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Art, Recyclables, and Education

The global movement to “go green” encompasses recycling, conservation, and preservation, all of which are important environmental concerns. In the United States in 2001, the Environmental Protection Agency approximated two hundred and twenty nine million tons of municipal solid waste is produced each year (Graddy 5). Of the excessive amounts of garbage produced, roughly seventy three percent ends up in a landfill. Landfills are filling quickly and not being replaced due to environmental, economic, and various other concerns. Every sector of our society contributes, and likewise, each sector needs to collectively work toward a solution to this progressive problem (Environmental 6). Children are an important sector of society when it comes to taking an active role in solving environmental concerns, especially the problem of excess garbage. There needs to be a way to inspire them to support the much needed global change. Creating art from recyclable materials is a powerful and effective way to inform children about the importance of addressing environmental concerns, especially recycling, as well as giving them an active role in cleaning up the planet.

The earth is in a depleted condition as a result of the decisions of the current generation and those that preceded us. The land, water, and air all have pollutants that were created by these poor decisions and the growing population of the world will likely face the consequence of pollutants, in the forms of illness. The severity of this type of pollution can be reduced greatly simply by making “greener decisions,” decisions that replenish the earth and return it to a healthier atmosphere for future generations. Teenagers and children alike are probably the most important people to get involved with the green revolution. Scientists predict that the teenagers will likely be the first to feel the

effects of global warming, something which they did not cause, but will impact their lives provides motivation to make a difference (Flounders 1). The incorporation of environmental concerns into the everyday lives of these youth will help create a safer, healthier, and greener future.

Manufacturing and other causes of these environmental problems cannot be changed overnight; small alterations of individual behavior toward more ecologically friendly action are needed. The environmental problems at hand are extremely complex, therefore rather than attempting to fix the unfixable, we must attempt to focus on the aspects that we can control, and make necessary changes with regards to those. To make a significant change, there must be a mass involvement in subtle changes and therefore it is necessary to find a way to convince others to be involved. “Art can creatively call attention to our wasteful, harmful, and unsustainable disposal practices by bringing trash into the public's everyday life, and not allowing it simply to disappear into landfills, out of sight and consciousness” (Graddy 6). The visual aspect of art allows it to reach many people, and therefore expose the harmful results of our destructive behavior. Art can also inspire change, participation, and global concern.

People around the world are setting the stage for environmental activism and involvement through art. A recycling and disposal company in San Francisco has created an artist-in-residency program (Graddy 6). During a three-month period, a local artist uses the trash from the dump and recycling facilities to create art. To do so the artist is given free access to anything that comes through the transfer station, a studio, and various other supplies and equipment needed. The company intends for the art that results to inspire people to recycle and conserve natural resources. Besides creating art the artist is

an activist working within the company. Tour groups often come through the company gallery, and the resident artist is responsible for greeting and talking to them about the work that he or she is doing, the work of “turning trash into treasures” (Graddy 6). The tour groups get to see recycled materials being used, all the while submerged within the problems caused by the excessive amounts of garbage that are visible in the surrounding dumps. This program supports the needed change in behavior regarding the environment by bringing the problem into the public eye, and also giving them something to think about in terms of the various uses of the materials we often discard as garbage.

Another creative approach to inspire recycling is in action in Santa Barbara, California and is part of a program called Art From Scrap (AFS) (Graddy 11). This program for schools provides a depot for recycled materials that the teachers can get inexpensively or even free for the use of students for school projects. When a school joins the programs and school groups visit the AFS facility, environmental educators speak about the local landfill and where the trash we generate ends up. In addition, the environmental educators talk about ways that we can minimize the garbage we produce through simple actions of reducing, reusing and recycling, and specifically how to identify recyclable items. Afterwards the children are provided with an opportunity to make art from the materials in the depot. “AFS creates a powerful nexus in its community: local businesses donate materials (reducing what they send to landfills...) artists, parents, teachers, kids, and other members of the public go to the depot; school and summer camp groups participate in the educational workshops; and volunteers donate labor” (Graddy 11). Overall, like the previous program, Art From Scrap educates about recycling and furthermore it involves children and schools in the process.

Many times children get more enjoyment from a combination of everyday objects and their imagination than new toys. Resource Depot Inc., West Palm Beach, Florida was created to “foster this inherent creativity,” by “transforming industrial materials into art supplies” (Raflo 1). The Resource Depot contains three thousand square feet of recycled materials from fabric scraps to shaving cream lids and pieces of jewelry boxes. This company has stressed the importance of training and education in addition to recycling and reducing garbage in landfills. To implement the education into the resource depot , they hired childhood education expert Walter Drew, who pioneered the recycled material center, to develop an accompanying curriculum for teachers that come to the facility (Raflo 1). This program is giving children the education needed to better our future as well as the ability to get involved today.

The previously-mentioned facilities all have one thing in common: they are all working at bettering environmental issues through art with recycled materials as their medium. The facilities also provide a monetary benefit to teachers. When the Resource Depot, in Florida, first opened, the depot employees interviewed teachers, and found that teachers spend at least five hundred dollars of their own money on art supplies for the classroom each year (Raflo 1). The Art From Scrap program in Santa Barbra, California, on the other hand, costs only a dollar per student, and when schools join teachers can purchase material at discounted prices (Graddy 12). The Resource Depot has an even better deal. Any teacher that works with children in the area can get materials from the facility free of charge. In addition, the Resource Depot provides the suggested curriculum free of charge (Raflo 1). This monetary break for teachers is much needed especially in areas where states have cut education budgets.

Constructing art from recyclable materials is an influential and efficient way to educate children about the importance of addressing environmental issues, especially recycling, as well as giving them a dynamic role in cleaning up the earth. Children are the future and for that reason they need to be involved in preserving the earth that they will inherit. Past generations have left the earth in a depleted state as a result of their excess garbage and irresponsible use of resources. Creative ways to educate children about recycling and get them involved are of great importance. Art can be that medium. Art is a way to use the recycled materials that unfortunately end up in landfills after being discarded improperly, and a supplemental benefit is that it brings the garbage into the public eye. In the age of “going green,” children’s involvement is important, and art is a tremendous way to involve and educate them.

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