Picture Justice: A Place-Based and Human Rights Approach to Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

Human rights are often neglected in Western high school classrooms. When they are covered, the focus is all too often on situations occurring in other parts of the world. This can lead students to believe that critical human rights abuses happen only "over there" and leaves many feeling powerless to affect change. A place-based and human rights approach to curriculum design and teaching can help overcome these challenges. Place-based education engages students in local experiences and uses these as the foundation of study. Human rights education, with its focus on peace, equality and human dignity, empowers students with the knowledge and skills to critique injustices and needless sufferings, and to work for social change.

This paper describes Picture Justice, a program which is rooted in both placed-based and human rights education. Created in 2014 as a partnership between The United Nations International School and PROOF: Media for Social Justice in New York City, the program equips high school students with the skills and confidence to address social injustices in their own communities through photography, storytelling and human rights education. In 2015, the program's focus was on America's criminal justice system. Participating high school students used New York City as their classroom to investigate racial disparities in America's War on Drugs, the torture of solitary confinement, the criminalization of mental health problems, and additional human rights issues. Students met with lawyers and activists from NGOs working on reform, trained with human rights photographers, and met with 17 formerly incarcerated people to hear their stories and take their photos. They then designed a photo exhibit called "Broken?" and devised a theater piece. The culmination of the project was a public symposium on mass incarceration attended by students and activists, as well as the formerly incarcerated speakers, who came to view their portraits, see their stories performed and engage with the audience.

This paper describes the content, pedagogies, goals and impacts of the program. Using Picture Justice as a case study, it illustrates ways in which human rights and placed-based approaches to education can be incorporated into teaching and learning.

1. Introduction

Human rights violations are not only the appalling atrocities that grab our attention: the exploitation of children as soldiers, torture, genocide and mass rape. Insidious human rights abuses occur here in the US, including in New York City. These offenses, too, cause immense suffering for millions of people. For some populations, harassment, discrimination, violence, assaults on dignity, or even hate crimes are a daily threat. And sadly, in the world's most eager exporter of democracy, justice can be as remote for some, as it is for people living in the most troubled parts of the world. (Excerpt from "I Don't Feel Protected" a Human Rights Photo Exhibit created by high school students at the United Nations International School)

High school curriculums often fail to engage students in meaningful lessons that locate their personal experiences in wider social issues. This is especially the case when it comes to the study of human rights. When issues related to human rights and social justice are covered in US classrooms, the focus is all too often on situations occurring in other parts of the world. But when racial profiling and police brutality against people of color, environmental racism, homelessness and poverty, and deportation of immigrants are absent from the curriculum, the experiences of those students for whom these are daily occurrences, are negated.

The absence of local human rights issues from the curriculum also leads those students who are further removed from the issues to believe that critical human rights abuses happen only "over there." And while many students, whose lives and communities may not be directly impacted by the issues, are deeply compassionate and have a strong desire to help, their engagement is often limited to cleaning parks, helping out at soup kitchens or holding bake sales. Fundraising and community service are worthy activities but they leave many students ignorant of the social, economic and

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political causes of human rights violations and with the false belief that charity is the solution to injustice.

Picture Justice was created in 2014 to address these limitations. The program is a partnership between the United Nations International School (UNIS) and PROOF: Media for Social Justice. UNIS offers an education guided by the UN principles of global peace, fundamental human and equal rights, sustainability, social progress and a free world. PROOF is a non-profit organization based in New York City that uses visual storytelling and education to inspire global attitude and policy changes.

Rooted in a human rights and place-based approach to education, Picture Justice uses New York City as its classroom to engage students in the study of local human rights issues. It equips high school students with the knowledge, skills and confidence to address social injustices in their own communities through photography, storytelling and human rights education (HRE).

2. Human Rights Education

HRE is committed to building knowledge of human rights and to fostering the values and skills needed for their realization.

The United Nations defines HRE as "education, training and information aimed at building a universal culture of human rights. A comprehensive education in human rights not only provides knowledge about human rights and the mechanisms that protect them, but also imparts the skills needed to promote, defend and apply human rights in daily life. Human rights education fosters the attitudes and behaviors needed to uphold human rights for all members of society. [1]

While there are many definitions and approaches to HRE, most models share similarities when it comes to content, pedagogy and goals. [2] HRE aims to foster knowledge, agency, empowerment, solidarity and mobilization for social action. Process is equally as important as content, with most literature emphasizing the use of pedagogies that are participatory, experiential, critical, problem-posing and that result in authentic and action-oriented projects. [3]

2.1 Content

HRE educates students about human rights, as well as about the declarations, conventions, constitutions and local laws that were created to protect rights. [1] Picture Justice is committed to building this knowledge, as well as to the values of peace, equality and human dignity. This is done through explicit teaching about human rights, which begins on day one and continues throughout the program. In Picture Justice 2015, students read the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, watched short videos, and engaged in discussions and simulation activities designed to have them reflect on the connections between social identity and human rights.

Picture Justice, like other HRE programs, places an emphasis on context-specific content. In this regard, HRE holds much in common with a place-based approach to teaching and learning in that its focus is on local experiences, which are used as the foundation of study [4]. In 2015, the focus of Picture Justice was mass incarceration and the US Criminal Justice System. The topic was chosen in advance by the program director and potential participants for its contextual significance and was largely inspired by the work of civil rights lawyer and author, Michelle Alexander. In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Alexander describes mass incarceration as "the racial justice issue of our time." [5]

As the global leader when it comes to incarceration (the US holds just 5% of the world's population, but has 25% of its prisoners), the US criminal justice system is rife with injustice. Torture, in the form of solitary confinement, is still widely practiced. In New York State, sixteen and seventeen year olds are tried as adults. Aggressive and discriminatory policing practices disproportionately fuel the incarceration of people of color from New York City's low-income communities. Thousands of poor people sit in jails on New York's notorious Rikers Island, not because they have been convicted of a crime, but because they cannot afford bail. US prisons include one-third of the world's incarcerated women and until recently in New York State, incarcerated women could be shackled while giving birth. The issue of parental incarceration in the US has become so pervasive that Sesame Street, a popular children's television program, introduced a muppet whose father is incarcerated. And while studies have shown that people of all races in the US sell and use drugs at similar rates, blacks are much more likely than whites to be incarcerated for drug offenses. In fact, there are more black men in the criminal justice system today than there were enslaved in 1850 and if current trends continue, one in three black men can expect to spend time behind bars at some point in his lifetime.

These were just some of the human rights issues that students confronted in the program.

2.2 Pedagogy

Picture Justice makes use of HRE pedagogies. Participatory, experiential, problem-posing and critical pedagogies are present in the program's four main components: visits to local human rights organizations, meeting with those directly affected by the issues, photography and theatre.

2.2.1 Visits to local human rights organizations

Picture Justice is participatory and experiential. Part of what makes the program unique is the student engagement with local human rights and social justice organizations. In 2015, students traveled throughout the city to meet with lawyers, activists, academics, policy experts and representatives of twelve different organizations working on criminal justice reform, advocacy and service provision to the formerly incarcerated. Most visits lasted between one to two hours and took the form of brief presentations, followed by question and answer sessions.

2.2.2 Meeting with those directly affected by the issues

The most powerful component of the program involved students meeting with formerly incarcerated people. In total, the students were able to hear and record the testimonies of seventeen people who had firsthand experience with the US criminal justice system.

Meetings and visits were debriefed using problem-posing and critical pedagogies. Problem-posing and critical pedagogies challenge students' prior understandings and engage them in the process of reflecting on why things are the way they are and how they came to be. [3] Reflection centered on three overarching questions: How did the US become the leader in incarceration? How just is the US criminal justice system? What can be done to remedy the injustices?

2.2.3 Photography and Photojournalism

One of Picture Justice's main goals is to teach high school students how to use photography and photojournalism to raise awareness of local human rights issues. This was accomplished through trainings with two PROOF photographers, who taught not only the basic skills of photography, but used their own work as references to introduce students to human rights photojournalism, portrait photography and photography as advocacy. Over the two-week summer institute, as students met with formerly incarcerated people to hear their stories and take their portraits, the photography instructors were present to guide and assist them. At the end of the summer institute, students worked with photo editors and designers from PROOF to create a photo exhibit on mass incarceration.

2.2.4 Theatre

On the final day of the summer institute, students transcribed all seventeen testimonies provided by the formerly incarcerated speakers. The transcripts were then given to UNIS' theatre department, where students engaged in a seven-week project of devising vignettes and small scenes based on the transcripts. The final scenes were then connected in a devised play.

3. Awareness-Raising and Action

Finally, Picture Justice is goal and action-oriented. Action-oriented pedagogies in the context of human rights education enable students to become activists by fostering within them the ability to organize, speak up, raise awareness and take action to address injustices. [3] Picture Justice 2015 provided students with different ways of being active: documenting stories, taking photographs, creating a human rights photo exhibit, devising and acting in a theatre piece, public speaking on mass incarceration, organizing a public symposium and participating in local campaigns for criminal justice reform.

The culmination of Picture Justice 2015 was a public symposium on mass incarceration held at UNIS. The symposium featured student presentations, workshops led by representatives of the participating human rights organizations, as well as the photo exhibit and theatre performance. The symposium was attended by students from throughout the city, as well as by the formerly-incarcerated speakers who came to view their photos and see their stories performed.

Students also took part in local anti-police brutality protests, and supported campaigns to end solitary confinement, reform the juvenile justice system in New York state and "ban the box" that formerly incarcerated people must check when seeking employment.

4. Impact of the Program

At the conclusion of Picture Justice 2015, surveys and interviews were conducted with all participants to determine the impacts of the program. The responses revealed that students had acquired a deeper

understanding of human rights, mass incarceration, and New York City, as well as a new appreciation for the role that storytelling, photography and theatre can play when it comes to raising awareness of oppression. Most importantly, many expressed a new sense of agency. The responses are best summed up by participant Elisabeth Wandel, "In Picture Justice, you start to realize that there are so many things going on in the city, that there are so many activists and that there is a lot of change happening. And you get to be a part of it. I think other people my age should do this program because you come into direct contact with human rights violations and you get to play an active role in changing them and promoting social justice."

References

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