Using Sweatshop History to Meet Social Justice Requirements of the Undergraduate Curriculum

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Abstract
The purpose of this research was to provide examples of undergraduate textiles and clothing lesson plans that incorporate social justice into the course curriculum.

Keywords
sweatshops, social justice, curriculum, history, apparel

Disciplines
Curriculum and Social Inquiry | Fashion Business | Labor Relations

Comments
Using sweatshop history to meet social justice requirements of the undergraduate curriculum

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The purpose of this research was to provide examples of undergraduate textiles and clothing lesson plans that incorporate social justice into the course curriculum. Specifically, the researchers examined three periods of sweatshop conditions in the United States ready-to-wear apparel industry: 1880 to 1915, the 1930s, and the 1990s and developed corresponding lesson plans. The three periods were selected because they represented significant occurrences in the history of sweatshops in the United States, including disasters, legislation, and demonstrations held by unions, trade leagues, consumer advocacy groups, and the popular press media.

Scholars have defined the term social justice in a plethora of ways, ranging from the equitable resource distribution of goods and societal positions to the fair and just execution of the law (Gewirtz, 1998). Most commonly, social justice can be described as the overall structure and institutional context of society and the effects of domination and oppression that fuel injustice (Young, 1990). The idea of social justice implies that there are inequalities, which are deeply ingrained in present day society, and must be overcome to create an equally just world (Martinez, 2007). It is argued that the practice and teaching of social justice in educational settings may promote fairness and equality throughout society (Goodman, 2008).

Due to the plethora of political, economic, and social challenges experienced on a global scale, students need to be concerned with more than just their immediate surroundings (Johnson, 2005). The ability to approach the world from various vantage points will prove advantageous to current students and future leaders. When implemented in an educational setting, topics encompassing social justice, such as environmental, socio-economic, and labor issues may provide students with the confidence and skills to be “reflective, moral, caring, and active citizens in troubled world” (Banks & Banks, 2009, p. 5).

The present study was guided by a critical multiculturalism framework, which seeks to challenge traditional knowledge to expand students’ perspectives (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2007). From this approach, students may be able to grasp how justice and social change relate to one’s identity and position in the world. Curriculum that serves multicultural education goals can help diverse student populations to become part of the institutional culture, ultimately strengthening the institution and its’ students (Banks, 1996).

By studying sweatshop conditions in the U.S. ready-to-wear apparel industry, students enrolled in textiles and clothing programs can learn about the lack of societal benefits afforded to marginalized workers, both historically and contemporarily (Green, 1996). Examining sweatshops of the past can provide “a foundation for understanding the dynamics of the present” (Ulrich, 1995, p. 49). Examples of the treatment, lack of opportunities, and conditions of workers in the garment industry can offer students a learning experience that satisfies the social justice core curriculum component implemented by many universities and encouraged by ITAA (ITAA,
n.d). By participating in lessons that expand students’ understanding of oppression within the apparel industry students will gain knowledge of situations in our capitalistic society in which financial gains were placed above human rights. Girded with this knowledge, students may choose to fight to alleviate forms of social reproduction, such as sweatshop labor (North, 2009).

Formal education shapes the lives of students who receive it and academic institutions have the responsibility to teach students more than just basic skills (Banks & Banks, 2009; Walker, 2003). An instructor’s focus on meeting only assessment standards will leave students ill prepared to deal with societal issues students will face upon graduation and employment in the apparel industry (Banks & Banks, 2009). Through incorporation of lesson plans regarding sweatshops in the U.S. ready-to-wear apparel industry, students may better understand social injustices in the world and become capable citizens that can challenge social order (North, 2009).

References


