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### Social Issues: A Qualitative Case Study Revealing the Importance of Activism in the Middle School Art Education Classroom

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

A Master's Project in Art Education

Social Issues: A Qualitative Case Study Revealing the Importance of  
Activism in the Middle School Art Education Classroom

by

Vonessa L. Toczynski

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Master of Science in Education  
December 2011

Approved by:

Date:

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Dr. Shirley Hayes  
Project Advisor

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I would like to dedicate my research paper to a special person in my life who will be remembered always and forever. My grandmother passed away just weeks before I finished this research to satisfy requirements for a Master's in Art Education from Buffalo State College. She would not be able to celebrate this accomplishment with me like I knew she would want to, with snacks like orange soda floats, pizza, Kit Kats, and chips. I do know she is at peace and watching over me, she is my guardian angel as I begin a whole new journey following my dreams to be an Art Teacher.



**Grandy, March 20<sup>th</sup> 1921 – December 11<sup>th</sup> 2011**

## **Abstract**

I began this qualitative case study on art activism in the Art Education classroom because I wanted to find the benefits of employing an activist curriculum in an art classroom. I also wanted to learn methods and strategies for this type of teaching. I choose two middle school art teachers and seventy of their sixth and seventh grade students in six of their art classes. Both teachers had been teaching for over five years and said they incorporated social issues and contemporary art, as well as encouraged activism in their art room. In this study, I was an observer participant and collected data through semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, observations, and student artwork. My findings suggested that a critical pedagogy framework allowed for a democratic classroom, with freedom for students to work as a team with the educator; the teacher was not a dictator, but a mentor. A sense of comfort and respect was formed between teacher and student through humor and the teacher “being real,” which refers to the teachers’ honesty, opinion sharing, and openness to allow students into their own personal lives. This type of teaching also addressed social issues through contemporary art, and how, as activists, students can promote change now and in their future as prospering citizens. The teachers at both middle schools also were teaching based on their own strengths, sharing knowledge of certain subject matter, creating their own meaningful artwork they shared with students, and accentuating their strong points as they delivered their lessons and ideas to students. My research supported the above ideas. Uncovering these methods and strategies used to teach in this manner may encourage other teachers to begin to open up to the world of contemporary art, social issues, and activism to benefit student learning.

## **Chapter I: Background for the Study**

### **Introduction**

I began this study of art as activism in the field of Art Education because, like many other students, I find the practice of teaching about ancient artists, applied techniques, and artwork created for recreation and the holidays can be less rich in learning potential. Although these ideas may have a time and a place, many other vital aspects of art education are far more intriguing and beneficial to today's students, those which enable them to evolve into thriving members of society and the world.

In order for art education to take on a greater meaning, I feel that students should explore contemporary artwork, its purpose and overall meaning. The work of contemporary artists is intriguing and expressive. It can make a statement, have a powerful impact and leave more than just a pretty image on the viewers' mind. Postmodern artwork reflects less of the types of art we see in art history textbooks, and more of the visual imagery surrounding people's lives and society (Freedman, 2003). Contemporary artists often express strong feelings about their views of social issues within our world. These issues are often controversial or avoided, but can be explored openly through the creative arts. Many contemporary artists and their artworks lend themselves to the ideas surrounding "art as activism," as they address social issues in the world (Freedman, 2003).

Beginning this study, I knew that social issues and contemporary art went hand in hand, yet I was not sure where "art as activism" would fit into the equation. I understood that contemporary art lessons could be based on significant social issues in which discussions of the art and production of student art could reflect those issues. I also knew

art activism was the next step, but did not completely understand what that meant. I wondered how art activism worked and what students thought about addressing social issues as social activists, and if indeed they saw themselves as activists.

My first thoughts of activism stemmed from the idea of actually doing something, of being part of a group, organization or a program that helped to promote positive change. I envisioned art as activism as simply developing a piece of artwork that raised money to benefit a cause or group in need. Art activists could help homeless shelters, animal hospitals, or other places that the artist felt inclined to support. I did not realize that raising awareness within my own classroom by simply addressing social issues in the world could be a form of activism and a key point to encourage change.

Developing artwork that addresses an issue and placing the work in the public eye is where art activism begins (Dewhurst, 2010, p. 12). Research articles dating further back than 1995 show the concept of art as activism in the art education classroom similar then as now. Whittaker (1992) wrote, “Art of social change typically emphasizes content over form, process over product, and audience as participants, rather than passive observer” (p. 11). Realizing that art as activism was around longer than I imagined and went further than simply raising money for a cause, I wanted to explore and understand the unique values of art as activism and how it plays out in the art classroom. This exploration and understanding would benefit me greatly as an art teacher.

The research I have collected on the study of art as activism has revealed a myriad of ways that art can make a statement by addressing social issues and allowing students to be activists for change. Before reading literature on this topic I thought one of the only ways an art teacher might address social issues and art activism was to develop a lesson



on the work of a particular contemporary artist who focused on a social issue with which students were familiar, such as homelessness. Students living in the cities may see homeless people sleeping outside on park benches, collecting cans, or asking for money. This topic is important because it is relevant to the students and they can understand it or have witnessed it taking place. The students then can develop artwork that expresses their feelings on the issue of homelessness, or on the significance of having a place they call “home.” Next, the student’s work may be strategically placed in their student gallery and be displayed during an open house or a school event. These art students might sell their work and then donate the money to a shelter or soup kitchen for people in need. The school might also hold a clothing drive or collect canned goods for the shelter to further their contribution to this issue. These were examples of how I thought art activism might be incorporated into the art education classroom. Yet, I soon realized that this vision lacked the depth and substance of the greater purpose of social activism. This lack of knowledge has led me to consider a research project on “art as activism” in an educational setting. The information I have found has led me to see ways that art powerfully impacts people, and how students all over the world can play a role as artists and activists in society.

In exploring art as activism I found three researchers who changed my vision of social activism which allowed me to really understand its true meaning. First Paulo Freire (1970) in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* critiqued the “banking approach” of education, which depicted teachers as dictators and students as mindless receptacles. Rather than think for themselves, students receive, memorize, and repeat information that is chosen and delivered to them by the teacher. The teacher determines the information they find

most important and relevant to transmit (Freire, 1970, p. 73). The banking approach, Freire feared, was further oppressing the oppressed. Freire's intent was to serve the case of liberation. Freire (1970) then referred to a "liberatory approach" to teaching: a problem-posing approach to education where the student has the chance to become a critical thinker, develop ideas, and solve problems. Freire's problem-posing approach encouraged student-teacher interaction where students actually formed an intellectual relationship with their teacher. Freire (1970) felt that as a citizen, human beings needed to develop skills to overcome challenges in life and be able to make choices for their future (p. 83). Decision-making is a means of being human; without this opportunity and the process of inquiry, humans are not humans but merely objects (Freire, 1970 p. 83).

Second, Freedman's (2003) ideas focused on the impact of visual culture and the need for a democratic classroom. She stated, "We live in a world increasingly saturated by visual culture that influences students at all educational levels" (Freedman, 2003, p. 86). This bombardment of visual culture poses a need for curriculum to address not only what one thinks of as art, but also objects that are made, seen, and judged at all levels (Freedman, 2003, p. 87). Freedman (2003) felt that teaching visual culture helps students develop knowledge to interpret and understand what they see, and to make intelligent decisions that will shape their lives (p. 99). Another of Freedman's (2003) ideas focused on the democratic classroom that taught citizens how to take part in political decision making and to understand how to work together to improve cultural conditions in the world (p. 124).

Third, Gablik (1992) highlighted artists who addressed the ills of the world. She addressed the art of Coe, Wodiczko, and many other artists who focus their work on

world problems or social issues. The artists who create work about these issues are making them visible to the rest of the world so people can acknowledge that these problems exist and consider how they might be changed (Gablik, 1992). According to Gablik (1992), “The vision we need to develop is not one that observes and reports, that objectifies and enframes, but one released from these reifying tendencies and rooted instead in a responsiveness that ultimately expresses itself in action” (p. 100). Her writing also discussed performance art such as Lacy’s *The Crystal Quilt* and art groups such as Rollins’ “K.O.S Kids of Survival.” In these art groups certain people are given a voice, a chance to interact, and feel empowered as a citizen (Gablik, 1992). Gablik depicts how art in many different forms and ways has the power and potential to be a positive force toward change, progress, and transformation (1992). Gablik (1992), Freedman (2003), and Freire (1970) contribute to the fabric of social activism.

### **Statement of the Problem**

My studies in art courses normally followed a curriculum that traveled down the timeline of art history with only a glimpse at contemporary art. The world of contemporary art often involves social issues and can lead to art as activism in the classroom. Yet, art educators tend to teach in the ways they were taught, which results in a change that comes slowly. Art as activism gives students the opportunity to become active citizens in the world as they learn, promote, and teach others about current social issues through art expression. This approach to education can benefit students by giving their artwork meaning and relevance, rather than teaching only formalistic approaches. To understand art activism in the art education classroom and engage students in social issues has the potential to lead to generations of active citizens towards promoting

societal change through art (Darts, 2004). Since my experience in schooling showed a shallow view of social and world issues in art classrooms, the problem for my research project then is to find out how art as activism is functioning in today's traditional art classrooms. In addition I am wondering what might be learned to enhance art practices from those art classrooms where an activist stance is supported and employed.

### **Purpose of Study**

Through the understanding of activism in the art world, one can begin to uncover methods and strategies used by professional art educators to address social issues and understand how activism is cultivated in the art classroom. Another aspect to this study is to comprehend how students feel about addressing these issues and whether or to what extent students believe they are working towards positive change. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to pinpoint art classrooms that focus on teaching social issues to their students and promoting activism in their classroom. Understanding how these art teachers teach these issues and encourage activism will benefit the art educators of today.

### **Research Questions**

The main question being addressed in this study is:

- What are the benefits of employing an activist curriculum in an art classroom?

This question leads to sub questions, which will be addressed throughout the study.

- How do art teachers use visual art to generate a sense of activism in students?
- What strategies are used to teach social issues to students in an art classroom?
- How do students feel about addressing social issues in the art classroom?
- How do students feel about taking an activist stance in their art classroom?

- What can I learn from teachers who address social issues in their classroom and practice art as activism with their students?

### **Significance of the Problem**

To fully understand art activism, teachers must understand the meaning and the benefits of incorporating art activism in the art classroom. In this study I hope to encourage other educators to find ways to begin promoting activism and addressing social issues with their students in their classroom. Discovering an array of methods and strategies that lead to a sense of activism and ways to design successful lesson plans will give educators the understanding on how to cultivate art activism in their classroom. Studying art as activism has the potential to help students identify with their communities as well as to become citizens working for positive change (Giroux, 1988). Addressing social issues with students will help them to process what is happening in the world today and make them aware of what needs to happen to become enlightened citizens creating positive change for their future.

### **Vocabulary**

- Art Activism: Any form of art that is created that draws attention to a particular injustice and in one way or another encourages others to take part as active observers (Whittaker, 1992)
- Social Issues: Problems that occur in the world that involve people or groups of people in society (Whittaker, 1992)
- Critical Pedagogy: Developed as a cultural practice that enables teachers and others to view education as a political, social, and cultural enterprise. This pedagogy links schooling to the imperatives of democracy, and makes the notion of democratic

differences central to the organization of curriculum and the development of classroom practice (Giroux, 1988)

- Visual Culture: Consists of all the forms of imagery one sees around them on a daily basis such as advertisements, print images, graphic design work, television, film, Internet as well as fine art and photography (Freedman, 2003)

### **Limitations of study**

The limitations to this study will include: a) the small sample size consisting of two teachers from two different schools, b) the limited amount of time devoted to the study, and c) the focus only on a single region in Western New York.

### **Conclusion**

Through observing and interviewing professional art teachers I will determine first-hand how these teachers address social issues with their students and the methods and strategies they use to generate a sense of art activism in their classroom. I also hope to uncover how students feel about addressing social issues and what they learned from being a part of art as activism in their art education classroom. Overall I hope to share the benefits and controversies of this type of teaching as students are learning not only about art but their world and their place in the world. The following chapter builds the framework for my study and provides information that grounds the direction and content of the study.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

### Introduction

This literature review will focus on research that highlights social issues and activism in the field of art education to establish a foundation for my research project, which is to study art as activism in the art classroom. Art education can encompass more than art history facts and applied techniques of past artists. In our present society, we have the opportunity to surpass the approach Freire (1970) described in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as the banking approach to education. To fill students with art history facts and applied techniques lacks real meaning and holds little purpose for their future as prosperous citizens or thriving artists. My bias is that art education today holds the most potential when it involves a critical pedagogy, addresses contemporary art and social issues, and in the end, allows students to participate as art activists in their society.

Freedman (2000), a well known art educator described perspectives of art education that are concerned with “issues and interactions of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, special ability, and other body identities and cultures; socioeconomics, political conditions, communities, and natural and humanly-made environments, including virtual environments” (p. 314). Today a contemporary curriculum also involves complex systems of freedom, individualism, equity, democracy, and cultural knowledge which can be seen as its own form of social action through teachers communicating their best knowledge to their students (Freedman, 2003, p.106). Giroux (2005) wrote that any talk of the future needs to begin with issues of our youth. The youth hold the projected desires, dreams, and commitments of society’s obligations to a better future (p. 213). The education of our youth is essential to creating a better world for today and the generations

to come. Quinn, (2008) suggests that “art, planted in a field of education and social action, is the seed it can crack our classrooms open, and make possible a rich and wholly humanizing and vision expanding [sic] education for every child. That is the catalyzing power of the arts in education” (p. 37). Quinn’s powerful statement represents what art can and should be for the youth of today, which leads to my focus on a type of pedagogy that can be used to make that vision a reality in the art classroom.

### **Critical Pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy as a teaching theory focuses on students as having relevant thoughts and experiences, valuing critical thinking skills, practicing democracy in the classroom, and forming interactive relationships among teacher and students (McLaren & Leonard, 1993). This approach to teaching goes back to what was mentioned in chapter one and Freire’s (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* where he felt the need to move away from a “narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students)” (p. 71). Freire’s teaching gave students the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills in a democratic classroom, complemented by learning skills that enabled them to learn, grow, and flourish in society (McLaren & Leonard, 1993). Developing the necessary skills to function and prosper in the world of today is beneficial to students in many ways and critical to our society. Stuhr (2003) suggests that “school subjects should be integrated in educational purpose and be molded on what is important for students to know to enable them to enjoy life and prepare them to be independent, yet socially responsible individuals and informed critical citizens” (p. 304). Practicing critical pedagogy can pave the way to social activism in the classroom.



A critical pedagogy focuses on democracy in the classroom. Giroux (1988) stated democracy in education is necessary for students to understand democracy as a way of life that is to be fought for, a freedom that is struggled over, and even rewritten as time passes (p. 172). Democracy in the classroom is similar to democracy in the world; students have equal speaking rights as their teacher in the dialogue, as well as the ability to help formulate and negotiate the curriculum (McLaren & Leonard, 1993, p. 33). Critical pedagogy holds a respect for the diversity of student voices, opinions, and insights (Giroux, 1998, p. 176). This all around respect for students provides an appreciation for creating a public language that is part of a commitment to social transformation (Giroux, 1998, p. 176). Social transformation begins with addressing social issues in education (Giroux, 1998). Sullivan (1993) noted that through art education there is a critical edge of artistic practice which makes it possible for a variety of stances to be adopted including descriptions of everyday struggles, hardships, social justice, and alterative opinions.

Reed (2009) discussed five emblematic themes that a critical pedagogy focuses on for meaning and relevance: (a) connectedness between self, others, as well as humanity, (b) a sense of impact on the world, (c) understanding one's need for self-transformation in order to transform society, (d) social activism to foster equity and social justice; and (e) a need to act collectively in order to be effective (p. 52). Using a critical pedagogy can benefit student learning as well as help create active citizens in the world. The role of an active citizen brings up the topic of art activism in the classroom.

## Art Activism

Art activism through a critical pedagogy framework, gives students the opportunity to be a vital part of society and actively participate in advancement and progression and can be accomplished in part by studying contemporary art and artists who work as activists. For instance, Gablik (1992) addressed the *Homeless Vehicle Project* by Wodiczko in which he created a shopping cart that became a homeless shelter, storage, and means of transportation for a homeless person (p. 100). His goal was not to mass-produce a shopping cart that was beneficial to the homeless, but to bring social awareness to the issue of homelessness. His aspiration was to open the lines of communication on the plight of homelessness (Gablik, 1980, p. 102). This example of art being used to bring awareness to social issues and evoke societal transformation is one example of art as activism.

The main goal to activist art is to use the arts to “educate their audiences about a particular social issue, prevent a social problem from spreading outside a designated population, rehabilitate a population already suffering from a social problem, or lobby for specific policy initiative” (Whittaker, 1993, p. 12). Even more than a decade later, Dewhurst (2010) had a similar theory as Whittaker in that art activists often share “a commitment to create art that draws attention to, mobilizes action towards, or attempts to intervene in systems of inequality or injustice” (p. 7). Art activists focus on social issues in their artwork in hopes of promoting positive change.

Activist artists are seen around the world creating art for societal progress. This idea can be carried out in the art classroom as well. Darts (2004) wrote, “By introducing students to the work of socially engaged artists, as well as to other forms of visual

representation that leave us less immersed in the everyday, art educators can begin to challenge learners to reconsider the complexity of their daily visual experience” (p. 320). By employing a social justice lens in art education, students and teachers can examine the “reasons and ways that artists create art, influence others, and actively engage social problems through art in communities” (Armon, Uhrmacher & Ortega, 2009, p. 13). Students, as developing artists, often “make art not merely for its formal, technical or even private value, but to communicate about social issues in social ways” (Freedman, 2000, p. 323). Darts (2006) helped to encourage students to be activists as he “developed a curriculum around beliefs that the arts can facilitate the development of an ethic of care, thereby enabling participants to positively transform themselves, their communities, and the world(s) in which they live” (p. 7). Long (2008) wrote that adolescents need a reason to participate in their own learning and crave affective and cognitive experiences (p. 507). Long (2008) continued to state “they are ready, willing and very able to be moved and to act if given a compelling reason to do so” (p. 507). These researchers believe that students can be activists using art as a vehicle to promote progress in society, and bring awareness to current issues. When students are given the opportunity to learn about real issues toward which they can relate and develop strong empathetic feelings, they can initiate the drive and power to create art to facilitate change and forward movement.

In cultivating a sense of activism through art, Dewhurst (2010) stated that “activist artists engage in critical reflection and attentive exploration of the ways injustice plays out in the world and in relation to the artist’s own life” (p. 11). Students as activists begin to make connections and further understand the issues they study when they can directly relate it to their own life and experiences. Dewhurst (2010) quoted one of his

students, who completed an art project on homelessness that enabled her to realize the prevalence of this issue is in our world. The student stated, “Everywhere I went I actually began noticing homeless people....it opened my eyes again and I was able to see them again” (p. 11). To bring attention to an issue develops its relevance in our life, and makes us aware of what is occurring in our world.

In a program called Letras y Arte, college students and Latino children from low-income families actively engaged with one another. In one exercise, college students paired up with a child to create self-portraits. Through this exercise, they developed connections to both themselves and others, demonstrating reciprocal mentoring as they honored one another’s differences (Armon, Uhrmacher & Oretga, 2009). This art program gave a voice to children who are often invisible in the community and are excluded from some educational and social opportunities (Armon, Uhrmacher & Ortega, 2009, p. 12). These service programs are relevant real-life examples of the ability of art to open people’s eyes, enabling them to make connections to their own life, and give a voice to people who are not always heard.

Darts (2006) proposed that promoting art activism in the classroom encourages students to successfully negotiate the challenges of living in a rapidly transforming, globalizing world. Through contemporary issues in the visual arts students can understand and be a part of the world around them (Darts, 2006, p.11). As a high school teacher, Darts (2006) facilitated students’ freedom and investment as active citizens by requiring them to participate in the daily teaching and lesson planning responsibilities (p. 7). Giroux (1994) proposed that an educator’s goal is to “provide the conditions for students to learn that the relationship between knowledge and power can be

emancipatory, that their histories and experiences matter, and that what they say and do can count as part of a wider struggle to change the world around them” (p. 44). Students need to be aware of their capabilities and know the power they possess as active citizens. Through the use of a critical pedagogy and the power of art as activism, the field of art education becomes a meaningful and powerful venue for learning. Activism is possible when educators are willing to examine the world of social issues and human rights to educate students on these issues, and to help them achieve the motivation and tools to initiate positive change.

### **Social Issues and Human Rights**

Art education and activism is a powerful combination that lends itself to the transmission of social issues and human rights. Students at all levels have the power to understand the world around them and understand how they can make a difference in that world. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) speaks of “humanism” and how the banking approach, filling human beings with knowledge and not letting them think for themselves, was creating women and men “robots,” the very opposite of the “ontological vocation to be fully human” (p. 74). To be human is to think critically, act, and hope for a better world (Freire, 1970). Addressing social issues spurs critical thinking for action that can lead to understanding and promoting human rights.

According to Freedman (2000), “If we view art and art education as aids to making life meaningful, as reflections of liberty, and as means which people might pursue constructive forms of happiness, *art education is a sociopolitical act*” (p. 315). To address social issues and human rights through art allows for work of greater meaning. Examining the artwork of contemporary artists, students begin to explore and understand

why these artists create art, how they influence others, and how they actively engage in social problems using their art to speak to others within their communities (Armon, Uhrmacher & Ortega, 2009, p. 13). Addressing social issues with students and discussing human rights helps to develop a sense of compassion that can empower students to want and to create social change through art (Medina, 2009, p. 59). Darts (2006) stated that the “arts can facilitate development of an ethic of care, thereby enabling participants to positively transform themselves, their communities and the world(s) in which they live” (p. 7). Overall, students and teachers who engage in addressing social problems are engaging in sociopolitical acts that encourage students to be aware of the world around them and how they can play a role in human transformation.

Social issues can be addressed with students in numerous ways. The challenging nature of social issues often leaves teachers uncomfortable with bringing up sensitive issues related to economic and financial inequalities (Lucey & Laney, 2009, p. 260). Lucey and Laney discuss how art and music can serve as vehicles for bringing awareness to social issues in a relatively safe and comfortable way. Through using artworks that address these issues, an educator can simultaneously personalize and depersonalize the subject matter (Laney & Laney, 2009, p. 260). Pierce and Short (1993) found that social issues can be addressed with even young students through the use of literature, for example family narrative, realistic fiction, poetry books, and well-researched nonfiction (p. 148). Reisberg (2008) has a similar outlook to promote social and ecological awareness, making connections through multicultural picture books (p. 255). The books being published today can introduce these complex issues to children in ways that they

can understand and relate. The text and illustrations in books provide avenues for rich discussion and a prelude to personal and visual creations.

Freedman (2000) recognizes that like adults, youth have concerns, form questions, make judgments and execute choices. “Students make art not merely for its formal, technical, or even private value, but to communicate about social issues in social ways” (Freedman, 2000, p. 323). According to Quinn (2008), students really value the idea that they can incorporate social commitment while creating artwork through their schooling (p. 37). Quinn (2008) believes art education focused around social issues and activism is based around fun, risky, and surprising experiences with artists, activists, and ideas that are important today (p. 34). Quinn feels that students today are expressing themselves about the greater world and how they feel about certain social concerns. Freedman (2003) stated, “Art problems are authentic; they are some of the few problems in school for which the teacher does not know the answer” (p. 113). The student is dealing with feelings and emotions where they have the freedom to voice their opinion. Art education through this social lens stimulates emotions and helps students form connections to the past that allow for understanding in relevant and profound ways (Zwirn, & Libresco, 2010, p. 35). According to these authors, students accomplish the most meaningful type of art education when they are able to explore social issues in their world and understand their human rights; they acquire the ability through art to promote positive change and hope for a better future. Another aspect that plays a vital role in developing meaning and forming opinions in social issues and human rights is the role of cultural awareness.

## **Cultural Identity and Awareness**

A relevant aspect of art education and promoting activism is the focus on culture. Culture, specifically cultural identity, shapes the way many people feel about social issues and human rights (Lucey & Laney, 2009). Activism is influenced by cultural awareness. The arts can reflect on diversity and promote a “tossed salad” of cultures in America (Lucey, & Laney, 2009, p. 262). Lucey and Laney (2009) discuss the arts as promoting empathy and tolerance for different cultures and ways of life, as well as finding similar links to connect people (p. 262). Art education facilitates a freedom to address and bring understanding to one’s own culture and to the cultural outlook of others.

Cultural awareness in schools relates to different cultural groups, their beliefs, religions, and way of life. “Educators need to help students understand, investigate, and determine perspectives on culture, developing understanding of others and being able to depict biases” (Banks, 1996, p. 20). Grant and Sleeter (2010) wrote that, “while education is necessary for upward mobility and community uplift, education does not wipe away racial advantage” (p. 60). Cultural issues are still a constant concern and to acknowledge these issues is to bring about understanding, to shun them is to ignore reality (Grant & Sleeter, 2010).

Reflecting on the ideas of Grant and Sleeter another piece of writing by Lund and Nabavi (2008), brought up the idea of a “middle space,” something else to acknowledge and understand. Nabavi was an immigrant woman whose position within two cultures left her in a middle space with more than one identity. Nabavi (2008) stated, “I came to realize that this confusing middle space that I have often found myself in is the result of



being raised by parents who genuinely did not see me as a racial minority and a society who saw nothing but” (p. 28). Part of education is for teachers to help students from diverse groups develop a common ground between their homes, communities, and school settings (Banks, 1996, p. 8). These aspects of culture and understanding one’s identity play an important role when it comes to students’ voicing their beliefs in ways through which they understand the world around them. These authors found that cultural awareness in the classroom enables students to be themselves and begin to determine how they fit into the greater world, as well as to develop their own perspectives on politics, social issues, and human rights.

Armon and Uhrmacher (2009) asked this key question in art education, “How might we call upon the power of art to reveal and connect us to faces and lives that have been hidden for too long?” (p. 18). Not only will cultural awareness help students develop great pride in their own culture, according to these authors, they will also develop an empathetic concern for other cultures, which can progress into a want and need to promote advancement for those forgotten. Lastly, we move onto another influential topic that plays a role in art activism, the world of contemporary art and visual culture.

### **Contemporary Art and Visual Culture**

The last essential concept I wish to explore focuses on activism in contemporary arts and visual culture. Activism is influenced by visual culture. Freedman (2003) stated, “We live in a world increasingly saturated by visual culture that influences students at all educational levels” (p. 86). Students are bombarded daily with visual culture images from magazines, televisions, shopping malls, websites, and newspapers. The mixing of popular

visual culture and fine art creates new images with new meaning (Freedman, 2003, p. 86). Educators need to teach students the skills to decipher forms of visual culture, including how to analyze and assess the images they see and the meanings they hold (Freedman, 2003). Freedman (2003) wrote, “What is important about visual culture is that students develop enough knowledge to make intelligent decisions about the visual culture they make and see and the ways in which visual culture will influence them” (p. 99). Interpreting visual images goes hand in hand with a critical pedagogy where students are given the opportunity to be critical thinkers. Through the discussion of visual culture, students are critically reflecting on and decoding meaning (Freedman, 2003, p. 91).

Today visual culture plays an important role in students’ everyday life. Through imagery, they learn about different cultures, issues, and ways of life. Students’ young minds are easily molded by propaganda and false information that visual culture often communicates (Chung, & Kirby, 2009). The duty of the art educator is to help students make sense of these images. Darts (2004) wrote, “If art education is to move students beyond modes of passive spectatorship and towards more generative and thoughtful forms of cultural production and resistance, art educators will need to help students make meaning of, and creatively respond to, their everyday visual experience” (p. 325).

Contemporary art, like visual culture, is a large part of the world today. Many contemporary artists are addressing social issues through their artwork. Gablik (1992) discussed contemporary artists who are art activists and express social issues through their work. This form of artwork opens lines of communication, gives people a voice, and makes the viewer reflect on the topic being addressed (Freedman, 2003). Contemporary art and visual culture are vital components of an art education system that incorporates

activism. Through studies of social issues, human rights, cultural awareness, visual culture, and contemporary art, one can more clearly understand how each piece seamlessly fits into the idea that art education can cultivate a sense of activism in the classroom.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion the aforementioned authors held the importance of each topic discussed as essential elements of an art education centered in social and community activism. Each topic plays a role in students developing as art activists in the classroom. A critical pedagogy demands critical thinking skills and dialogue, and focuses on the idea of a democratic classroom. The goal is to create active citizens who will take part in their community and society in creating a better future. Art as activism gives students an opportunity to express more than just a pretty picture. Art designed to express social justice is not only inquiry motivated by a specific social ill, but also holds a purposeful want and need to impact structures of inequality (Dewhurst, 2010, p. 10). The idea of meaningful art creates the potential for change and advancement as it provides students a sense of pride and power; it helps youth see how they are a viable part of society and how they can have a voice when it comes to social advancement.

When reflecting on the last topics of social issues, human rights, cultural awareness, and contemporary art and visual culture, one can see that each is part of the bigger picture in art activism. To be an activist for change, social issues and human rights need to be addressed and explored. In this exploration, cultural awareness plays a vital role as one determines his/her own cultural identity and develops empathy and understanding for other cultures and ways of life. Contemporary art and visual culture are

forms of art that lend themselves to exploring social issues. Contemporary artists use art as their vehicle to encourage change about a particular social concern. Visual culture is a part of everyone's world and students today are continuously bombarded by visual imagery. These images are communicating a message to students, which they then must decode and interpret or not. Teachers today need to spend the time enabling students to understand different mechanisms to decode, analyze, and read the messages that are part of their everyday life. Encouraging students to understand these messages allows them to form their own thoughtful opinions and decisions in life.

When teachers incorporate the topics discussed in this review of literature into their curriculum, they can initiate a well-rounded approach to developing student activists that have knowledge about their world, knowledge of their place in it, and the tools and skills to promote change through art. These authors felt that students who learn these skills will be better equipped to prosper in the world of today and carry out all they have learned inside the classroom into the real world as active citizens. Through my research I want to find out how these ideas for art as activism are carried out in art classrooms. The following chapter provides the reader with my design for this research project.

## **Chapter III: Methodology and Procedures**

### **Introduction**

This study seeks to understand the benefits of employing an activist curriculum in two different middle school art classrooms. In this study I conducted qualitative research, which is much different from quantitative research. Quantitative research can be measured by comparing two variables so numbered data can be analyzed using statistical procedures (Creswell, 2009, p.4). According to Merriam (2009) using a qualitative study focuses on “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 23). Qualitative research is beneficial to this study because it focuses on students’ experiences, learning, and feelings. These are things that cannot be measured mathematically but can be described and analyzed for understanding. Using this qualitative approach led my research in the direction of a multi-case study.

A case study pinpoints “a single person who is a case example of some phenomenon, a program, a group, an institution, a community, or a specific policy” (Merriam, 2009, p. 40). A case study is referred to as a bounded system, which is considered the case, or multiple bounded systems (cases), that the researcher or investigator explores over time (Merriam, 2009, p. 43). This study was based on two cases making this a multi-case study, the two cases being two middle school art classrooms where I observed the art educator and their students. These two cases were chosen because these educators are known to, or said to employ activism in their art class and address social issues. In this qualitative case study the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009, p. 52).

## **Context**

In order to obtain meaningful data I needed to find participants who fit the criteria of employing activism in their art classroom and addressing social issues with their students. The criteria limited my search as not everyone approaches teaching art education in this manner. I chose art teachers with five or more years experience and who claim to employ activism and address social issues in their art classroom.

## **Participants**

The sample selection for this study is a non-probability purposeful sampling. Merriam (2009) refers to this type of sampling as “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (2009, p.77). Probability sampling, where the sample selection is random, is not normally a part of qualitative research (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). In order to create a purposeful sample, the criteria for my study included: two middle school settings in the area of Western New York where the art educator is known to, or claims to employ activism and address social issues throughout their curriculum. Both male and female students of the six selected art classrooms were participants in this study as well as one male and one female art educator. The grade levels used in the study were sixth and seventh grade middle school students. The estimated number of subjects will include 50-70 participants including two art educators. There were no restrictions as all students within those classrooms had equal opportunity to be a part of the study if they chose to. Specific criteria was used when selecting which students to be interviewed, what to observe, and which documents to analyze.

## **Role of Researcher**

The role I played as researcher in this multi-case study is observer participant, in which participation is part of observing but comes secondary to observation (Creswell, 2009). “Using this method, the researcher may have access to many people and a wide range of information, but the level of the information is controlled by the group members being investigated” (Merriam, 2009, p. 124).

## **Data Collection Methods**

The data collection methods used for this research consisted in triangulation of data from interviews, observation, and document analysis of artwork. Triangulation is the act of using different sources of data by comparing and cross-checking data collected through the three multiple methods used (Merriam, 2009). I collected data through audio-recorded interviews with teachers and select students. Eight students were selected due to their interest and enthusiasm about the subject matter, and five due to their lack of interest in the subject matter being taught. Selected students from both sides of the spectrum gave me an understanding of why this type of teaching worked for some students and not others.

Another means of data collection used was observation in the classroom setting. All class sessions were audio taped. The audio recordings benefited me greatly. As a single observer I could have missed important phrases, voice tones, and exact quotes from students and teachers. Being able to rewind class sessions and listen to them later helped me further develop and organize data.

Lastly, the data collection method of document analysis of student artwork was used to help me define what content students employed from and learned from the

lessons. Some artwork needed to be explained to understand fully the meaning behind the work, and was achieved by asking questions of students working during class time as well as observing during critiques. Students' artwork was photographed so that I was able to examine the work further on my own time as well as reference their work in Chapter Four. I elaborate on each data collection method below.

### **Interviews**

According to Marshall and Rossman (2011) "qualitative researchers rely extensively on in-depth interviewing" (p. 142). Creswell (2009) defines qualitative interviews as those interviews that "involve unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants" (p. 181). The interviews done for this research study took place with thirteen selected students and two art teachers (see Appendix E: Interview Questions-Teacher; Appendix F: Interview Questions-Student). These interviews were semi-structured casual interviews where all questions are open-ended and flexibly worded (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). These semi-structured interviews allowed for conversations to take place and other probing questions to arise throughout the interview (Merriam, 2009). An audio recorder was used during the interview process and later I transcribed these interviews pulling meaning from student and teacher responses and opinions.

### **Observation**

Another method of data collection I used in my study was observation. Observation is a first hand account of activity and allows the researcher to record data as it occurs using personal expertise to analyze findings (Merriam, 2009, p. 119). Merriam (2009) points out that "observation is the best technique to use when an activity, event, or



situation can be observed firsthand, when a fresh perspective is desired, or when participants are not able or willing to discuss the topic under study” (p. 119). When observing children, their movements, gestures, facial expressions, comments and responses will give clues as to what they know, think, and feel (Almay & Genishi, 1979 p. 21). Observations not only focus on students’ and teachers’ actions, but also settings, tools, and technology seen and used in the classroom. A reflective journal was kept to record all of this data, which then was transcribed on computer.

### **Document Analysis: Artwork & Lesson Plans**

The last form of data collection came from students’ artwork and any written or visual materials the teachers used to teach the lesson. Merriam (2009) refers to the gathering and analysis of written work and artwork as forms of document analysis (p. 139). Merriam (2009) has chosen “document as the umbrella term to refer to a wide range of written, visual, digital, and physical material relevant to the study at hand” (p. 139). The lesson plans and student artwork benefited my study by allowing me to see how students interpreted the lesson and how they portrayed the content through their artwork. Now, to describe my considerations of ethical issues.

### **Confidentiality and consent forms**

During this study confidentiality was very important. The IRB, Institutional Research Board, approved my research before I began, strict rules and guidelines were followed to keep confidentiality. The organizations, students and teachers who participated were given pseudonyms to keep identities concealed and protected. Schools, teachers, and students filled out consent forms that described the type of research being done and what it entailed. A letter of consent was sent to parents requesting permission

for their child to take part in this research study (see Appendix D: Letter of Consent-Students). The letter of consent stated that they were allowing their child to be observed during class sessions and audio recorded during class and interviews as well as allowing their child's artwork to be photographed. Administrators and teachers also received a consent form (see Appendix B and Appendix C). Administrators and teachers received all interview questions for approval before interviewing students. All information was used strictly for educational research purposes and will be stored in a secure location for a minimum of three years in compliance with federal regulations.

### **Reciprocity**

This research study has two main benefits. First, students studying contemporary social issues in art are given the chance to voice their opinion on certain topics. Through understanding contemporary artwork students are learning and understanding what is happening in the world around them and who and why these issues affect certain people, animals, and or the environment. Secondly, students that are expressing themselves through their work and taking a stance are activists for something they feel strongly about. Art teachers are encouraging students to think for themselves as they learn about the world around them and make their own decisions. Students will understand that their role is to become enlightened citizens in hope for positive change for their future. This research focuses on art as activism and can impact both students and teachers in heightened awareness.

### **Data Management and Analysis**

The data collected is located in a reflective journal where thoughts, notes, sketches, and observations were recorded. My reflective journal consisted of a pad of

graph paper where sketches were easily drawn and columns could be made. These notes contained diagrams, quotes and highly descriptive language, to enable the study to be so detailed that anyone reading it will feel as if they were there (Merriam, 2009, p. 130). After each observation I coded the data that was collected and listened to the audio recording of the class session. I then transcribed this data on the computer while the information was still fresh in my mind (Merriam, 2009, p. 122). A major part of my data was observer comments. These comments had their own separate column in my journal. According to Merriam these reflective comments can include “the researcher’s feelings, reactions, hunches, initial interpretations, speculations, and working hypotheses” (p. 131). The management and analysis of the data recorded is also an important part when its time to make sense of all the hard work put into the research and data collection methods. By labeling or creating a qualitative codebook after my data was collected I was able to systematically organize data, allowing me to utilize and make sense of my findings (Creswell, 2009, p.188). My codes were determined after I began to see reoccurring themes and important ideas. This allowed me to easily compare and contrast data from both settings.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the design of the study reflects how data collection methods were chosen and used to develop a successful study. The criteria for selecting the sample was a search for art educators with five years experience or more that addressed social issues and encouraged an activist curriculum in the Western New York area. Data triangulation used interviews, observation, and document analysis of artwork and lesson plans. Recording my data in a reflective journal while coding data and transcribing audio

recordings allowed for an easy reliable way for me to compare and contrast the results.

Chapter five discusses my findings and answers the research questions for the study.

With this study I hope to bring insight to others on the benefits of addressing social issues and employing an activist curriculum in art classrooms.

## Chapter IV: Results and Discussions

### Educators & Settings

As I arrived at my first destination, Austin Middle School, located ten minutes away from my apartment, I sat parked in the only spot I could find, while observing my surroundings. The parking lot at this school is practically non-existent. Parking was found at any neighborhood side street. The school is an older building with ornate architecture and a churchlike structure. It is surrounded by quaint houses, green grass, and has a welcoming ambience. Across the street is a small library, one block away from Tom Avenue. Tom Avenue is full of family-owned shops, restaurants, and gyms that are all very unique and inviting. The school is located in the center of this suburban area, and the population is predominantly white middle-class families.

Entering Austin Middle School, I noted that my destination was Room 317 on the third floor. This was a workout – a large staircase and a long hike to what seemed to be the farthest point from the entrance. My destination was Mr. Burgundy's art class, where artwork is created. Mr. Burgundy has been teaching for nine and a half years. His room is very much his own, tailored to his individual tastes. This art room is very different from many other art rooms I have observed. All of the walls are covered with student art work: painted replicas of superheroes such as Spiderman and Batman, Tim Burton's *Nightmare Before Christmas* lives on, and a scene from *Lady and the Tramp* sharing a spaghetti noodle is seen as you enter the room. High up on one of the walls you can spot musical artists' symbols such as "Wu-Tang" and the "Beastie Boys." Those are just a few of the visual attractions. There is not much room left for many additions, even the ceiling tiles

have been decorated by students. The seniors in previous classes were given the privilege to leave their mark at Austin Middle School.

Aside from the walls covered in paintings, are some free standing sculptures: another superhero is dangling in the corner of the room with a real trench coat and hat; he is faceless and creepy. On a nearby table, set against the wall is a human size purple papier-mâché octopus with real yellow suction cups on his tentacles. Next to the octopus – as if they were life-long buddies – is a papier-mâché Sponge Bob. Art supplies, drying racks, and paper surround these two characters. The room, although small, has seven Mac computers, with a separate room conjoining the art room housing a kiln and large storage area for more supplies. Along the perimeter of the room are more shelving units and a small sink. The room is packed with supplies and artwork, although the center of the room consists of five tables, all free from clutter. Four students can sit comfortably at each of these tables. A Smartboard is non-existent in this room. Instead there is an old, reliable chalkboard, used a few times while I was there. Everything needed to create art is held in this estimated 700 square foot space. Although this is not a huge space, Mr. Burgundy enables the set-up to work. The interactive atmosphere of the room reflects Mr. Burgundy's personality, sparking creativity and inspiration. I sensed that some students felt a creative itch by simply entering the room.

What makes this room so different from other rooms is the long 30 foot wall that is covered with a massive sheet of paper, 42 inches by 15 feet. The paper is centered on the wall and securely held by pushpins on all sides. This paper is Mr. Burgundy's canvas. He has two forty-minute planning periods that he uses to not only be an art teacher, but also work as an artist. At the time, he was creating work for his art series

“Rhinoceros.” This series is very powerful and holds great meaning to Mr. Burgundy. I will discuss his work and series later in Chapter four.

My second destination was Boulevard Middle School, to observe Mrs. Beetle, an eight-year art teacher. This was not a ten-minute joy ride. This school was a trek, tucked approximately 35 minutes away in a suburban area. One would think after ten observations I would know the route like the back of my hand, but my poor navigation skills added an extra ten to fifteen minutes each time, due to minor wrong turns, or the more severe wrong way on the expressway. Boulevard Middle School was two to three times larger than Austin Middle School and is between, and connected to Boulevard High School, and the elementary school. This school is in the center of five suburban towns and has students coming from five different areas. The Boulevard – just like Austin Middle – is predominately, white-middle class students. The school looks more like a corporate building, very official and formal, without added ornamentation. Parking lots surround this school, not a border of quaint little houses. The local houses are spaced far from the school, with plenty of available parking spaces.

Mrs. Beetle is the Art Teacher and the Computer Arts Teacher at Boulevard Middle School. She is in charge of a large, spacious, very well-organized art room, and a large computer lab down the hall that she shares with another teacher. The lab has over 25 computers, with a double row of computers in the center of the room and computers surrounding half of the perimeter. They are all Macs, which are in good condition and seem fairly new. The other half of the perimeter is made up of storage units, a chalkboard, Smartboard, and the teacher’s desk. The chalkboard is large enough with the

Smartboard located in the center. A television hangs in the upper corner of the room. Several pieces of technology and equipment are available for student use.

At this time of year, fall decorations line the heater and windowsills, enhancing this office-like environment. A few posters addressing piracy and copyrighting policies, as well as student artwork on “8.5 x 11” sheets of paper are hanging around the room. The room is quite plain for an art room, but with wires and computers everywhere it is probably a good idea to keep it simple with less clutter. Every time I entered the room I admired the small poster hanging outside the door that a student designed in Photoshop for Mrs. Beetle. The poster was a cut out of Mrs. Beetle with her hands up. The student placed pencils and paintbrushes in her hands as if she were juggling; the background appears to be an outer space theme. The student made it clear he created this masterpiece by making his name very visible in the corner, “To: Mrs. Beetle, From: Chris.”

Boulevard Middle school has a few extra luxuries that Austin Middle School does not have. Boulevard Middle has plenty of space, progressive equipment, and the added subject of “Computer Arts.” Computer Arts is actually separate from the students regular art class, so seventh graders at Boulevard Middle receive both Traditional Art and Computer Arts, doubling the amount of time spent on artistic endeavors. The equipment, space, and double art class at Boulevard Middle school is an added benefit, which students at Austin Middle School do not have. Each school and art teacher works well with the facilities at each location. The instructors developed a system and way of teaching that works well for them and revolves around student learning.



## **Pre-Research Interviews**

I initiated my preliminary research before the school year started. I extensively reached out to both educators to see if I could interview them at the end of their school year, during the months of May and June. This would be prior to my observation of their classrooms, in the fall semester. The interview would allow a jumpstart on my research, enabling me to gain further understanding and insight on their teaching methods, and their feelings about social issues, activism, contemporary art, and their students. I am grateful for the teachers' cooperation, and did feel as if I created extra work for these two gracious teachers. I deeply appreciated their encouragement and positive attitude. I received some insightful data from the interviews and got to know the educators on a more personal level. The pre-research interviews allowed a clearer focus for my research. I was more readily able to form connections with my previous ROL from Chapter two and the data I would eventually be analyzing from data collection.

The interviews revealed that both art teachers incorporated social issues, contemporary art and activism in their curriculum since the beginning of their teaching careers. Not every project focused on these three topics, but throughout the year they were able to incorporate all of these ideas in one way or another. A few key questions and answers I received from the interviews were important to highlight, before getting to the classroom observations, lessons, and student responses. In the interview, I asked each art teacher why they felt it was important to address social issues with their middle school students; how others respond to the artwork; and how students feel about addressing this subject matter and creating artwork that demonstrates a stance or makes a point. Understanding why the two teachers instruct in this manner and how others, including

their students, view their teaching leads to a spectrum of perspectives, both positive and negative. The interview questions are answered below.

As I sat with Mr. Burgundy in his classroom on a hot day in the beginning of June, I asked him the following question, “Why do you address social issues with your students?” (see Appendix E: Interview Questions-Teacher). Mr. Burgundy’s response was short, sweet, and bold. He stated, “It is important to see what art is capable of. You realize and understand students have a voice and opinions and are passionate about something.” This formulates the idea from Chapter two where Freedman (2000) recognizes that like adults, students have concerns, formulate questions, make judgments, and execute choices.

Mrs. Beetle’s response to the same question was very similar. Mrs. Beetle addresses social issues with her middle school students because, “It brings meaning into their school life, into their home life, and makes them feel empowered to do something. It gives them a voice for something they care about.” Mrs. Beetle also brought up the idea that addressing social issues with students allows choices. Students create what is meaningful to them; in return, this leaves no two projects looking alike. Uniqueness is found in each and every student work. Reinforcing this idea McLaren & Leonard (1993) state a critical pedagogy allows students to have relevant thoughts, experiences, and critical thinking skills.

The response I had received from both teachers when asked why they feel it is important to address social issues with middle school students, uncovered that a critical pedagogy framework was being implemented. This framework was discussed in Chapter two. Giroux (1998) stated that a critical pedagogy holds a respect for the diversity of

student voices, opinions, and insights. Through art education, students can address social issues, formulate opinions, and take a stance on what is meaningful to them.

Another interview question which is particularly relevant is discussing how others feel about projects that address social issues and promote activism. “Others” refers to faculty, parents, family, voters, and anyone else that may see students work displayed in the hallways, or hear about projects that address these topics. My feeling was that some people look down upon this form of teaching. They may feel it is inappropriate to address social issues, which often bring up sensitive subjects and a harsh reality of the world.

When addressing this question with Mr. Burgundy, I asked: “What are some responses from parents or other faculty that you receive from these types of lessons?” (see Appendix E: Teacher Interview Questions.) Mr. Burgundy stated, “I received a lot of compliments because people saw a different side to the kids. Through art you can pull back layers. It’s surprising what you learn about them.” Teachers did not have to pry into a student’s thoughts and feelings to understand. The artwork spoke for them. Teachers had an opportunity to see what students felt strongly about and what mattered most to them. Mrs. Beetle on the other hand had a few instances where issues arose.

One situation in the past that Mrs. Beetle encountered occurred when a voter entered the building and saw one of the political posters Mrs. Beetle had students do in her art class. The poster was very well done and the concept was clever, especially for a middle school student. The poster was George Bush drinking from an oilcan, as he digested the oil it seeped down into his stomach, forming graves. The voter was offended and felt the student was disrespecting the President. He did not think students should be allowed to say anything negative about a leader. Shortly after, the Principal, Mr. Burton,

confronted Mrs. Beetle and asked her to please take down the poster. She replied with a simple “No,” and then continued to question the idea of freedom of speech. She stated that students also have the right and freedom to voice their opinions. Mr. Burton began to see the matter in a different light; he supported her decision, and respected the fact she was fully supporting her student.

The voter returned a few weeks later and saw that the poster had not been removed. He confronted Mr. Burton, inquiring why it had not been taken down. Mr. Burton told the voter that he was sorry, but the poster would remain up. He explained that each student had the freedom of speech to voice their opinions, and he would not hide that student’s feelings and thoughts from viewers. The voter replied “What if a student put up a poster disrespecting you as a principal...What would you do?” Mr. Burton stated, “Well, I would have to support the student’s opinion.” This was clearly a powerful message and incident for Mrs. Beetle to experience and share with me. It reinforces the fact that students have relevant ideas and opinions. Part of the path of becoming an adult and acclimating into our society is learning how to constructively express these opinions and viewpoints. If students understand the world around them, they should feel confident in expressing their thoughts about certain issues, especially an issue they feel strongly about. As this student shared his feelings about George Bush, he took a stance and a position. He clearly felt that George Bush had started a war over oil, leading to unnecessary death. In this instance, the student became an activist for that cause, bringing attention to a serious matter. Dewhurst (2010) reminds us that the artwork in support of change needs to draw attention to the problem, by providing a powerful visual message. This student’s piece was powerful enough to create controversy. This controversy

brought attention to the topic at hand. Therefore, the piece did exactly what it was meant to do.

Mrs. Beetle, taking a stance and backing her student's opinion in the face of antagonism, relayed a message that student ideas matter. If Mrs. Beetle had said, "I'm sorry that drawing offended the voter, I will take it down immediately," what kind of message would her actions have sent to her students? The democratic classroom she supported would have failed, and students would have felt as if their opinions and thoughts should be kept to themselves. Students are individuals, young adults, and prospering citizens of our future who have voices that need to be heard. Giroux (1988) and other theorists such as Freedman (2003), Gablix (1992), and Dewhurst (2010) see youth as our future. They need the skills and confidence to formulate opinions, understand society, and have the courage to share with others what they stand for. Mrs. Beetle encouraged and stood by her student, as she was an art activist in support of positive change.

Lastly, I inquired if Mr. Burgundy and Mrs. Beetle ran into any issues with students' discomfort discussing certain topics. I asked each teacher, "Have you ever had students that said they were uncomfortable or uneasy about the topics you had chosen?" (see Appendix E: Teacher Interview Questions.) Some social issues may be sensitive topics for some students or bring up unwanted memories or feelings. I wanted to know how they handled student discomfort in the art room. Both teachers ran into some conflict. Mr. Burgundy said some of his projects can get personal and he has had some students feel uncomfortable or shy away from expressing themselves. During these projects, discussions are initiated, allowing him to get to know his students on a deeper

level. He can then see how each student handles certain topics. He has had many students choose meaningful personal issues to convey in artwork, and over the years, he has learned how to handle these topics with students and their classmates. During these projects, classmates know what is expected as others share meaningful personal aspects of their life. For students that seem to struggle with expressing themselves or discussing sensitive topics, Mr. Burgundy may resort to a one-on-one conversation. During these conversations, students open up and share their stories and opinions with him, in the end form a trusting relationship.

Mrs. Beetle has had similar issues especially while completing her thesis project, incorporating racism and stereotypes into art education. She had such a small population of African American students at the time – one class having a single African American girl. One of the projects made the young girl feel singled out. The project was based on the television show “Survivor.” Survivor is a reality television show where teams of people fight to survive on an island, without being voted off by fellow team members. The current season at the time (2006) actually split the teams up by race. Many people were upset by the producer’s choice to divide teams up in this way. It was as if each team had to represent their ethnicity in the game, not only to remain on the island, but also to prove they were the dominant race. The students’ instructions were to develop a flag for a number of different races. Some of the comments and symbols were ignorant and hurtful, especially for the single African American student to hear.

Mrs. Beetle knew the African American girl was hurt by some of the comments, and kept her after class to speak with her. The young girl’s mother showed concern by asking to remove her daughter during this particular project. Mrs. Beetle was

understanding and said this would be fine, as she already had planned a discussion for next class about student comments and lack of knowledge of other cultures and races. She knew issues would arise and her goal was to bring light to what students did not know, and to question what they thought they knew.

The discussion with all students on their lack of knowledge of other cultures and races allowed students to look back on their “jokes” or side comments that were offensive. Many of the students felt ashamed and asked to apologize to their African American classmate. Since the discussion was so productive, Mrs. Beetle informed the girl’s mother, relaying an apology from many in the class. The young girl’s mother was pleased to hear the results of this discussion, and allowed her daughter to attend class again. She understood Mrs. Beetle was trying to teach students tolerance and understanding of other cultures and races. Although this project may have created concern, it also uncovered some of the ignorance students had regarding race and culture. Mrs. Beetle knew she was taking a risk when she addressed this topic but was willing to do so because of the end results. This ended up being a precarious situation that was turned into a positive of facilitating growth, both individually and as a class.

Lucey and Laney (2009) discuss the arts as promoting empathy and tolerance for different cultures and ways of life, as well as finding similar links to connect people. This was Mrs. Beetle’s chance to do just that. Art allowed her the freedom to address and bring understanding to the cultural outlook of others. In order to fix this problem, these issues needed to be brought up and corrected, not covered or ignored. Teachers addressing current issues need to be aware of the sensitive nature of certain topics and be prepared to take action if student discomfort and concern arise. The teacher needs to be

able to bring understanding and comfort back into their classroom, as they educate the students on their own culture, as well as the cultural viewpoints of others. Addressing these topics may be challenging, but in the end, students gain valuable knowledge of the world and the people in it.

After hearing stories and getting to know each educator through the interview process, I was excited to learn about the upcoming projects I would be observing at each location. Both projects were very different from one another and incorporated the topics I was researching: social issues, contemporary art, and activism.

### **The Projects Begin**

It was the beginning of the school year and observation had started in early October. I was excited to see Mr. Burgundy introduce his project to his new sixth graders. Both he and I would be getting to know the students through their artwork. Mr. Burgundy was extremely funny and relaxed, forming a comfortable rapport with his new class. I was curious to see if his humor would follow through into his teaching. Upon my arrival at the school, I sat on a stool near the window next to Mr. Burgundy's desk in the back of the room. I observed all the students and the chalkboard, indicating he was preparing to use it in his introduction. The moment we all sat down, the fire alarm suddenly blared. The kids moved towards the door, down the three flights of stairs, exiting the building to their destination on the neighborhood side streets. The students were very quiet and Mr. Burgundy and I both noticed the students moved like molasses. He joked with them, making comments to pick up the pace, addressing this lack of movement in a humorous fashion. After the fire drill, it was back to business.



Mr. Burgundy introduced his famous project, one he does every year with his new sixth graders. The project title is: “If you could change one meaningful thing in the world what would it be?” He instructed students to take out their sketchbook and write down everything he was writing on the board. He stressed that this project is “50% about the drawing and 50% about the idea. The idea, kids, the idea!” He then listed the three main rules to this project. I noticed his character and humor were always on; teaching does not stop him from being who he is. He brought life and fun into the classroom as he described his rules:

1. No words or letters
2. No kids holding hands around the earth
3. No circle with slash or peace sign.

Mr. Burgundy sketched the well know image of the kids holding hands on the board and the circle with the slash and peace sign. He then stated that if they break any of these rules, they get a zero. He laughed and assured the students he was joking, yet serious. They needed to follow the three rules. He also told them not to be surprised if he makes them sketch 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 times before deciding on an idea and layout. The project was based on a meaningful subject and would take time to discover. The final project would be an “11 x 17” colored pencil drawing.

In the next step, he explained the term “meaningful,” since that word represents a broad category. Mr. Burgundy wrote on the board that the topic needed to be “special,” which equals something important to you. He stated, “The topic can affect many people; it can be worldly, or it can affect one person, or a few. It can be personal.” He then gave the example of winning the lottery and asked the class if winning the lottery is

meaningful to them. Many students said, “No.” A boy with glasses and dark hair named Phillip was very attentive and his hand flew up, “I disagree. Well, it can be meaningful to some, but it’s very selfish.” Mr. Burgundy and I both glanced at each other impressed by his spunky yet honest answer. He then asked students to name some meaningful topics in the world. Students listed: global warming, the environment, war, killing, dying, crime, violence, 9/11, terrorism, and bullying. Mr. Burgundy wrote all this on the board as students copied it into their sketchbooks.

The students seemed to have a lot of questions, some serious and some goofy. Some of them saw Mr. Burgundy’s humor and wanted to join in. Mr. Burgundy accepted some humor; but if their humor was in excess, he didn’t hesitate to address it, and bring the conversation back to topic. He also reminded students to raise their hands, and to not be sharpening pencils or throwing out garbage while he spoke. These were new sixth graders and establishing rules was important.

Some student questioned whether guns or blood could be displayed. Mr. Burgundy said he would allow this within reason. Students asked if a number on a soldier’s uniform is appropriate to use, and Mr. Burgundy said that would be fine. Then some goofy questions arose: “What if I draw adults holding hands around the globe?” “What if I draw a peace sign on a hippy’s shirt?” Mr. Burgundy said no and reminded students, “The artwork needs to speak for itself.” Phillip had a number of interesting questions and brought up 9/11 more than once. He asked how he should go about showing 9/11, a before or after scene, and whether he should split his paper and show both. He also questioned whether he could create a stack of documents as he shaped the documents with his hands, and whether he could jot down scribbles to symbolize writing.

He seemed very excited about this project and mature for his age. Many students were involved with the conversation. Many hands were outstretched, indicating questions and comments. I was pleased to see the enthusiasm and the lack of fear the students displayed in this art classroom. Mr. Burgundy ended class with mental homework, “Next class, have an idea to work with.”

The next time I came to observe this group of students, Mr. Burgundy introduced me. Letting the students know I would be around observing and taking notes, he said to the class, “Miss Toczynski is very excited about this project; she wants to see your drawings, and would like to talk to you about your ideas for your drawings. This is a good project, and is asking you to think about what are considered by some people ‘social issues.’ Social issues, do you know what that means? You are sixth graders, I don’t know if you know what that means?”

A student raised his hand and said “problems with the economy.” Mr. Burgundy thought for a moment, and stated, “Social issues are issues that affect society and the people that live in society. These issues affect the people, you and me and her (pointing to a student), and those problems are social issues.” He told the class that the meaningful concepts they listed last time were all considered social issues. He assured students he understands these subjects can be difficult, depressing, and painful, and the world certainly does have problems.

It was now time for students to begin working on this meaningful project. There was an array of options available for the students, and I was eager to see what was meaningful to each one. I observed three out of the four sixth grade classes Mr. Burgundy taught. I was able to walk around and talk with the students and see what they were

working on. All the students were more than happy to share their ideas with me and express their thoughts and positions. Freedman (2003) states that one aspect of a contemporary curriculum is student freedom. Mr. Burgundy allows his students the freedom to choose a topic for their artwork, which allows their work to hold meaning to them; and as they expressed their ideas, it brings meaning to others in the world.

Mrs. Beetle's project held the same core purpose of meaning, yet was very different from Mr. Burgundy's project. Mrs. Beetle's project involved seventh graders engaging in technology, and was a group-based project. Mrs. Beetle normally does this lesson later in the year, but reconstructed her syllabus so that a few classes would complete it in the beginning of the year, so I could include it in my paper. I found this to be a very thoughtful gesture.

Mrs. Beetle's seventh graders this year had Computer Arts in addition to a regular art class. Mrs. Burgundy taught these students before and she had an obvious comfortable and warm rapport with her students. Since this was their first year using computers, Mrs. Beetle had to start by going over and understanding the rules: including copyright, trademark, piracy, illegal downloading, and plagiarism. My first observation was an introduction to the Internet for the students. Following a few classes of reviewing these terms, the two seventh grade classes would then start the main project that I was eagerly waiting to observe.

The main project was a Public Service Announcement video that would be thirty seconds long and based on one of Boulevard Middle Schools character traits, which were: respect, responsibility, integrity, cooperation, and empathy. These traits are seen all over the school and are a focal point at Boulevard Middle. Each Public Service Announcement

would involve a group of five to six students having a role on camera as actors and actresses; as well as roles off-camera, coordinating the videos. The group was to consist of a camera person and the director, as well as actors and actresses from the class. The character trait Public Service Announcement was then shown at a character trait assembly later in the year. Several years ago, after the principal viewed Mrs. Beetle's video project, he wanted to involve it in the assembly and even encouraged other teachers to make videos of good character traits with their students. The project was definitely a hit!

First, the students had to become familiar with the terms mentioned earlier. After understanding those terms, they could begin to use the Internet and create their Public Service Announcement videos. To help students better understand the terms, Mrs. Beetle used a role-playing skit. As I entered her computer room I took a seat in the back corner near the heater. I could see everything and was out of students' direct view, so they could concentrate on the lesson. As students began to take their seats, I could already tell the rolling chairs were a source of amusement. The class attempted to sit quietly, but were inevitably drawn to wiggle their chairs back and forth. After observing Mrs. Beetle, I could see she was slightly distracted by the sound of the rolling wheels. If she had the tools she would have removed the wheels herself!

She began with attendance and I noticed a small skinny boy with glasses hiding under his computer table. Mrs. Beetle called out, "James" and looked around; the boy in hiding popped up. He smiled and said "Here!" She asked what he was doing under his table, and mentioned it was not a good idea to be under there, with so many wires and plugs. Mrs. Beetle was relaxed and nonchalant about this, and she told me how last year the whole class had designed a mummy coffin, and ironically, our classmate hiding under

the table was the one the coffin was designed for! He fit perfectly and could hide in this coffin, similar to how he was hiding under the desk. It was obvious he was a class clown, yet also polite, smart, and innocuous. She then handed out the printed skits to each student and had them pick parts. Everyone had a part and most of the students seemed really excited to role-play.

The skit was a story that incorporated all of the aforementioned terms and involved lawyers, a judge, students, and a rock star. One of the lines that really made sense and stuck out in my mind was, “Would you take something off the shelf at a grocery store without paying for it? No, because it’s stealing. Well, why would you think you can download games and music for free?” This skit was a fun and easy way to understand some complex concepts. It was also a good way to get the students to understand why illegal downloads, piracy, plagiarism can harm people and businesses; and how they can avoid breaking these rules. My older brother works for ESA: Entertainment Software Associates in Washington D.C, and travels around the world to speak about piracy. He feels very strongly about this topic and was pleased to hear Mrs. Beetle was directly addressing these issues with students. My brother helped design a program to teach students about these terms and sent me some pamphlets, light up pens, and posters to share with Mrs. Beetle and her classes. The pens were a great incentive for the quiz they would have on these terms!

Students then picked parts for their skit. James the “class clown” got to be the rock star. Naturally, he played the part very well. Most students really assumed their characters. A small freckled faced boy played the judge, reading his part with sternness and professionalism. He was small, but had a tough, no-nonsense image. He was a

football player for the school and was always wearing his jersey. I noticed he was very bright and helpful to his classmates and teacher. I learned a lot about the students' personalities even as they were pretending to act as someone else. The first round of role-playing was their practice round. Next class was the live performance. Students set the stage by bringing in props. The role-playing final was done in the art classroom instead of the computer room, because the art room was set up more like a courtroom. Students seemed very excited. This exercise was preparing them for acting in their Public Service Announcement videos.

The next class I observed was the introduction to the actual Public Service Announcement lesson. Mrs. Beetle went over the five character traits, probing into the meaning of each. Students replied with comments like, "Responsibility would be when you get your school work done before after-school activities." She explained the other traits, some more in-depth than others. After discussing the terms, she told the students they would then create a thirty second Public Service Announcement about one of the character traits and that they needed to involve an element of surprise. She then showed them a few professional Public Service Announcements and then a couple former student Public Service Announcements. During the viewing of these Public Service Announcements she encouraged them to figure out the character trait and the element of surprise in each one. The element of surprise was something you wouldn't expect to happen.

The first Public Service Announcement consisted of a lunchroom scene where a new student sits alone. Seconds later, a group of popular girls sit down next to her, making her feel welcomed. The students were excited to identify the trait, singing along

with the Christina Aguilera song that played in the background and quietly whispering, “Empathy, it’s empathy!” When asked to identify the element of surprise in this Public Service Announcement a student responded, “Well, it’s like people who normally wouldn’t do this actually did it, it was the popular girls.” Their behaviors were the element of surprise. The next video had the song “Respect” playing in the background. The students were cheering, dancing in their seats and singing along. They were still paying attention, so Mrs. Beetle was accepting of their enthusiasm. The scene was a crowded bus where a young boy dressed in black with piercings and headphones stood up, offering his seat to an elderly woman. The students immediately identified the element of surprise. It was the young boy who appeared to be super cool, listening to his heavy metal and ignoring life, yet, in fact, he wasn’t truly ignoring his surroundings. He exhibited care and awareness by giving his seat to an older woman who needed it more. When Mrs. Beetle played the previous students’ videos, the class was excited to see friends or people they knew. They remembered the assembly from last year and remembered the Public Service Announcements the students had made. The students all wanted to know if their video would be played during the assembly this year. The students seemed enthused and eager to appear on the big screen for all to see. Mrs. Beetle was happy to tell them that the whole school would be seeing their videos at the assembly.

Now that the projects had been addressed and rules and standards set, it was time for students to create, work together, and start the process of promoting positive change. The students began creating art, becoming activists of what mattered to them.



### **Sketching and “Places everyone, Places!”**

As the sketching process began in Mr. Burgundy’s classroom, I observed with my pen in one hand, sketchbook in the other, and an audio recorder in my pocket. I made my rounds, peering over students’ shoulders. I talked to many students and began to take mental notes, as well as jot down what I observed. Students focused mainly on 9/11, recycling, war, oil spills, and animal cruelty. (see Appendix G: Pie Chart of Topics Chosen By Students.) After seeing so many of the same themes, I began to wonder if there was a meaning behind the students’ topic of choice. I was very surprised when I spoke with students and uncovered the meaning behind their artwork.

First, I focused on Philip, who I spoke of earlier. He chose 9/11 and I was curious as to why. As I spoke with him, I realized he did not just choose 9/11 because he was aware it happened. He expressed that his father talked about 9/11 excessively, particularly at the dinner table. Philip knew a lot about 9/11 and shared many facts with me. He said, “Our neighbor was born exactly on that day at 9:00 in the morning – he is the kid across the street. My dad asks him a lot of questions and the parents do not like talking about it. It was a bad day, yet they still gave birth to him, so it was also a good day. He’s ten now.” It was clear that Philip, like his father, felt strongly about what had happened on that day. He readily absorbed the information his father shared with him, and he was passionate about the topic. He most likely bonded with his father through these discussions. He had learned a lot from this tragic event.

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Phillip  
and  
are needed to view this picture.

*Figure 1. Phillip's work, 2011, colored pencil drawing, "11x17".*

Animal cruelty was another big topic, with visual images of sad dogs, bruised kittens, and bunnies with scars. One boy student focused on the mistreatment of elephants. He had been involved in numerous fundraisers in grammar school for elephant mistreatment. He was against the poaching of elephants for the use of their ivory tusks and the mistreatment of elephants in circuses. The image and the story go hand in hand and to see the actual effort he put forth at such a young age was moving. He had stories full of meaning, one in particular that was close to home. The young boy strongly believes this topic is important and has chosen to continue his activist stance, in hopes for a better life for these creatures. When students have a meaningful reason to create artwork such as the previous examples, they are willing and ready to participate in learning, creating, and sharing their work with others (Long, 2008). This way, the world around them can also be profoundly affected by their work and message.

Figure 2. Tim's work, 2011, colored pencil drawing, "11x17".

*Figure 2.* Tim's work, 2011, colored pencil drawing, "11x17".

Another effective piece of student artwork reflected the subject of death and dying. I did not realize the subject matter at the time I had asked Cindy, the young girl, about her art work. As I walked by, I saw her putting her piece in the drawer, since it was clean up time. I approached her, smiled, and asked, "Can I see your work before you put it away?"

Figure 3. Cindy's work, 2011, colored pencil drawing, "11x 17".

*Figure 3.* Cindy's work, 2011, colored pencil drawing, "11x 17".

I looked down and saw a coffin and a girl crying. She pleasantly said, “It’s about my dad. He died last year, and that’s me and my family,” pointing to the people in the picture. I was taken back. I wasn’t expecting such an emotionally-based topic. I told the young girl that this must be a very meaningful piece of artwork for her. She smiled and went back to her seat and started talking with her friends. I wondered if I would be capable of telling someone the meaning of this piece without crying. This project allowed her to express sadness, bring back memories, and honor her father, as he was and will always be a meaningful part of her life. To share this with others was courageous, and I admired this young sixth grader for the strength she had. At times I think some of these middle school students have a better outlook on life and deeper understanding of the world than some adults. Mrs. Beetle often remarked, “Kids are a lot smarter than you think.” This is very true, as I was surprised and pleased to see this powerful piece of artwork come from this young courageous girl.

A young girl named Becky created a piece of artwork on cancer. Her piece was beautiful, which surprised me, since she was constantly speaking out of turn, making goofy comments, and being reprimanded. Becky seemed to appear a particular way on the surface, but if you observed her artwork, another side comes to life. Through her artwork, I observed that beneath the jovial façade, was a serious and contemplative young woman. This idea reflects the comment made earlier during the interview with Mr. Burgundy, how through student artwork you can peel back layers to see a different side to each student. Becky drew an image of what appeared to be an elderly lady, maybe her grandmother.

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*Figure 4. Becky's work, 2011, colored pencil drawing, "11x17".*

This older women was wearing a handkerchief wrap on her head, a gown, and a rectangle on her stomach which held a heart – half healthy and half decayed and dying. Two angels were on either shoulder. It reminded me of my own sweet grandmother. I proceeded to interview Becky, to gain greater understand of the meaning of her creation, and to find out who the elderly women was. Speaking to Becky one-on-one, I observed a whole different persona. She was quiet, sweet, and a bit shy. Becky explained, "This is Grandma, she died of cancer awhile ago, and these are the angels that are my Grandma's soul when she died." I let her know this drawing reminded me of my grandmother and I was happy she shared it with me. She smiled and seemed pleased I had formed a connection with her work. The work was meaningful to both of us; a true testament to the living connections art can forge between people.

After students completed their projects, they then shared their work with their classmates, as well as Mr. Burgundy, during a final critique. Mr. Burgundy told me that he does not always have critiques after projects are completed. Yet, this project definitely had a greater impact when a critique followed the completion. The critique gave students the opportunity to express to their classmates personally, through words, the meaning of their work, rather than merely writing about it. When students shared, they held their piece up at the front of the room, becoming the center of attention. Mr. Burgundy was sitting in the back observing the critiques, while each student took the spot light. Before the artist spoke, they allowed their classmates the opportunity to figure out what their work was about. After the classmates determined the perceived meaning of each piece, the artist then had the freedom to tell their own story behind their work, bringing light to the real meaning.

Critiques were new to most of Mr. Burgundy's students. Being sixth graders, they were just entering middle school. In elementary school, especially in the younger grades, critiques generally do not occur. Most students in Mr. Burgundy's class had never experienced a critique, and did not know what the concept meant. I was very curious to see how students would react to the critique. Would they be listening to their classmates, participating, taking suggestions, and enjoying sharing their work? As students took the stage, you could see the critique was necessary and beneficial; it validated their hard work. The critique allowed the artist to educate their audience – their classmates – and bring to the forefront a particular issue they felt strongly about. Many of the issues shared were personal to students, which made the work even more powerful. This critique is the

first step to activism. In the eyes of Whittaker (1993) and Dewhurst (2010) the sharing of the work is equally as important as the creation of it.

Mrs. Beetle's class observation took place in the form of collecting data during discussions and watching students create their videos. Students would break into their groups discussing who does what, who was acting, holding the camera, and so on. I usually would pick a group and ask if I could see what they were engaged in. They always welcomed me, and even allowed me to make suggestions. I found one aspect very interesting: Mrs. Beetle allowed her students to enter the halls and do their filming without supervision! This could have resulted in major problems. Some groups would be downstairs, others upstairs, and some upstairs and around the corner. The students were entrusted to be on their own throughout the building, with expensive pieces of equipment. No problems ever arose during the many times I observed. I believe the relationship Mrs. Beetle formed with her students allowed trust to be established. In return, the students respected her enough to follow rules and behave responsibly on their own. This freedom goes along with a critical pedagogy, giving students not only freedom of speech, but the freedom to be on their own and function independently. This established the teacher's role as a mentor, and not a dictator (Freire, 1970).

This freedom and responsibility that students were granted led to serious care being taken in the filming. Students were in charge of an expensive piece of equipment – the video camera – and they created, as a group, their own video that would be shown to the whole school. They all wanted to re-watch each clip on the camera to make sure angles were perfect and distance was just right; they also delighted in seeing themselves appear on screen. I did encounter a student or two that shied away from the camera, in

hopes they could direct and be supportive on the sidelines. I followed one group more closely than the others; the students in this group seemed to be excited when they saw me arriving. One of the boys in the group always had a story to tell me about his home life, art projects, even his Halloween costume. I felt very welcomed. The young girl in the group named Megan was very sweet, polite, and a bit shy when it came to being filmed on camera. When I talked to her, her cheeks would get a little rosy and she would smile shyly. She had mentioned to me before that she didn't want to be on camera, although she enjoyed being the director and getting everyone else prepared to be filmed. I had a feeling at some point she would be required to make an appearance on the big screen. The upcoming scene called for extra help and this meant Megan had the option to either help the team or shy away. She decided she would participate in the scene. I was happy about her decision. In the scene, students were pretending they were busy configuring their locker combinations as the "bullies" walked by them in the hallway. No one wanted to draw attention to themselves while the bullies passed, avoiding eye contact and allowing them a clear path. Everyone had fun creating this fear-filled atmosphere. Even Megan appeared to relax and enjoy herself, becoming more at ease on the camera.

A few weeks later, I got the opportunity to interview Megan, I asked how she felt about the whole school seeing the video, and her being on camera. (see Appendix F: Interview Questions – Student). She stated, "I didn't want to be in it, but I had to. After a while though, I was excited because I wanted people to see me doing good things." I think her fears subsided because she knew this video was meaningful and had a message with a huge impact. Megan wanted other faculty and students to witness her making a difference, as she appeared in the video, taking a stance.



## **Pardon the Interruption**

Mrs. Beetle's class was taking a mini-break from their own videos to create a music video. The counselor last year wrote lyrics to the beat of Michael Jackson's, "You Wanna Be Starting Something." The new song she created was titled, "You Got To Be Spreading Kindness." They never got around to actually completing the music video last year and decided they would complete it for this year. Each group of four or five students in Mrs. Beetle's computer classes had a verse they would act out and film, while the school chorus would do the singing. The Computer Arts class would then edit and apply the music with the corresponding clips. They would also create a CD cover for this single. The students seamlessly moved into creating the music video. I listened in as students discussed how they would portray their verse. It was humorous to see students pick the shy girl or the scrawny meek boy as a bully. One of the group's verses involved a cell phone text. The group was planning their nasty text message to a friend about another student. They were discussing the extra close zoom with the camera on the cell phone. The text read "Mikey is sooooo weird!"

In another group, a large Puerto Rican boy spinning in his chair turned around and glanced at me. At first it looked like tears on his cheek, or possibly dirt. Then Mrs. Beetle said, "You see Jorge can make himself cry" pointing to his tears. Jorge would look at the light and tears would eventually roll down his face, perfect for acting in the video. A group member laughed and said, "Jorge wipe the tears, no one can take you seriously!" I started laughing. Everyone was enthused about creating the music video. I noticed that Mrs. Beetle was just as excited as her students. I had discovered at the end of one of my observations that she also had a theater degree before she received her Art Education

Masters. Acting and videography were her specialties. She was very enthusiastic and knowledgeable on the subject matter, which transmitted to the other students.

Around the time the video projects had been assigned, an incident of suicide occurred in a nearby suburban middle school. A fourteen-year-old boy who had been bullied about being gay was pushed to his breaking point. Only a few weeks into the school year, he ended his life. This was a real eye opener for students to hear about a tragic event so close to home. The new music video project interruption had slipped in at the perfect time. It provoked a discussion on the importance of creating this video. Mrs. Beetle wanted to talk to students about the relevance of making this video, and the worth of their efforts to spread the message of kindness. She brought up the fourteen-year-old boy who recently committed suicide and had students think about what the last remark was or last action that pushed him over the edge. Why did he feel his last resort was to end his life? Students were very quiet and serious as Mrs. Beetle talked about this matter, reminding students that this is a real occurrence. The consensus in the room was that the video was worth creating and showing during the character traits assembly. The students felt the video would not have long-term effects, but if the short-term effects stopped someone from bullying for a single day, it was a worthy endeavor. Mrs. Beetle assured them that this video would be powerful and leave a lasting impact on others. Mrs. Beetle said, "This is a huge act of kindness. We are spreading it throughout the whole school! We are showing it to 660 kids!" The students cheered and there were many positive comments to add onto Mrs. Beetle's statement. After this powerful discussion, the students resumed filming.

The discussion on bullying was also brought up in Mr. Burgundy's class. Bullying was happening at schools all over the world. Addressing bullying openly was a way to get students to recognize their actions, and the actions of others, in an effort to prevent this behavior from occurring. Mr. Burgundy commented that at one point in his life, he was a victim to vicious bullying. This painful occurrence was still a vivid memory that lives on through the artwork that he creates at home, as well as in class.

### **Artist in the Building**

During my weekly observations I noticed the stark white canvas I mentioned earlier (the 15 foot by 42 inch piece of paper pinned to the side black board) was starting to transform. It was completely blank during my first few observations, then lines and shapes appeared. Mr. Burgundy's artwork was being created in the front of these curious young adults. The final piece was bold, powerful, and intense; vivid with color and meaning. Mr. Burgundy has his artwork displayed in many local galleries. A main theme of his work stems from a single event in his life. (see Appendix H: Artist Statement- "Mr. Burgundy"). Right after graduating from college, Mr. Burgundy was beaten up by a group of power-hungry men. The men felt they were better than him and wanted to make their power visible to all. After their victory, they left him bruised, beaten, and abandoned. He combined this experience with a play he had read during his college years called *Rhinoceros*, written by absurdist playwright Eugene Ionesco. In this story, a rhinoceros runs through a small town, causing people to physically become rhinoceroses. As people in power, leaders such as military and government, "turn," so does everyone else. The main character in the play is the only one who does not conform. He bandages his head to prevent a horn from growing, in an effort to avoid becoming one of "them."

His pastel drawing depicts these power hungry creatures with their horns, showing reflections, guillotines, and a self-depiction as the bandaged character. The scene tells a story and shows many different depictions of this incident and the feelings behind it. The meaning of this piece was powerful and I wondered if he shared its message with his students. Students could not have missed this large creation in front of them and were inevitably curious about what it meant.



Figure 5. Walk 4, 2001, Pastel on paper, 42 inches x 15 feet.

When I asked Mr. Burgundy how students reacted to his work or if he shared the true meaning with them, he said he addressed his work with every class, “There was a student or two who asked what it was about, or what he was creating.” He took ten to fifteen minutes to explain his work and answer questions in each class. I asked how he told his story: Did he only mention certain aspects due to the harsh nature of his piece or did he share the whole truth with his students? I already knew he did not hold back from his students, so I assumed he shared the ideas and thoughts his artwork portrayed. He responded with:

I explained a little of the play *Rhinoceros* by Eugene Ionesco, and how the play is basically about being yourself and not feeling like you have to conform or follow the herd or be like everybody else. The main character in the play, Berenger, bandages his head, so the guy in my drawing has his head in bandages because he doesn’t want to be like everybody else. I did explain briefly about how when I

was in college, I was beat up by a group of six or seven guys. They beat me up because they felt the need to prove themselves as men and display their masculinity. Why people would do that like a herd of wild animals or mindless stupid creatures, I do not know. But it happens more so with men who are aggressive. My artwork is combining the two ideas. So I then try to bring it to sixth or seventh graders. I talk to them about bullying and picking on other kids, peer pressure, and so on. I try to tie it all together in my artwork. That's what it is about in a more kid simplified way. (Mr. Burgundy Interview, May 2011)

Since bullying is something that had become a very prevalent issue in schools, the connection between his experience and bullying allowed for the work to take on greater meaning to his students. It was bringing this issue to the surface once again to address directly, and to promote change. The reinforcements on this topic were circulating. There was Mrs. Beetle with her discussion on the suicide and bullying; the School Counselor recreating a song about bullying; and Mr. Burgundy allowing his artwork to speak to this issue. All were true activists for a cause.

After speaking to Mr. Burgundy about his work, I wanted to hear the students' thoughts on this completed piece. The artwork had been removed shortly after it was finished to be placed into a local gallery. I wondered if the student's would remember his work. Did this piece leave a lasting impression on them, like it had for me? It had been a few weeks since the work had been taken down, so when I asked the students if they remembered Mr. Burgundy's creation, I did not know what responses to expect.

I circled around from table to table inquiring if they saw the huge pastel drawing Mr. Burgundy had on the wall, and if they remembered what it was about. One girl said,

“It was about an old movie about a guy, where other people had horns and he didn’t want a horn, so he imagined himself in a window or his head being cut in half. It was kind of about bullying. It was a nice idea, in a weird way. But that’s art... it’s not always what you expect.” Another boy replied, “The green guy was Mr. Burgundy looking at himself as being a bad person, and seeing a bad person.... Then he wrapped his head up because he didn’t want horns to come out. He thought he was going to be a bad person in the mirror. Yet, he was trying not to be.”

They understood the concept and recalled the size and the cool chalk (pastels) he used. They realized it had to do with their teacher, a play, and a good vs. evil idea; with good overcoming the bad. I was happy to get these results and was even more excited to tell Mr. Burgundy that his students remembered his piece. Shortly after Mr. Burgundy shared his work, it was time for his students to share theirs. I was interested in seeing how the critique would go with sixth graders and some serious topics.

### **The Students’ Critique**

The time came for Mr. Burgundy’s critique of the project titled: “If you could change one meaningful thing in the world.” All students would be presenting their work. This process took a few class periods; it was not rushed and everyone had a chance to speak. Mr. Burgundy also had comments and opinions to share. As one girl shared her piece, a discussion broke out about homelessness. Her work was a drawing of a girl thinking, with her little finger in the air and a thought bubble appearing above her head as the main idea. The image of a homeless person near a rock was tiny in one corner and a large framework of a house was seen in another.

*Figure 6. Sarah's work, 2011, colored pencil drawing, "11x17".*

From her work, Mr. Burgundy began to speak about the topic of homeless people. He spoke to the students like real people sharing his thoughts and waiting to hear their responses. Aside from the artwork itself, he wanted to talk about the issues and meaning behind each piece. He stated:

I'm not judging people in my life. But I'm gonna get real here. I'm gonna be completely honest, I have walked past someone who technically, I'm assuming is homeless, and I have given them some money from my pocket. And then, I have also walked past homeless people, and absolutely kept walking and gave them nothing. I'm okay for anyone to judge me on that. I've also seen homeless people being completely rude and disrespectful. That's the truth, being real, I'm being honest with you. Most people I feel compassion for because something terrible may have happened in their life, terrible childhood or awful parents, non-existent

parents. Now you're out there asking for money or help and that's okay...but some homeless people may get that money and go get drugs or alcohol. There is no easy answer. It's a tough topic. There isn't a one hundred percent happy ending. With an issue like recycling, most people agree that recycling is good. I'm not the biggest do-gooder in the world, but my wife and I try to recycle as much as we can. (Mr. Burgundy Response, November 2011)

Mr. Burgundy continued on this topic, in an honest and straightforward way. Students had questions. The student holding up her work on homelessness asked, "I have a question for you, getting back to homeless people: What if you saw a little kid our age, wearing nothing but a blanket, what would you do?" Mr. Burgundy replied, "If I saw a kid, I'd feel terrible, I'd call the police. I would even call social services!" Then questions arose about the meaning of social services. It was a discussion that expressed opinions and thoughts of teacher and students – it also led to the explanation of new terms. All of the dialogue was truthful, upfront, and honest.

The critique opened the floor to many topics besides feelings, opinions, and positive feedback. Students loved to praise others and give one another suggestions. One young girl commented at the end of a young boy's critique, "This isn't about your work, but you have a really good vocabulary and a great context of words." Students were respectful and open to learning about one another and the world around them. Each student had the opportunity to act like a teacher, calling on people and responding to what they had to say. This was also similar to each person's role in Mrs. Beetle's video project, students as a team controlled their videos and how they would be acting and setting up



scenes. Mrs. Beetle was merely monitoring and making suggestions when needed. The democratic classroom worked using teamwork in both scenarios.

The critique allowed student stories and experiences to surface as they explained their piece. Many did not have a quick response to their artwork and there usually was an entire story from start to finish. The project allowed creative freedom, and the critique allowed students to share this freedom. A boy named Mike conducted a critique with details, meaning, and an entire story behind the work. Mike held his piece up to the class.

QuickTime™ and a  
H.264 codec  
are needed to view this picture.

*Figure 7. Mike's work, 2011, colored pencil drawing, "11x17".*

There appeared to be a hospital scene with someone sick in bed. After he told the story behind the image, the hospital scene came to life with meaning. Mike took much detail into account, and made sense out of all the elements in the piece. The man in the drawing was a father; the child in the hospital bed was his baby son who was dying of cancer. Over the past five years, Mike expressed he had five family members die of cancer. The color purple in the drawing resembled the walls of a children's hospital. The floor tiles

had drawings on them done by children (similar to the drawings on Mr. Burgundy's ceiling tiles, the boy stated). There was a drawing on the doorknob that the father did for the boy, passing the time as he sat at the hospital with his son. Even the father had minor details, such as a red tie, hands behind his back, and a worried look. Sharing this topic was serious, and the students reflected that seriousness. Everyone learned, became aware, and understood their classmates may have experienced sad, depressing, or painful things in their life. This project allowed for the reality of the issues to come alive, and to be processed, in a group setting.

During the final interviews, students commented on the critique. They felt it was fun and interesting. Students valued the feedback and appreciated being able to talk about their piece. A young girl's comment was definitely worth quoting. Megan, who completed the homeless drawing stated, "Art is important to express your feelings. In science, all we do is learn about stuff... and in art, *teachers learn about you.*" This quote pulled all my findings together. Through art, you get to know students, their life, opinions, ideas and emotions. Students, especially at this age, value sharing, talking, and expressing ideas and issues they feel strongly about. It is part of their coming of age, and becoming part of society. This fact was reiterated as I left the interview and Megan followed me. She pulled me aside and said, "I really like talking to you. You're a good listener." This comment meant a lot to me, and I am glad she could open up and share her ideas and opinions with me. The critique had the same effect on the rest of the students, allowing them to speak, express, share, and feel like they mattered. Their classmates listening intently to each story, and they felt valued and validated.

In Mrs. Beetle's class I gathered some important data from the student interviews. The boy who was the class clown, James, shared some things that made me understand why he may have this fun and playful facade. Mrs. Beetle noticed he was extra goofy when I was around, as if he was showing off. During his interview, I asked if he felt art was important. He stated, "Yes. If you really don't want to go to anyone to get help, you can share your feelings through art." Then when I asked if there was any other issues he would like to address through a piece of artwork, he replied, "I would draw my own perspective on bullying, like maybe something that happened to me in the past... but not draw myself in the picture." These answers were leading to the idea that he may have been a victim to bullying, and art was his way of expressing himself.

After I told Mrs. Beetle about the interview with James, she noted that he often gets picked on about his height, so his interest in creating work about bullying was most likely because he had experienced it directly. She also felt that was the reason he was so involved in the bullying video and eager for the school to view it. His funny, goofy exterior brought attention to his personality, and deflected attention from his physical appearance. James was very intelligent and talking with him once again reinforced the idea of the benefits of addressing social issues in the art classroom. To address these topics of concern, students are able to take a stance, with the intention of creating positive change in our society.

## **Conclusion**

The interviews with students allowed me to see they all felt art was relevant, mostly as a vehicle to express oneself. Some did feel that other school subjects may be more important, but as young middle school students, as they complete more projects, they will begin to see that art is interconnected to the world, and woven into every subject. Many of the sixth graders came from different schools where they had not completed any projects that had to deal with social issues, contemporary art, activism or even the notion that they had options and choices while making their artwork. When asked if they enjoyed this aspect of freedom, addressing world issues, and sharing their work with their class, they all agreed it was interesting that they were allowed to pick issues of their choice, and they enjoyed sharing their work in the final critique. It was inspiring to see the positive feedback.

Although I cannot include the showing of the Public Service Announcements in my paper, Mrs. Beetle found them meaningful. The students' excitement, hard work, teamwork, discussions, filming, editing and the final video were worth all the time and effort devoted to this project. Being seen on the big screen will be the best part for some of the students. Students who created these videos of good character traits and anti-bullying will feel pride as they encourage other students to join them in the hope for a brighter future for students everywhere. Both of the projects were a success even as they were still in progress when I stopped gathering data for this project. Both the long term and short term goals of the students resulted in meaningful work that mattered to them, as well as work that took an activist stance as it spoke to the audience.

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

The findings in my research were based on the data collected from both of my case study sites and backed up by research found in Chapter two of this document. To better understand teaching and incorporating social issues and activism in the classroom, I recommend observing more than two teachers and for a longer period of time to form more in-depth connections. To also have had the opportunity to observe more often and develop stronger relationships with the students, I feel my data could have taken on greater meaning and depth.

My findings revealed that both teachers I observed followed a critical pedagogy framework. A term coined by one of the teachers, “being real,” and humor allowed for teacher and students to form relationships. Through critical pedagogy, a democratic classroom assured students freedom as young adults by allowing them choices and options. Lastly, the teachers relied on their own unique strengths. They taught what and how they knew best. I further discuss these findings below.

I concluded that the teacher’s attitude, presence, and teaching strategies set the tone for this type of teaching. If a teacher addresses social issues and encourages activism in their classroom, they are expecting students to express opinions, thoughts, and feelings. The teacher needs to be able to do the same, allowing students to see they are willing to share their own ideas honestly, interact with students, and learn about their students. At the same time, students also learn about their teacher. A mutual openness is supported. This idea follows the concept of teachers “being real” with their students.

I observed how comfortable the students seemed in both of these settings. Throughout my observations, most students appeared enthusiastic about the projects. All

students were working diligently and enjoying art class. The way students readily asked questions and expressed their opinions showed they were comfortable and at ease in this environment. I found one of the reasons students could be themselves was the idea that both of these teachers were always “being real.” This term “being real,” was coined by Mr. Burgundy, I heard him say it a few times after he finished sharing something about his life, his opinion, or a harsh truth in the world. After engaging in realistic and honest conversations with students, it was clear that students and teacher were equals, listening, speaking and sharing thoughts and opinions. This teacher was not always right and was not always the authority figure. This teacher was not afraid to let students into his world and not afraid to talk about some of the harsh realities of the world around them.

The teachers I observed also allowed humor to be present in the art classroom, another element of “being real.” Humor gave students a sense of comfort. As the teacher made lighthearted jokes, students smiled and laughed. Humor helped students to feel a part of the group and connect to their classmates, and gave them a sense of belonging, which created a safe environment for self-expression. Accepting humor from students showed the easygoing nature of the teacher and classroom setting, which allowed students to freely explore their feelings and emotions. This openness was reflected in their artworks.

The relaxed environment in Mr. Burgundy and Mrs. Beetles art classroom set the stage for a democratic classroom as teacher and students formed trusting relationships and the teacher took the role of mentor as Freire (1970) noted. Students became comfortable understanding what was expected of them. Students took part in discussions, shared thoughts and feelings rather than listening to instructions that required simply

absorbing information. Equal student and teacher participation in these settings allowed students to grow into the role of young adult and citizen in a democratic classroom as Giroux (1988) proposed. Students learned to think for themselves.

The only way students can think independently is through freedom. In order to have a democratic classroom, freedom is essential. Both teachers encouraged students to have freedom in many ways. Mr. Burgundy's class accentuated freedom of choice in subject matter, enabling students to choose subjects that were meaningful to them. Freedom of speech was prevalent in both settings. Students expressed feelings, opinions, insights, and thoughts. One could witness Mrs. Beetle's trust as students had the freedom to work on their videos unsupervised in the hallways. These freedoms and independence in turn gave students confidence and pride in having made their own choices, under the guidance of a helpful mentor. This type of freedom of choice facilitated students as activists who were proud of their opinions as they shared their artwork that encouraged change.

In Mr. Burgundy's class students were encouraged to become activists as they saw Mr. Burgundy take a stance as he developed artwork in front of students in his classroom. His work was meaningful, powerful and at such a large scale, it would be difficult for students to miss. He takes a strong activist stance on a serious topic about an experience that was tragic and meaningful to him and shared it with his students. Students could ask questions about the work and become part of the teacher's art making experience. Mr. Burgundy shared and created for the purpose of wanting and hoping for change in which he completed the same type of assignment he gave to his students.

Students became activists during the final critique in Mr. Burgundy's class telling their story and sharing what was meaningful to them with their classmates.

Contemporary art is powerful when used to initiate discussion of social issues. Like Mr. Burgundy, Mrs. Beetle used video Public Service Announcements, a form of visual culture, as an example of a contemporary art form. Her students took an activist stance against bullying as they filmed videos to be shared with the whole school.

My findings connect under a broad category of "teacher teaching to their strengths." These teachers used their strengths in subject matter, such as Mrs. Beetle, who received an undergraduate degree in theater, utilizing acting and video in her Public Service Announcement lesson as well as the music video. Since theater is a subject she has studied extensively, it is beneficial to share her insights with students since she is very knowledgeable in this area. Mr. Burgundy and Mrs. Beetle also have developed their own teaching styles and allowed their character traits to come through as they teach. These teachers are not trying to be something or someone they are not. Being honest, sharing pieces of their life, and bringing humor into their classroom is how they form relationships with students, build trust, and encourage student-expression. Students see the authentic teacher, Mr. Burgundy and Mrs. Beetle, and develop a realistic view of their teacher.

Bringing these points together using the idea of a critical pedagogy, teaching social issues to middle school students, and promoting activism allowed for art education to take on a greater meaning. Mr. Burgundy and Mrs. Beetles art classes took on world issues, contemporary artists, and students as activists for positive change. Teaching art in this manner allowed students to learn about the world, their teachers, and what is



meaningful to them. Art can teach students to get involved and take a stance for what they feel strongly about and learn how to be an active citizen now and in the future (Giroux, 1988).

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10/1/11

Dear Administrator/Principal:

As a graduate student at Buffalo State College, I am conducting a research project on the benefits of addressing social issues in the art education classroom and promoting an environment for art activism to take place. In my search for teachers who teach in this manner I have heard from reliable resources that the art educator at your school district teaches following these ideas and would greatly benefit my study. I have discussed my research project with your art educator who has agreed to be a participant. I hope you will agree to these terms also.

I will be collecting data through observation of students and teacher during class time, as well as informal interviews, questionnaires, and conversations during class with students and teacher. I will be taking photographs of student artwork, and video and/or audio recordings of some class sessions.

Your school's participation will be helpful to my research project and is completely voluntary. There are no major risks for you or your students and all information will be confidential and used for research purposes only. Fictitious names will be used to protect your students and teachers' identities as well as the school's site and its members.

I would certainly appreciate your consideration of this request to further my graduate research at Buffalo State College to further my own education and that of others on this subject matter in the visual arts.

I look forward to hearing from you and setting up a time to further discuss my research project and fill out any necessary paperwork to begin my study.

Thank you,

Vonessa Toczynski

- 
- \_\_\_\_\_ **I approve the study** described above and will move forward on approving the researcher to conduct it within my school.
  - OR-
  - \_\_\_\_\_ **I do not approve the study** described above and will not move forward on approving the researcher to conduct it within my school

Administrator

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**\*\*If you are unable to reach a member of the research team and have general questions, or you have concerns or complaints about the research study, research team, 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 [gamedg@rf.buffalostate.edu](mailto:gamedg@rf.buffalostate.edu).**

10/1/11

Dear Art Teacher:

As a graduate student at Buffalo State College, I am conducting a research project on the benefits of addressing social issues in the art education classroom. This study is to understand the content, methods, and strategies used by teachers when using this type of curriculum.

I will collect information from teachers and students through observations during class time, informal interviews and conversations during classes, questionnaires, photographs of student artwork, and video and/or audio recording of some classroom sessions.

Your participation will be helpful to my research project and is completely voluntary. There are no major risks as class will be conducted in its normal manner. All information will be confidential and used for educational research purposes only. Fictitious names will be used to protect your identity as well as your students and school itself.

If you chose to participate you may withdraw at any time during the study. No penalty will result if you do not participate, however, I would certainly appreciate you and your students participation in this research study furthering my education and others knowledge on this subject matter.

Please complete the bottom of this form. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Vonessa Toczynski

- 
- \_\_\_\_\_ I agree upon these terms and **I will be participating** in the study described above.
  - OR-
  - \_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree upon these terms and **I will not be participating** in the study described above.

Teacher

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\*\*If you are unable to reach a member of the research team and have general questions, or you have concerns or complaints about the research study, research team, 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).

10/01/11

Dear Student/Parent or Guardian:

As a graduate student at Buffalo State College, I am conducting a research project on the benefits of addressing social issues in the art education classroom. This study is to understand the content, methods, and strategies used by teachers when using this type of curriculum.

I will collect information from teachers and students through observations during class time, informal interviews and conversations during classes, photographs of student artwork, and audio recording of some classroom sessions. The audio recordings will not be used in the final project they are only used to reevaluate data for my own analysis.

Your child's participation will be helpful to my research project and is completely voluntary. There are no major risks as class will be conducted in its normal manner. All information will be confidential and used for educational research purposes only. Fictitious names will be used to protect your child's identity and that of the teachers and the school.

You may withdraw your student from the study at any time. No penalty will result if your child does not participate, however, I would certainly appreciate your child's participation in this research study furthering my education and others knowledge on this subject matter.

Please complete the bottom of this letter and return to your teacher by 10/10/11. You may contact me at any time per the e-mail address or phone number below thank you.

Sincerely,

Vonessa Toczynski

---

My legal guardian, (please put name here)\_\_\_\_\_, and I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree upon these terms and **I will be participating** in the study described above.

-OR-

My legal guardian, \_\_\_\_\_, and I, \_\_\_\_\_, do not agree upon these terms and **I will not be participating** in the study described above.

Student's Signature:\_\_\_\_\_ Date:\_\_\_\_\_

Guardian's Signature:\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\*\*If you are unable to reach a member of the research team and have general questions, or you have concerns or complaints about the research study, research team, 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).



**Casual/ Semi-Structured Interview**  
**• Interview with Teacher**

**School**\_\_\_\_\_ **Teacher**\_\_\_\_\_

**Number of Years Teaching**\_\_\_\_\_ **Date**\_\_\_\_\_

1. What type of issues have you addressed with your students, and how did you go about doing this?
2. Why do you address social issues with your students?
3. When did you start incorporating social issues and activism in your curriculum?
4. What are some responses from parents or other faculty that you receive from these kinds of lessons?
5. Have you ever had students that said they were uncomfortable or that you could tell were uneasy about the topics you had chosen?
6. In what ways have you incorporated an activist stance in your classroom?
7. Has incorporating social issues and activism in your curriculum ever been controversial in your school setting or community?
8. Would you consider yourself an activist? Elaborate?
9. Overall what have you learned teaching from this activist stance in your classroom?

**Casual/ Semi-Structured Interview**  
**• Interview with Students**

**School:**

**Teacher:**

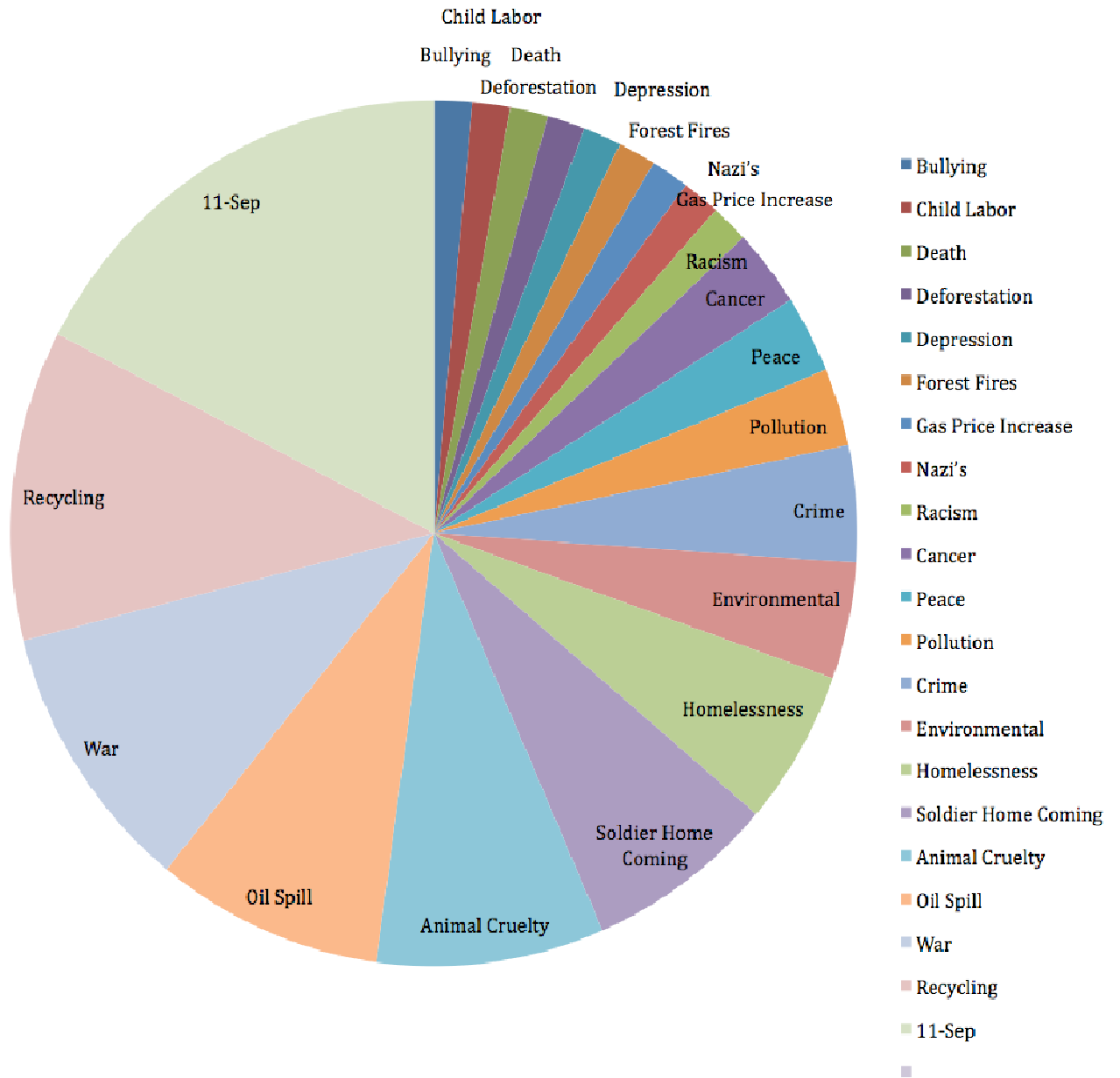
**Name:**

**Date:**

1. What is your favorite school subject? Why?
2. What is it about Art class that you enjoy?
3. Do you think Art is important? Why?
4. What kind of things do you create artwork about?
5. What projects in Art class this year did you like best? Why?
6. Have you ever done a project that addresses a social issue or problems in the world? Tell me about it?
7. Do you like talking about social issues, or problems in the world in your Art class? Do you like making artwork about these problems? Why?
8. When you made artwork about a particular social issue did you show anyone, a friend or family member, or did you share your feelings with others about the issue? Explain?
9. Is there an issue today in the world or your life that you feel strongly about? Would you like to make a piece of artwork on this issue?

# If You Could Change One Meaningful Thing in the World?

Out of 70 students



## Mr. Burgundy's: Artist Statement

Rhinoceroses, guillotines, windows, mirrors, and simplified heads without bodies have constituted a recurring vocabulary of symbols that I have been exploring in my ink and pastel drawings the last several years. Each of these symbols carry their own distinct metaphors. For example a rhinoceros is known as a small-minded animal that violently attacks without reason, guillotines symbolize judgment and instant death, windows and mirrors represent a dual reality, perception, truth, and paranoia. In my artwork I have focused on creating a visual narrative that exposes the grotesque nature inherent in men. Themes I am specifically investigating in my work include masculinity, violence, control, peer pressure and conformity.

The inspiration for my work, in part, is the play *Rhinoceros*, written by absurdist playwright Eugene Ionesco. In this story, a rhinoceros runs through a small town in France, causing people to physically become rhinoceroses seemingly due to a mysterious epidemic. As people in power, such as military and government leaders “turn”, so does everyone else. Berenger, the main character in the play, is the only one who doesn’t conform. He bandages his head to prevent a horn from growing out of it in an effort to avoid becoming one of “them”.

One year after reading *Rhinoceros*, the themes of the play became horrifically real to me. I was at a bar, singled out, and beaten by seven men. These men decided that I was weak and an easy target. They circled me, humiliated me, beat me, and ran off without being caught or facing any consequences. That night, these men decided to follow their animal instincts. They became rhinoceroses. Years later I’ve realized that what Ionesco intended as absurd is in fact our reality. Society is filled with men who want to control and hold power over those they view as weaker.

There is one central figure in almost all of my pieces, an oval-shaped and bandaged head. This character represents the Everyman. He has no arms or legs because he represents psychological rather than physical trauma. In other works there are three horned figures standing in a doorway. They vicariously and voyeuristically live through the pain of others. Lines pass through their horns questioning their perceived power.

We live in an absurd world where power is more important than life. My works are about power: those who hold power, those who abuse power, and those who are powerless.