

Home, School and Community Connections

Educating for peace and justice: Using literacy as a tool for social change

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In the words of St. Louis Public School's Roosevelt High teacher Charles Murphy, the Third Annual Educating for Change Curriculum fair connected "local" and "remote" educators and activists in St. Louis on Saturday, September 29, 2007. From as far away as Philadelphia, Milwaukee, Austin and Chicago, educators and activists met in the College of Education at the University of Missouri – St. Louis around the timely issue of peace education. Among the featured speakers at this year's event were Murphy, students and recent graduates of Roosevelt High School's Media Academy and Laura Richlin and Dominique Kinard from the public Philadelphia School District's Parkway Peace and Social Justice High School. A major goal of the event was forging alliances between educators working for social change in schools and communities. Such an alliance was built between Roosevelt High's Media Academy and Parkway Peace and Social Justice High School.

Roosevelt high school and digital literacy

About Roosevelt High School, Murphy, a media literacy teacher explained, "We are teaching Roosevelt students to be multilingual. In today's world, students need to know how to speak 'digital' – that's where the jobs are." But Murphy's teaching is doing more than preparing his students for the world of work. Students in his media classes at Roosevelt learn how to participate in their communities in active ways and to solve complex problems using the tools of digital literacy. The clearest example of this was in the DVD titled *Our Generation Wants Accreditation*, shared at the Educating for Change Fair in front of the crowd of 150 educators, students, activists and parents. Students and recent graduates, along with Murphy, their teacher and mentor, shared the ways

in which media and song can be used as a cultural tool for organizing civic action.

In January 2006, Roosevelt students and their teacher picked up the signals that their school district was about to be taken over by the State of Missouri. To the students this was an important issue; they were afraid that the impending loss of accreditation would affect their future, and they saw in the takeover the disenfranchisement of local voters. They got to work, and created two songs, "Democracy Anthem" and "Plan B." Performed at events such as a city-wide public forum on the proposed state-takeover, a student-led protest at the Mayor's office, and a demonstration at City Hall, the student-created songs are quickly becoming a symbol around St. Louis for student and teacher activism around social justice issues.



In the musical form of socially-conscious hip-hop, the Roosevelt students applied a critical literacy lens to craft lyrics that made connections between texts addressing voter rights, social justice issues, and the traditions of democratic societies.

From the song, "Democracy Anthem"

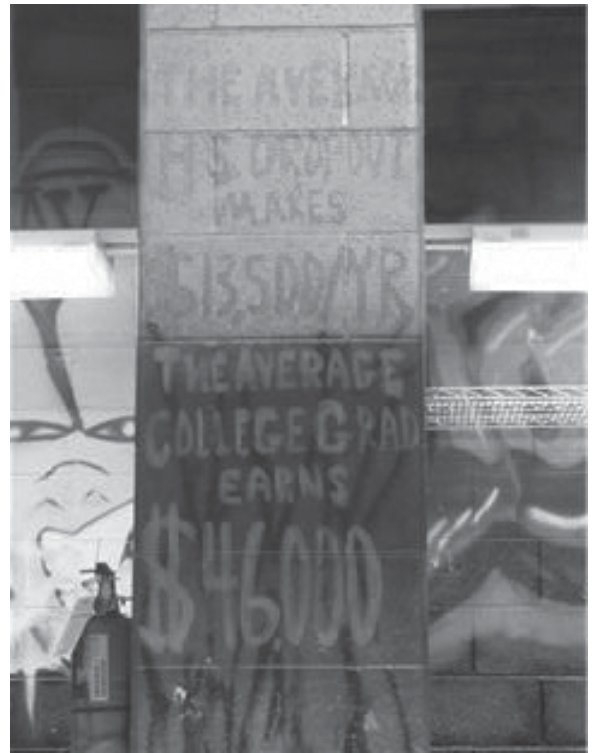
*It's all about democracy
See, y'all don't see what we be sayin'
We're not a bunch of puppets
So, Dirty, no, we ain't playin'
Just tryin' to get our point across
But before we vote we already lost*

*It feels like you mocking me
It's all about democracy
I'm gonna tell you this
Democracy is cool with me
So throw your hands up
Just for democracy*

(The song, in its entirety, may be found at: <http://web.mac.com/debbiemac1/iWeb/DEBBIE1/Movie.html>)

As part of their participation in Murphy's class, students continuously read, write, and rewrite songs addressing issues that are important to youth. The students develop passion about their school, their community, the country, and the world because they are encouraged to make their message heard. According to Murphy, he was raised to work for social justice. "Through my parents and my neighborhood, I learned that if things weren't right, I was supposed to change them. This takes certain skills. If you don't have those skills, you can learn them. I always believed that I can make a difference, I can change things. Things can be changed!" He takes that belief into his classroom. "My students learn the skills that it takes to transform society's mind. Media really means, 'sharing ideas.' We use audio, video, text, and graphics to mediate ideas between people – we find new solutions to old problems."

The Media Academy at Roosevelt was started seven years ago with old computers and minimal software. With the innovative direction of Charles Murphy, the Academy has grown into a state-of-the-art studio which facilitates the production of video and DVD media, interactive



programming and has the capacity for live screening and broadcasting. In addition to creating media products that respond to community problems, students in the Media Academy work on the school yearbook, editing sports programming, and maintaining the school's website.

Parkway high school for peace and social justice

In the Fall of 2005, Philadelphia's Parkway High School Northwest became the Parkway High School for Peace and Social Justice. For 18 years before the transition, the school was a small public high school that prepared its students for college or careers in the traditional way. With the shift, Parkway found purpose - as Philadelphia's first college preparatory public high school committed to the principles of peace, social justice, and conflict resolution. The school governance model is guided by school-wide practices that create a safe and just school climate.

Laura Richlin, of Philadelphia's Parkway High School for Peace and Social Justice explains, "Peace Education is an important part of teaching and learning in a democratic society. It is especially timely given the global context and the context of increase militarization and criminalization of youth, the ongoing wars, and violence in schools."

The school staff at Parkway High School infuses a rigorous academic program with the study of peace, violence prevention, and social justice issues. Students learn to solve

problems to bring about positive changes both locally and globally. Because the vision of social justice includes a sense of shared leadership, students, parents, and the community also have a voice in the school's program. Some of Parkway's initiatives include a required Social Development and Leadership class for 9th and 10th graders. This class focuses on self-awareness, multi-cultural sensitivities, mediation, and using those skills to take action through service learning. As part of the core humanities curriculum, all students take a class in ethical problem solving, where they learn to use critical thinking, cooperative learning, and research methods to address problems in the community and beyond. In addition to required curriculum, Parkway students can choose to participate in peer mediation and mentoring. In addition, all graduating students complete a senior project. These projects are research-based, connected to service learning, and address issues that align to the peace and social justice mission of the school.

Laura Richlin is the Peace Program Coordinator of the school. She directs the core peace and justice program, and teaches some of the school's classes. Richlin and Dominique Kinard presented a keynote session at the Educating for Change Curriculum Fair and conducted an interactive workshop that allowed the participants the opportunity to learn more about the unique school. According to Richlin, her school's goal is to raise a nation of thinkers, people who analyze situations, and know how to solve problems and take action instead of standing by and watching injustice. Parkway teachers hope to help their students develop empathy, to learn to care, and to understand that everyone makes a difference. As Richlin explained, "Every effort matters. We hope we are preparing young leaders to make a difference, to be the change."

According to Geoffrey Winikur, an English teacher at the school, literacy is strongly connected to social justice. As part of the curriculum, students read text that encourages them to think outside of natural stereotypes. Literacy is seen as an essential tool in the quest for social justice. In the process of reading about and analyzing another culture,

students come to realize that they can analyze their own cultures, a first step in making a difference in their communities.

In an effort to decorate her new office at Parkway Peace and Justice, Richlin installed a cork board, and filled it with old social justice-themed buttons. Some of the slogans, such as "Stop the Arms Race," and "No Nukes," were unfamiliar to the students. Richlin saw in this the chance to explore the historic language of social justice. She asked the faculty and advisory board to share any buttons they had. Her corkboard filled with donated buttons, like "Hiroshima Never Again," and "Healthcare Not Warfare." According to Richlin, these buttons opened the conversation about social justice.

One day, Richlin's office was used for a mediation circle aimed

at restoring peace between a group of fighting girls. When the meeting ended and Richlin was back in her office, she noticed that many of her buttons were missing, and then began seeing girls walking through the school wearing these buttons. She explained her sadness at the loss of her buttons, and within a few days, most of her buttons were returned. The girls sent a clear message; they loved the buttons! Richlin used this opportunity to help the students buy their own buttons, and then eventually a button-making machine so that the students could make and sell buttons addressing local and global social justice themes. Usually the students come up with their own slogans, but occasionally the ideas come from outsiders. For example, a local diner agreed to sell buttons for the school, but wanted a buttons that said "Bread Not Bombs" along with the student designs. The money from the sale of the buttons funds activities that support the students' social justice activities, including trips to conferences and rallies.

What brought the teachers from these two innovative programs together? Solving problems and working towards a more just and peaceful society. Both Murphy and Richlin's programs are geared towards teaching students how to design solutions to complex social problems. Murphy and Richlin met after the Curriculum Fair to share ideas and tour the



media studio at Roosevelt High School. When the teachers realized they both had the capability of live video-conferencing, they made plans to connect their classes for remote collaboration on social justice issues. As Richlin explained, “we are raising consciousness, developing leaders of tomorrow who have access to their hearts, and a passion for changing the world, creating equity for all people.” Students participate in peace and social justice events both



Kinnard, Murphy and Richlin

in and out of school, connecting to a broader world. They are learning how to develop skills and resources to make a difference.

This is but one of the connections made at the Curriculum Fair. Across a day consisting of a variety of workshops, table displays, interactive presentations, musical celebrations and a social justice theatre – all focused on creating a more peaceful and just world - it was easy to see the way in which the St. Louis community was committed to promoting peace and justice. Presenters and attendees of the Fair included K-12 educators, adult education teachers, informal educators, community activists, college professors and university students.

Other featured speakers at this year’s Educating for Change Curriculum Fair:

Kelley Ryan and Clayton High School (Clayton, MO) students shared a presentation called “Carl and Clayton: A Story about a Clown and his Fools.” Why would a public high school theater teacher choose to create an original play about an imprisoned priest? What were the reactions from

the students, community and administration to doing a politically controversial play? As one high school reviewer said, “Perhaps the most impressive part of this entire production [was] the courage it took for such a small cast and crew to tackle such a momentous play without fear or reserve. In a time when bringing up controversy in school is usually avoided, the Clayton High School Performing Arts Department stated their opinions without sugar coating it or making it more “acceptable” for the public. In this session, using video clips from the production, the faculty and students involved in *And Carl Laughed* shared what working on the show meant to them.

Bob Peterson from Fratney Elementary School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and the Rethinking Schools organization shared a presentation called “Teaching for Peace and Justice in Times of War.” Peterson’s presentation focused on the responsibilities teachers have in these times of war. How do teachers committed to social justice answer the critics who accuse them of bias? What are the goals in teaching about war? What are some specific ideas that teachers can use to help foster empathy and critical analysis in their students, while at the same time making sure that they are reaching their full potential for learning?

Dr. Alice Bloch, educator, performer and activist danced “Blessed Spirits,” “Peace,” and “Revolutionary.” “Blessed Spirits” was choreographed c. 1903 by the historical modern dancer, Isadora Duncan, to music by Gluck. The dance / Peace/ blends the poem by the Christian mystic, Gerard Manley Hopkins, music by Oscar Rangel, with her uniquely expressive movement. The dance premiered at the Gerard Manley Hopkins International Festival in Ireland in July 2006. Finally, the dance “Revolutionary” was choreographed by Isadora Duncan in 1920 to music by Scriabin. It was inspired by the struggle of the Russian serfs to free themselves from their ancient bondage under the czars.

The Fair honors an educator with the annual Courageous Educator Award, this year awarded to Florence Borman of Keysor Elementary School in the Kirkwood, Missouri School District. Florence has taught first, third and fourth grades for nine years. Her social action leadership began with the “Pennies for People” program she initiated five years ago, benefiting the Salvation Army Tree of Lights Campaign. Under her leadership, Keysor has become an exemplary youth fundraising program around the holidays and her initiative is being used as a model for other schools. Borman is also actively involved in the Dismantling Racism Institute for Educators. She formed the Keysor Civil Rights Team which invites fifth graders to explore issues of social justice and end instances of hate and intolerance at the school and in the community.

The Fair was sponsored by The Literacy for Social Justice Teacher Research Group, The Literacy Roundtable, the Instead of War Coalition and the Dean's Committee on Social Justice, College of Education, UMSL. Many individuals and groups worked collectively to find ways to connect teaching and activism in and out of the classrooms with the world in hope of creating a more just and peace-filled reality. The event was made possible with the in-kind support of over 50 volunteers and community organizations such as the Technology and Learning Center at UMSL-College of Education, Whole Foods Market, The Book Source, Spiro's Panera Bread, The Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet and School Sisters of Notre Dame.

The Literacy for Social Justice Teacher Research Group is a grassroots professional development group that is committed to literacy education and advocacy as it relates to social justice in classrooms and communities. LSJTRG includes teachers and activists across the lifespan. To learn more about LSJTRG meetings and events, visit the website: www.umsl.edu/~lsjtrg

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