Chapter 38
Building a Racial Identity:
African American Students' Learning Experiences at the Florence County Museum

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines African American college students' learning experiences at the Florence County Museum. Looking at several works of art, how do African American students construct their learning experiences in a course-required tour? What personal meanings do they take away from the experience? African American students are voluntarily engaged or only occupied in the works that are related to or connected to their racial roots. They also interpret the works of art from their racial points of view. Therefore, their racial identity as an African American is a key part of understanding their learning experience from the museum. It is important for African Americans not only to see themselves in museum exhibitions but also be able to develop their racial identity and imagine their future through art. It creates equal opportunities for all students from different social, racial, and cultural groups to function effectively in a diverse demographic society.

INTRODUCTION

In public institutions, students' ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds are increasingly diverse in the United States. Today students of color account for nearly 45% in elementary and secondary schools (Milner, 2015). Classrooms are consisted of more students of color than ever before. However, the majority of teachers are white, middle class, and female, so students of color are more at higher risk of failing in schools because of bias, ignorance, unfairness, and lack of representation in the classroom (Desai, 2010). Racial disparities present great challenges for students' achievement and success. Black

students are three times more likely to be referred to law enforcement with levels of racial bias in surrounding communities. They are almost four times as likely to be suspended or expelled from schools than their white peers (Lewin, 2012). Disciplinary actions are also connected to a range of negative life outcomes, including involvements in the criminal justice system (Morrison, 2019). As art educators, we need to pay close attention to this disparity as it addresses to the racial divide that colors the experience of students from public schools to universities.

Recently, the killings of Rayshard Brooks, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, David McAtee, Tony McDade, and so many others led to national debates over the use of deadly force by law enforcement. These incidents greatly inflamed racism and injustice issues because all of the deaths were African Americans. However, the topic of race is an entirely different story in many schools and classrooms (Desai, 2010). Teachers tend to avoid controversial issues like injustice, discrimination, and racism. When they do take place, classroom conversations on such topics remain simplistic or superficial. There is plenty of research demonstrating that children notice race at a young age and begin to form stereotypes (Dell'Antonia, 2014; Milner, 2015). Therefore, if we do not deal with racial factors in our classrooms, we are telling our students to figure it out themselves. Nadworny (2015) found that students who feel good about their own race do better academically. African American students have suffered from low self-esteem because of society's negative views of African Americans. The development of their self-identification is therefore influenced or limited by their social experiences in conditions of social discrimination, prejudice, injustice, and racism (Young, 2013). The field of art education must re-examine teaching practices to integrate social issues like racism, equity, discrimination, and prejudice into art classrooms. Art educators need to develop appropriate pedagogical methods that bring comprehensive discussions meaningfully and effectively with students and students of color in their classrooms.

In this chapter, I examine African American college students' learning experiences at the Florence County Museum in South Carolina. Looking at several works of art, how do African American students construct their learning experiences in a course-required tour? What do students learn about the works of art? What personal meanings do they take away from the experience? In sum, the objectives of this study are threefold: 1) To examine African American students' learning experiences from the museum; 2) To investigate any learning experience about works of art encountered in the museum; and 3) To evaluate overall students' museum experiences.

BACKGROUND

Historically, museums have been biased toward elite white visitors. The art world has largely ignored or discredited non-European cultures while deifying European-descended artists and culture. According to Crum and Hendrick (2018), a legacy of historic discrimination and cultural exclusion within museum practices has resulted in African Americans attending museums less frequently than white Americans. Researchers found that African Americans visit museums at a rate of 20 to 30% lower than the national norm (Falk & Dierking, 2013). Caucasians, in particular Americans of European backgrounds, were roughly two times more likely to have visited museums than other groups. Several researchers (Acuff, 2020; Crum & Hendrick, 2018; Taylor & Doyle, 2018) demonstrated that museum exhibitions and programs are not culturally relevant for ethnic minority groups. Some possible explanations are lack of relevant objects from their own cultures; negative images of South Asian and African people connected with disasters, poverty, and famine; and a colonial view of history that portrayed African Americans as

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