# Inside and Outside: High School Students Increasing Self and Social Awareness Through Artmaking

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## Abstract

Creating and talking about visual art with other people is an effective method to evoke multiple dialogues about identity and social phenomena. This form of discourse, in which visual language and cultural and social expressions are intertwined, helps people better understand themselves and other human beings. Artmaking can be a pro-

cess of learning about human lives (Leavy, 2015). Through discussing several artmaking approaches in a Korean high school setting, I will argue for the importance of art in terms of its effectiveness in encouraging students to reflect on their identity and social problems that influence them and the greater community. Many high school students are struggling with the concerns of dealing with intense competition, their future careers and other people's judgements of them. At the same time, they are at a dramatic turn in their lives, where they are charting their future direction and where they should not forget about their roles as members

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of society. The visual stories that contain individual students' lived experiences and emotions about their concerns illustrate the multiple layers of living as human beings in a complex society.

## Opportunities to Reflect on Self-Identity and Social Issues

In Korea, there is a lack of opportunities for high school students to reflect on their self-identity and social issues around them. They mainly focus on major subjects: Korean, Mathematics, Science and English. Arts classes often become elective courses, especially for senior students. I met many high school students who go to school without a specific purpose other than getting accepted by a prestigious university. Therefore, I want to focus on the importance of an art class as an effective tool for them to reflect on their identity and social issues.

Art is an ordinary way of living in society (Bourdieu, 1984; Stuhr, 1994) and draws attention to the diversity of human issues. Through art, we can expand human understanding (Eisner, 2008; Barone & Eisner, 2011), learning with other people. Art can approach sensitive issues, promote meaningful dialogues and provide meaningful experiences.

In this vein, an art class can be a new way of exploring students' identity and diverse social concerns, providing opportunities for sharing each student's perspectives about them. Students can reflect on their relationship with others, including friends, teachers and parents, while expressing their identity through art (Pauly, 2003). At the same time, art helps them realize what their role is in society presently and what it can be in the future as well.

# Objectives

This study describes several approaches to providing students with an opportunity to reflect on their identity and social issues related to their daily lives through a visual art class. I focus on these main questions:

- ☒ How do students perceive themselves?

- ☒ What are their issues and concerns?

- ☒ What do they want to become?

- ☒ What are their status in the classroom and society, and how can they deal with it?

Inside: Self-Reflections

For freshmen, I asked them to pick the most familiar materials to use such as pencils or colored pencils. By doing so, students who did not have enough skills to use professional tools could feel more comfortable in expressing themselves. Before drawing, students had a small group conversation with classmates about how they spent their time in middle school and the regrets they had that they would improve on during their high school years. Students shared their previous experiences such as having problems with maintaining good friendships due to lots of gossip or severe competition. Students had chances to look back their past experiences in order to move forward as high school students. They did not want to have the same problems, so they decided to change their previous attitudes.

One female student stated that she often insisted on her own ideas without accepting others' opinions. Therefore, her goal as a high school student was to stop being a talkative person and to become a better listener. (See Figure 1.) A male student recalled that he was addicted to listening to music, so he wore earphones all the time, which caused a lack of conversation with his colleagues. He said that he would remove the earphones in order to listen to and communicate better with his friends. (See Figure 2.) Another female student expressed that she used to be easily distracted by non-academic conversations even when she needed to focus on her studies. Therefore, her new goal as a high school student was to become more curious about academic subjects, which led her to draw the symbols of mathematics coming out from her mouth with question marks on her glasses. (See Figure 3.) One of the stu-

Figure 1. 10th grade Hangaram High School student, Self-Portrait

Figure 2. 10th grade Hangaram High School student, Self-Portrait

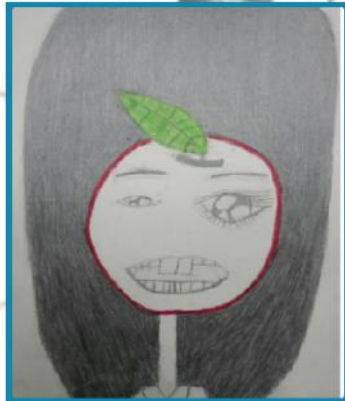Figure 3. 10th grade Hangaram High School student, Self-Portrait

Figure 4. 10th grade Hangaram High School student, Self-Portrait

dents expressed that she mingled with a limited number of friends in her middle school, so she wanted to have well-rounded relationships with more classmates in the future. In that sense, she used the shape of an apple to symbolize good relationships. (See Figure 4.)

A student who felt confident using another art medium, pastels, used yellow on the background of her figure to describe her lively feelings. (See Figure 5.) In fact, she had a fear of opening her mouth in front of people due to her braces, so she had problems with making new friends due to lack of confidence. She revealed that she thought other people would think of her as a monster or an animal due to the braces. However, she did not need to hide it or feel ashamed anymore. At the beginning of the first semester of the high school year, mentioning her previous concerns and poor experiences with middle school classmates made her feel lively.

She added a speech bubble of "Hello" in Korean to show her new positive attitude toward opening her mouth. Similarly, although a 10th grade male student had a sense of inferiority about his appearance due to grey hair, his peers in their small group conversation argued that grey hair is a symbol of knowledge, which made the student feel much better. The student used magazine clippings which had black text on a white background in order to symbolize grey hair with knowledge. (See Figure 6.)



Figure 6. 10th grade Hangaram High School student, Self-Portrait

A student who planned to go to an art college recalled that she had a unique way of thinking. When she wanted to make a decision, another part of her brain asked her not to do it. In her self-portrait, there are two different hands holding her mind in a frozen position in a space where time has stopped. (See Figure 7.) She couldn't think anymore and felt like she was being controlled by someone else, not by herself. On the other hand, an 11th grade student majoring in art who utilized an explorer figure from a magazine stated that she had a clear idea of what she wants to pursue. She shared her impressions that she could finally decide on her future career and that she felt like she was able to look at her own direction very clearly as she examined her mind with a magnifying glass. (See Figure 8.)

Figure 8. 11th grade Hangaram High School student, Self-Portrait

# categories

Here are some categories of students' ways of expressing themselves through artmaking:

• Some divided a paper into two sections, left and right, and on each respective side represented their previous attitudes and future goals (Figures 1 & 11).

• Some used speech bubbles to express their thoughts (Figure 5), while others drew symbols to describe their personal habits or struggles (Figures 2, 3, 4 & 7).

• Students highlighted with color their most important goals (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4 & 8).

• Depending on time limits and individuals' skills, students used more than one color (Figures 5, 6, 7 & 8) and diverse materials such as magazines or newspapers to create a collage of his/her character (Figure 6).

Through this lesson, students were able to reflect on their previous emotions, attitudes and behaviors and their future goals and how and what they wanted to improve as high school students.



Figure 9. 11th grade Hangaram High School student, Self-Portrait

## Outside: Social Awareness

In a multimedia-based arts class, using such materials as clay animation, movie making or computer graphic design, students explored personal concerns which are related to social phenomena. In this article, I will discuss three topics they explored: bullying, plastic surgery and global warming. First, one of my students who spent most of the time by himself in my class made a video clip about an odd man. (See Figure 9.) The main character wears the same school uniform as the student does and is excluded from a major group of students. In contrast with the main character, the students in the group have the same silver-color faces, which represents stereotypical people who reject ideas that differ from their own. The students bullied the main character, which led him to suicide. After watching this movie, all of the classmates became silent and reconsidered what they had been doing to the student. Luckily, I observed positive changes in the classmates' attitudes toward him.

Another student created a clay animation based on the plot of 200 Pounds Beauty, a Korean movie about an overweight singer who had plastic surgery to appeal to a management company producer. The student criticized the trend that some people consider fundamental human needs such as eating or sleeping to be an enemy of their success on a diet or having a boyfriend. (See Figure 10.) Moreover, she described the negative effects of social media that fosters a distorted concept of beauty (See Figure 9).



Figure 10. 11th grade Hangaram High School student, 200 Pounds Beauty; Figure 11. 11th grade Hangaram High School student, Global Warming

Many students highlighted the important issue of global warming. (See Figure 11 & 12.) As temperature is increasing, arctic animals are losing their homes and families, and are increasingly at risk. Students emphasized that the problem was created due to human pollution and that we should find a solution for saving these animals from the possibility of extinction.

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# Conclusion

By sharing their own stories, students were able to understand diverse issues and the perspectives of their peers, which prompted them to reconsider their limited and biased thinking. This awakened an interest in understanding current social problems (Smith-Shank & Soganci, 2011) and self-identity. Students could pause and rethink their roles as members of a society and as global citizens and criticize ethical aspects of social issues on which we need to see diverse sides and should focus on through art (Bourdieu, 1984).

Through these lessons, students were able to explore and analyze their own identity, understand their peers by expressing and sharing their concerns, and gain awareness of current important social issues as an ongoing process (Eisenhauer, 2009). At the same time, students were encouraged to positively change their previous habits and bad behaviors while reconsidering and shaping their future goals. Art became an effective tool for promoting students' deep understanding of themselves and issues in the greater community and how they and society can move forward in the future.

Figure 12. 11th grade Hangaram High School student, Global Warming

117

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