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Qualitative Research in Teaching Diversity in a Non-Diverse High School Setting Using Contemporary Art

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Qualitative Action Research on Teaching Diversity in a Non-Diverse High School Setting Using Contemporary Art

by

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Dr. Shirley Hayes

Project Advisor
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Abstract

This qualitative action research study examined the effects of introducing diverse contemporary artworks into a non-diverse educational setting. For 3 months, 18 female high school students explored a range of artists, art styles, and artworks, in aid to discovering their own diverse qualities as well as the diversity of their classmates. Through participatory action research, I investigated how diverse contemporary artwork impacted student actions, discussions, and artworks. With the assistance of the transformative learning theory, I expected to convert students with non-accepting diversity views into unbiased young women. My research included data gathered from an assortment of alumni interviews, student questionnaires, class discussions and observations, and student artwork. Using content analysis, I read through my data numerous times, reading, re-reading and coding, until I was able to focus my discoveries into many categories. From there I narrowed the categories down to my main findings: changing the definition of diversity; the separation in appreciation for learning about diversity can segregate the class; diversity education is crucial in a non-diverse educational settings; changing student appreciation for diversity and others’ differences is possible. Through my research, I was able to discover that when students are exposed to a wide range of differences, they are more likely to be open-minded about people’s diversity. Experiencing diverse artwork opens the door to discussing how people are different and promotes discussing the student’s differences. Ultimately, this study demonstrated how studying diverse art can improve student artwork. Overall, there are many positive effects on teaching and discussing diverse contemporary artworks in a non-diverse educational setting, especially when used as a tool to assist students while they develop an appreciation for people’s differences.
Chapter I

Introduction

The day has come. The students managed to walk across the stage without falling, tossed graduation caps high in the air, took countless tear-filled pictures, said goodbyes to former teachers; they are officially graduated from high school. At this point many students wonder what is next for them. Each year, Sacred Spirit Academy graduates a class of about 75 students, with a majority of students attending college promptly after graduation. These students venture off on their own, holding numerous high school memories and ample aspirations regarding their future. Some students immediately enter the work force, some attend local community colleges, or small schools in the area, while the majority embark on a journey to Ivy League schools or a large university. Quickly Sacred Spirit Academy graduates come to realize they are no longer in the comforting walls of the Academy. Each graduate is immersed into a more diverse world then they have ever experienced. Students begin to encounter people of varied religions, races, sexuality, disabilities, economic backgrounds, and cultures. With little experience through tolerance and appreciation of diversity, students often look back on the comforting memories of their homogenous community of friends and teachers at Sacred Spirit Academy and wish they were still there.

In the spring of 2010, I had the opportunity to participate in Buffalo State College’s Anne Frank Project. I was asked by a former professor to incorporate a project we had done in a graduate class into my art curriculum at the Academy. The project consisted of learning about Anne Frank, her struggles while she was in hiding, and how she found comfort in her own little corner in her family’s crowded hideout. The project was
designed so each student would imaginatively create their own “comfort corner” where they could escape from their own problems. Each student designed and created a model of a corner using their artistic creativity and imagination. At the end of the project my professor asked if she could join the class on the day of the critique to observe the students and take pictures for her presentation, so I obliged. During one of the class critiques, my professor explained how she came up with the “comfort corner” project and the significance of the corner to Anne Frank. At some point in the discussion, my professor asked the students what they knew about the history of Anne Frank. One of the students graciously raised her hand and described how we had discussed Anne Frank prior to the project, but she still did not know too much about her. As this student was relaying her lack of knowledge about Anne Frank, another student responded in a disparaging tone, “She was the Jew that was murdered.” Now, even though Sacred Spirit Academy is a Catholic school, I knew at least one student in the class was Jewish. After class and dealing with the situation, I began to reevaluate the way I presented the project. Just presenting the students with historical facts about Anne Frank did not create actual understanding of the trials and tribulations she had to endure because of discrimination. At this point I began to realize the lack of diversity in the classroom. Predominantly the class was composed of upper middle class, Catholic, white females students. I wanted students to experience diversity in order to create empathy and understanding of people’s differences.

Though this moment alerted me to the problem, it was when a group of former students came to visit on a break from college that I realized how problematic the lack in diversity at Sacred Spirit Academy was. “I had no idea Miss R” are expressions I hear
repeatedly as they referred to their new world experiences, mainly the diversity. Students generally leave Sacred Spirit Academy with transcripts filled with advanced placement courses, high-test scores, and ample amounts of community service, yet many students lack experience with others different from themselves. After I heard all about their first day drama of getting lost on campus, hating their assigned roommate, or questioning whether the campus food is even edible, the students began to discuss the small world of Sacred Spirit Academy.

Sacred Spirit Academy is one of the most diverse private high schools in our area, yet, it is incomparable to the real world. Students tend to feel as if our school has failed to educate them about issues of diversity such as race, religion, economical background, sexual preference, and especially gender. After having similar discussions with student after student, I began to question whether I am doing what I need to do as an educator to prepare my students for the diverse world after Sacred Spirit Academy. I feel these students are being sheltered, coddled, and led naively into the world. So I began to wonder, since the art world is so diverse, how I would use contemporary art and art discussions to help my students feel better prepared to appreciate and tolerate people’s differences.

The majority of parochial high schools are synonymous entities of uniform, curriculum, and expectations. Schools are mainly divided by religion, gender, and socioeconomic categories, which creates a homogenous population. Without adequate exposure to people different from themselves, students fail to develop a tolerance for diversity. When students lack knowledge of positive experiences in learning about people’s differences, they may resort to other ways of managing diversity, which may be
negative (Smith & Watson, 2009). Students may begin to believe culturally created popular stereotypes, and even sometimes begin to take negative action against the people they see as different. Within the past few years bullying statistics show increases (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). One’s intolerance to people’s differences is the root cause of bullying (Bullying Statistics, 2009).

Pick up any newspaper from within the last few months and one will likely find a new tragic story of another teen taking his/or her own life because of bullying (Bullying Statistics, 2009). The American Justice Department reported that in one month’s time one in four students are abused in some form by another youth (Bullying statistics, 2009). Intolerance and ignorance is the root cause of all bullying; choosing to bully or degrade a person begins with the misunderstanding of one’s differences (Bullying statistics, 2009). Maybe they are more shy, smarter, or less fortunate, but the creation of this harassment begins with a student’s awareness of another’s differences, labeling them as a target or an outsider (Bullying statistics, 2009).

Though childhood is the traditional time for schoolyard bullying, it is during the teen years that the art of bullying is ‘perfected’; gossip, pranks, notes, and name calling become typical tactics used to intimidate and harass outsiders (Johnson, 2004). With the advancement of computers and cell phones, technology has given bullies a new weapon in their arsenal (Johnson, 2004). Unsuspecting teens can quickly become victims, receiving electronic harassment by e-mail, text message, cell phones, or Web pages (Johnson, 2004). Simon Johnson (2004), author of Keep Your Kids Safe on the Internet, believes that one of the most destructive elements to cyber bullying is its invasiveness into an area where teens typically feel safe in their own home. As former IT specialist,
Johnson has a great understanding of all of the uses of technology today. He explains, “This is a very serious issue; unlike traditional bullying where teens can come home and be safe, cyber bullying occurs 24/7” (p. 137). I feel that teachers should help student appreciate people’s differences, which may help combat the appeal of bullying and create better understanding and appreciation for diversity. Though bullying will never completely go away, educating youth to recognize and embrace differences among their classmates might help counteract the desire to bully other students.

I feel that art can play an important role in developing understanding of diversity among students, and art can provide students with a means to explore an assortment of different cultures, life styles, and experiences within their own environment. The configurations of classrooms today make it necessary for students to be knowledgeable, comfortable, and considerate of people from diverse backgrounds. An understanding and appreciation of art may assist students in developing their own sense of identity and acceptance of people’s differences from themselves (Johnson, 2002). Learning about others through art, while developing a sense of self, may create positive attitudes and valuable perspectives on how people interact within a society, which can result in a better understanding of humanity and provide students with a broadened view of the world.

Teachers, especially in Catholic schools, can use art to introduce students to issues and ideas based on religion, race, sexuality, or culture. With the use of contemporary art and multicultural pedagogy, teachers can broaden students understanding of differences (Smith & Watson, 2009). “Since contemporary art influences our perceptions, it also provides a venue to facilitate ‘safe’ dialogue about elicited and visceral responses” (Smith & Watson, 2009, p. 26). Introducing students to
the vast range of various cultures, religions, and sexual preferences through art may allow students to better accept people’s differences as well as their own. Helping students recognize and find comfort in their own differences, builds student confidence and a positive self-identity (Gregorie & Lupientti, 2005). Once a student can accept their own difference, they can begin to accept other people’s differences and even embrace diversity (Gregorie & Lupientti, 2005). “In the end, students learn to conceptualize diversity as a strength and an asset, and to see themselves and others in meaningful and in significant ways” (Johnson, 2002, p. 20). Perhaps using art to bring diversity into a safe environment of a classroom enables students to encounter differences with a sense of comfort.

Since I teach high school girls ages 14 to 18, in Chapter II, I provide an overview of cognitive, emotional, and social development at this level. High school students are beginning their transition into adulthood. According to The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2009), during this phase of development, teenagers are developing their unique personality and opinions. As a teacher, I believe it would be beneficial to use this time in student development, to generate an understanding of differences. “The way sensitive issues such as race and ethnicity are handled by teachers are critical to learners' development of a sense of social identity” (Darlington, 2008, p. 263). I believe that by allowing students to discover these issues in a controlled environment may help students build a sense of comfort with future encounters.

Mainstream media today is very influential on our youth. Females especially, are swayed to fit the ideal image portrayed by the media (Smith & Watson, 2009). “Various popular culture media and visual images continue to bombard and influence individuals'
perceptions and mental models” (Smith & Watson, 2009, p. 25). When students begin to recognize they do not fit this ideal image of a female, many psychological effects can occur (Sax, 2006). High school is a pivotal time in adolescent development (National Center for Chronic Disease, 2009). Using art to provide opportunity to embrace their differences, and build understanding of the inaccurate portrayal of females in the media may help students develop acceptance of their own uniqueness and the uniqueness of others.

For the past twenty years, education professionals have been discussing multicultural education. Schools’ creating multicultural week or diversity night, to celebrate the diverse backgrounds of the students has created some positive and negative effects. Introducing students to a variety of cultures is a great concept, but the approach needs some work. When schools highlight and segregate the diversity that forms the student body, students’ accumulate a negative idea of differences (Darlington, 2008). “Embedding diversity in the curriculum is not simply an additive process” (Darlington, 2008, p. 269). Smith and Watson (2009) suggest that educators need to consciously develop a curriculum with diversity intertwined in each and every lesson, no matter what subject. As discussed in an article about educating instructors on teaching an antiracist multicultural curriculum, Veblen, Beynon and Odom (2005) relate, “Developing an antiracist multicultural curriculum is not about celebrations within and additives to the curriculum; it is an integrative process that is woven consciously and inextricable through the entire curriculum” (p. 2). With a vast array of artists of diverse backgrounds, the visual arts classroom is a good place to start introducing students to diversity.
Educators today face the dual obligation of effectively serving the needs of their increasingly diverse student body, in addition to preparing their students for the future. All students need to be aware of and capable of functioning in a global society, as well as how to appreciate the diverse uniqueness of all individuals. Teachers often create curriculums that include diversity. Campbell (2002) emphasizes that education should include differences in gender, age, disabilities, ethnicities, religious affiliations, socioeconomic status, sexual preference, race, and culture. Multicultural education “seeks to encompass the voice of disenfranchised groups such as women, gay/lesbian/bisexual persons, people with differing abilities and others” (Veblen, Beynon & Odom, 2005, p. 2).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to find out whether students, who experience diversity through the discussion of contemporary artwork created by a range of diverse artists, feel better prepared to recognize diversity when encountering diverse peoples. Furthermore, this study’s intent is to make students more aware of the diversity that surrounds them, assist in creating appreciation for learning about peoples differences, and most of all improve their artwork. Overall, this study has the capability of introducing students in a non-diverse environment to a range of diversity they may encounter after they leave SSA.

**Problem Statement**

The problem is that the homogenous white Catholic school population at my school appears ill prepared to handle a diverse outside world. So it becomes a question of, whether and how an art curriculum rich with diversity can raise issues and ideas to better prepare this student population for the outside world.
Research Question

- How does a study of diverse contemporary artwork impact students in a non-diverse educational setting?
- How can a presentation of diverse contemporary artwork help students feel better prepared to understand people’s differences?
- How does a study of contemporary artists and their artwork change student artwork?
- How does studying contemporary artists and their artwork impact student awareness of their own and other classmate’s differences?
- What can I learn from educating students through a study of diverse contemporary artists and their artwork?

Significance of the Study

Students benefit from this study by the changes in curriculum which introduces ways of discovering the diverse aspects that make up a person in an educational setting that is lacking diversity. After graduation from Sacred Spirit Academy, students will have knowledge about their own differences, other people’s differences, and how to respect these particular peculiarities. From this study, teachers will have an example of a collection of diverse contemporary artists and their work, as well as an example of teaching the theories of multiculturalism and transformative learning. The art education field will benefit from this study by having access to an example of teaching diversity in a non-diverse educational setting. As a teacher, I will benefit from this study by expanding my knowledge about the contemporary art world and the effectiveness of its use in the classroom. Everyone can also benefit from this study by creating an appreciation for people’s differences.
Limitations of the Study

This study will not be able to see the effects of this curriculum on the student’s actions or decisions outside of the classroom, or after they graduate high school. This study is also limited to only find whether students feel more prepared to address issues of diversity, not whether or not they truly are. Due to the brief amount of time, this study will only be able to address a limited number of issues, will not be able to discover the effects of long-term exposure, and will only be taught in one art classroom in one high school.

Another limitation in this study will be the differences between students of different backgrounds who see the world through different lenses. Perceptual differences are not only found in people of different cultures but even in people from the same geographical, historical, religious, and political groups. I am eager to find how this study of diversity helps in the realization that peers from the same backgrounds are all different.

Resistance to change has been a challenge throughout history. Another limitation to this study may be student opposition to changing their acceptance of people’s differences. In every culture, systems of power and privilege along the line of class, gender, and racial difference have always existed and are continually enforced (Freire, 2006; McIntosh, 1989). Affirmations of the superiority of dominant cultures are so imbedded in the structure of society that they are often indiscernible (Freire, 2006; McIntosh, 1989). Also hidden is the invisible assertion that being of European descent is correct while other cultural ways can be seen as substandard (Nieto & Bode, 2008). People, who are from the dominant culture, not only resist change but also can be oblivious to the conditions or issues that others face. One may accept the way things are
because they have no understanding from another perspective, and may not realize the harm they may be causing.

Students learn more than art itself through participation in the arts. With carefully selected contemporary artists, teachers can use real examples to bring diversity into the classroom. Eisner (2001) discusses that any teacher, art or classroom, can use the arts in general, as a resource for teaching empathic understanding of a situation. Using the arts, as a starting point to create empathy and understanding of people’s differences, hopefully will combat the current intolerance of diversity, which I have found in my school to be one of the root causes of bullying. With great anticipation, I will create a curriculum filled with diverse artists, to introduce students from a non-diverse environment, to people different from themselves and the immediate population they have come to know so well. I will begin this journey of infusing diversity into a non-diverse environment by examining the current curriculum’s deficient inclusion of diversity and multiculturalism.

Conclusion

After I became aware of the lack of diversity education in my school, I wanted to use contemporary art to enrich student understanding of diversity to combat bullying and the lack of tolerance for people’s differences. With minimal prior knowledge and many questions about the effects of a study of diverse contemporary artists in a non-diverse environment, I yearned to know more about single gender education’s drawbacks and advantages, the importance of diversity in the classroom, multiculturalism’s significance in education, stereotypes and cultural issues connected to art, and contemporary art’s place in the classroom, which are discussed in Chapter II.
Chapter II: Review of Literature

Introduction

Today’s educational and professional worlds are very diverse. Students will certainly encounter a vast array of diverse people no matter where they go after graduation. Using the diverse art world to promote positive understanding of people’s differences may help students succeed in our diverse world. Studies have shown many ways to address how art education can be used to promote the understanding of diversity. To build a foundation for my study, I have compiled research from work about single gender education, diversity, multiculturalism, cultural issues regarding stereotypes, contemporary art in the classroom, and teaching theories. These broad themes are important to this study because of the situation of where the study takes place and what I am attempting to accomplish with the study. Without an understanding of the structure of a single gender education system, this research project would not be possible. With no background information on diversity multiculturalism, cultural issues, stereotypes, contemporary art in the classroom, and teaching theories, I would have no grounding for my study.

Drawbacks and Advantages of Single Gender Education

Researchers, such as Kubacki (2006), Sax (2006), Freedman (2008), and Hagg (2004), conducted studies on aspects of single gender education. Surprisingly, research shows significant positive and negative arguments to both sides, and the majority of researchers state that it mainly depends on the child (Sax, 2006; Freedman, 2008; Hagg, 2004).

According to Sax (2006), student behavior is another factor that changes when a student is educated in a single gender classroom. “Student behavior inevitably reflects the larger society in which they live” (Sax, 2006, p. 197). When female students are separated from their male peers, their social and educational decisions and behaviors change (Sax, 2006), and as Gandy (2007) noted, especially behaviors regarding gender stereotypes. “It is a great paradox: coed schools tend to reinforce gender stereotypes, while single-sex schools, properly led (which was explained in the book), can break down gender stereotypes” (Sax, 2006, p. 198). Gandy (2007) also noted in his research that students in segregated schools tend to feel less pressure to impress the opposite sex and focus more on academics; even more he states, “They often challenge themselves in
classes that do not follow society’s gendered professions (i.e. Science professions are for males, English for females)” (p. 11). “Girls who attend all-girls schools are much more likely to study subjects such as computer science and physics than are girls of comparable ability attending coed schools” (Sax, 2006, p. 198). Freeman (2008), an educational researcher, found that when students, females in particular, have the ability to explore a variety of fields of study, without males or society’s academic stereotypes, they can resist following traditional roles placed on girls. “Single-sex schools seemed more likely to encourage students to pursue academic paths according to their talents rather than their gender” (Freedman, 2008, p. 1). Kubacki (2006), a single-gender education researcher, states that students can explore a variety of different career paths without pressure to follow society’s influences and further break down what they understand about their own femininity since, “single-sex classrooms have the effect of reinscribing particular versions of masculinity and particular versions of femininity” (Kubacki, 2006, p. 3). These authors deemed that taking away male pressure in a classroom allows teachers to better focus on developing a curriculum based on female learning styles, development, and behavior.

Other studies also argue the negative aspects of single gender education, particularly how single gender education focuses on student performance rather than student well-being (Freedman, 2008). Freedman tells us that the separation of gender generally produces better academic achievement in both males and females, compared to coeducational schools, and often to the extreme. “These girls set themselves impossibly high standards, with an obsessive intolerance of mistakes” (Freedman, 2008, p. 1). Hagg’s (2004) points out how people who oppose single gender education bring up the
fact that it is an unnatural situation for learning. “Single-sex schools may protect girls and boys from the distraction of each other, but they also protect them from learning any developmentally appropriate ways of dealing with each other in non-social settings” (Hagg, 2004, p. 23). Hagg states that segregating genders can only further create narrow-mindedness of student’s differences. Hagg believes that teachers need to send out a message to students that the classroom is a place for students to learn about difference, equality, and achievement, while “learning to treat each other with the basic respect and dignity that we expect in the workplace” (Hagg, 2004, p. 23). My feeling is that when teachers are aware of these possible negative side effects of single gender education, they can make sure they bring more variety into the classroom to compensate for the preexisting lack in diversity.

Collectively, this group of researchers understands that each student learns and develops differently, and parents and teachers must make a mutual effort to find the right educational setting for the child. With evidence of both positive and negative aspects of single gender education, it comes down to the student and parent to decide what setting is best for them whether it be in a public or single gender education classroom.

The Importance of Diversity in the Classroom

Schools are collections of students from varied and distinct backgrounds and upbringing. Researchers such as Grant (1993), Sleeter (1993), Darlington (2008), Johnson (2002), Veblen (2005), Beynon (2005), Odom (2005), Gregorie (2005), and Lupinetti (2005) agree that diversity is found everywhere in today’s educational settings, some varying more than others, with no two students the exact same. Their combined research, which I summarize in the following segments, displays the importance of teachers integrating diversity in the classroom to generate knowledgeable citizens.
Grant and Sleeter (1993) both agree that students come from all different upbringings that influence who the student grows up to be. “Each student is a member of multiple status groups, and these simultaneous memberships influence the students’ perceptions and actions” (Grant & Sleeter, 1993, p. 62). Darlington (2008) discusses how teachers address these differences in helping students learn to appreciate diversity. “The way sensitive issues such as race and ethnicity are handled by teachers is critical to learners’ development of a sense of social identity” (Darlington, 2008, p. 263).

Darlington (2008) further indicates that educators are responsible to model appreciation of people’s differences in the classroom so students develop empathy towards each other.

Since single gender education creates a homogeneous environment, my feeling is that with a lack of diversity in the classroom my responsibility as the teacher is to incorporate diversity into my curriculum and pedagogy, in order to ensure appreciation of differences. I agree with Johnson (2002) who noted that the art classroom is an ideal place to bring diversity into the curriculum. “The visual arts are a natural place for the pursuit of the intercultural dialog and knowledge our students require to succeed in the 21st century” (Johnson, 2002, p. 18). Veblen, Beynon, and Odom (2005) suggested that when art teachers bring diverse artwork and artists into the classroom that “students are encouraged to become border crossers and engage in dialog and critical reflection about what it means to have a wide variety of cultures in dialog with each other” (p. 2). Johnson (2002) agrees with them by iterating that using art to encourage students to discuss diversity increases students’ intelligence about the world in which they live. “Art centered diversity education facilitates students’ intercultural competency” (Johnson, 2002, p. 18). Gregorie and Lupinetti (2005) find that exposure to diverse art not only
enriches student’s knowledge about themselves and art, but also has benefits in other areas of education. “Students who participate in the arts learn to communicate using various symbolic systems, and these experiences support divergent and creative thinking” (Gregoire & Lupinetti, 2005, p. 160). “Further, this participation can lead to better understanding and ultimately higher levels of performance in other academic subjects” (Gregoire & Lupinetti, 2005, p. 159). Johnson (2002) affirms that when a student does not fear being different, they are enabled to personally reflect on their own uniqueness, which builds personal strength and grounds student understanding of their own distinctive identities. “In the end, students learn to conceptualize cultural diversity as a strength and an asset and see themselves and others in meaningful and in significant ways” (Johnson, 2002, p. 20).

The researchers found that integrating diversity into art curriculum has extensive benefits. Their collective research suggests that student exposure to diversity enhances their overall well-being. Addressing diversity in the classroom has grounding in multicultural theories, to which I now turn.

**The Significance of Multiculturalism in Education**

Authors such as Grant (1993), Sleeter (1993), Ballengee-Morris (2001 & 2008), Stuhr (2001 & 2008), Banks (1993), Chung (2008), Daniel (2008), and Ladson-Billings (1992) have studied and published material on multiculturalism. Despite criticism, scholars from many fields have emphasized the value of multicultural education for decades (Banks, 1993; Grant & Sleeter, 1993). Advocates strongly emphasize that multicultural education allows all students to function more successfully in a diverse world (Banks, 1993). Multicultural education goals seek to reduce prejudice and discrimination against oppressed groups, to work toward equal opportunity and social
justice for all groups, and to effect an equitable distribution of power among members of
the different cultural groups (Grant & Sleeter, 1993). Grant & Sleeter (1993) noted that it
is not enough for students merely to have contact with students different from
themselves, but just as important for teachers to assist students in developing
understanding of diversity, in order that they can effectively contribute to a multicultural
society.

Authors, such as Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr (2001), point out that students must
have an understanding of their own cultural identity in order for multiculturalism to be
effective.

The aspects of one’s personal cultural identity includes: age; gender and
sexuality; social and economic class (education, job and family position);
extinctionality (giftedness, differently abled, health); geographic location (rural,
suburban, urban, as well as north, south, east, west, or central); religion;
political status; language; ethnicity (the aspect most people concentrate on when
they think of culture); and racial designation. (p. 7)

Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr extend the idea that when students have an understanding of
the collection of aspects of which their own cultural identity consists, they can begin to
understand how their own individuality intersects with others. “Recognition of our own
sociocultural identity and our biases make it easier to understand the multi-faceted
cultural identities of others” (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001, p.7). Banks and Banks
(1993) allege that an examination of cultures also allows students to look at their own
culture and understand it more fully, as they compare and contrast how it relates to and is
different from others.
Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr (2001) indicate that when students feel comfortable with the knowledge of their own cultural composition and how it interacts with others within society, student-centered issues can be brought into class lessons. They state that student-culture relevant issues such as stereotypes, racism, discrimination, and sexism can be incorporated into the curriculum to create deeper meaning in student artwork and overall human awareness. Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr (2001) both believe that the arts and visual culture need to be taught together in order to provide students with information on current issues and concerns that are more relevant to their own lives. Likewise Chung (2008) explains, “Issue-based art education entails a process of critical questioning that teaches students to actively examine prejudicial social conditions and to reflect upon cultural attitudes, beliefs, and values manifested in particular to aesthetic practices such as advertising and popular media programming” (p. 22). When students explore social issues regarding stereotypes in the art room, students are offered the opportunity to nurture their aesthetic sensibility, critical facility, and social awareness to resist discriminatory attitudes and behaviors, furthering their understanding of other’s differences (Chung, 2008).

Stuhr, Ballengee-Morris, & Daniel (2008) also emphasize the importance of students investigating how their lives connect to and are limited by the broader society. “Students need to recognize their own biases and those of others in order to understand the connections between power, wealth, and injustice” (Stuhr, Ballengee-Morris, & Daniel, 2008, p. 83). Stuhr, Ballengee-Morris, & Daniel (2008) stated that students can achieve this by “examining and producing visual culture imagery and objects that lead to understanding of justice and the complexities of social, political and economic personal
relations” (Stuhr, Ballengee-Morris, & Daniel, 2008, p. 83). They feel that students need to be aware of the exchanges of relationships outside their educational system to better understand our diverse society as a whole. Similarly, Ladson-Billings (1992) discusses how multiculturalism is beneficial to students because it provides checks and balances by having people examine different points of view and discourages them from blindly accepting institutional policies and actions, as addressed in the following section.

The above researchers conclude that multiculturalism has many benefits to an art curriculum, student’s learning environment, and overall development. I feel that the integration of multiculturalism in my classroom can create richer deeper-rooted meaning for art lessons that may combat negative student perceptions and stereotypes.

**Connections between Stereotypes, Cultural Issues, and Art**

The assimilation of visual culture and stereotypes has been a choice of study for many authors. Some leaders in this area of content are Smith (2009), Watson (2009), Ed Check (2002 & 1996), Darlington (2008) and Eaton (2005). These authors incorporated ideas of multiculturalism and diversity in the classroom by using art to dispel stereotypes and gender biases.

Students of the same gender, who come from similar backgrounds, socioeconomic status, religious affiliations, and often giftedness, need exposure to differences (Hagg, 2004). For when students leave the confines of their educational setting, they have little experience in dealing with diversity in the real world (Hagg, 2004). When the classroom lacks diversity, Smith & Watson (2009) believe that using diverse artists and their art may help students discuss differences. “Since many contemporary artists are not afraid to tackle the most provocative stereotypes, including those surrounding ethnicity, religion, and gender, art provides an excellent venue for diversity awareness renewal and
reinforcement” (Smith & Watson, 2009, p. 30). Using contemporary artists and their work to bring up these taboo topics opens the conversation to freely discuss these as personal issues, without putting pressure on the students.

Ed Check, a contemporary artist and former art teacher, found considerable importance to the inclusion of diversity in the art classroom. Being taught within the public school system and later teaching art education in an elementary and college setting, Check discusses how he saw little of his identity, more specifically sexual identity, reflected in his education as an adolescent. “I was never taught much about my working-class background much less anything queer. Silence, misinformation, invisibility, and shame characterized the methodology and curriculum that I experienced” (Check, 2002, p. 54). Check, now an openly homosexual male, points out the significance of discussing diversity in the classroom in order to connect student lives to what they are learning in the classroom.

I figured out that school wasn’t the place to talk about what I was really thinking or feeling. Not seeing my reality mirrored at school, I became detached.

Needless to say, school didn’t prepare me for the realities of my life. (Check, 2002, p. 54)

Like Check (2002), other authors acknowledge that sexual identity and sexuality in general are commonly regarded as highly sensitive, controversial, and still somewhat taboo subjects that tend to be avoided within the educational setting. Darlington (2008) emphasizes, “The way sensitive issues such as race and ethnicity are handled by teachers is critical to learners’ development of a sense of social identity” (p. 263). As educators, we must have the courage to address these difficult issues in order to offer students a
more diverse definition of their own identity thus creating broader perspectives with which to view, interpret, and understand the world around them (Check, 1996; Eaton, 2005).

The authors above highlighted the importance of including and educating about diversity and social issues in the art classroom. They agreed that students need to learn about differences and stereotypes in order to dispel misunderstandings about others and the negative impact it can create later in life. As a teacher, I hope to create a curriculum that connects students’ lives to what they are learning in the classroom, so when students leave the classroom they are informed citizens who make respectable decisions. Thus incorporating diversity into the art curriculum requires some understanding of contemporary art and artists.

The Place for Contemporary Art in the Classroom

In order to address modern issues, contemporary artists and artwork must be used in the art curriculum. Authors such as Giroux (1996), Mayer (2008), Villeneuve (2008), Erickson (2008), Wilson (2003), and Knight (2006) have all reported on the importance of teaching contemporary art.

To some educators, contemporary art can be intimidating due to the complexity of issues being addressed. Mayer (2008) understands that, “some contemporary art can make us uncomfortable, which might be exactly what the artist wanted or could be the consequence of our own values, beliefs, or preconceptions being piqued in some way” (p. 78). She also states how educators must understand that “art has always been complex and frequently served as a disquieting agent in culture” and “even that most popular of art styles, [such as] Impressionism, was appalling to 19th-century sensibilities” (Mayer,
Mayer (2008) also believes that contemporary artists create art about social issues in order for these issues to be discussed, and ignoring these subjects is a disservice to students. So, it is imperative that teachers put their personal biases aside and pay “careful attention to viewers' abilities and artwork selection,” because both “are critical to facilitating positive learning experiences about challenging works of contemporary art” (Villeneuve & Erickson, 2008. p. 96). Effective discussions of contemporary art, which focus on social issues, can aid students in their ease of discussing their own social concerns.

Teaching issues relevant to daily life produces lessons of deeper meaning, compared to instructions of art styles and techniques. Mayer (2008) explains, “Good art lessons are always about something important; it is not solely the exercise of technical skills” (p. 78). While students do need technical skill instructions, using art with underlying significances aids students in developing complex ideas. Mayer (2008) clarifies, “[Technical] skills are in service to an exploration of something more meaningful” (p. 78). Today, educators teaching about social issues have an advantage because of contemporary art. Contemporary art focuses on today’s issues and Wilson (2003) agrees that “contemporary artworks, artifacts from visual culture, and the theories, ideas, and ideologies that surround them are of our time, and they hold the possibility of informing us, more than art and artifacts of previous eras, about our contemporary lives” (p. 217). Discussing art that criticizes issues of our time can aid teachers in discussing issues relevant to student lives.

Contemporary artists with a social-issue focus can assist teachers in the discussion of student issues. Mayer (2008) specifies, “Just as our students are looking at the worlds
around them and wondering what their role might be, what events mean, or what difference they can make, today’s artists are pondering the same questions through their art” (p. 77). Teachers can use contemporary art to help students confront their own ideas of social-issues, and guide them to create artwork as a constructive form of expression, just as contemporary artists create in order to express their own notions or opinions of current real-world issues. The main reason for including contemporary art in the curriculum is to “fashion instructional activities that have the students examining, reflecting, questioning, and responding to the important issues of their world by engaging with the concepts and inquiry that spurred the artists’ thinking and art making” (Mayer, 2008, p. 79). On the other hand, just discussing these issues in the classroom is not enough. Having students recognize and appreciate people’s differences from analyzing contemporary art can aid in the lack of diversity often found in a non-diverse ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious environment.

Contemporary art offers a range of diverse artists. Authors such as Giroux (1996) have described contemporary artists as “public intellectuals who cross borders, invent new forms of representation, and at the same time, interrogate the quality of social life by addressing the language of sexuality, social exclusion, identity and power” (p. x). These artists are not the typical “masters” found in art history books. However, “Recent published textbooks on art of the post-World War II era include more women, artists of color, out gays and lesbians and other previously excluded groups than ever before” (Cahan & Kocur, 2011, p. 7). Contemporary artists today collectively create a diverse group of people, including female, non-white, homosexual, or non-traditional artists, who were commonly excluded in the past. Art educators who incorporate contemporary art
into their curriculum often aim to introduce the diversity and global characteristics of contemporary art to their students by asking them to look through the artist’s lenses and examine the “cultural, social, gender, and economic perspectives that their works embodied” (Knight, 2006, p. 42). In summary, these authors agree that by looking from another person’s viewpoint students can begin to appreciate differences and change their perception of others.

The importance of teaching relevant issues to students has been a recent discussion in the field of art. Using contemporary art to discuss these issues is one approach. Along with the authors previously discussed, educators are beginning to realize the positive outcomes of using contemporary art in the classroom and how it aids with discussing real-world and student issues, while bringing diversity into a classroom. These authors propose that discussing and create artwork about significant issues can help student feel comfortable creating artwork that can inspire social change. Learning about various contemporary artworks can inspire students to appreciate differences, and therefore use their own artwork to encourage others to do so as well.

**Connecting Transformation Theory and Multiculturalism**

Art education is constructed of many different theoretical premises, which are continually evolving with the changing influences on the field. I find the theories of transformative learning and multicultural education best suit my teaching situation. I elaborate on transformative learning below.

Transformative learning is an approach that can assist students in evaluating their understanding of people’s differences. At the core of transformative learning theory, is the process of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow (2000) pointed to Clark (1993) who identified three dimensions to a perspective transformation as: “a)
psychological (changes in understanding of the self), b) convictional (revision of belief systems), and c) behavioral (changes in lifestyle)” (p. 5). O’Sullivan (2003) connects transformative learning to multiculturalism by explaining that transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. He discusses that this is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world. O’Sullivan (2003) notes that this shift of consciousness:

Involves a) our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; b) our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; c) our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; d) our body awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and e) our sense of possibilities for social justice, peace and personal joy. (O’Sullivan, 2003, p. 3)

Therefore teachers using transformative learning theory, as the author indicates, can help students activate a shift in consciousness with regards to multiculturalism. The opportunity to make this shift in a comfortable educational environment may ease students’ fear of diversity and difference and, as O’Sullivan (2003) indicates, positively impact their worldview.

McArdle & Piscitelli use the metaphor of a palimpsest to describe ever-changing theories within the field of art education. “The complexities and diversity of influences that have shaped views on the teaching of art can be understood as a palimpsest” (McArdle & Piscitelli, 2002, p. 11). “A palimpsest is a term that describes the way in which the ancient parchments used for writing were written over, but new messages only partially obliterated the original message beneath” (McArdle & Piscitelli, 2002, p. 11).
McArdle and Piscitelli (2002) iterate that educators ought to understand that research and expansion in educational theories is only to improve practice that better suit student’s needs. McArdle and Piscitelli (2002) note, “Recognizing that traces of previous thinking are not always completely obliterated but, instead recur, shape and interact with new developments” (p. 11). Therefore in any field, including art education, continuous education on new theories and teaching strategies is important for any teacher’s professional growth, in order to keep up to date on the newest ideas being proposed in their field, all the while keeping the foundational theories in mind.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter we found that the diversity of the world is often described in terms of race, culture, and ethnicity (along with language, gender, ability, class, among others). The demographic composition of my classroom reflects little diversity, but knowledge of diversity is highly important to any young person today. Single gender education limited by religious and socioeconomic constraints, has many benefits, but can create issues as well, mainly in the lack of diversity. Fortunately, art teachers have the advantage of using contemporary art to integrate diversity into their courses and to seek to combat the lack of diversity found in a single-gender Catholic school. Since the art world is so diverse, teachers are able to use art to address all types of issues and stereotypes that the students face or may face in the future. Pulling diversity from the art world specifically from contemporary artists needs a theoretical foundation, and multicultural theory provides one. By relying on multicultural theories and transformative learning, I hope to integrate studies in diversity into my art classroom curriculum and educate my students on people’s differences, current and relevant artists and their artwork, and transform any close-minded perceptions of cultural, even personal, differences. Therefore my research
addresses the impact of art curriculum rich with diverse contemporary art that’s purpose is to raise issues and ideas that better prepare a single-gender student population for the outside world. In order to study the effects of a diverse contemporary art focused curriculum, I will implement a qualitative participatory action research study that is discussed extensively in Chapter III.
Chapter III: Methodology

Methodology of Study

For my study I will conduct a qualitative participatory action research (Grundy, 1995) project that examines how a study of diverse contemporary artists and their artwork impact students in a non-diverse educational setting. Merriam (2009) states that, “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5). Through this study, I can better understand each student’s world, their apprehension toward differences or diversity, and any anxiety about diversity they anticipate encountering after graduation.

By practicing participatory action research from a critical research perspective (Merriam, 2009), I will be able to investigate and analyze the underlying causes of the problem, in order to result in a collective action to address the specific problem and create change (Merriam, 2009). According to Merriam (2009), critical research is used to, “not just understand what is going on, but also critique the way things are in the hopes of bringing about a more just society” (p. 35). Participatory action researchers have two primary aims, improvement and involvement (Grundy, 1995). Since I am the teacher and researcher, participation in the process is necessary.

Conveniently, as the teacher and researcher, I can use the information students provide during classroom discussions and visual journaling to make adjustments as needed for lessons and activities. Action research, “is not a process that proceeds from planning through action to evaluation and then stops” (Grundy, 1995, p. 12). Action research must become an ongoing process that evolves. Grundy (1995) clarifies that, “an important feature of action research is its cyclical rather than linear nature” (p. 12).
Planning, teaching, observing, and reflecting (Grundy, 1995) with the intentions of enhancing instruction leads to improved lessons and student growth.

Transformative learning theory and critical inquiry research have similar objectives in that, “in critical inquiry the goal is to critique and challenge, transform, and empower” (Merriam, 2009, p. 34). Through the changes in curriculum, I expect to empower my students to feel more comfortable with people’s diversity and differences. My research will determine the outcomes. As Grundy (1995) stated, research that is specifically directed to improve and create change is known as action research, and creating change for the benefit of my students is one objective of this study.

Site of Study

Since my project is specific with investigating the effects of diversity infused art lessons in a non-diverse environment, the site for my study is the school where I have been teaching at for the past three years. Sacred Spirit Academy is an all-girls, Catholic high school located in the northern part of a city in Western New York. The school is located in a quiet neighborhood, within walking distance to many locally owned shops and markets, but still has a city atmosphere. Sacred Spirit Academy educates students from 9th through 12th grade with a total of 278 girls. On average, a core subject (Math, History, English, and Science) classroom consists of 20 students, and specials (foreign language, art, music, and physical education) with few as four students.

Being a small school, Sacred Spirit Academy employs an average of 37 fulltime educators, with me as one of two Art teachers. As a department we offer eight different art classes: Studio in Art (full year), Studio in Art (half year), Design, Drawing, Sculpture, Digital Media, Digital Photography, and Advanced Painting. As a school requirement, each student must take one full credit of an art or music class within their
four years of study at the Academy. Studio in Art 1 (Full year) & Studio in Art 2 (Half year) are two classes I mainly teach to freshman. Whereas my other three classes, Digital Media, Digital Photography, and Advanced Painting are only offered to seniors. Though students are not required to take art all four years, both the other art teacher and I highly recommend it.

After climbing three flights of stairs, the students manage to discover the art rooms. The art rooms are two adjoining rooms with large windows and ample amounts of natural light. Arranged to accommodate groups of six, the room contains four clusters of student desks. Besides the bookcases and shelves scattered around each room, the art rooms share a common store room with plenty of space for storage and two sinks for cleanup. Keeping up to date with technology, Sacred Spirit Academy recently added a Digital Media lab, located one floor below the art rooms filled with computers equipped with Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, and Media Software.

The majority of the schools population consists of Caucasian, Catholic, upper middle class female students. Sadly, less than 14% of students of a different religious or cultural background attend Sacred Spirit Academy.

Sacred Spirit Academy is engrained with strong Catholic school teachings, which began over 150 years ago by our founding Holy Mother, St. Catherine York. Even now, students are taught the same Catholic values of faith, leadership, and service, just as it was many years ago. Our mission as educators of the academy is to guide students through faith and knowledge to become confident, faithful, and intelligent young women. To assist me in honoring this pledge, I believe this study can benefit my students and me, therefore assisting me with creating well-educated young women.
Participants

Student participants for this study will be from two senior studio art classes: Digital Media, Digital Photography. These two classes were chosen specifically due to the fact that the students in these classes are all senior art students and are approaching gradation. Students graduating from Sacred Spirit Academy often feel anxiety toward leaving. Recognizing and understanding the distress of leaving Sacred Spirit Academy and entering a large and diverse university, plays a big role in my research. I wanted to best understand ways to help students cope with these new diverse environments. Each student and parent signed a permission form agreeing to the student’s participation.

On average Sacred Spirit Academy senior students are 17 years old (some may be 16 or 18) with several years of art experience. Due to the school requirements, all seniors must have taken art class for the past three years in order to participate in any senior studio. At the age of 17, students are still considered adolescents. Though they are approaching adulthood, they are not yet recognized as adults. Students during their adolescent phase are in search of their own identity, but still find their peers to be very influential; and depending on their home life, parental guidance can still have a big impact on the student’s decisions as well. Piaget (1953) describes adolescence as the stage of life in which the individual's thoughts start taking more of an abstract form and egocentric thoughts decrease, and it is then when the individual begins to think and reason in a wider perspective. Since students at the adolescent stage are concerned about their own identity as well as the people around them, I find this to be a good age to teach about diversity and people’s differences. Through my curriculum using contemporary art, I hope to encourage students to create positive views regarding diversity before leaving Sacred Spirit Academy, and build consideration for people around them. My
research will examine the impact of this type of curriculum and show the benefits the students.

Part of my research data documentation will come from interviews conducted with alumni. I intend to interview 10 alumni currently attending an array of colleges and universities. These participants will be graduates of Sacred Spirit Academy from within three years of 2011. Participants, as defined by Merriam (2009), are carefully chosen with attributes specific to what is being studied, as well as willingness to cooperate. Without student and alumni participation, this research project would not be possible.

Next I examine my role and participation.

**Role of Researcher**

For this participatory action research, I will carry out the role of the teacher and researcher. Conducting participatory action research will require me to continuously be involved in the process, including teaching, participating in discussions, and formal and informal documentation of observations. Merriam (2009) articulates that “individuals engage in research in this mode to better understand the subtle and overt manifestations of oppression, and that understanding leads to more control of their lives through collective action” (p. 36). By instituting this curriculum my students can realize the effects of negativity toward diversity, and what it does to our society and world. Resulting from a study of diverse contemporary artists, my hope is that students can build a knowledge base that contributes to greater comfort and tolerance of people’s differences. As the researcher I will document the introduction of this curriculum using observations, interviews, questionnaires, and documents as described in the following segment.
Data Collection Methods

For my study I will be using data collection methods including audio recording of student discussions, student journals, student artwork, and questionnaires, as well as alumni interviews, and my own observations. “Qualitative data consists of direct quotations from people about their experience, opinions, feelings, and knowledge, obtained through interviews, with detailed descriptions of people’s activities behaviors and actions, recorded through observations” (Merriam, 2009, p. 85). I will begin my data collection with alumni interviews containing questions (Appendix F) that inquire about experiences with diversity. Good interview questions described by Merriam (2009) are, “open ended and yield descriptive data, even stories about the phenomenon” (p. 99).

Once an adequate amount of information from alumni interviews is collected, I will focus on student participation and start with preliminary student questionnaires (Appendix C & D).

Each student completed a questionnaire (Appendix C) prior to the beginning of the unit on diversity to gather a basis of where the students were in their comfort level with diversity and people’s differences. Throughout the unit’s lessons, discussions, and assignments, observation notes were recorded. During class critiques, audio recordings were also used for data collection. Since I was the teacher and researcher, I used the audio recordings as a way to document the data, while I focused on teaching. After the class discussions, I reviewed the audio tapes and created a written record using coding, as recommended by Merriam (2009), for my final analysis. Coding is assigning shorthand to various aspects of data for easy retrieval during the analysis process (Merriam, 2009). During the research process each student kept a visual journal which I reviewed periodically for additional data collection. Throughout the project it was imperative to
have my own research journal to keep track of thoughts, ponderings, speculations, and hunches in preparation for the data analysis (Merriam, 2009).

Toward the end of the study students received the second questionnaire (Appendix D) in order to compare student responses. Another way to determine student response is through examination of their artwork. Therefore, student artwork will also be studied and used as data. Triangulation of data described by Merriam (2009) is “using multiple investigators, sources of data, or data collection methods to confirm emerging findings” (p.229) which gives my study more validity. In the next section I discuss how to analyze the collected data to emerge findings.

**Data Analysis**

Perfectly stated, Merriam (2009) describes “data analysis as the process of making sense out of the data” (p. 175). After collecting data through observations, interviews, questionnaires and documents, I organized the information gathered by grouping my findings within each method. Creswell (2009) writes that the first step toward data analysis is to obtain a general sense of the information gathered and to reflect on its overall meaning. In order to do that, I reviewed questionnaires, interviews, and journal entries individually to compile bits of information within each data collection method. After I reexamined all of my data, I looked for similarities in themes, ideas or categories that cross over data collection methods, and compared one unit of information with the next in looking for recurring regularities in the data (Merriam, 2009). Throughout my reading, I noted patterns that helped me answer my central and sub-questions. According to Merriam (2009), “Data analysis is the process used to answer your research questions” (p. 176). Later, in Chapters IV and V, I used the analysis of the data in depth to build a
narrative that relates the importance of my findings. In Chapter V, I discuss the implications of this research for the field and for my own teaching.

**Ethical Issues**

In any research, concerns about ethics arise since, “the validity and the reliability of a study depend upon the ethics of the investigator” (Merriam, 2009, p. 228). Any researcher can gather and analyze data to create virtually any findings they desire (Merriam, 2009). Knowing that, it is important for both the readers and the author to be aware of biases that can affect the final product (Merriam, 2009). As the researcher, I endeavor to set aside any biases I have about single-gender education and diversity in a seemingly non-diverse educational setting, which I have gathered from prior knowledge or experiences. “The best a researcher can do is to be conscious of the ethical issues that pervade the research process and to examine his or her own philosophical orientation vis-à-vis these issues” (Merriam, 2009, p. 235). Throughout my research process I will keep all of the ethical issues in mind and seek to stay accurate to my data.

**Confidentiality**

To assure confidentiality, the site of study, students, and alumni were given pseudonyms to protect their identity and safety. I only used data collected from the students whose parents or legal guardians provided written consent to participate in the research project. In compliance with the requirements of Buffalo State College, permission for this study has been formally requested in writing and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

**Reciprocity**

This study provided many benefits for my students, myself and, the field of art education. My students specifically profited from my study because I expanded student
awareness about diversity, the value in embracing their classmate’s differences, and their knowledge of contemporary art. I benefited from this study after discovering new contemporary artists and learning more about my students and what their personal social concerns are, consequently building stronger relationships with my students. Lastly, the art education field will benefit from this study because it will provide an example for educators in a non-diverse setting, a way to use contemporary art to bring diversity into the classroom.

Closing

This main purpose of my study was to find out how students at Sacred Spirit Academy developed an understanding of people’s differences though the use of the content of diverse contemporary artworks. Using participatory action research, I explored the ways contemporary art education can bring diversity into a non-diverse environment and optimally help my students overcome their fears of people’s differences. Through my research and findings, I hope to have persuaded and paved the way for other educators to educate students through the content of diverse contemporary art.
Chapter IV: Results

Always in the back of my mind is the thought of how short of time I have with my students and how much information I want, so more feel, I need to still share with them. What educational information I choose to share now is more significant than ever, because before long they will no longer be my students. Yes, the element of art and principles of design are important to know and understand, but the thought of my students leaving my classroom with only fundamental and technical skills terrifies me. So this year in particular, I focused my lessons on content and ideas.

As a college preparatory school we emphasize academics. Courses such as Advanced Placement Calculus, Advanced Placement Physics, and Advanced Placement U.S. History, will most likely be on each graduates’ transcript. However, preparing our students with priority on academics can have its downfalls, and this is where my uneasiness originates. Memorizing the first 25 numbers of Pi will help in math class, and being able to elaborate on the 5 main ideas of Quantum Theory will help in Physics, but how to relate to your Muslim roommate cannot be found in any book. Therefore I see my decreasing time spent with my students as highly valuable, and with only three short forty minute classes per week, time well spent is of the essence.

To the girls it is no surprise that at the beginning of each class, I am beaming with excitement. Standing at the entrance of the Digital Media Lab with a smile from ear to ear, I greet them as they chattily enter for class. After the bell rings, one can find me at the front of the lab, eager for updates on how the college application processes is going or how hard they fought to win last night’s soccer game. While listening, I pleasantly remind them of how our voices tend to carry into the silent library below. The Digital
Media Lab (DML) is a newly constructed addition to the school. Six years ago, the Alumni Association and some generous donors, rebuilt the academy’s library, gymnasium, theater, and added the Digital Media Lab. Located on the second floor, the DML is designed with glass walls to overlook the newly built library, which sits invitingly filled with books, laptops, work tables, and a fireplace surrounded by comfortable chairs. As the girls settle into their seats and log on to their computers, one of them reveals the countdown, “One hundred and forty-six days Miss R!” Though I am completely capable of figuring out the decreasing amount of time on my own, that declining number repeatedly shocks me. “And that is why we need to get to work!” is my general response as I regroup my thoughts and try not to have a panic attack thinking ‘Oh my, that is nowhere near enough time!’ Depending on the day, the students generally work independently on their projects and ask for my assistance as I walk around the room. Luckily, there has been great interest in the class; this year the school scheduled two sections of Digital Media, 5th and 7th period. Both classes after lunch, the girls are fully fuelled and more rambunctious than if the class were first thing in the morning. With their excitement combined with mine, both classes tend to the highlight of my day.

Understanding the reality of how little of time the girls have left here at SSA, I find my lessons becoming more and more filled with content and ideas in addition to technical instruction. In the beginning of the year, the girls perhaps would agree that they took Digital Media only to master Adobe Photoshop for help with the creation of the perfect Facebook profile picture, but they had no idea how much they would learn about each other throughout the process. One student in the beginning of the year stated that,
“When you attend a small school, after four years together, you get to know your classmates very well”...or so she thought. I fail to believe that their 3.95GPA brains considered that just by sitting behind the same student in English for the past four years, based on the fact that seating was arranged in alphabetical order, meant they knew any more about each other. Graduating from high school in a class of less than 60, I was astonished of their lack of ability to recite which area of town each classmate grew up in, what their background was, or even how many siblings they had. Whether it was their lack of concern for these details or just not finding this information important, I questioned if they even knew how to get to know each other better. In addressing this lack, for the past three I filled my curriculum with three different units emphasizing who they are as a diverse group of students; to discover their classmate’s differences, similarities, and to our surprise a lot of unknown information. In retrospect, we all learned a lot about each other. In the flowing, I will discuss the developments observed after implementation of my curriculum.

For this study I explored the specific question “How does a study of diverse contemporary artwork impact students in a non-diverse educational setting?” In order to answer this question I focused my research on questions:

- How can a presentation of diverse contemporary artwork help students feel better prepared to understand people’s differences?
- How does a study of contemporary artists and their artwork change student artwork?
- How does studying contemporary artists and their artwork impact student awareness of their own and other classmate’s differences?
What can I learn from educating students through a study of diverse contemporary artists and their artwork?

Throughout my study, I was primarily focused in finding if it was possible to educate students on diversity and to create a better appreciation for their classmate’s diversity, so the majority of my research was based in the classroom, recording data, collected from the students during their ‘discovering diversity’ process. I began my research with several interviews from SAA alumni to base my direction for the current students. From those interviews, I was able to collect information about where those students in retrospect would have changed their diversity education at SSA, and used this data to compare to current students. Subsequently, I began with student questionnaires to gauge students understanding of diversity. Surprisingly, my most advantageous data collection method was classroom observations and student artwork. It was there that the students attested the saying ‘actions speak louder than words’ and I now consider declaring, “actions and artwork speak louder than words.” Overall, my alumni interviews, student pre and post questionnaires, student artwork, and personal observations were exceptionally beneficial to my research. Each branch of data collection provided me with a vast amount of information to aid in the development and interpretation of my findings.

Changing the Definition of Diversity

As one of my data collection methods, I administered a preliminary anonymous student questionnaire, which revealed much information. After a few days into my study, what I found in the questionnaires began emerging in class and could also be seen in student artwork. In devising the query ‘Define diversity in your own words’ did not seem as monumental as I typed the student’s first questionnaire, but the results led me to more
than I could have imagined. Dependent on students definition of diversity, partially
determined their journey through the class. Two main groupings emerged after a detailed
comparison of all of the student’s questionnaires, one being a group of ‘the inclusion of
self with diversity’ and the other seeing it as a ‘separate entity’.

Fifteen students defined diversity as something separate from them, making no
reference to self-reflection or correlation to their being seen as diverse. One student even
went as far as defining diversity as, “Experiencing cultures and races different from
yours.” When a student does not include herself in the equation of diversity, I found it
difficult to demonstrate how everyone has their own differences. To these 15 students,
they saw diversity as, “That is them and this is me.” This separation causes disconnect of
how their unique qualities may have connections to other people’s diversity. During
observations in both classes, this separation had a ripple effect in student behavior,
discussions, and artwork.

After observing student interactions, the separation became quite obvious as the
‘separate from diversity’ students disconnected themselves from the diversity group.
Certain students were more accepting of others during class discussions or group work,
while five only seemed to care to listen or participate when ‘their group’ was involved.
A prime example occurred during an introductory activity, where only three students
gave their attention while students from another social group presented. Some students
disrespected even talked while other groups presented, even after I had spoken to them.
These ladies seemed to see themselves as being separate from them and saw others
different from themselves as less valued. Actions that reiterated the division between the
students were more specifically seen in the student questionnaires. One student honestly
answered strongly disagree to the statement “I respect other students even when they are different.” This particular student even went on to strongly disagree to the statements, “I am comfortable being friends with students of other races or cultures” as well as “I think it is important to speak up when other students make fun of people who are different.” Her detachment between her and being different did not allow her to see the problems with strongly disagreeing to these statements. Smith and Watson (2009) found that when students lack knowledge of positive experiences for learning about people’s differences, they often resort to other ways of managing diversity, and manifesting negative responses. Students disrespecting each other during class discussions are examples of negative responses to diversity interactions, seemingly from not attempting to make connections between themselves and others defined as different.

This separated response can also be seen in the student’s choice of creating artwork. When given the choice of what diverse artist to be influenced by, these students created artworks with little to no personal connection. For example, when studying street art and an artist by the name of Swoon (who is very influenced by embracing people’s differences and creates portraits that show in detail all of what makes up a person), one student took a photograph of three women playing instruments and used them as her subjects for the project (Figure A). When questioned about her project during the class critique, she stated that she did not know these women personally, nor was the location of the photograph a relevant place to her, but she saw them as a diverse group of women and just thought they appeared to be “full of culture.” She further disconnected herself from the “cultured women” in choosing the location to graffiti her street art. She also explained that she just found a wall to create her street art by judging the appearance of
the wall more than her connection to the location. When this student defined diversity as
disconnect to the self, it was difficult for her to create a diversity inspired artwork linked
to her own personal life.

On the contrary, some students intelligently self-reflected and made the
connections between who they are as a person and how that connects to being diverse. In
response to define diversity, one student wrote, “diversity is unique qualities that
different people share.” Understanding that one’s own unique qualities can be shared in a
group is a step toward appreciating people differences. Beth even went further in
explaining that diversity is, “embracing and accepting peoples from other races, cultures
and backgrounds.” When a student can understand that they are intertwined with others’
diversity, they can begin to appreciate others differences and see the value in learning
about diverse people. When a student understood people differences as a positive connection to themselves, they were more respectful and open to their classmate’s ideas and comments. During class critiques and discussions, Beth chimed in to say how she enjoy hearing about each other’s ideas because she can bring their thoughts back to her artwork and improve her work.

This correlation was further seen also in the actual artwork. When given the choice of what artist to use for idea inspiration, students who connected their differences with choose an artist that focused on what made them unique as person. Specifically, when assigned the same Street Art project, another student (Erica) chose Swoon as well, but her outcome was completely different. Erica chose to use her family as her subject to illustrate what made them unique, and even went further using a building in her neighborhood as her

![Figure B: Erica’s Artwork. Street Art project.](image-url)
street art location (Figure B). Johnson (2002) summarized that when a student does not fear being different, they are enabled to personally reflect on their own uniqueness, which builds personal strength and grounds student understanding of their own distinctive identities. Being able to see her unique connection to diversity showed how her definition of diversity had a deep influence on her work’s decisions, therefore strengthened her artwork.

In conclusion, from examining all student definitions of diversity, and making connections to their behaviors toward each other in the classroom I was able to see how a student defines diversity changes if they can understand how they are connected to the idea of being diverse. Fifteen students, who saw diversity as a segregated entity, struggled with making correlations between themselves and others as diverse humans. In contrast, the 3 students who defined diversity with a connection to them appeared to appreciate alternative ideas of diversity, and found ease in connecting their own lives to diverse artwork. To conclude, this all means that student in my educational setting were not getting enough diversity education and their understanding of diversity thus far was altering their views in negative ways. After I discovered the two ways of defining diversity, the division led to the separation of student comfort with diversity, which further separated the class.

**Different Appreciations for Learning about Diversity Separates the Class**

Each individual student is a specific learner, so it was no surprise that there would be a range in appreciation levels with learning about their classmate’s differences. However, I was not expecting that the divide in preference would tear the class apart. I could tell that students were hesitant of learning about diversity, while looking at answers
on the questionnaires, observing them in class discussions and critiques, and examining their artwork. On the other hand, when a student was open to the idea of learning about diversity and their classmate’s differences, their questionnaires presented different results, their class participation changed, and their artwork improved. When students bear such obvious appreciation levels of learning about people’s differences, it changed how the whole class ran. Grant & Sleeter (1993) stated that it was enough for students merely to have contact with students different from themselves, but just as important for teachers to assist students in developing understanding of diversity in order to appreciate it. Just introducing students to diverse artist would not create the appreciation of people differences I intended to accomplish. Getting students to recognize the importance of knowing about people’s differences needed to start with me know who appreciated leaning this valuable information, and who unfortunately did not.

Students who were unappreciative of learning about other people’s differences bluntly explained it in their questionnaire by answering the statement “I want to learn about different cultures and people’s differences, especially ones specific to my classmates” with a either a disagree or even a strongly disagree. Though these two students were honest, this demonstrated that students did not see the importance in learning about differences.

I observed this unappreciative action in class discussion specifically in the beginning of a graffiti unit when that included distinguishing between Street Art and Tagging. Each student was able to choose a nickname and create a ‘tag’ to be used for the labeling of their projects. While working on the project, one student outwardly stated, “Ugh, this is ghetto,” meaning that only inner city, poor, African American people
tag; she wanted to put a real nametag on it. Her lack of appreciation for learning and attempting a different style of art was evident in her response. Though she did complete the project, her effort was minimal compared to her normal work ethic. This instance suggested that this student’s biases negatively motivated the work. Moreover the instance reflected the depth of her biases.

I observed apprehension to learning about different styles of art during the creation of artwork as well. During lesson introductions students who had been showing unappreciative attitudes toward learning about diverse artworks and artists often resorted to choosing humor for their project. One student in particular chose her dogs as subjects for her Street Art project (Figure C). Like the artwork of her influential artist, she made
the subjects (her dogs) really small and put them in their natural environment. When questioned about why she chose her dogs she said she picked them because she was home when she remembered she needed a photograph for class, and using them was just easy. She made little effort to make personal connections in the assigned project.

A mature student can show appreciation for learning about diversity and people’s differences in multiple ways. One way it was shown in my study was in the questionnaires. Only 4 students out of 18 were confident in answering ‘strongly agree’ to the statement ‘I want to learn about different cultures and people’s differences, especially ones specific to my classmates.’ These few students showed this appreciation for learning about differences and different cultures in class as well by becoming fully involved in class discussions.

One particular example was observed when the class went on a tangent and began discussing their present job issues. Looking around as the class talked, I watched some of the students tune-out when certain classmates began to share what they go through in a typical day at work. One student surprised me by carrying on an in-depth conversation with a student who generally is treated as an out-cast, mainly because she is part of the school’s minority and has some mild disabilities. She appeared very intrigued with hearing about the issues the other student dealt with at work and genuinely showed interest in giving her time to share. Johnson (2002) even stated that the arts are a natural place for the pursuit of the intercultural dialog our students require to succeed in the 21st century. Allowing these tangential of conversations to occur seemed to help them two students better understand each other. This individual in particular exemplified how,
even without my guidance, a student can have an appreciation for learning about another person.

Lastly I found students who expressed appreciation for learning about diversity and people’s differences commonly made strong statements through their artwork. One student illustrated her appreciation to learn about a fellow classmate by choosing to use her as the subject for her Street Art project. These two students were not particularly close friends before the class, but after the decision to use Vhils as her artist, Jessica had to learn about her classmate Taylor in order to complete the project (Figure D). This surprised me because no requirement stated that the girls had to use someone from the class. When Jessica was asked to talk about her project at the final critique, she explained that she saw it as an opportunity to get to know Taylor better since they sit next to each
other in class. These two students built a new friendship by their willingness to move past not being from the same group of friends or the same backgrounds.

I have always believed that my classroom has been most successful as a cooperative community. When these students turned to cliques who resist learning about people’s differences, that division created a rift. Any educated instructor knows, differentiated instruction is needed in every contemporary classroom. So this means that knowing where students are in their appreciation for learning about each other’s differences, provides the teacher with the opportunity to help the egocentric students to grow into being appreciative of diversity, especially with the assistance of artwork. Johnson (2002) even specified that when students understand and appreciate art, they can develop their own sense of identity and acceptance of people’s differences.

**Looking for a Place**

All students’ appreciating each other and their differences sounds ideal, but how necessary it was in my classroom wasn’t so obvious at first. The thought of being able to teach students about diversity and how to appreciate people’s differences before they went off to a more diverse university sounded wonderful, but I had no idea how much students who were considered as outcasts were yearning for involvement. This longing became noticeable during class activities, class work-time, and artwork.

When graduating in a class of less than 75 students, you would think they all would be comfortable chatting with anyone from your class, but apparently not. During the first week of school, I enjoy having the students participate in ‘warm-up’ activities in class before the dreaded ‘syllabi day’ or any assignments. These activities consist of random games to ease the students back into school after the long summer, while getting to know their own classmates a little better. One of my favorites is having the girls use
Play-Doh. The girls often get the biggest kick out of being high school students and assigned to use what they consider a childish material. In this session I paired each girl with an unlikely partner (someone with whom they were not friends), with the assignment to create an inanimate object that best represented their partner. The groups discussed their interests and hobbies, ended the conversations when they had enough information gathered for the assignment, and quietly wait for further directions. Overall, it appeared the activity went well. Downtime in class is generally very chatty, especially after summer. Discussions of summer vacations, updates of news, and plans for the year usually filled the classroom, but no…nothing. The silence surprised me the most. After our informal critique of their sculptures, the pairs quickly dispersed into their usual formations of cliques and then the talking began. What astonished me was, they had a whole summer of stories or things to talk about and they appeared to have cared less to share or even hear from the student outside their circle. Grant & Sleeter (1993) explained that each student is a member certain status groups, and these memberships influence the students’ perceptions and actions. The division of members in such a small class (13 student’s total) was something I hoped to modify.

The cliquishness was also obvious when the students individually worked on their projects. Though Digital Media is my favorite class to teach, it is chaotic during work time. Commonly, I end up running around the lab helping each student individually on their specific problem with the computer. So, any student that is proficient in any of the programs we use in class is godsend to me. This year there is one student (Danielle) who is very intelligent, yet lacks common social skills. This deficiency leads her to commonly act erratic in attempt to fit-in. Unfortunately, many students reject her, and
often fall into mockery. The extent of this problem came about one day during class work time. The two students, Jenny and Samantha, who sit next to her (both knowing how proficient she is at using Adobe Photoshop an I had suggested in the past how she could be of assistance if she wanted to help) sat with their hands raised waiting for their turn for my assistance. After helping both of them with their problem, I was baffled by the thought that if they would have just nicely requested her help (a problem she would definitely had been able to fix) they would have not had to wait for over 15 minutes for my assistance, as I ran around to the students waiting before them. Not being able to see past her quirks and appreciate that she could help was disheartening.

Thirdly, throughout the quarter, one student’s artwork in particular showed the need for her fellow classmates to appreciate learning about her differences. Erica is generally a very quiet student, who keeps to herself, barely participates during class discussions, and chooses to sit in the back corner of the lab. Her artwork, on the other hand, screams for empathy from her fellow students. As unfortunate as the truth is, I have yet to observe the majority of the class ever acknowledge her or just say “Hi.” Erica comes from a different upbringing than majority of her fellow classmates and has had quite the colorful past. As mentioned before, Erica selected Swoon as her influential artist for her Street Art project (Figure B) and skillfully created a project that made a direct connection to herself, her community, and the assignment. By looking further into the work, one can read that she was telling the class about her community, her family, and how proud they were of her older brother as a college graduate. During individual discussions with her I was able to gather information about how he was the first from her family to go to college, so it was monumental when he graduated. Watching her talk
about it just showed how proud they were of him. Yet, during the final class critique, she only shared how she chose Swoon because she liked her artwork and added that the building was from her neighborhood. She did not elaborate on anything else, but waited for her classmates to ask about her brother, or the other person in the artwork, however no one did. The conversations about her work were about techniques or how they liked it, and she quietly refrained from revealing and the class moved past the deeper meanings behind her work. Where other artworks with less personal meaning were discussed in depth, the class passed over the embedded messages in Erica’s work. For the next project, students shared untold secrets with each other in a PostSecret project. I found four main ways students dealt with the idea of sharing personal secrets with each other: ‘reviling humor’ (something silly about themselves), a ‘childhood secret’ (something anyone innocently could have done), ‘throwing it out there’ (bluntly sharing something deep, dark or horrifying) or lastly, ‘the invitation’ (alluding to having something to say but not really sharing without someone actually having to ask). Erica chose ‘the invitation’ (Figure E). Written over a movie still in an exaggeratedly large font, Erica wrote ‘Everyone has a story, but mine is a…long and emotional journey’.

Figure E: Erica’s Artwork. PostSecret project.
emotional journey LEFT UNTOLD!” As if she could not have said her desire to be heard any clearer, during the class final critique, no one asked about her journey or even if she wanted to share anything about it to the class. While her artwork was being critiqued the group chose to discuss technique, and asked what movie the image was from. Erica quickly explained how it was from her favorite part of the movie Freedom Writers. She even went on to elaborated why she liked that part of the movie best, yet no one asked about what she meant by her journey, they just discussed the movie and imagery until the critique moved on. The need for appreciating her for what she has been through was obvious, yet they just moved on. I eventually asked Erica a leading question as to why she connects so much with that part of the movie, then asked her to explain how she created a balance between text and imagery (assignment requirement), and she bashfully answered with a shortened version of what she told me earlier, “I like that part of the movie because of that girl. And it’s balanced because the text doesn’t tell you everything, you need the story too.”

So all of this shows that students demonstrate their need for acceptance, or the lack of acceptance for others through social interactions, nonverbal actions, and through their artwork, and that it is the teachers responsibility to pick up on these cues to fill their needs. Not being able to hold a friendly conversation with a fellow classmate of four years, or ask for help with a computer problem, shows the boundaries between student groups at this site. Johnson (2002) even stated that students need to learn to conceptualize cultural diversity as a strength and an asset in order to see themselves and others in meaningful and in significant ways. Even though this can be found outside of schools, when a student yearns for this divide to diminish, it is the teacher’s responsibility
to initiate the transformation. This change can happen through the process of exploration, trust, respect, and growing together in knowledge.

**Breaking Boundaries**

Knowing the girls since they were freshman, I have been able to watch them mature, because three years is a long time for growth, but what about three months? Is it possible to change a student’s view on diversity in as little of time as three short months? One would think no, but on the contrary, it is possible to see the smallest changes if watched carefully. No radical transformations or epiphanies occurred, only minor revelations. The signs of change were observed as three of the resistant students showed appreciation for discovering about diversity, even if so little as just to appreciate learning about other classmates. I discovered these small changes during the last critique, final questionnaires, and observation of the class interactions during their fringe assignment.

As my research concluded the students took their final questionnaires (Appendix D). Comparing the data collected from their first and last questionnaire was evident that the results yielded noticeable differences in answers. The increase in the correct answer
averages displayed student growth in learning about other’s diversity and their differences.

While looking at the short answer question of, “Do you feel you have learned more about your fellow classmate through any of the class projects?” only one student responded to not having learned more about her fellow classmates over the course of the class. The other 17 student answers explained how and where the students felt they learned more about each other. One student wrote a response of, “When we did the PostSecret project my classmates were able to share something they never told anyone. Some of the secrets were very personal. If we did not do the project they probably would not have shared it, and we would have never known.” She explained further, “Also, our other projects allow for free expression so we are able to see what things are important to each other based on what we put in our projects.” This student showed her appreciation for being able to learn about her fellow classmates and their differences. Another student wrote, “Through the projects and the artist’s explanation of her work, I learned more about my classmates lives.” Reading into these two student’s responses, appears that they now have a better understanding of their classmate’s differences and even are beginning to appreciate getting to know them as well. I was also able to create this assumption while comparing observations of the student’s interactions from the first class to the last.

Strategically, for the current assignment I grouped the students in similar groups that did not mesh well in the beginning of the year. My hope was to see if, through the past three months, the students learned to appreciate each other. One of the most interesting observations was when Jenny responded to Danielle being added to her group by surprisingly saying, “YES! She’s good with Photoshop! Ours is going to rock!” In the
beginning of the year, not only did these two not converse during the Play-Doh activity, Jenny sat next to Danielle needing Photoshop help plenty of times, yet waited for me to come around the room for a simple solution to a problem. O'Sullivan (2003) previously explained that transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and/or actions. From that specific observation I was able to watch Jenny appreciating Danielle for her skills and knowledge, and see the benefits of having her in her group. Since then, the group has been successfully sharing each other’s skills to complete the project. Yet, it was not until I looked at a comparison of student artwork that proved their growth in appreciation for each other over time.

In the beginning majority of the students chose artwork that had minimal personal connection or resorted to humor. Over time more and more students chose very poignant themes for their art. Their comfort with sharing this information with their classmates is growing, as well as their understanding that people will appreciate them for sharing. During the PostSecret final critique, one student chose to share that she is 17 years old and still sucks her thumb (Figure F). As a cautious educator, I pulled this student aside prior to the critique and gave her the option of just turning it in and not participating in the sharing portion of the class, for fear of

*Figure F: Danielle’s Artwork. PostSecret*
backlash from her fellow classmates. Without even a pause, she explained that she wanted to share because she wanted her classmates to understand her better. Eaton (2005) even stated that as educators, “we must have the courage to address difficult issues in order to offer students a more diverse definition of their own identity thus creating broader perspectives with which to view, interpret, and understand the world around them” I was thrilled with her decision to share. During the critique, not one single student was disrespectful while remarking on her work. Each fellow classmate was attentive as she explained that sucking her thumb was a reaction to her anxiety issues. Before this study, I would have never believed she would feel comfortable sharing that information with the other students in class, for fear of rejection, nor would I have thought that her classmates would have bestowed the respect they showed during that critique. Truly, it was an eye opening and pleasant experience.

Students will grow into respectful young women when given time and nourishment. So all of this shows that through months of discussions, observations of interactions, and analysis of artwork, honestly shows that students can be transformed into students who better appreciate each other and each other’s differences. In the end, growing-up together can also mean growing in sensitivity toward each other.

Conclusion

Change in perspective can awaken students to things they may have blatantly missed. Students who sat next to each other for four years can change opinion, appreciation, and understanding of each other. Being able to see their differences and appreciate that person for being different can only come from understanding how one is directly connected. By students not understanding the interconnection of one’s differences to other people’s differences, often creates a divide in the classes’ collective
appreciation of people’s differences. When students are divided in diversity appreciation, this rift between classmates indicates the student need for creating appreciation of differences. Eventually, though trust, progress and respect, student can grow together in appreciation of each other’s differences; in hope that these appreciations will continuously grow and follow them on to more diverse settings.
Chapter V: Conclusions and Recommendations

When I started this study I mainly wanted to change the limited diversity education specifically at SSA. Overall, I hoped to reveal how beneficial contemporary art is to students, especially in non-diverse educational settings. After all is said and done, now looking back, I discovered the larger impact my study has had on the field of art education. Primarily, I found this study developed student artwork, changed student awareness, and impacted my teachings.

Change in Artwork

Throughout this process, the students were continually changing. What they talked about, what the weekly drama was, even towards the end where they sat, but the most noticeable change was in their artwork. I have had the advantage of knowing these students since freshman year, so their art abilities were no news to me. Some students have always had the knack for drawing or painting, but the reason I have always enjoyed Digital Media class so much was they generally all started as beginners. Their development over a period of time through the help of the contemporary artwork was astounding. I was amazed at how below average art ability students progressed into creating jaw-dropping conceptual work, just from the presentation, the discussion, and critique of contemporary artwork. Students who previously asked for the project’s answer, found their own voice and demanded to be heard; for example Erica’s case. In the beginning of the year she constantly asked what she should do for her project, what artist to use, what imagery was appropriate, but in recent projects she has found comfort in using her own decisions and values creating works that have meaning to her.
Transformations like these showed how the inclusion of contemporary artists and their artwork can positively change student artwork.

**The Impact on Student Awareness**

In a close second, what also amazed me was the drastic change in student awareness of their own classmate’s differences. Prior to this study the students were very biased toward some classmates, and/or some just did not seem to care. Whatever the reason, the questionnaires showed that majority of the students had no desire to gain knowledge of neither their classmates nor why it could be beneficial for them to know. Once students began expressing their ideas and personal differences through their artwork, the excitement at critique days was hard to miss. The opportunity to show each other what they creatively produced was exciting and no longer just part of their participation grade. Each artwork and discussion became a story of them. Starting each lesson by discussing and interpreting the artwork with information about the artists gave the students a platform to begin to look at each other under the same microscope and see the similarities and differences amongst personal artwork. Since the artwork was a personal reflection of each individual, they gained information about each other as artists and about the personal content of each work, which provided insight into each person’s life. Without the use of the artwork, the students may not have been able to change the way they viewed each other, therefore not developing an awareness of their classmate’s differences.

**What I Have Learned**

Summarizing what I have learned through the process of presenting a range of contemporary artworks to students in aid of discovering and understanding diversity
seems just as challenging as the research process was. Mainly, I discovered that when students are given the chance, they would rise to the challenge; even the most unlikely contenders will surprise, in their artwork and their behaviors. I learned that providing students with a range of artists or starting points for their artwork doesn’t overwhelm them, yet influences them to produce a breadth of complex solutions. I also discovered that what I model as important to me, inherently influences the students. If I demonstrate qualities I would like them to have, the students follow my lead. Finally, what I also learned and valued learning the most was being able to further gain insight into student’s personal interests: where they come from, what makes them who they are, and ultimately watch them grow into sophisticated young women.

Recommendations for Further Study

The longevity of the changes observed throughout this study within the 18 students could be a point for additional investigation. Following these students into college and even years after in the professional world, to observe their diversity interactions would be fascinating, hopefully discovering that these few short lessons created long term effects on their behavior, even years after they left SSA. Another intriguing continuation of this study would be to take a similar conceptual study to an all-male school and public school, and see what results it would yield, determining if these results were specific to this situation or reproducible in other settings. If I were to do this study over I would definitely make the study longer. I would also have the students keep a journal so I could keep track of their personal thoughts and progress, rather than just my observations and the final questionnaire.
Conclusion

From this study I was able to develop a greater sense of how to implement diversity education into a non-diverse environment. This study showed how students benefit from discovering and embracing classmate’s differences, while providing teachers with information of how to begin to implement similar practices in their own classroom. This study has shown how diversity education, through the use of contemporary art encourages, inspires, and enhances student learning. Finally, this study demonstrated how diverse contemporary art enhanced the overall education of the students and me. For future studies, teachers can use my study to help them initiate the incorporation of diversity education into their own non-diverse classrooms.
References


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Appendix A: Student Assent Letter

Dear Students,

I am writing this letter to ask your permission to be a part of a special art study this coming quarter. As part of my Masters project in Art Education at Buffalo State College, my senior Digital Media classes will be participating in a diversity-based art study where you will be introduced to a variety of diverse artists and their artwork.

The goal of my research is to investigate the question, “How does teaching about a diverse group of artists and their artwork, help students feel better prepared for the diversity they will encounter, after graduating from Holy Angels Academy?” You will have the opportunity to gain knowledge of cultures and customs different from your own, while learning about contemporary artists, and important art techniques and concepts.

Fictitious names will be used throughout this study to protect your name and the schools privacy. Everything created for this research project will be completely educational and confidential. I appreciate your time and willingness to help me in my professional development. If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact me at any time. Thank you very much for helping me make this project possible.

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

I give permission to engage in the study as described above.
I give permission to be photographed or videotaped during the quarter art class for data collection methods only (Photographs of you will not be in final project)
I give permission to be interviewed about my experience in art class.

Please print, sign and date on the line below.

Student Name (Print) ___________________________       Date ___________
Student Name (Sign) __________________________

Sincerely,

Robin Reczek
Art Teacher
Holy Angels Academy

Kathleen Tedesco
Principal
Holy Angels Academy

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

I am writing this letter to ask your permission for your daughter/child to be a part of a special art study this coming quarter. As part of my Masters project in Art Education at Buffalo State College, my senior Digital Media classes will be participating in a diversity-based art study where students will be introduced to a variety of diverse artists and their artwork.

The goal of my research is to investigate the question, “How does teaching about a diverse group of artists and their artwork, help students feel better prepared for the diversity they will encounter, after graduating from Holy Angels Academy?” Your daughter will have the opportunity to gain knowledge of cultures and customs different from her own, while learning about contemporary artists, and important art techniques and concepts.

Factious names will be used throughout this study to protect your child’s and the school’s privacy. Everything created for this research project will be completely educational and confidential. I appreciate your time and willingness to help me in my professional development. If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact me at any time. Thank you very much for helping me make this project possible.

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

- I give permission for my daughter/child to engage in the study as described above.
- I give permission for my daughter/child to be photographed or videotaped during the quarter art class for data collection methods only (Photographs of child will not be in final project)
- I give permission for my daughter to be interviewed about her experience in art class.

Please print, sign and date the line below:

Parent/Guardian Name (Print) ___________________________ Date ___________

Parent/Guardian Name (Sign) ___________________________

Sincerely,
Robin Reczek
Art Teacher
Holy Angels Academy

Kathleen Tedesco
Principal
Holy Angels Academy

If you are unable to contact the researcher and have general questions, or you have concerns or complaints about the researcher, research study, or questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact Gina Game, IRB Administrator, SUNY Research Foundation/Buffalo State at (716) 878-6700 or gameg@rf.buffalostate.edu.
Appendix C: Student Questionnaire #1

Student Questionnaire #1

Date__________

5………….….…4………….….…….3…...……………2………… …..1

Strongly Agree     Agree     Don't Know     Disagree     Strongly Disagree

Please answer the following statements: (‘I’ referring to you)

_____ I am comfortable when meeting people from different races and cultures.

_____ I embrace people’s differences.

_____ I think judging people by their race or culture is OK.

_____ I think it is important to speak up when other students make fun of people who are different.

_____ I am comfortable being friends with students of other races or cultures.

_____ I respect other students even when they are from different cultures.

_____ I can learn important things from people who come from other cultures.

_____ I want to learn about different cultures and people’s differences, especially ones specific to my classmates.

_____ I think I can avoid having to associate with people from different cultures.

_____ I think all people are equal and are given the same rights.

_____ I am superior than people of different cultures than myself.

Define diversity in your own words:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

List as many artists you know of/have learned about:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Appendix D: Student Questionnaire #2

Student Questionnaire #2  
Date__________

5………….….…4………….….…….3…...……………2………… …..1

Strongly Agree    Agree    Don't Know    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

Please answer the following statements: (‘I’ referring to you)

_____ I am comfortable when meeting people from different races and cultures.

_____ I embrace people’s differences.

_____ I think judging people by their race or culture is OK.

_____ I think it is important to speak up when other students make fun of people who are different.

_____ I am comfortable being friends with students of other races or cultures.

_____ I respect other students even when they are from different cultures.

_____ I can learn important things from people who come from other cultures.

_____ I want to learn about different cultures and people’s differences, especially ones specific to my classmates.

_____ I think I can avoid having to associate with people from different cultures.

_____ I think all people are equal and are given the same rights.

_____ I am superior than people of different cultures than myself.

Do you feel you have learned more about your fellow classmate through any of the class projects?

YES         NO

Elaborate:  _______________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Appendix E: Alumni Assent Letter

Dear Alumni,

I hope life after Holy Angels has been treating you well! I am writing this letter to ask for you participation to be a part of a special art study this fall. As part of my Masters project in Art Education at Buffalo State College, my senior Digital Media classes will be participating in a diversity-based art study where students will be introduced to a variety of diverse artists and their artwork. Since you all have graduated from HAA, I also need your help collecting information about your experience with diversity during your times here at HAA and from after graduation.

The goal of my research is to investigate the question, “How does teaching about a diverse group of artists and their artwork, help students feel better prepared for the diversity they will encounter, after graduating from Holy Angels Academy?” You have the opportunity to present me with insight of your specific experiences with diversity on your present journey of life after HAA. To obtain the most information possible I am asking for a small amount of your time to be interviewed with some questions specifically on diversity. If you wish to participate in my research please e-mail me back with specifics on times of availability and I will contact you to make further arrangements.

For confidentiality purposes, factious names will be used throughout this study to protect your name and the schools privacy. Everything created for this research project will be completely educational and confidential. I appreciate your time and willingness to help me in my professional development. If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact me at any time. Thank you very much for helping me make this project possible and I look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

Miss Robin Reczek
Art Teacher
Holy Angels Academy

Mrs. Kathleen Tedesco
Principal
Holy Angels Academy

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

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

- I give permission to engage in the study as previously described.
- I give permission to be voice recorded during the interview for data collection methods only

Please print, sign and date the line below.

Alumni Name (Print) ___________________________      Date ___________

Alumni Name (Sign) ___________________________

Thank you again!

Sincerely,

Robin Reczek
Art Teacher
Holy Angels Academy

Kathleen Tedesco
Principal
Holy Angels Academy
Appendix F: Alumni Interview Questions

Diversity Interview Questions for Alumni

1) How would you define diversity?

2) Would you consider SSA a diverse educational setting? Why yes/why no…

3) Where do you attend college?
   • Would you consider the college you are attending a diverse educational setting?
   • Why yes/why no…

4) Has your experience at SSA prepared you to be effective in this environment? How?

5) (Depending on answers) What do you see as the most challenging aspect of attending a more diverse educational environment then SSA? What steps have you had to take to meet this challenge?

6) What kinds of experiences have you had working with others with different backgrounds than your own?

7) Was there ever a specific time where you had to alter your involvement in a class or school event to meet a diversity need or challenge? Elaborate…

8) Have you ever encountered a situation where a friend or classmate was not accepting of others’ diversity? Explain…

9) Have you made any efforts to foster diversity competence and understanding? Where?

10) Have you made any attempt to further your own knowledge of diversity or people’s differences? How?

11) In hindsight, would you change any of your educational choices? (like attending SSA or your college?) Why?

12) In hindsight, is there anything you wish was different about your education at SSA?