

12-1-2021

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Recommended Citation

O'Malley, Janelle, "Art Education as Mutual Aid: Community and Social Justice Based Initiatives" (2021). *Student Projects*. 63.
<https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/art-studentprojects/63>

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Art Education as Mutual Aid: Community and Social Justice Based Initiatives

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Final Project

ARTE 780

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, education has drastically changed. The months of pandemic coupled with rising political upheaval left issues with schooling at the bottom of the list. Yet, the repercussions of the pandemic have forever changed the face of our educational system. Especially hard hit during this time was subjects deemed unimportant such as music and art. These classes, which already have faced their fair amount of cutbacks, were once again left on the chopping block. Even though the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 ensured that art would be treated as a core subject, it was not considered to be during the pandemic (Bowen & Kisida, 2017). The pandemic has exacerbated the inequities in education as whole, but especially the arts (Herbst & Schwab, 2020).

Multitudes of studies have shown that the arts are an essential part of education.

According to Bowen & Kisida:

Engaging with art is essential to the human experience. Almost as soon as motor skills are developed, children communicate through artistic expression. The arts challenge us with different points of view, compel us to empathize with “others,” and give us the opportunity to reflect on the human condition. Empirical evidence supports these claims: Among adults, arts participation is related to behaviors that contribute to the health of civil society, such as increased civic engagement, greater social tolerance, and reductions in other-regarding behavior (2019, p. 1).

Since art education is considered a newer field, it is easy to see why it might be the first subject to face pushback. But in order to understand why this common response is hurtful to students we must first look at how important art education is.

According to Ruppert, an arts education gives students six major benefits in their overall education: reading and language skills, mathematical skills, thinking skills, social skills,

motivates students and it creates a positive environment (Ruppert, 2006 p.10). “Arts education has also been linked to not only higher GPAs and SAT scores but lower suspension and dropout rates” (Gehry & Feruzzi Shriver, 2020). A recent empirical study conducted by Bowen & Kasida examines the effects of a sustained reinvigoration of schoolwide arts education in a Texas school system (2019). The study was part of a city wide effort to restore art education in the school system through community partnerships. Bowen and Kasida found that a substantial increase in arts educational experiences has remarkable impacts on students’ academic, social, and emotional outcomes. This study was just one of many examples of the efforts of communities to keep arts in schools even when school systems cannot manage it. Despite public interest and support arts education is still the first to be cut when schools experience underfunding.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic a cultural shift happened within education. The complexities of the learning process were revealed as parents, students and school struggled to keep going. But this pandemic showed us that it takes a village to keep students engaged in learning. What we can learn from the lack of access to art education during this time is that educational collaboration is necessary and should be treated as a form of mutual aid.

Art Education as Mutual Aid

Mutual aid is an organizational theory where a mutual and voluntary exchange of resources is shared amongst a population. Often mutual aid is given in times of crisis by way of food pantries and child welfare programs. Mutual aid efforts have been popularized by organizations such as the Black Panthers in the 1960s with their free breakfast program. This program was the basis for the current breakfast programs in schools. During the pandemic free fridges and pantries popped up all over cities to help those with lack of access to food. However,

mutual aid is much more than those programs highlighted above. Mutual aid is something that is human nature.

Peter Kropotkin, a famous anarchist revolutionary philosopher, outlined in his book *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* that mutual aid is inherent across species and has been practiced by humanity for hundreds of years (Kropotkin, 1902). Kropotkin argued that the modern world was pushing against our inherent nature to aid and support others. His work directly opposed Darwin's theory of evolution that touted survival of the fittest (p. 1). He goes on to state that although competition is present in animals the overwhelming need for cooperation is stronger (p. 10). What Kropotkin is noting is our drive to help one another, especially in times of need. But how can this apply to art education?

When a school lacks funding it cuts programs that are deemed nonessential. But when funding is no longer an issue this problem ceases to be. By creating a mutual aid network of collaborative organizations, students will have access to more art education than before. The ability to pool resources and to share skills will make it possible to create additional courses and give broader selections of art classes. This type of collaborative network will differ from other models as it provides mutual benefits across the organizations involved. This process will also create community buy in and allow for students to create a deeper sense of belonging. By adding a curriculum that is community-based and has a social justice focus, mutual aid art education networks can create a more connected pedagogical experience for students.

Connecting Community and Rebuilding Through Art

John Dewey stated that everyone is capable of being an artist and that living an artful life benefits and beautifies the world (Goldblatt, 2016 p. 17). Dewey was not just referring to beautifying the world in an aesthetic sense but also a holistic sense. When art education is

centered around the student and the place in which they live it connects on a deeper level. It is essential to a mutual aid art education network to incorporate community-based pedagogy and social justice focused curriculum to achieve harmony.

The best way to bring a sense of community and to foster an art education mutual aid network is to shift paradigms to a community-based art education. Community-based art education (CBAE) takes the education outside of the classroom and focuses on the people and place it is situated in. “A local focus can give art educators a familiar basis to introduce and expand content” (Villeneuve & Sheppard, 2009 p.6). This switch allows for inclusion of educational content that addresses environment, well being, understanding and can reduce cross-cultural conflict (p. 7). CBAE will provide contextual learning using local art and culture (Ulbricht, 2005 p.6). Students can use their real life experiences to gain a better understanding of the content. “The act of exchange among participants in a community can be empowering as voices are heard and valued as equally important” (Lawton, 2010 p.7). The familiarity with space will also give students a comfortable path to exploring new content. The network of collaborators will also give students the opportunity to hear different voices and learn skills from a wider range of educators. Students will be able to foster a deeper sense of knowing and belonging while becoming better active listeners.

Additionally, incorporating social justice focused lessons will create a wider student reach. “Social justice education brings together the goals and perspectives of feminist, multicultural, disability rights, environmental, community based, critical pedagogy, social reconstruction, and visual culture art education” (Garber, 2004 p.4). Social justice based curriculum will allow for educators, community and students to come together to address issues within the community. In order to exact change and to foster a sense of community social justice

based curriculum must be approachable and connect with students. By pairing this with community-based curriculum students will be able to connect classroom learning with community involvement (Chung and Ortiz, 2011 p. 47).

Community-Based Art Education in Action

To better illustrate how this collaborative effort can be put into practice we can look at the relationship of a Chicago area nonprofit's efforts. Side Street Studio Arts (SSSA) is a small nonprofit in the heart of Elgin, Illinois. This project was started by Tanner Melvin and Erin Rehberg in 2013 as a creative outlet for the area with a focus on education and community building. During the past few years the organization has created a collaborative network amongst local schools. This collaboration, Community Moves, was made out of the need for more arts curriculum in some of the district's schools who had to cut back courses due to funding issues. SSSA brought their art educators to schools to provide free art classes and supplies for students (Figure 1.). This project created a mutually beneficial partnership amongst artists, SSSA, students and the school district.

Figure 1. Group mural project at Garfield Elementary School



During the pandemic SSSA created another outreach initiative to aid students during the shutdown. The Side Street Art Mobile (SSAM) was created as a mobile art center that would bring programs to neighborhoods and also act as an art supply delivery vehicle (Figure 2). During the last year SSSA was able to use their gallery and educational spaces to bag over 7,000 art supply kits that were distributed via their SSAM vehicle to students within a 10 mile radius of their location (Side Street Studio Arts, 2021). In addition to the kits they provided free on demand art lessons via their YouTube channel that students could access. They created content that used items from the available kits and supplies that could be found in the home. These lessons were accessed by several local elementary schools to supplement the art classes that had been cut. This outreach also prompted another collaborative effort to get free art supplies to all preschoolers in the U-46 school district (Guerrero, 2020).

Figure. 2 Side Street Studio Arts mobile art center SSAM



This organization's outreach efforts highlight an effective way that nonprofits and schools can partner to create an art education mutual aid network. By creating a mutual aid network

across schools and nonprofit organizations students can experience a robust fully connected art education.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of time we've expressed our humanity through art. As we evolved, our relationship with art diverged and was considered a luxury. In order to create connected communities and foster compassion, students need art education in their everyday life. The inequity in art education shows that we need accessibility now more than ever. "While democracy and equal opportunity are foundations of the belief system in North Americans and of our school systems, educational opportunity in U.S. education is not socially just" (Garber, 2004 p. 11). The past two years has demonstrated that mutual aid art education networks are necessary. By collaborating and sharing responsibilities, art education will remain accessible and allow for further student exploration. Pooling resources will also give students the ability to experiment with media not accessible to them previously. Social justice focused art initiatives paired with community-based pedagogy facilitate interaction and allow for students to be fully engaged with the world around them. Garber states further:

Education for social justice puts the goals of social engagement up front, where it cannot be mistaken. Education for social justice is education for a society where the rights and privileges of democracy are available to all. Art education for social justice places art as a means through which these goals are achieved (p. 16).

Utilizing social justice practices and community-based learning is one step towards building community connection and compassion within students. According to Lawton (2010), art educators should be concerned with teaching their students to make critical connections between the classroom and the outside world. By forming mutual aid art education networks

with community focused learning will guide students to know themselves, their world, and how to live as an active part of society.

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