

## What Should Research Tell Us About Multicultural Art Education Practices?: A Personal Perspective

Enid Zimmerman

I was a keynote speaker at the Symposium for Research on Conceptual Issues in Art Education that took place at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and returned home a week later to Bloomington, Indiana where I teach and live. It was the day after Won-Joon Yoon, a Korean doctoral student at Indiana University, was gunned down in front of his church by a fellow student. Yoon was the victim of a hate-crime that challenged the community members in this college town, who claimed tolerance for different points of view, to confront challenging issues. In a column in the local newspaper, a community member wrote,

[not] all the anti-hate posters in the world . . . nor all the *diversity* and *multiculturalism* and other tolerance education programs at Indiana University and every other well-meaning institution [could prevent this incident], though all do express a message that must be voiced: hatred and bigotry are intolerable. (Van der Dussen, 1999, p. A6)

The Ku Klux Klan has been active since the 1920s, when Indiana was a stronghold for the Klan, and almost every county had political offices filled by Klansmen. More recently, in 1989, there was a controversy about a mural that depicted Indiana history, one of 22 painted by Thomas Hart Benton for the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. In 1941, this mural was installed in a large classroom on campus and it has stimulated racist remarks ever since. A detail of the mural shows a Klu Klux Klan member in front of a burning cross. Several other hooded Klansmen stand near a United States flag. This mural raises questions as to whether or not its presence tacitly condones racism. There were many suggestions about how to confront the problem of racism caused by the mural including covering or removing it. The issue was resolved by looking and talking about the mural's content and having all students understand that members of the press, who exposed the Klan, are shown in the front of the mural and they are being honored. The importance of knowing how to read the mural's images made art education a central issue in resolving this controversy. A plaque explaining the mural's content was placed near the mural and all students who have classes in the room where the mural is displayed are required to see a video that raises questions and attempts to resolve diversity issues caused by the mural's content. In addition, in response to concerns relevant to the mural, a Unity in Diversity week was held on the IU campus and discussion about how to look at and talk about Benton's art work took a prominent place.

History repeats itself. In response to the latest incident on campus, the IU administration has announced that there will be more diversity and tolerance education programs this Fall semester. Attorney General of the United States, Janet Reno, one of the speakers at a community gathering to honor diversity and celebrate the life of Yoon, said "We must speak out against hatred and prejudice everywhere we

find it. Let us not be afraid to lift our voices and be heard" (Wright, 1999, p. A7).

As an art educator who has researched and written about equity and multicultural issues for the past three decades, I still have hope that art education can play an important role in promoting cultural diversity and social equity for all students. Through many, recent efforts that have been developed in art education for students to study art objects and the cultural contexts in which they were and are created and then having them create art that has personal meaning for them, perhaps we can take a step toward eradicating racism, sexism, prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping in our society. Although many of us, who are art educators or art teachers, have as one of our goals to make our classrooms places of reflective decision-making, where educational processes are constantly nourished and problems and ideas are examined freely, how do we know if our efforts are fruitful or long-lasting? Have we begun, though our teaching, to promote social action positions in communities in which we teach, where problems involving racism, sexism, and inequity are stressed as much as teaching social values (Sleeter & Grant, 1987)? Has teaching about cultural similarities and differences, and examining art objects in the broadest sense from different cultures, including popular culture, made a difference in how our students view themselves and others in their communities and the larger world that surrounds them? Does learning about art in a variety of cultural contexts promote understanding and tolerance for diversity? Have resources and textbooks as well as curricula, that recently have been developed to promote multicultural understanding, made an impact on what is being taught to students in public schools across the United States (Clark & Zimmerman, 1992)? Are art teachers, especially in communities where there is not tolerance for cultural diversity, able to teach art equitably and through a cultural pluralistic point of view? Although we have tacitly assumed that teaching and learning about multicultural concerns in art education can make a difference both locally and globally, can we counter with research results, such as Van der Dussen's claim above that nothing, not even education, can prevent tragedies such as the one that befell Yoon?

Research is needed to demonstrate that teaching art from multicultural and social reconstructivist points of view does make a difference in so far as students are not just tacit recipients of knowledge but are able, in many cases, to recognize and take action to effect change in their schools, communities, and society as a whole. In 1990, when I wrote about teaching art to secondary students from all cultural backgrounds, I noted that I could not locate studies about teaching art from a social action, social reconstructivist point of view (Zimmerman, 1990a). Has the situation changed? What research is being conducted in this area? If so, how are results of this research being assimilated?

Besides teaching art from a multicultural point of view, there has been a recent emphasis on teaching art in community-based contexts, and from multinational and global perspectives (Clark & Zimmerman, in press; Zimmerman, 1990b). I have been interested in community-based art education that encourages students to be active participants in their own learning and encourages teachers, parents, and community members to be active partners in this process. Art programs created from a community-based initiative build upon local cultural values, resources, and

histories and then introduce the world of art outside the community that is contrasted and compared to local community values and resources. Is this community-based art education initiative an appropriate way to empower local community involvement in art education practices and at the same time help students and community members appreciate the values and traditions of others? What evidence do we have to demonstrate its effectiveness?

In preparation for the next century, has research been conducted to determine the extent that art education programs and practices are attending to global issues and international trends as well as local and national ones? Are art educators, art teachers, and art students, as well as community members linked through their communities with people in other communities and nations throughout the world?

An area of concern for education in general and art education in particular is a national focus on assessment and educational reform. In the past, assessment criteria have been standardized to reflect white, middle class values and contained procedures, resources, and content that were not sensitive to the backgrounds of other students being assessed. How and to what extent are art education assessments being employed that use multiple criteria, define specific student performances, and at the same time take into account unique characteristics of students from diverse backgrounds (Zimmerman, 1994)? Are individual students' learning styles, motivation, work habits, as well as their ethnicity and cultural backgrounds being taken into consideration when classroom assessment and large-scale program evaluations are conducted?

At present there is much written on an advocacy level about multicultural and global issues in art education and how programs that possess these practices should be assessed. Now is the time to build a body of research that is local, national, cross-cultural, and global and uses multiple methods and methodologies that are best suited to the questions being posed. Historical, descriptive, experimental, and philosophical methods should be employed, and quantitative and qualitative methods should be used as they are appropriate. The long term effects of teaching and being taught from multicultural and global points of view, based on equity and tolerance, must be studied and results of these studies disseminated widely. It is time to convince naysayers that diversity and equity programs at all levels of education, in and through the arts, do make a difference and that those differences can be *heard throughout the land*.

## References

- Clark, G., & Zimmerman, E. (1992). *Resources for teaching art from a multicultural point of view*. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education. (ERIC Art Bulletin)
- Clark, G., & Zimmerman, E. (in press). Greater understanding of the local community: A community-based art education program for rural schools. *Art Education*.
- Sleeter, C., & Grant, C. A. (1987). An analysis of multicultural education in the United States. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57, 421-444.
- Van der Dussen, K. (1999, July 8). Hearts, not laws, must be changed. *Bloomington Herald-Times*, p. A6.

- Wright, M. (1999, July 13). Voices raise against hatred. *Bloomington Herald-Times*, pp. A1, A7.
- Zimmerman, E. (1990a). Preparing to teach art to secondary students from all cultural backgrounds. In B. E. Little (Ed.), *Secondary art education: An anthology of issues* (pp. 185-189). Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Zimmerman, E. (1990b). *Teaching art from a global perspective*. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/ Social Science Education. (ERIC Digest EDO-S0-90-10)
- Zimmerman, E. (1994). Authentic assessment does not always mean equitable assessment. *InSEA News*, 1, p. 11.