



Social Justice Feature

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Feature Editor

**Building a Sense of History:
Folk Art for Early Childhood Learners**



Our Community Project

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Abstract

This study is a result of working with a first-grade teacher, Ellen Stubblefield, who plans, implements, and evaluates a modified Reggio Emilia approach. She documents students' learning through visual means. In tandem with a kindergarten teacher, Glenda Watson, early childhood learners question and reflect about their community history and that of Harlem primarily through folk art but also in music, poetry, literature, and architecture. Students inquire about historical events in the Harlem Renaissance and connected it to Hoover, Alabama. They deconstruct art works, replicate their favorites, learn the history of the Harlem Renaissance, map Harlem, write about artists, visit the local museum's exhibit of folk art and make comparisons to their community. Ultimately, they educated peers and parents about the diversity of the people who made Harlem such a wonderful community. As educators, we learn the most. We see young children can begin historical understanding with an active learning/research approach.

Theoretical Framework

Elliot Eisner (1991) counsels that “there are multiple ways in which the world can be known.” He maintains that the aesthetics, including art and artists, are integral to education. Unsurprisingly, if social studies are included in the menu of school at all, early childhood social studies still seem to exclude the study of aesthetic education.

Aesthetic education, in particular visual arts, is commonly absent in early childhood educational settings as the “push down” curriculum intensifies. This force is akin to the traditional notion of filling a container to hold facts to be later delivered on a test.

Young learners are increasingly shortchanged of spontaneous play, of creative discovery, and, especially, of art education (Eisner, 1992). Interestingly, art education is relegated to the affective domain or maybe the social realm (Greene, 2001). But indeed, the visual arts have a proper place in an academic-oriented curriculum focused on the cognitive realm as well as the social and affective domains. Because the arts awaken the senses, enable encounters for discovery, stimulate wonder, cause questioning, and promote reflection for early childhood learners, educators implement the arts through experiential and playful means. These are higher order cognitive methods. Yet, the arts offer ever so much more.

Visual arts cause young children to naturally raise questions. Information is gathered from observations, and data are gathered from observations. Interpretations and inferences are made. Theories are developed about the work of art. Various points of view are considered as other children's ideas are discussed about the work of art. Textures are felt and discussed. This is the nature of thought and thought development (Booth, 1999).

Moreover, Association of Childhood Education International's (ACEI) (2002) position statement explains that exemplar early childhood settings supply children with an abundance of materials to promote problem solving, critical thinking, and creativity to develop innate talents, abilities, and potential through play, curiosity, and discovery. Offering ample materials and equipment for young children assists them in cultivating and developing self-identity and

integrity about their own culture(s) through the experiences with art, music, dance, and drama. ACEI considers the arts essential to optimum self-development.

Art education is having an awareness of beauty. It is an inventive, creative, and personal action. Imagination is stirred. Booth (1999) reminds us that art is not just a noun. It is a verb as well. It is defined as “putting things together.” The work of an artist does, indeed, put things together. The observer is active as well. The observer makes meaning from the artwork, so they too “put it together.” Using prior experiences and history, young social scientists cognitively construct meaning about visual arts simply from making observations.

Meaning is constructed from observers’ personal and historical connections. It is conscious, wide-awake participation. An exchange of creative energy occurs between the artist’s work and the perceiver (Dewey, 1934; Greene, 1995). Perceiving, or attending to a work of art, elicits connections for the observer and touches the entirety of the observer’s domains, emotionally, socially, physically, and cognitively.

Young children are naturally drawn to folk art. Fascinating folk art pieces activate aesthetic and historical thinking of early childhood learners. Effective social studies teachers nurture the naturally developing cognitive and affective propensities of imagination and intelligence (Dewey, 1934). William H. Johnson, Romare Bearden, and Jacob Lawrence, whose folk art hails from the era of Harlem Renaissance, illustrate how profoundly aesthetics can ensure the development of young children and their ability to differentiate geographical skills, and develop historical understanding, while reading and writing about concepts relevant to social studies.

Folk art and artists, and the rudiments of history and geography merge through artistic expression. Folk art pieces are often works accomplished by people who have had little or no formal preparation in art. Folk artists usually create their works of art with traditional techniques and content in styles handed down through many generations, often from a particular region, or about an event in the life of the artist. Frequently the artwork has multidimensional pieces added to it to give it a three-dimensional appearance. Paintings, sculptures, ceramics, weaving, metalwork, costumes, tools, and other everyday objects all may be included under the umbrella of folk art. Some of the objects are combined into one piece of folk art work.

Related concepts connected to aesthetics’ study of folk art can extend to preservation of relationships among people, places, and environments. Distribution, production, and consumption are related if the study takes a project form (Katz & Chard, 2000; Sunal & Haas, 2005). In order for young learners to effectively construct historical understanding, teachers provide experiences to help them recognize how their experiences form a relationship to the history of the art, which makes it familiar, and enables them to see the continuity of the human experience over time (Hoge & Crump, 1988; Sunal & Haas, 2005). Implementing this type of teaching method permits learners to make better sense of past events, to understand the geographical place(s) in which they occurred, and to realize how the historical figures are connected to them.

Since art is subject matter that affects the sensory system (Eisner, 1991), the senses relate to artwork from the observer’s experience, which is a cognitive activity. Content has to do with the piece of art itself and should not be confused with form, a work’s physical characteristics, or context, the art work’s environment—time and place in history. However, to the onlooker, the young, social scientist, these are essential features. On the other hand, some think that content is the meaning of a work beyond its subject. It consists also of its connotations.

Levels of meaning are not obviously apparent but may relate to social justice and civil

rights. Young learners are capable of making these observations from folk art. Content usually has levels of complexity but is usually painted through uncomplicated images, describable facts, and actions. Presented are predictable signs and symbols. Subjects, objects, and events intersect, and the creative mind of the observer becomes operative. Inferences are constructed from past experience.

Young social studies students deserve the right to have rich learning opportunities and to build functionally operative historical cognitive schemas through aesthetic experiences. In essence, historical cognitive frameworks serve to accommodate effective teaching methods for later learning in history.

As Banks (2006) notes, the “contributions” approach is inadequate. It is implemented most frequently to teach about history and historical figures in the early childhood elementary curriculum. Banks describes three stages to further increase in-depth learning about pluralism. As levels advance toward depth, each level adds a supplementary perspective. The continuum sequence consists of the following levels: (a) additive, (b) transformational, and (c) social action.

The upper limit is the social action level. Young social studies students that are involved in making decisions, solving problems, or taking action on issues that they have learned about as a result of specific study, become involved in social action. This level is preferred and is the level at which the students in this study practiced (Banks, 2006).

The issues in this study are about what young social studies students derived from folk art because of the ways their teachers planned and implemented challenging, relevant, active, values-laden, and meaningful lessons (NCSS, 1994). In Banks’ (2006) recent work, he cites the failings of the levels below the transformational and social action approaches to learning. He emphasizes that synthesis of pluralism that created the historical backdrop against which the United States has to be presented. Contextual history is fundamental to students’ full understanding of our country’s history and cultural history as well as the development of identity for many of our young social studies learners.

Moreover, seeing folk art from a historical and contextual point of view lends cognitive complexity to increase understanding that assists the construction of the historical schema within the young social scientist. Learning about traditionally marginalized people and seeing folk art from a particular lens enables young learners to begin recognizing various perspectives on history and/or artistic pieces.

In the social action approach, students autonomously engage in means to take action related to community education, social justice, and civil rights. This is the model that educators implement with hopes that learners begin to value issues of justice as they grow into voting citizenry.

Early childhood learners can vicariously live and learn geographical and time-related concepts through art, which are precursors to historical understanding (Dewey, 1934). Because it is often problematic for young learners to learn these concepts, engaging in aesthetic experiences to study about particular locations, places, and historical figures which have relationships within particular places, they are provided opportunities to build a relevant sense of history and geography and relate it to important people and events in the past. They can see what and who are special about specific locations. It is powerful learning (Sunal & Haas, 2008). Learners are able to “try on” slices of historical figures’ lives that are connected to particular geographical places through artists and artwork. As they engage in detailed observations and are led in critical discussion, students are enriched in a depth of learning. They begin to construct a contextual

understanding about art, geography, and historical figures and events in a critical fashion and certainly more about themselves in the process.

Early childhood learners, focusing on authentic folk artwork, such as the myriad works of William H. Johnson, Romare Bearden, and Jacob Lawrence, through instructional strategies, inquired about historical events in the Harlem Renaissance and enjoyed learning the social studies. Early childhood learners deconstructed art works, replicated some of their favorites, learned the history of the Harlem Renaissance, mapped Harlem, wrote about the artists, and visited the local museum's exhibit of folk art to examine others' work and make comparisons. They wrote about the differences and compared folk art and traditional art. Then they educated their peers, parents, and the community about the Harlem Renaissance.

Methods

A narrative, ethnographic design guided the study. Particularly, we utilized an action research approach which focuses on teachers' practice, looking for insights and means to improve it. Using the steps of planning or looking, enacting or acting, thinking or observing, and reflecting was the focus of the study (Kemmis & McTaggart 1982; Stringer, 2007). We tried to make sense of the ways an early childhood teacher and university professor perceived how the social studies were manifest through the implementation of a unit on folk art as an approach to early childhood social studies. We utilized the process described above, and once the narrative was written, the process became recursive.

Participants and Setting

A primary teacher in a suburban school system in the southeastern United States studied and implemented an integrated social studies unit about folk art during the Harlem Renaissance era for early childhood learners. The first-grader students studied community as the large idea. This study examined how this particular teacher and the university professor working with her articulated their work, the progress of the young children in describing the historical era of the Harlem Renaissance, and the parental perceptions as a result of the innovative practice. This included a social action piece that educated the community about the folk art and history of the Harlem Renaissance.

The participants for the study include (a) early childhood learners, (b) their teacher, and (c) a university professor. Following an in-depth study of aesthetic education and the Harlem Renaissance, the teacher implemented the curriculum and reflected upon her and her students' work. The university instructor was part of the study and planning and was a participant in the study. The focus of the study was looking at early childhood social studies practice through teaching folk arts in context. We were looking for greater insights surrounding our work, which can be characterized as action research project.

Procedure

After detailed documenting and reflecting how social studies education intersected with the commitment to permeate early childhood educative space with folk art from the Harlem Renaissance era, both educators responded to a prompted written reflection. Additionally, the educators engaged in a second reflective session, using student work samples to further reflect

and deconstruct how early childhood social studies were manifest through the approach.

The educators used the interpretive and inductive method to analyze the data set. This method involved separate analysis and coding the prompted responses, as well as looking closely at the reflective notes kept in response to students' work samples, digital photos, email reflections, Wiki page entries, videos, learning boards, a tour of the display of the community project by the kindergarten and first-grade classes involved, and teacher plans as a basis for identifying emergent themes. The researchers (teachers and university professor) repeatedly read data.

Codes were initially developed in a bracketing stage (Denzin, 1989; Husserl, 1976). Afterward, formal themes were identified as four emergent themes. Highlighting repeated sets of coded words was the scheme used to identify the themes.

For purposes of trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba (1986) suggested a procedure for enlisting an outsider to "audit" fieldwork notes and serve as an overseer of the analysis and interpretations. Another researcher, not involved in the research, checked our work. The kindergarten teacher served as member checker and edited this piece.

Triangulation, a comparison if you will, occurred with pieces of data against other data and among multiple references to support raw data. Member checks ensured validity of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Researchers interpreted journals, written documents, and open-ended interviews, while verifying the identified emergent themes within the various data sets to ensure inter-rater reliability. Member checks were inherent in journal notes (Wiki-notes kept by the first-grade teacher), responses to one another's reflection, and response to drafts of the written account (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). A peer-debriefer contributed to the trustworthiness process.

Findings

Four themes were identified from the raw data. The four themes identified were as follows: Pre-Study; The Project Study, and Community Project; and Community Learning Made Visible.

Pre-study. The study of community lasted for two months. Under the umbrella of community, the first graders also studied music, literature, including non-fiction, fiction, and fairy-tales, technology, and, of course, folk art. The curriculum was interdisciplinary and standards from all content areas were encompassed.

Prior to the study, the students in both the first grade and kindergarten classes read an abundance of books about community and people who made a difference in various types of communities. They mainly focused on Harlem and compared the Renaissance era to the present-day Hoover community where they live and learn. One piece of children's literature utilized in both the kindergarten and first-grade class was Jan Greenberg's, (2003). *Romare Bearden: Collage of Memories*, which features the folk art by Romare Bearden.

As the study progressed, the students created mosaics or collages of communities. Each class put together a collage of what they thought the constitution of community would look like. The students cut out pieces from magazine pieces and words to create the masterpieces on poster boards. These were displayed on a family and friends' night held as the culminating celebration of the project.

Experts within the community were consulted as well. The mayor of the suburban city where the school is located and the city planner served as expert consultants.

The study of community project. With the assistance of Ms. Stubblefield, the children in her first-grade class established committees to facilitate the learning process. This way the documentation of learning would be easier to attain. The publicity committee alerted the school and parental community about the celebration of the culmination of the learning project.

The first-grade class took a field trip to the local art museum to study and view the exhibit of folk art. The work presented is Alabama Folk Art. The children were able to examine features of Alabama artists and compare art work features such as textures, colors, styles, medium, and themes. Some themes have diversity or social issues as a focus of which the young children were able to identify.

Once back in the classroom, children replicated some of Romare Bearden's work. After reading his work about collage, they created group collages. While they worked, they listened to the music of Duke Ellington.

The web site entitled "[The Block](#)" from the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art features folk art created by Romare Bearden and is a replica of Harlem during the Renaissance. The children examined aspects of the street, people in the windows, the building on the street, the church, and some of the artistic parts of the piece. They noticed the skyline, the types of colors, the shapes, and the mosaic-type art. The children noted that the people were all African American because in the community of Harlem, African Americans gathered there because it was a welcoming place. Because people were obviously on the street, talking to one another out of the windows, it was a friendly community. They thought Harlem was a community where people worked, played, and prayed together.

The students also studied poetry, most of which was the poetry of Langston Hughes that students learned about through reading, writing, and hearing it read. They looked beyond to see the deep messages about racism, discrimination, and prejudice. These issues required time and discussion, especially for such young social studies learners. Following the discussion, students in the first-grade wrote poetry. Those that had less writing skills used inventive spelling or had help from more skilled writers.

Students were divided up into groups which became smaller communities or committees. For instance, the publicity committee developed a brochure about the evening to showcase the multiage children's two-month study on the stage at the elementary school. The brochure was part of the actual study of the project. It was a portion of a reflective component in "looking back" over what the young students completed and intended to showcase to schoolmates, family, and friends what they learned and thought about Hoover and its people in comparison to Harlem and its historical place and people.

Community learning made visible. For the finale, in the exposition, the first-grade students created community service buildings, various types of businesses, and public buildings. Children chose which buildings they wanted to produce and used boxes to cover, draw on, and decorate in order to look like a pet store, city hall, train station, and hospital. The boxes used for the exhibition were donated by a local business. Parents donated the materials that they children used to create the buildings, such as paint, construction paper, glitter, wood, etc.

The young social studies children noticed the rich array of color in folk art. They learned about collage and the replicated the medium in their work. They read non-fiction and fictional literature about the Harlem Renaissance and people in the era that made the Harlem community vibrant. They were able to see how the lives from Harlem still live on and are historical figures in a prominent time and place in history. Children perceived and articulated that history incorporated folk art, music, literature, and geography and that it continues to be meaningful

today. This was the insight and realization that we were looking for as educators. Even though it is documented throughout the literature, lingering doubts lurked.

Additionally, young learners educated their parents, classmates, school, and local community about folk art and the history of the Harlem Renaissance through their study of community. The invitation brochure and the panels they created documented their learning and were presented on Friday night entitled, "What's Going on On Stage?" The evening was a celebration of learning, and the first-grade students with a kindergartner in tow, assisted each individual who came for tours of the exhibition.

Parental involvement was intensified. Parents served as representatives assisting the teachers throughout many phases of learning as explained earlier. A teacher intern assisted in putting up the display documentation panels showcasing the students' learning. Interestingly, Ellen shared that three of her former students (two of whom are in middle school) stopped by to see the community project. The two middle school students said they still have their buildings from when they did this project with their group.

Implications for early childhood social studies. The early childhood educators found that primary social studies students were self-directed learners who represented thoughts, feelings, and observations through graphic arts as a means to document learning about folk art. These young learners were able to document learning in social studies through folk art, poetry, music, literature, mathematics, and science. There was no evidence of shortchanging spontaneity or creativity as they discovered the likenesses and differences between Harlem and Hoover (Eisner, 1992).

Folk art, coupled with social studies, had a proper place in an academic-oriented curriculum focused on the cognitive realm as well as the social and affective domains (Greene, 2001). Senses were awakened which enabled encounters for discovery and wonder. The early childhood learners questioned and reflected about their community history and that of Harlem primarily through folk art, but also by music, poetry, literature, and architecture.

Textures were noticed, felt, discussed, created, displayed, and then captured in writing. This is the nature of thought and thought development. Promoted were problem solving, critical thinking, and creativity that develop innate talents, abilities, and potential through play, curiosity, and discovery. Imagination was inspired as the youngsters put collages and their conceptions of community together (Booth, 1999). Children replicated their cognitive constructions of a community with representations of Harlem and people that contributed to making Harlem the vibrant community that it was and still is through music, literature, and folk art. Using prior experiences and newly developed constructions about the history of the Harlem Renaissance and the geography of Harlem through folk art, young social scientists cognitively constructed meaning about visual arts simply from interaction with multiple medium and materials under the masterful guidance of early childhood teachers. They were able to compare this information to what was relevant in the geographical place where they live. This was extremely insightful to us as educators. It appeared that these youngsters were able to begin developing a sense of history and geography through folk art as they acquired numerous learning strategies from the in-depth project.

Learners are able to live particular slices of historical figures' lives that are connected geographical places accomplished by artists and their art work. Because it is often difficult for early childhood learners to cognitively construct these concepts, engaging in study about particular locations, places, and historical figures, which have relationships within the particular places the kindergartners and first graders were, provided opportunities to build a relevant sense

of history and geography. Learning was integrative, relevant, active, meaningful, values-based, and therefore powerful learning (Sunal & Haas, 2008).

As the young social studies students engaged in detailed observations and were led in critical discussion, they experienced a depth of learning. They began to construct a historical context about how art, music, geography, and historical figures and events were connected. They taught others of all ages about what they learned and certainly learned more about diversity and themselves in the process.

This fortunate group of early childhood learners focused on authentic folk artwork, such as the myriad works of William H. Johnson, Romare Bearden, and Jacob Lawrence, through instructional strategies, inquired about historical events in the Harlem Renaissance and enjoyed learning about the social studies and the humanities. They deconstructed art works, replicated the some of their favorites, learned the history of the Harlem Renaissance, mapped Harlem, wrote about the artists, visited the local museum's exhibit of folk art to examine others' work, and made comparisons to their community. Then they educated their peers, parents, and the diversity of the people who made Harlem such a wonderful community that the Renaissance continues until today. As educators, we learned the most, of course. We saw that young children can, with an active learning/research (Stringer, 2007) approach, begin historical understanding.

The teachers who brought the study of community and an aesthetic, educative offering to young children gave them myriad opportunities and possibilities to soar. They made sense of the world through folk art, from one piece of folk art to another, from arts to text, from the arts to self, arts to diverse others, and arts to cultures. Art education is self-connoisseurship, as Elliot Eisner (1991) terms it, because within the realm of the aesthetics is where our young children are indeed freed to become.

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Online Resources

<http://www.whitney.org/jacoblawrence/art/index.html>

<http://www.beardenfoundation.org/index2.shtml>

<http://www.beardenfoundation.org/education/education.shtml>

<http://www.beardenfoundation.org/education/activity.shtml>

<http://www.whjohnsongrant.org/whjohnson.html>

<http://americanart.si.edu/education/guides/whj/index.cfm>

<http://americanart.si.edu/education/guides/whj/whj-lesson2.cfm>

<http://americanart.si.edu/education/guides/whj/whj-lesson3.cfm>

<http://americanart.si.edu/education/guides/whj/whj-lesson4.cfm>