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Practicing Social Justice Through Arts Education

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Last year, one of my first grade students could not look at herself in the mirror let alone have the will to draw her self-portrait. Maria* eventually tore her drawing in half, threw it on the floor, put her head down and cried. Of my six years teaching art to youth in Los Angeles, this was the first time that a student was so disgruntled with her appearance and ability to create her own self image that she became destructive. For all subsequent lessons that year, Maria animatedly refused to participate.

I do not deny that there could have been a number of external elements that contributed to students, like Maria, being dissatisfied with their physical appearance, frustrated with art class and disengaged with our current education system. Contrary to popular belief, not all students enjoy creating art due to insecurities in their artistic ability and fear of making a mistake. As an educator, I have come to the understanding that when students express discontent and disrespectful behavior with their artwork or others, they are unleashing secondly emotions of a core issue (i.e. fear, guilt, shame, etc.) at hand. Furthermore, I have witnessed firsthand elementary school students expressing physical and emotional stress due to their performance on standardized tests every May. As part of the generation that missed the implementation of No Child Left Behind, I empathize with our younger generation of learners who are made to think that their sense of self-worth is determined by a test.

Truthfully, I did not know of Maria's life experiences that may have caused her to disconnect completely in my class. But, I do understand that as an arts educator, I have a role and responsibility to engage students and their community through the arts. For the past three years, I have been a Visual Arts Teaching Artist at a public charter elementary and middle school in south Los Angeles, in which I single-handedly orchestrate an arts program for over 750 students every week. I develop and instruct an interdisciplinary art program invigorated with global and local art histories, the exploration of cultural and ethnic identity, the reflection of personal and communal narratives and incorporate the California State Visual and Performing Arts Standards.

Every year, I teach a self-portrait project that invites my young artists to represent their personal identities and practice their artistic skill. This year, I decided to introduce the project by asking my young artists to observe themselves in a mirror and notice the lines, shapes, and values in their face. Then, I proceeded to say as they saw their reflection, "Repeat after me: I am smart. I am beautiful. I am handsome. I am an amazing artist!" After reviewing the proportions of the face, I asked my young artists to draw themselves. Additionally, I included the biography of a Los Angeles native who made history by being the first Latina astronaut, Ellen Ochoa. Then, they transformed their self-portrait pencil drawing into a collage by adding an astronaut suit and helmet using paper plates and acetate.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Maria, now a second grader, smiling. I approached her and said, "Well, look at this artwork! I love it! I remember last year you told me that you could not draw." She looked down, nodding with a smirk on her face. "Now tell me, what can you do now?" I asked. Maria lifted her head and the corners of her mouth and replied "Everything!"

In teaching art, I teach the whole person. I believe that students learn best with an inquiry-based, engaged pedagogy and mindfulness practice. I believe that art can be a vehicle for change on a personal and communal level. I know this to be true because art allowed me to discover my identity, find my voice, compassionately lead and creatively work with others. In 2003, as one of the few undergraduate Latina studio-arts majors at Loyola Marymount University, I felt like I did not belong. Culture shock nearly led me to give up. But then I took a sculpture class with a professor that both challenged and inspired me to be a better artist and, in turn, my best self. I held power that I did not know I even had. When I would submerge my hands in clay, I was the master modeler, the creative constructor, and sculptural story-teller. It was the support and encouragement from a community of professors, cultural center directors, peer mentors, friends, and family that I owe a great debt to for nurturing my strengths and inspiring me to reach my fullest potential.

In a lot of ways, I was once a Maria and I'm sure there are still many Marias amongst us. For the Marias who needed a dream to believe in, who needed a little inspiration to motivate change, who needed a mentor to guide them, or needed to know that they can be an artist or an astronaut if they so choose. You can be that change. In the spirit of social justice, become a mentor to one child and you will help uplift a community and inspire a generation. Contribute your time to engaging your daughter in an art activity, give your energy to volunteering at your nephew's local school or cultural center, attend cultural events and art exhibitions with a friend, or donate your money to your local teacher's project on www.donorschoose.org, such as my project [Mirror, on the Classroom Table](#), which was fully funded by generous donors who gave my students a class set of mirrors used in creating their self-portraits this year. For all the tests that our youth must endure, there is no better time than now to invest in our youth and the arts.

*=Name changed for confidentially purposes.

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