

Can social justice be more than just another brick in the wall? An investigation into the effectiveness of a school in communicating social justice issues

Central Material

My relatively high socio-economic status, access to quality education and other human rights resulted in me having little exposure to social and cultural inequalities, conflicts and discrimination. Therefore, I analysed the world from the perspective of a Symbolic Interactionist - my micro perspectives had shaped my behaviour and attitudes towards my society and, more broadly, the macro world. My interactions with others had caused me to perceive “a social reality that is socially constructed”,¹ clouding my perception through a lack of broad enculturation.

However, this “social reality”² shifted through exposure to those less fortunate than myself, building empathetic connections and subsequently affecting my burgeoning social and cultural literacy. This exposure arose through my school community, influencing my beliefs and values.

Experiencing Fowler’s synthetic-conventional stage, I found myself copying the actions of others in the school community - those of my peers and those in authority. This “overdependence on the mirroring and evaluations of influential significant others”,³ was ironic as I was copying a “faith”,⁴ supposedly altruistic, but I was doing so for personal gain. I participated in organising a variety of social events, raising funds and awareness for worthy causes yet my intentions were not entirely altruistic. I was copying a way of life exemplified by those individuals around me, in an attempt to find my identity, find my place in the micro social hierarchy, practice the norms and accept the values in order to belong to the society.

The catalyst for my change, initiating a process of increased social and cultural literacy, and transitioning to the fourth stage of Fowler’s theory – individuating-reflexive faith – was the role I played in organising last year’s 40 Hour Famine at my school. I had a “deepening self-awareness and a [sense of] personal responsibility for the values which [had been] integrated into [my] society”⁵ as a result of attending World Vision’s Global Leaders Convention.⁶ This event focused on equipping students to organise the 40 Hour Famine in their school, arming them with knowledge, skills and passion. And it succeeded.

¹ Hill, S, 2012. Families: A Social Class Perspective. 1st edition Los Angeles: SAGE/Pine Forge Press. Pg 35

² ibid

³ Roehlkepartain, E et al, 2006. The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence. 1st edition, Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications. Pg 40

⁴ ibid

⁵ Astley, J and Francis, L, 1992. Christian Perspectives on Faith Development. 1st edition Leominster, Eng: Gracewing. Pg 79

⁶ Big Top, Luna Park, May 31, 2013.

Can social justice be more than just another brick in the wall? An investigation into the effectiveness of a school in communicating social justice issues

Fired with passion, I was ready to share my newfound beliefs and values with other persons in my micro community.

Yet as the process of implementing the 40 Hour Famine came to fruition I began to discover that, despite my newly acquired knowledge and passion, the influence and power I thought I had was not as effective as I had predicted.⁷ I lacked something significant that the convention itself had, and thus, came to question the value of hosting social awareness events at school, their effectiveness, and ultimately developed a desire to challenge the students, as well as the school's traditions in raising awareness of social issues.

“Wasn't it, like, depression or something?”⁸ ~ Questionnaire Respondent

As I commenced the process of conducting social and cultural research I questioned the validity of educating teenagers about social issues. After analysing the data collected from my first primary methodology, a questionnaire conducted following “Happiness Week”,⁹ I discovered not one of the respondents, other than those who were organisers, were aware of its purpose. The event was designed to create a strong community atmosphere, while a variety of fun activities presented methods to deal with stress and anxiety. Students typically responded “wasn't it, like, depression or something?”¹⁰ Not only were students unaware of the purpose, but 51% stated they *learnt nothing from the week*. Did that make me a failure?

Cynicism clouded my evaluation. Why bother spending the time organising events, asking permission, purchasing supplies and attempting to influence students' values and beliefs when they fail to reap results? I realised, however, despite these difficulties, 49% had at least learnt something, and my hardships in trying to breach the gap between the two cultures were trivial in comparison to issues associated with the cause.

Seider¹¹ conducted similar research to my own by forming focus groups to determine “how a course on social justice issues affected the beliefs, attitudes and values”¹² of teenagers. He validated his study by

⁷ Not only did I struggle to gain participants, but also struggled to maintain their commitment in returning their sponsorship booklets and money.

⁸ Questionnaire conducted December 2, 2013 to December 6, 2013

⁹ Happiness Week was designed to increase the community atmosphere of my school, while a variety of fun activities throughout the week presented the means to deal with stress and anxiety.

¹⁰ Questionnaire conducted December 2, 2013 to December 6, 2013

¹¹ Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Teaching at Boston University

¹² Seider, S, 2009. Social Justice in the Suburbs – How can we raise privileged students' awareness of social inequalities and empower them to work for social justice? Retrieved November 6, 2013 from

Can social justice be more than just another brick in the wall? An investigation into the effectiveness of a school in communicating social justice issues

suggesting many American teenagers are “insulated from collective human suffering”¹³ and as the title of the article suggests, education can lead to students being “empower[ed] to work for social justice”.¹⁴

<http://people.bu.edu/seider/Consolidated%20papers/Social%20Justice%20in%20the%20Suburbs%20PDF%20Black%20and%20White.pdf>

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid*