Teachers for Change

An overview of our initial plan and objectives

Mission - to bring together local and global initiatives by providing a local youth shelter with handmade quilts while fundraising for a global NGO.

Our social action project, Sewing Patches - Sowing Progress, was aimed at connecting the local and global charity initiatives. We did this by making and donating quilts to a Gatineau based organization, Le Bras-Sida that distributed them to homeless persons in Gatineau. The quilts were made out of old clothing, donated by Entraide Familial, that we recycled to form the patches and stuffing. We then fundraised for a NGO based out of Cameroon called Drombaya. We did this by ‘selling’ each quilt block for a small donation.

We felt this project was a success as we reached our target of 21 quilts and came very close to our target of $500. It was a very labour intensive project and took a huge commitment from each of the group members. However, the experience itself was rewarding and allowed each of us to further our learning and understanding in different ways. This newsletter provides a brief glimpse into each members’ personal reflection on what they learned from participating in our social action project or how it furthered their understanding of course readings.

"Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue, a wonderful living side by side can grow, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the other whole against the sky" - Rilke

- Dawn Collins

OBJECTIVES TO MEET BY END

- $500 will be raised for Drombaya,
- 21 Quilts made

ACTUAL OBJECTIVES MET

- $346 have been raised for Drombaya
- 21 Quilts have been made
A CRASH COURSE IN MICRO-FINANCE

Before starting this project I had never heard about micro-finance, so partnering with the organization, Drombaya, introduced me to a whole new concept. Through talking with Bonnie Burlton, co-founder of Drombaya, I learned that micro-finance is often more effective than donation based charities, as micro-finance enables the borrower to become self sufficient. Donations are great but once they run out, the problem is still there and the people become dependent on foreign help. Donations don't target the root of the problem as micro-finance does. Micro-finance helps a family become self sufficient and establish a small business that will help earn money and build towards freedom from extreme poverty. Most of the people who borrow from Drombaya can repay their loan in a really short amount of time and can start making money off of their new businesses within months. I also learned that typically micro-finance businesses are run by women as it has been shown that women are more likely to invest the money toward getting their family out of debt than the men were. Therefore, businesses started by micro-finance are most often run by women. All that is required for the women to get a loan is a viable business plan: the business plans do not need to be complicated, simply feasible. The business plan could be something as simple as borrowing money so that they can afford a bus trip to the market to buy casava and then another bus trip to a secluded part of the country in order for them to resell the casava at a slightly higher price and make a small profit. I find the whole premise of micro-finance interesting and have learned about its importance through Sewing Patches, Sowing Progress. Micro-finance certainly embraces the idea behind this old saying: “give a man a fish and feed him for a day or teach a man how to fish and feed him for life!

Bella Flammia

PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED AND OUR SOCIAL ACTION PROJECT

In reviewing several of our course readings, that of Paulo Freire entitled Pedagogy of the Oppressed allowed me to make immediate connections with our social action project (SAP). I believe there are two reasons I am drawn to this article after creating Sewing Patches, Sowing Progress (SPSP). Firstly Freire speaks of learning as a reciprocal process, as opposed to the banking method of information input, where student is teacher and teacher is student, in a manner of ebb and flow. This fluidity of knowledge transfer was extremely apparent throughout the scope of our SAP, as group members were constantly building skills, gaining foresight and losing apprehensions. We looked to one another, and the community at large, to become educated in areas of others’ expertise; we supported one another when help was needed; we embodied the roles of both student and teacher simultaneously. Also discussed in the article is the dichotomy of humankind and nature, which suggests that “a person is merely in the world, not with the world or with others; the individual is spectator, not re-creator” (Freire, pp. 38). This is a dichotomy that we addressed in our SAP through the recycling of material goods, in order to prevent it from going to a landfill. Our reasoning behind this stems from an understanding that the human environment is intrinsically linked to the physical environment: if we misuse or abuse one component, then the other is bound to suffer negative repercussions. Likewise, if one component is positively endorsed (i.e. the provision of quilts to provide a basic need for warmth, or a micro-finance loan which fosters autonomy), then a positive chain reaction can be initiated. This notion of pay it forward, or the domino effect that can ensue from a single act of kindness, is the type of character we, as educators, should strive to foster in our students. We must remember that students are an important piece of our societal mosaic: as educators we must aspire to encourage, enrich and ultimately, evolve humanity for the betterment of future generations.

-Cat Costa
ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN THE CLASSROOM

A recurring theme in our project, Sewing Patches Sowing Progress, was that of recycling. The clothes we used to make the quilts were unusable clothing that Gatineau organization Entraide-Familial would have had to pay to get rid of. Instead, we used patches of these clothes to create our quilts and the leftover bits of fabric were used in the stuffing of the quilts. In a less obvious way, raising awareness about micro-finance has lead myself and other group members to see that micro-financing is also a form of recycling. As loans are given out, paid back, and redistributed, the original purpose of one loan gets redefined with every cycle of repayment and lending. Connecting this to the article “An/other Bell Ringing in the Empty Sky: Greenwashing, Curriculum, and Eco-justice,” allowed me to see our project as tangible while attempting to conceive how environmental sustainability could be incorporated in the classroom. The aspect of recycling materials that would have otherwise found itself in a landfill lends itself to be the opposite of greenwashing: the outlining of policies to appear that an institution is taking strides to stop the destruction of the earth but in reality, failing to practice these policies (Ng-A-Fook, p. 51). Furthermore, the absence of any economic transaction when recycling these materials works against the “corporate green campaign” which is becoming ever more present in Canadian society: “[...] Westerveld suggests that the objective of this type of corporate “green campaign” is about increasing profits and not necessarily diminishing our ecological impact. Consequently, he labelled such green campaigns and other outwardly corporate environmentally conscious acts with an underlying purpose of profit increases as greenwashing” (Ng-A-Fook, p. 52). Though our project is a small-scale use of recycling, I think that this form is what is most needed in our schools. Instead of promoting green products, we can be promoting the use of all sorts of materials in manners that were not necessarily intended when they were created. Instead of taking more from the earth to fulfil our immediate wants, we can promote working with what we have already and finding new uses for old models.

- Elyse Snell

THREE THINGS I LEARNED FROM SEWING PATCHES - SOWING PROGRESS

The following are the top 3 lessons learned during the course of our social action project:

1) I learned how much work it is to make a difference. We had grandiose, noble goals for this social action project and I personally did not realize what a commitment I was making. Not that I am not happy to be a part of this endeavor, because I truly am, and I have learned so much over the course of the project. Rather, telling everyone you are learning to sew and making quilts is one thing, while actually sitting down between working evenings and after all your other school work is done to sew is another story. I felt there was just never enough time to get ahead. This seems to have been a recurring theme throughout the program. However, I know that it is good practice for the demanding career that is teaching, about which we are all so passionate.

2) This project has furthered my ability to be flexible, which I know is one of the most important qualities of a great, effective teacher. Being in a group of seven members meant that we all had to learn how to take turns listening to one another, amalgamate all of our ideas, and assign tasks accordingly based on our individual strengths and weaknesses. In addition, as the scope and details of our project changed, we had to be able to go with the flow, be realistic about what each of us were willing able to contribute, and modify the proposal and tasks accordingly.

3) I learned how great it feels to make something with your own hands, to better someone else’s situation. Of course, I have always imagined that this would be a sweet sentiment, but to actually succeed on all of my goals and make quilts for my own community, was a big deal. It felt pretty fantastic to hold up my finished quilts and know that I had saved each square from a landfill, and what’s more, that they would be keeping someone in need of warmth, warm.

Being in the global cohort, all our group members are progressive thinkers eager to be not just teachers, but social activists as well. It is not surprising, then, that our group had grand expectations for this project. To be able to say today that we have succeeded in our endeavors and made a difference both locally, and globally, is really something to be proud of.

-Ashley Fisher
BRINGING SOCIAL ACTION TO THE CLASSROOM

This Sewing Patches Sowing Progress project, when proposed, seemed daunting to me. For one, we were just a small group of students with few resources. Secondly, few of us in our group – that I know of – had done anything like this before. As with most of the activities proposed by professors in the Education program, I was curious about whether this activity was effective and if it were possible to bring it into my own classroom. Honestly, I was doubtful. It seemed that the activity would be too grand in scope and that the anticipated outcomes were unrealistic. That was my opinion, until I saw the diversity and quality of social action projects throughout the school. These students, as well as our group, had decided on a valued cause, an interesting method of action, and unique presentation. The fact that many of the groups accomplished their goals and were agents of change, in my view as a potential teacher, is a bonus. The activity provides students with the opportunity to challenge their own beliefs, develop goals, work as a team to accomplish those goals, track progress, connect with the community, and become engaged in something interesting and valuable. The social action project activity does this while still allowing the students the freedom to produce work beyond the expectations of the teacher. Donald (2009), in his discussion of integrating indigenousness into the curriculum, argues that educators cannot hide behind excuses of ignorance or the unknown. This is relevant because for this activity, to be successful, the teacher must to some degree, “let go” of their control and allow the students to develop for themselves the direction the project will take. This is difficult to do for many educators, due to the unknown outcomes. Teachers should not, however, back away from implementing a social action project into the classroom because the learning opportunities that are possible from this activity are endless.

The activity can be modified for different age groups or students based on their own level of aspirations or abilities. A class can work together on a particular cause or even work as a unified school. The project is aligned with the Character Development Initiative as outlined in the Ontario Ministry of Education’s (2008) Finding Common Ground: Character Development in Ontario Schools, K-12, albeit beyond its scope of personally responsible type focus. I have learned that the social action project has great potential within the classroom and has been a significant component to my own education at the University of Ottawa. It has given me the opportunity to analyze my own morals and values in relation to social aid, homelessness, and social action. It also demonstrated the effectiveness of small-scale social organizations and groups and has helped me develop, what has the potential to be, an effective and powerful activity for my future students.

- Courtney Stiles

MY LIFE IN SELECTIVE SILENCE

During this social action project I read an article written by Tim Stanley (1999) entitled A Letter to my Children: Historical Memory and the Silence of Childhood. The reason I created a connection with A Letter to My Children, was because of the feeling that I grew up in a world of ‘selective silence’. When it comes to the issue of people who are homeless, I have lived a very sheltered life where I never had to even think about the real issues they must face. I feel that I was allowed, and later chose, to live in a space where I was innocent of such knowledge, constituting a world of selective silence. Stanley (1999) made me aware that not everyone has the privilege to live in selective silence, but by living in this selective silence I may propagate ignorance about the situation of people who are homeless. Like the Nazis that Stanley (1999) writes about within the article, people who are homeless are portrayed in a very one sided way through mass culture. Throughout my social action project I have been forced to think about the resiliency of those people who are homeless, the access to services, and the uncertainty of not having somewhere safe to live. If I had not had the experience of asking for money, even if it was a donation for an NGO, I would never have felt what rejection was like. Through finding an organization to donate the quilts to, I discovered the lack of access to services that exist in the Gatineau area. These are not issues shown in mass culture and assist in creating a selective silence. By taking part in this social action project I have come face to face with Stanley’s (1999) concept of selective silence and am now aware that my role as a teacher needs to be stopping the perpetuation of selective silence. My role is to guide students into projects, such as Sewing Patches Sowing Progress, and challenge them to think critically about the selective silences they may be part of. As a person, moving forward, I must identify and challenge my own selective silences and constantly remind myself of this lesson I learned during this social action project.

- Brita Goldie