Students at Holy Child Catholic School have art once a week for 40 minutes. Once students came into class, gathered their art materials and got to work they had about 30 minutes left in class. Some students had extensive clean up due to the materials they chose to work with and would need to start the clean up process 5-10 minutes early, in reality leaving them approximately 20 minutes to work on their assignment. One student felt “I didn’t have enough time to work on my art project, I needed more time to make it the way I really wanted” (Response from anonymous student questionnaire). To make up for the amount of time students did not have in the art room, students came down to the art room during lunches and study hall times throughout the day. This meant I had to have my classroom open and accessible to students. I often spent time eating lunch in my room or spending

my prep time working one-on-one with students to ensure they could create the best quality art. Oftentimes I was not able to get work done that I needed to do because I felt guilty turning a student away who wanted to spend extra time in the art room. Although many students took advantage of this classroom time, two did not and had to complete the project on their own time at home which resulted in less than satisfactory results. Raquel's art project depicting poverty and hunger was completed mostly on her own time, due to many absences from art class. Instead of coming to the art room for help she completed the project at home using computer paper and tape (Appendix O). If Raquel had spent more time in the art room I would have been able to provide her with better materials to complete her art project. I also would have also been able to share ideas with her about the ways she could have depicted poverty and hunger in her art work. In a democratic art class students still need guidance and perhaps it may be up to the teacher to seek out the student for guidance if they are unwilling or unable to seek out the teacher on their own.

Another challenge that stemmed from lack of time in the art room was the one-on-one time I could spend with each student during art class. I spent most of a 40 minute class session clarifying terms, leading a class discussion or assisting students. Many students chose to use materials they have never used before because they were not limited to a particular set of materials for this project, however this created another challenge. Instead of spending time discussing ideas and processes with students, I spent my time assisting them with mini one-on-one art lessons on how to use specific art materials. I was excited to see their enthusiasm for new materials but I felt as though too many materials were being used at a given time. Perhaps students would have had more time to

work and focus on their artwork if they had not spent most of class waiting for me to assist them. My organization in setting up a democratic art classroom needed rethinking.

While waiting patiently for me to assist them, most students took it upon themselves to experiment with the art materials. Six out of the twenty art projects were not at the same level of abstract thinking as the others. Natalia and Isabelle both created works of art about the social issue of child abuse. Natalia's art (Appendix P) is straightforward and concrete in her portrayal of child abuse; while Isabelle's work (Appendix Q) is simple, it strikes the viewer on more of an emotional level than Natalia's. Isabelle spent extra time in the art room and sought me out so we could discuss her ideas and collaborate on the project. Natalia never asked me a question about her art and when I would approach her she would become defensive and say she did not need any assistance. By interviewing Natalia I was able to better understand her thought processes.

*Ms. A:* "Natalia, can you please explain the concept behind your artwork for me?"

*Natalia:* "I wanted to show how child abuse affects a child mentally and the things they are missing out on. A girl is looking out the window surrounded by words she feels she will never have like love, hope, dream, and faith."

*Ms. A:* "So you tried to place yourself in the position of an abused child?"

*Natalia:* "Exactly. I have hope, love, and faith in my life and if I were abused I don't think I would have those things. They would be taken away from me."

*Ms. A:* "I understand. Do you think you conveyed this message clearly in your art or do you think people need to talk to you or read your paper to understand the message?"

*Natalia:* “I think people will get it but I had a hard time thinking of showing hope, dream, and love other than putting words. I wish I had thought of something else. Child abuse was much harder to show in art than I thought.”

*Ms. A:* “Why didn’t you ask for my help or allow me to sit down with you?”

*Natalia:* “I wanted to do it on my own, but it was harder than I thought it would be. I should have asked for help. I just thought I could do it all on my own”

(Interview with Natalia, 11/22/2011)

Natalia was a student who wanted to succeed on her own and thought she was able to do it. In hindsight she discovered that collaboration between her and me may have been beneficial to her art project. Sometimes students need extra assistance in a democratic art room, however assistance from the teacher should not be forced as it can potentially create more resistance from particular students. Students need the opportunity to exert independence in the art room and have the opportunity to make mistakes. In a democratic art classroom students make choices that may lead to mistakes allowing them the opportunity to reflect on their choices and make better choices in the future, consequently they are learning from their past allowing them to move forward.

Those students who spent extra time in the art room or stopped to share their ideas with me had more successful artworks than the students who decided to work entirely on their own. In the questionnaire students filled out a common theme that repeated its self was that students had to wait a long time to ask me questions or get assistance. I wondered whether the quality of the art work might increase if students spent more time in the art room or if class time were increased.

Many students enjoyed the creative freedoms that were granted to them through a democratic classroom; however one student in particular thought because of these freedoms he could create art about whatever he wanted. During the course of the class students regrouped to to redefine terms such as social issue to make sure this particular student, Nathan, had a clear understanding of project. I also sat down with Nathan during interviews and out of class away from his peers to ask why he was creating his artwork about “music being the hand of expression” (Appendix R ) he told me “this is what I want to make art about, and it looks like graffiti and graffiti is a social issue. I saw it on my way to downtown DeRidder one day, it was all over the buildings” (Interview with Nathan, 10/14/2011). Nathan clearly understood what the project was about but choose to create a work of art about music, even though his peers began to say things such as “Your project doesn’t make sense” “That is not a social issue, why are you doing that?” Upon discussing this issue with Nathan’s core subject area teachers they stated, “Nathan does his own thing, he has no regards for the rules. This has been an issue since he entered middle school.” Once Nathan was given freedom in the art room he decided this project would be about what he wanted to create. Students can misunderstand what the teacher expects from them in such an open ended learning environment, or they can completely ignore what the teacher expects from them. A democratic art classroom does not solve all behavioral or engagement issues in the art room and some student resistance should be expected.

Lack of age appropriate art resources was an enormous problem for my students. The school library does not have an extensive section of art books. Many of the books that are available to students are outdated or deal with the same white male artist such as



Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Monet, and Van Gogh. Although these are respected artists who have earned a place in art history books they did not create work of art that was essential for the students to investigate for this particular art project. Because students had freedom to decide which artists to research for inspiration, the Internet became a major resource when looking for contemporary artists. Although I directed students to age appropriate Websites, I was concerned students would come across images that were not age appropriate, especially when they were researching on their own. Several students did not bring in quality images or images that dealt with social issues when they were asked to research artists on their own. If students had better resources pertaining to contemporary artists at school I would have been able to assist them in seeking out a contemporary artist to better connect to their social issue.

According to Wolk (1998), a democratic classroom may be perceived by administrators and other teachers as a teacher losing control over their classroom. The principal of Holy Child Catholic School offered me many words of encouragement during this study; however her sentiments were not echoed by my peers. Teachers would stop in my classroom and see students out of their seats, using different art materials, or not making art at all. Some stated to me, “This room looks chaotic, what’s going on in here?” When I would explain that I was encouraging students to have a voice in their learning and giving them the opportunity to create a work of art based on their interests, I would hear things such as “It looks like you’ve lost control” or “Why would you make your job harder than it is?” My peers could not understand that underneath the chaos and sometimes difficult days, I was connecting with my students on a deeper level and my students were connecting with their peers in a new way.

The biggest challenge I struggled with was overcoming my personal feeling towards what was happening in the democratic classroom. At times I felt extremely overwhelmed by the amount of questions I was getting from students, and they picked up on this frustration. “I learned our leaders can get overwhelmed when they have to meet the many needs of many people” (Response from anonymous student questionnaire). Perhaps I had not been clear enough in explaining the assignment or perhaps it was too much change for students at one time. How would the results of my study have been different if the democratic classroom lasted longer than ten weeks? How would it have been different if I gave students fewer choices and gradually offered them more choices?

As the art teacher I felt pressure from administration to make aesthetically pleasing works of art and make sure they are visible for all parents, teachers, and visitors who enter our building. As our democratic classroom progressed, I began to feel anxious due to the fact I did not have any eighth grade art work to hang up for open house. I began to wonder if others were questioning the new method of teaching in the art room. Once the projects were completed the original plan was to hang them in a prominent part of the school so all who enter could see the art and take a moment to reflect on what the students had created. Once my principal saw that some artworks created may be considered “disturbing” to some, I was limited to where I could place the work. I felt defeated. I was so proud of the works of art and ideas the students were able to express but not everyone felt the same. While exhibiting the student work I tried to make it as special as I could with name plates for each student identifying themselves and their social issue. I also included an excerpt from each of their response papers so those who stopped to take a look at the art would understand why these particular social issues were

so important to the students. Because the artwork could not be prominently placed in the school, I made a special page for the artwork and quotes from the students about the experiences of participating in a democratic art class on the art room Web site.

Although we faced many challenges those who participated in the democratic art classroom completed their artwork and response paper by the assigned due date. In hindsight I cannot believe I did not foresee some of the challenges we would face such as lack of resources and lack of time spent in the art room. Despite the lack of individual one-on-one time I was able to spend with each student, 16 out of the 20 students successfully completed a work of art that is rich in ideological content and personal meaning.

## **Conclusion**

During this study of what a democratic art classroom looks like in practice, I discovered that 18 of the 20 students who participated in the study thrived in the new environment. Through analyzing student artworks, response papers, questionnaires, and classroom interactions I found that 19 students said they enjoyed the processes of working in a democratic art classroom and would like to continue participating in democratic processes in and out of the art room. In Chapter IV, I will further interpret the findings of student and teacher roles, art content, and challenges in implementing a democratic art classroom. Reflecting on these categories I discovered three concepts that underpin this study: student voice is key in the art making process, social issues help satisfy the needs of youth, and a democratic art class engages students. Chapter IV also contains recommendations for further study.

## **Chapter V: Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

In this study, I explored the question “What might an eighth grade democratic art classroom look like in practice?” (see Appendix S for visual abstract). In order to effectively discover the answer to this question I needed to change the way the art room was set up and I needed to change the way I taught. Instead of giving my students the information they needed to complete their art project, they would seek out their own information. I was available to assist my students in any way they needed whether it was choosing art style, art materials, or discussing potential social issues for their artwork. I enjoyed this on- on-one process I was able to have with my students, and I understand them on a deeper level. Together we explored topics and issues that were important to them and I had the opportunity to discover more about what their life was like outside of the art room.

### **Student Voice is Key in the Art Making Process**

“Art education supports each person in telling his or her own story” (Gude, 2009, p. 8) According to Gude (2009), the art classroom can become an avenue in which students can experience the power of their voice and personal experiences and begin to understand this voice through the creation of their artwork. In implementing a democratic art classroom for eighth grade students, I discovered that student voice is key in making art about which students are truly passionate. “Through quality art education, students are introduced to a range of tools and develop the skills needed to represent their experiences in their fullness, complexity, and contradictions” (Gude, 2009, p. 8). When students are

able to express their ideas in their artwork and share these ideas with others they are able to connect with themselves and their peers on a deeper level. Throughout the eight weeks that students participated in a democratic art class they continually made statements such as

- I learned we are individuals with many different views on the world. I liked being involved in a democratic class because we got to choose what to work on and we got to express ourselves.
- Being able to choose what we want and what feels right is important to me; I was able to express my thoughts and feelings. I learned being in a democracy was better because it allowed us to have more freedom.
- A democratic classroom gave us more us more control over our learning and what we want as students. (Responses from anonymous student questionnaires)

I discovered students appreciated the freedoms they were offered and enjoyed that their freedom of expression was not limited, as long as their art work was respectful of other others and their differences. One student wrote,

I had a great time doing my art project. I learned that if you have something that you feel strongly about, your artwork will turn out really well. The reason is because you push yourself to make people aware of your topic, an idea important to you. Working with any materials I wanted was great. Since I had this freedom, I could express my issue the best way I think people would understand, or at least in a way that would make them think. (Excerpt from Kourtney's response paper)

Kourtney's response demonstrates how deeply connected she felt to her artwork. She wanted to work hard to create a work of art that would make people stop and think. "A

quality art education provides access to the art and practices of making through which today's youth can actively investigate local and global themes" (Gude, 2009, p. 10). Students were able to remove themselves from their mostly white, comfortable, middle class surroundings to think about social issues and injustices that others face every day.

"Through art, the self becomes vitally interested in other selves, sensing the possibilities and problems of those selves within oneself" (Gude, 2009, p. 10). When students were offered choices in the art room they were able to engage with themselves and their peers on a personal level, ultimately creating a work of art they were proud to show our school community. When student voice is considered in the art room they begin to consider the power of their personal voice. In the democratic art classroom students were able to share their voices with their peers, and connect with their peers on a deeper level. Seeing that students were more engaged in the art room when they were given the opportunity to create art that is rich in ideological content and personal meaning demonstrates that this is an area that needs to be furtherer explored.

### **Social Issues Help Satisfy the Needs of Youth**

Discussing important topics such as social issues in the art room can help students define who they are as a person in and out of the classroom. Discussing social issues and creating works of art about social issues also gives students the opportunity to share their opinions with others. According to Gude (2009), "Youth learn that it is their democratic responsibility to be life-long makers of meaning through active participation in receiving, deconstructing, and reconstructing shared meaning" (p. 10). Students were able to take large social issues such as self-esteem, racism, bullying, etc. and discover how these

issues impact not only them, but their peers. Through the process of creating these works of art students felt they were doing more than creating a “pretty painting.”

I hope when people look at my artwork, they see that we are the only ones who can be doing something about the abuse of children. In 1998, three children were found dead per day because of child abuse. Now, five children per day die of child abuse. When I read articles or hear things on the news about child abuse, my heart breaks. The children being abused obviously can't speak for themselves, while they are being treated poorly. I want people to recognize the pain they are going through. One of the most important things I learned is that we are the voice of those who can't speak for themselves. (Excerpt from Isabelle's response paper)

Isabelle was struck by all the news articles she had heard and seen on the topic of child abuse and realized these children were helpless against their abusers. These children needed someone with a strong voice to stand up for them. Through the creation of her artwork “Why Does it Hurt to be a Child?” Isabelle was able to express her concerns about a very serious issue and feel satisfied that she was making others aware of the issue of child abuse, satisfying her inner need to share her concerns with others. According to Nakkula (2008), activities that are the most influential to identity development are those in which youth are the most vested. Allowing students the opportunity to have a voice in their learning in and out of the art room is an important aspect of their developmental needs. As stated by Raible & Nieto (2008), when students are given the opportunity to share their experiences and concerns it helps shape who these young individuals will become later in life. When students create art about hard-hitting topics such as social

issues it may help them to become adults who are more empathetic to the concerns of others.

Students are barraged with many social issues on a daily basis. They see important issues on the news, in magazines, and overhear conversations about the problems our world faces.

“I learned in a democracy that it is our job to give a voice to those who can’t speak for themselves, we should make people more aware of issues facing our world. We see them [social issues] every day so why not make art about something that we see a lot about in our world. I feel like I did something good by making this art project. Maybe it will help a child one day, who knows?”

(Interview with Isabelle 11/2/2011)

Throughout this project I realized this group of eighth grade students has many profound ideas on what happens in the world and ways we can change our thoughts or habits to make the world a better place. Throughout the art making process students felt as though they were contributing to the awareness of social issues they felt important about. If the next generation of students is to become productive democratic citizens who understand how to fully participate in a democracy, they need to engage in democratic practices within a school setting.

### **A Democratic Art Class Engages Students**

A democratic art classroom involves students in their learning in developmentally appropriate ways (Wolk, 1998). “A truly democratic culture is composed of many voices” (Gude, 2009, p. 8). When students are involved in co-constructing the art curriculum the needs of the majority of the students may be met, making the classroom a



better place to learn. Through the process of creating a classroom bill of rights and voting on important class matters, students realized they all had a say in how the art room was run. As students realized I was listening to their specific needs and concerns they became more vested in the learning process. Here are some responses I received from anonymous student questionnaires when I asked students the question “What did you learn from being a part of a democratic art classroom?” One student said,

I learned that everyone had different ideas about things going on in our world. You had to be responsible for your own ideas and work. Being part of a democratic classroom was a great experience. We all had a say. This was good because we will need to learn how to act in a democracy later in life. Being a part of a democracy is better because you are allowed to have more freedom.

(Response from anonymous student questionnaire)

Students became engaged with democratic processes in the art room and enjoyed the freedoms they were able to have. When students are exposed to democratic processes in the classroom it allows them to take democracy seriously and help prepare them to become active citizens in a democratic culture (Blandy, 2011). If students are never exposed to ideas of democracy outside of a social studies classroom or memorizing the preamble to the United States Constitution, how can we expect them to become active citizens who understand their role in a democratic country? Students engaged in discussion about the art work and social issues that we learned about in the art room. Through the class discussions student were able to better understand another person’s point of view, although they may not have always agreed with the other students point of view.

Although I may not have agreed with what my classmates said about their social issues I did learn a lot. It opened my eyes to the many problems our world has today. It was nice to see everyone respecting others ideas, even though we had different opinions. We should have more class discussions, I liked hearing what everyone had to say. (Response from anonymous student questionnaire)

Students at the middle school level showed they were emotionally and intellectually ready to participate in democratic processes in the art room. Perhaps students should be offered democratic rights at an earlier age in the art room. Because students showed they can participate in a democratic art class in a responsible way perhaps this style of teaching should be explored by art teachers.

### **Recommendations for Setting up a Democratic Art Classroom**

Students were very excited to participate in democratic processes and they created artwork that was rich in ideological content and personal meaning, I believe the method of democratic teaching in the art classroom should be further explored. I recommend recreating the study of implementing a democratic art classroom in a school where students see the art teacher every day for ten weeks or have block scheduling. I believe students would be positively impacted if they were able to participate in democratic practices on a daily basis in the art room. I also think it would be beneficial to expose younger students to a democratic art classroom. Perhaps this study could be recreated using fourth or fifth grade students.

If this study were recreated in an art room when the students spent more time in the art room, the art teacher could scaffold how a democratic process works and the amount of freedoms students had at one time. Students could have small choices at first

such as choosing from two or three art materials and building up to more choices in art materials. Students could also have the opportunity to vote on important decisions such as which artists or topics to study in the art room. Giving students the opportunity to co-create the curriculum with the teacher may lead to an even greater understanding of the importance of what they are learning in the art room.

Due to time constraints of this study I allowed students to use any materials they wanted in the art room to create their work of art. Through implementing small steps students may have had less confusion, and I would have been less frustrated at the lack of organization in the art room. If this study were to be recreated I would offer students choices to begin with and open to more choices in the art room in hopes it would be a less chaotic environment. I have confidence in students that they learn more when they are offered choices and freedoms and have the ability to reflect on why they made the choice they did. In a democratic society students face many choices on a daily basis and unless they are offered choices at a young age they may struggle with decision making later in life. In a democracy students should be offered choices so that they have the ability to make mistakes and learn from these mistakes.

Due to time constraints, I chose the topic of social issues. Democratic classrooms are rooted in critical pedagogy, and critical pedagogy demands that students take action. Students were given the opportunity to take action about a social issue through the creation of their art work. If this study were recreated students could be given the opportunity to showcase their artwork in a public forum, such as a library or town hall. This would allow students to spread the more awareness about their social issues, helping them feel even more satisfied in the art making process.

In this study students participated in democratic practices such as voting, freedom of expression and speech, and creating a classroom bill of rights. According to Cuant (1996), the purpose of a democratic education is to engage students in processes that will help them to become people who will contribute to the making of a democratic and humane society. If this study were recreated students could be given the opportunity to participate in other democratic rights such as voting classroom officials to perform specific duties in the art room. Giving students the opportunity to participate in democratic practices will encourage them to look more closely at the world around them (Wolk, 1998).

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The data I have collected in this study comes from a very small group of eighth grade students. The students who have participated in this study have known each other for approximately eight years, as they started kindergarten together. I question if the results of the study would differ if students did not have such a close relationship at school. This study only involved 20 participants. Knowing that this study consisted of such a small sample of students a next step would be to expand on the number of students who participated in a democratic art class. With more students participating in the study a clearer understanding of whether or not implementing democratic practices in a middle school art room helps students understand democratic practices outside of the art room would be evident.

Many of the students who participated in the study come from middle class families who have access to many resources. It would be interesting to see how the results of the study may change if the socio-economic make-up of the students changed.

Perhaps this study could be recreated in a public school where the researcher could study students from different backgrounds to gain a different perspectives based on students response to democratic practices in a middle school art room.

This study focused on implementing democratic teaching practices for eighth grade students. To further understand how students understand and use democratic practices outside of the art room a next step would be to expand the implementation of democratic teaching practices at a higher or lower grade level. A study of this nature would help to add credibility to the implementation of democratic teaching practices in the art room.

### **Importance of the Study**

This study is important to the field of art education because it offers an alternate teaching method to engage students in the art room. Because democratic processes engage students on such a deep and personal level, I recommend that teachers take a strong look at their current teaching styles and determine whether they can implement any democratic processes into their classroom. Small changes such as allowing students to have a say in classroom rights or rules may eliminate many motivational or behavioral problems that are encountered in the art room. As teachers our job is to provide conditions in which students can learn to the best of their ability. A democratic art classroom gives students the opportunity to take control of their learning and produce results we did not know they were capable of (Friere, 1978).

As teachers it is our job to inspire the next generation of democratic citizens and engage these students in democratic practices at an early age. “A truly democratic culture is composed of many voices. Through quality art education, students recall and represent

their own experiences; they formulate their own stories and images” (Gude, 2009, p. 9).

A democratic art class gives students a voice in their learning, allowing them the opportunity to connect with their teacher, peers, and themselves on a deeper level. When students are given the opportunity to demonstrate what they know, they may produce results we did not know they were capable of, and more often than not, I believe they will exceed our every expectation.

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## Appendix A

### “Parent/ Guardian Permission Letter”

Dear Parents/ Guardians,

I am writing this letter to ask your permission for your child to be a part of a special art study this coming school year. As part of my Masters project in Art Education at Buffalo State College, my eighth grade class will be offered several choices in terms of art media and art projects on a weekly basis, as well as exploring themes of democracy and social issues.

The goal of my research is to investigate the question, “What might an 8<sup>th</sup> grade democratic art classroom look like in practice?” Your child will have the opportunity each week to look at visual art that addresses social issues, all the while learning about democracy and democratic choices. Students will discuss artworks that are chosen as a class and will participate in art making experiences that are unique to each individual student.

All data that is collected throughout this study is for educational purposes and will remain confidential. Fictitious names will be used throughout this study to protect your child’s privacy. Photographs and videotapes will be used only for the purpose of documenting and backing up observations that are made during the study. Your child has the right to withdraw from this study at any time, though they will continue to participate in normal art room activities. I appreciate your time and willingness to help me in my professional development. Thank you very much for helping me make this project possible. If you have any questions or concerns about this study please do not hesitate to contact me.

Please sign your name below, to give permission for the following:

- I do give permission for my child to participate in this study.
- I give permission for my child, and their artwork to be photographed or video-taped for purposes of documenting and backing up observations of this research project.
- I give permission for my child to complete written questionnaires and interviews conducted by me in the art room.

Please print, sign and date the line below.

Student Name (Print) \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/ Guardian Name (Print) \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/ Guardian Name (Sign) \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Sincerely,

Kari Achatz

If you are unable to contact the researcher and have general questions, or you have concerns or complaints about the researcher, research study, or questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact Gina Game, IRB Administrator, SUNY Research Foundation/ Buffalo State at (716) 878-6700 or [gameg@rf.buffalostate.edu](mailto:gameg@rf.buffalostate.edu).

## Appendix B

### Creating a Democratic Art Classroom

**Grade Level: 8**

**8-40 Minute Classes/1 Art Class per Week**

**Standard 1: Creating, Knowing and Participating in the Arts**

**Standard 2: Knowing and Using Art Materials and Resources**

**Standard 3: Responding to and Analyzing Works of Art**

**Standard 4: Understanding the Cultural Dimensions and Contributions of the Arts**

**New York State Learning Standards addressed in this lesson: 1, 2, 3, 4**

**Context:** Students will engage in democratic processes in the art classroom, while adhering to the classroom Bill of Rights created by students. Students will learn about the artwork of several contemporary artists whose artwork addresses social issues such as women's rights, poverty, war, environmental concerns and racial inequality. Students will produce a work of art based on a social issue of their choice, using the art materials of their choice.

#### **Objectives:**

Students will:

- Learn Democratic processes
- Create a work of art about a social issue
- Create a work of art using an art style and art materials of their choosing

#### **Concepts and Skills:**

- Have an understanding of how their voice contributes to a democratic society
- Use analysis, interpretation, and judgment and critical reflection to create a work of art

#### **Visual Resources:**

- Pablo Picasso's - *Guernica*
- Kathe Kollwitz's - *Germany's Children are Starving*
- Barbara Kruger's - *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)*
- Steve Shepard's - *Pitcher Plant*
- Soraida Martinez's - *What Prejudice Looks Like*

#### **Vocabulary:**

**Democracy:** government by the people; a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system.

**Right:** in accordance with what is good, proper, or just.

**Responsibility:** a particular burden of obligation.

**Social Issue:** Social issues are matters which directly or indirectly affect a person or many members of a society and are considered to be problems, controversies related to moral values, or both.

**Presentation:**

**Day 1:**

- Introduce a democratic classroom to students. Define as a class democracy, rights, and responsibility. It is important for students have a clear understanding of these words so they may understand what is expected of them during the democratic classroom process. As a class we will make a classroom Bill of Rights, that all students will be expected to adhere too. If a right needs to be changed we will meet as a class to make an amendment if needed, based on a majority vote.
- Define social issue so that students have a complete grasp on the word and what it means. As a class come up with a list of social issues that are important to middle school students.
- For homework students will fill out a worksheet reflecting on two social issues. Students will write about the social issue they choose and a few sentences explain why it is important to them. Students will look up one artist whose artwork deals with a social issue in an art style that interests them.

**Day 2:**

- Class will open with a discussion led by students about the importance of discussing social issues in school. Students will work in small groups and share the social issues they wrote about on their reflective worksheet. Students may then share their ideas with the class. Students will have the opportunity to reflect on common social issues that are important to the group.
- Students will have the opportunity to share their images and artists with the class. This should provide students with some inspiration to begin creating their own art.

**Day 3:**

- Students will have the opportunity to begin sketches for their artwork. The teacher will be available to share ideas and work with students on a one on one basis. Students will also be able to work with other students in small groups to share sketches and ideas.
- Students will have the opportunity to look through the materials in the art room to see what is available for them to work with. For this project students were allowed to use any and all materials in the art room.
- For homework students should finish their sketch and finalize choice of materials they plan on using to create their artwork.

**Day 4-7:**

- Studio class for students to work. Teacher will be available to work one on one with students. Students may work with other students at any time. Teacher will check in with each student a minimum of once per class to make sure students are on task.

**Day 8:**

- Closure of democratic class project. Each student will have the opportunity to present their final artwork to the class before it is hung in a main hallway in the school. Students will have the opportunity to explain to their peers why they choose to create a work of art on their chosen social issue and what their artistic process was like.
- Students will hand in a reflective paper following the guidelines given to them in class.

**Assessment:**

Students will:

- Be able to clearly define what a democracy is in their own words
- Express their ideas and views about a particular social issue
- Be able to articulate their ideas and artistic process in a written reflective paper

## Appendix C

### “Art Room Bill of Rights”

# *Art Room Bill of Rights*

*We the students of Mrs. Achatz’ art class, in order to behave and respect one another do hereby establish this Bill of Rights and Responsibilities on the principles of liberty, justice, honesty.*

#### Rights

We have the right to a caring teacher who will help us learn.

We have the right to feel safe.

We have the right to express our ideas.

We have the right to be ourselves.

We have the right to share our thoughts and ideas with others.

We have the right to ask for help when needed.

We have the right to be creative!

We have the right to be inspired!

#### Responsibilities

We have the responsibility to let everyone share their opinion.

We have the responsibility to respect each other’s art work.

We have the responsibility to respect all art supplies given to us.

We have the responsibility to do our personal best.

We have the responsibility to do our own work-Don’t plagiarize.

We have the responsibility to display a Christian attitude at all times.

*Created for the Students, by the Students*

## Appendix D

### “List of Social Issues”

# List of Social Issues

A list of Social Issues to get the creative juices flowing!

Definition of a Social Issue: Social issues are matters which directly or indirectly affect a person or many members of a society and are considered to be problems, controversies related to moral values, or both.

Environmental Concerns

Freedom

Homelessness

Human Rights

Immigration

Hunger & Poverty

Volunteering

Racism

Peace

Women's Rights

Animal Cruelty

Stereotypes

Terrorism

War

Bullying

Self Image

Violence

Civil Rights

\* Not a complete list of Social Issues-there are many, many more \*

## Appendix E

### “Social Issue Reflection Worksheet”

Pick two social issues that are important to you. Write at least two sentences explaining why this social issue is important to you. Remember you will be creating a work of art based on one social issue so pick an issue that you are passionate about.

1. **Social Issue:** \_\_\_\_\_

Why did you choose this social issue?

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2. **Social Issue:** \_\_\_\_\_

Why did you choose this social issue?

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Find an artist whose work inspires you to create an artwork based on a social issue. Please bring in a copy of the artwork to share with the class. Use the following criteria to locate an artist. Be careful about typing into Google to find images-you never know what will come up!

- The social issue they speak about in their art inspires you
- The media or art style they create in inspires you

Name of Artist: \_\_\_\_\_

Title of Artwork \_\_\_\_\_

Social Issue that the artwork is about: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Helpful websites for locating artists:**

[www.pbs.org/art21](http://www.pbs.org/art21)

[www.artandsocialissues.com](http://www.artandsocialissues.com)

[www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov)

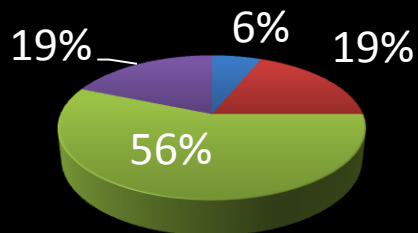


## Appendix F

### “Charts of Themes Found in Artwork”

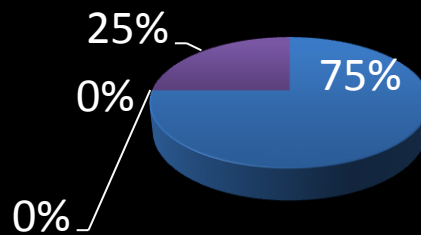
#### Girls Themes in Artwork about Social Issues

- Violence
- Self Image
- World Issues (Hunger, Peace, Poverty)
- Other



#### Boys Themes in Artwork About Social Issues

- Violence
- Self Image
- World Issues (Hunger, Peace, Poverty)
- Other



## Appendix G

### “Student Response Paper Guidelines”

#### Student Response Paper

Your paper should be typed in 12 point Times New Roman Font. Your paper should be at least one page double spaced and no more than two pages double spaced. I will not be grading you on correct grammar or punctuation, however please write the paper to the best of your ability. It needs to be in complete sentences and have an introduction and body and a conclusion like all papers you write. This paper is personal to you and your experiences, please show me what you have learned.

Your paper should include the following items. Please check them off as you go to make sure you include them. You may include more information if you would like. If you have any questions please see me sooner rather than later.

\_\_\_\_\_ **What is your art project about?**

\_\_\_\_\_ **Explain your artistic process**

Examples: I had this problem..., I didn't know how to use this material..., The symbols in my artwork mean this..., I choose these colors because..., I chose these materials because..., I thought people would understand my topic better because I did..., I would have done this differently...etc.)

\_\_\_\_\_ **Were you influenced by a particular artist or art style?**

If so who and what art style?

\_\_\_\_\_ **Why did you choose this particular topic?**

Do you see it as a problem in the world and why? Does it have personal meaning? Have you heard about it on the news a lot? Is it important to your family?

\_\_\_\_\_ **What do you hope to achieve in creating artwork about this Social Issue?**

Awareness, personal satisfaction etc.

\_\_\_\_\_ **What else did you learn by creating this artwork?**

This section may include information about how you researched an artist or topic, materials you learned to use, how to stay on task, personal motivation, what it was like to work more independently in the artroom etc.

## Appendix H

### Kourtney's Art Work - "People with Disabilities are People Too"



## **Appendix I**

### **“Kourtney’s Response Paper”**

Art is one of my favorite subjects and I love expressing my thoughts and ideas in each piece of artwork. When we were given such a serious topic such as social issues, what you may want to achieve in your artwork may be very big. I know my social topic is very important as well as personal to me. This is why I am determined to do well on this project to show how much I really care. I also know I am growing more and more as an artist by introducing myself to all the different ways and materials that can be used in a piece of art.

My art project is about how people act towards others with disabilities. People don’t always treat the disabled with respect. My project shows a never ending street with buildings. The people in the street don’t look “right” and there is a collage in the background of photographs of people with disabilities. The color of the street will start off dark and then get lighter as the street moves on. This will show there is hope at the end of the road for people with disabilities.

I chose this social issue based on my uncles experiences. When he was 38 his brain stem severed. Now he can’t identify anyone in his own family, not even if you taught him. I just wish that anyone who makes fun of someone who makes fun of someone because they are not exactly like them realize these disabled people did not choose to have these problems. This is an important issue to my family. After my uncle’s accident happened, I never drew a tear. Although ever since I talked about it out loud in art class it has come to my attention that I care about my uncle and this social issue more than I ever knew. Sometimes, when you’re young you don’t always realize and appreciate what is going on around you.

I want people to feel for those with disabilities. Put themselves in their place and see how they would feel. I also want people to know this just isn’t their personality, because before his accident my uncle was just like me and you. He’s changed so much and I think that’s part of what brings me to tears today; he’s just not the same.

I had a great time doing my art project. I learned that if you have something that you feel strongly about, your artwork will turn out really well. The reason is because you push yourself to make people aware of your topic, an idea important to you. Working with any materials I wanted was great. Since I had this freedom, I could express my issue the best way I think people would understand, or at least in a way that would make them think.

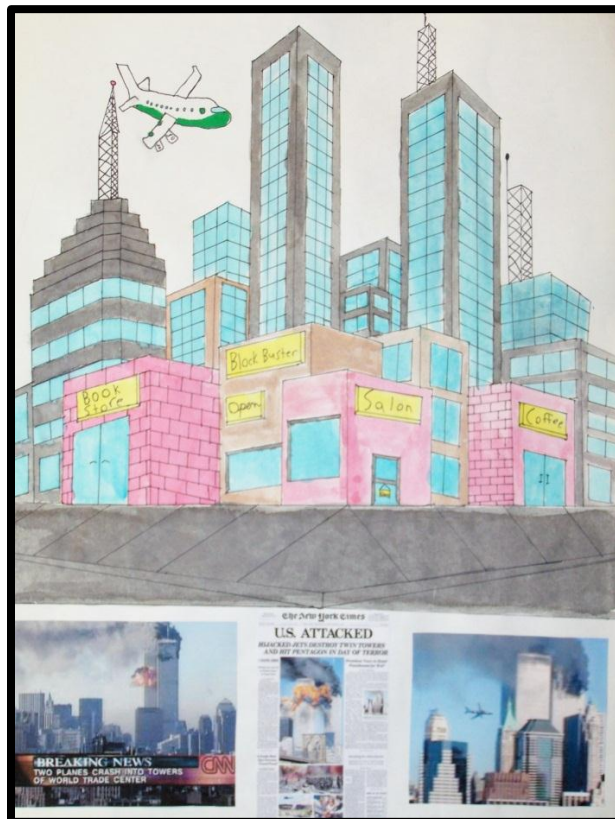
## Appendix J

### Rachael's Art Work - "Beauty Is Not Only Skin Deep"



## Appendix K

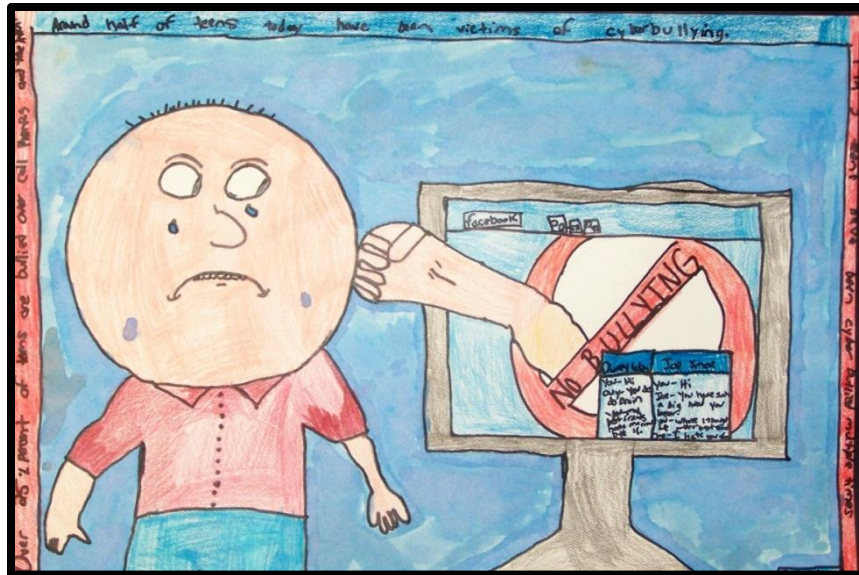
### Matthew's Artwork – "U.S is Attacked"





## Appendix L

### Cullen's Art Work - "Say No to Cyber Bullying"



## Appendix M

### Lara's Art Work - "There Is Hope Everywhere"



## Appendix N

### Emily's Art Work - "Equality For All"



## Appendix O

### Raquel's Artwork - "Peace, Poverty, Hunger"





## Appendix P

### Natalia's Art Work - "Child Abuse"



## Appendix Q

### Isabelle's Art Work - "Why Does It Hurt To Be A Child?"





## Appendix R

### Nathan's Art Work - "Music is the Hand of Expression"



## Appendix S

### Problem Statement

Although many researchers advocate for the use of democratic teaching practices in a classroom, just how art teachers can successfully integrate democratic teaching practices in a middle school

### Research Questions

- What might an eighth grade democratic art classroom look like in practice?
- What are the teacher and student roles in a democratic art classroom?
- What types of art content works well in a democratic art classroom?
- What problems might one encounter when trying to establish a democratic art classroom?
- What can I learn from establishing a democratic art classroom?

### Review of Literature

Critical Pedagogy  
Democratic Learning  
Democratic Art Classrooms  
Democracy in Everyday Life  
Middle School Students

### Data Collection Methods

Observation Interviews  
Questionnaires  
Reflective Writing  
Student Sketches and Artwork

### Important Findings

- Teacher and Student Roles Change in a Democratic Art Class
- Student Voice is Key in the Art Making Process
- Studying Social Issues in the Art Room Can Satisfy the Needs of Youth
- Students Need a Safe Classroom Environment to Explore Difficult Issues
- Democratic Classroom Challenges: Lack of resources, materials, and time