

# Exploring Families through Contemporary Visual Art

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## Classroom Prologue

In a Tampa, Florida, sociology class, small groups of high school students excitedly discuss the proverbs and sayings presented on the handouts they have been examining. In one group, a young man says, “‘There are other fish in the sea.’ My grandpa says this all the time. Whether it’s a girl, or something that I really wanted but didn’t get, he’s like, ‘Brush it off; something else will come along!’” In another group, a young woman says, “My mother is always saying to me, ‘Keep your nose to the grindstone.’ She says to focus and work hard and it will pay off.”

After a few minutes, the teacher, co-author Sarah Mead Denney, calls the class together and initiates a whole group discussion about proverbs, including what they are, what functions they may serve, and where they are typically heard. One student states that proverbs are passed down in families. Another says they reflect what is valued in a culture. Sarah adds that proverbs are sayings representative of collective wisdom. She explains that students would now be starting a unit on social institutions, and the first institution of study would be the family. Using photographic works by contemporary artists Deborah Willis and Hank Willis Thomas, Sarah launches into an engaging sociology lesson on the concept of social institutions, specifically the family, where students offer examples from their own families and neighborhoods.

In this article, we explore how using an arts-based learning approach in secondary social studies can satisfy a number of educational goals, including the development of critical thinking and writing skills, and an appreciation of diversity. In the sociology classroom—as in the lesson Sarah taught—it can promote the study of social institutions, specifically the family.

## The “Family” in the High School Classroom

The changes in the American family during the last half-century have been nothing short of dramatic.<sup>1</sup> The diverse compositions of contemporary American families (e.g., single-parent, same-sex parents, blended, or immigrant) point to critical demographic changes in family structures and changes in social institutions.<sup>2</sup> These changes, in turn, call for the study of the family with a thoughtful focus on both the universality and diversity of families.

Although the concept and institution of the family has been a long-standing unit of study in the elementary school social studies curriculum,<sup>3</sup> coursework at the secondary level is often silent on the topic. While courses such as anthropology, Advanced Placement (AP) human geography, and AP psychology could incorporate the study of the family into their curricular scope and sequence, sociology is the only course in the high school curriculum that explicitly does this. In psychology, for example, parenting and how it impacts behavior and development is discussed, but the structure or function of the family is not a major focus. It often takes enterprising

social studies teachers—those who recognize themselves as curricular-instructional gatekeepers<sup>4</sup>—to identify connections and opportunities to discuss concepts and issues related to the family as a social institution. (See the sidebar on p. 133 for connections to the social studies curriculum standards and the C3 Framework.)

## The Importance of Arts-based Learning

The arts (e.g., visual, music, dance, theater) afford students the opportunity to learn about themselves, others, and the world around them. Research reports that students who engage in arts-based learning improve their achievement in other subjects.<sup>5</sup> They also engage in learning and innovation skills known as the “four C’s,” advocated by the Partnership for 21st Century Learning: creativity, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking.<sup>6</sup> Further, infusing the visual arts into the social studies offers teachers and students an opportunity to explore the ten themes of social studies in a way that strengthens students’ skills and academic achievement.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, the importance of the arts in general—and visual art in particular—in education is constantly diminished, either overtly or inadvertently. A 2011 report from the National Endowment for the Arts noted that arts-based education across K-12 education has declined since 1985, with a major drop beginning in the 2001–2002 school year.<sup>8</sup>

While school budget cuts and lack of testing in the arts are often blamed for



In *Words to Live By* (2008) by Deborah Willis and Hank Willis Thomas, the artists feature the lower half of family and friends' faces.

the decrease, we believe another reason why the arts are not a regular part of students' daily learning may be due to teachers' unawareness of effective ways to implement an arts-based education. Further, incorporating contemporary visual art can be especially difficult for teachers for a myriad of reasons, ranging from being unfamiliar with the genre<sup>9</sup> to simply not understanding the meaning of contemporary artworks.<sup>10</sup>

### Using Contemporary Visual Art to Teach about the "Family"

In our professional development and curriculum work, we have found the works of four contemporary artists—Renee Cox, Debbie Grossman, and the collaborative work of Deborah Willis and Hank Willis Thomas—to not only be accessible to teachers, but also relevant to students' lives. Some of their works are highlighted here, noting their relevance to a high school sociology course, or other courses across the secondary curriculum that address the theme of the family. Their works can be found here: <http://www.usfcam.usf.edu/InsideART/>.

**Renee Cox, *Family Snaps* (2001).** Renee Cox was born in Jamaica in 1960, but has lived most of her life in the United States. Cox's interest lies in representation of the self and groups of people, most notably African Americans. Seeking to empower African American women, her photographic works center on a multitude of social issues, including racism and sexism, and often involve works that are rather brazen self-portraits.<sup>11</sup> *Family Snaps* (2011) includes approximately 60 family photographs representative of Cox's own American family of European and Jamaican heritage (<https://slideplayer.com/slide/>

10135759/). Photographs commonly found in any family's photo album (e.g., births, deaths, holidays, and vacations) are included in this work.

**Debbie Grossman, *My Pie Town* (2010).** Russell Lee was a photographer who documented the plight of rural communities during the Great Depression for the Farm Security Administration. Lee's iconic images are housed in the Library of Congress and are often featured in U.S. history textbooks. One collection, *Pie Town* (1940), offers an intimate view of families in a small, New Mexico settlement by the same name. Because Lee utilized a flash to take photographs inside buildings, he was able to record the life of his subjects and the environments where they lived.<sup>12</sup> Although the photographic series illustrates the difficult conditions many Americans were living in during the Great Depression, it also projects resilience and community ([www.loc.gov/pictures/search/?q=pie%20town&c=100&st=grid](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/search/?q=pie%20town&c=100&st=grid)).

Seventy years later, artist Debbie Grossman used Photoshop to alter Lee's original images to create "an imaginary, parallel world—a Pie Town populated exclusively by women."<sup>13</sup> In this community of the artist's creation, families are headed by women, sometimes singly, sometimes as parenting couples ([www.debbiegrossman.com/index.php?/projects/my-pie-town/](http://www.debbiegrossman.com/index.php?/projects/my-pie-town/)). Grossman's work, *My Pie Town*, provides an opportunity for social studies teachers to include LGBTQ families, a societal shift that needs to be reflected in the curriculum. According to the last U.S. Census, approximately 2.5 million K-12 students identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning. Further, the Census reported an 80 percent

increase in same-sex households with 25 percent of those same-sex couples raising children together.

**Deborah Willis and Hank Willis Thomas, *Words to Live By* (2008).** The work of mother-and-son artists Deborah Willis and Hank Willis Thomas often considers the role of the family in transmitting culture. Using traditional photography, digital photography, and videography, their work is both conceptual and thought-provoking. (See [http://ira.usf.edu/InsideART/Inside\\_Art\\_A\\_Family\\_Affair/InsideART\\_2015\\_AFA\\_files.html](http://ira.usf.edu/InsideART/Inside_Art_A_Family_Affair/InsideART_2015_AFA_files.html))

In *Words to Live By* (2008), Willis and Willis Thomas couple photographs of the lower half of family and friends' faces paired with proverbs, superstitions, and aphorisms. (See photo above.) The collection of images is ethnically diverse and the accompanying sayings reflect notions of culture, family, and relationships such as: "The water that carries the boat can always overturn it," "The prettiest papayas are always emptiest inside," and "A cow knows where to find the weak fence."

### Instructional Strategies to Teach about the "Family" Using Contemporary Visual Art

Teaching about the family may require a different pedagogical approach than other topics. Although tried-and-true strategies such as discussions, debates, role-playing, and research projects can be used effectively, there are five instructional approaches that may be particularly helpful in teaching about the family and its attendant constructs: visual analysis and discussion, writing, photo analysis, cooperative learning, and student-centered art projects (for

additional teaching resources and ideas see sidebars on pp. 130 and 132).

**Visual analysis and discussion.** Visual analysis is a process that uses art to help students develop critical thinking skills and visual literacy. Adding discussion with premeditated questioning to visual analysis, students can further develop their communication and collaboration skills while focusing on a piece of artwork. All of these are necessary twenty-first century skills.<sup>14</sup>

**Visual Thinking Strategy (VTS) approach.** The VTS approach is a specific visual analysis method that allows students to respond to a series of questions in an effort to promote learner-centered conversations about their examination of artworks.<sup>15</sup> In this approach, the teacher asks three questions:

1. What's going on in this picture?
2. What do you see that makes you say that?
3. What more can you find?

As each student responds, the teacher simply paraphrases what the student says and points to whatever portion of the picture the student is referencing. These questions (and teachers' comments) are purposefully general as they are designed to spark student conversation without limitations on student responses.

**Stratified questioning strategy.** To facilitate quality discussion, there are multiple effective questioning frameworks available to teachers, such as Revised Bloom's Taxonomy, Costa's Level of Questioning, and Webb's Depth of Knowledge. Each of these questioning frameworks groups questions into categories or hierarchies that move from basic to higher-level cognition and knowledge. By premeditating the types of questions to ask about the artwork under investigation, teachers can help scaffold student learning and engage students in deep and meaningful discussion. For example, using Bloom's taxonomy at the level of "analysis," a teacher may ask students to

critique the artwork: "What perspectives does contemporary art uniquely provide that are not found elsewhere?" Or, at the creation/synthesis level, the teacher may ask students how they would plan to create a piece of artwork: "If you were to create an artwork about family, what medium would you use and why?"

**Writing.** The Common Core State Standards and their attendant assessments place a heavier emphasis on writing than in the past. It is expected that at the secondary level, students should be able to develop the writing skills that prepare them for college and career. Standards ask students to write arguments that support claims, write explanatory texts, craft descriptive narratives, and conduct research projects.<sup>16</sup> Studying contemporary visual artwork and contemporary artists can provide several entry points to develop these writing skills. For example, through arts-based lessons, students can acquire and use academic and domain-specific

## Teaching Resources

Art 21. "Getting Started: An Introduction to Teaching with Contemporary Art," <https://art21.org/for-educators/tools-for-teaching/getting-started-an-introduction-to-teaching-with-contemporary-art>.

This multimedia gateway website provides a visual and pedagogical orientation for educators wishing to use contemporary art in their classrooms. Resources include essays, discussion questions, images of art works, and video clips.

"Inside Art," Tampa, Florida: University of South Florida, [www.usfcam.usf.edu/InsideART/](http://www.usfcam.usf.edu/InsideART/).

The 6–12 grade curricular and instructional materials described in this article can be found on this web page, home of Inside Art, an arts-based learning and visual literacy program that integrates social studies with contemporary art in an examination and discussion of pressing societal issues.

Marshall, J. "Five Ways to Integrate: Using Strategies from Contemporary Art." *Art Education* 63, no. 3 (2010): 13-19.

Scholarly article that discusses the studying and integration of contemporary art at all levels of schooling. Provided are five conceptual approaches as well as concrete examples of strategies to connect art with the academic curriculum.

Sweet, S., and J. Casey, (2018). *Work and family encyclopedia*. <https://wfrn.org/resources/work-family-encyclopedia/>

This peer-reviewed encyclopedia provides informative entries, up-to-date fact sheets, and a helpful glossary. The Teaching Resources section is a repository of syllabi, teaching modules and activities, and ideas for workshops and classes.



Students reflecting on proverbs. (Photo courtesy of authors.)

vocabulary (LACC.1112.L.3.6) and integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media formats (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.2).

Students who examine the *Words to Live By* series can demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings (LACC.1112.L.3.5). By examining and discussing the *My Pie Town* images, students can consider and respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1.D). And Cox's *Family Snaps* provides an opportunity for students to identify major characteristics of social groups (e.g., family) familiar to the students (SS.912.S.4.2) and describe how people are affected by the social groups to which they belong (SS.912.S.4.1). Biographies, interviews, and reflections are three methods to infuse writing into an arts-based learning approach to teaching about the family.

**Biography.** Because so much of contemporary art is conceptual, knowing something about the artists' lives can provide valuable insight into their work, often resulting in a deeper understanding and heightened enjoyment of the art itself. Using an arts-based learning approach, students can either research artists and

write their biographies—connecting their life experiences and philosophies to the art under study—or, if students develop their own art projects (see p.132), they can write their own autobiographies explaining how they developed the idea for their pieces. Connections to family upbringing, influences, and cultural values can be explored and integrated into the biographies.

**Interviews.** Developing an interview protocol, conducting interviews, analyzing the data, then writing the findings in a coherent report can serve as a real-world research project for students, enabling them to employ various communication skills and hone their writing, two very important skills for the twenty-first century. In addition to conducting face-to-face interviews, technology now allows students to interview artists remotely. Alternatively, if students create their own art projects, classmates can interview each other and create biographies. If a classroom or school gallery of works is displayed, students can interview visitors to the gallery on their reactions and impressions for an article in the school newspaper.

**National Archives photograph analysis approach.** The National

Archives offers an approach for analyzing photographs that can easily be adapted and applied to artwork (see [www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/worksheets/photo\\_analysis\\_worksheet.pdf](http://www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/worksheets/photo_analysis_worksheet.pdf)). In this adapted approach, students briefly view the artwork and, in writing, answer the question “What do you notice first?” Students then examine the artwork in more detail, paying particular attention to its various parts (people, objects, activities) in order to summarize the artwork in one sentence. After summarizing the artwork, students delve deeper into the piece, responding to questions such as “Who created this artwork?” “Where is it from?” “What was happening at the time in history when it was created?” Last, students are encouraged to use the artwork as historical evidence, answering questions such as “What did you find out from this artwork that you might not learn anywhere else?” and “What other documents, photos, artworks, or historical evidence are you going to use to better understand this event or topic?”

**Four quadrants jigsaw strategy.** In the four quadrants jigsaw instructional strategy, students start out in a base group of four students. They each receive a different quadrant of the visual artwork to investigate. Students then rearrange into expert groups with all those who have the same quadrant of artwork. In these groups, each student analyzes the artwork individually and then the group engages in a discussion on each quadrant. Once all members have shared, students return to their base groups and all members take turns reporting out what was discussed in expert groups. This is followed by a whole class conversation on the artwork and the process for studying the artwork.

**Student-created art projects.** After studying contemporary visual artworks, most students find the prospect of creating their own art exciting. Often, they see contemporary art as more relevant to their lives and easier to create than

traditional mediums such as oil painting or sculpture. After a curriculum unit on the family, students can design and create an original contemporary art-based project that reflects one or more concepts or issues studied. They should write reflective essays to accompany their art projects. The works can be displayed in a gallery walk format in

the classroom, such as in the example highlighting Renee Cox's artwork below. This cooperative learning approach has half the students setting up their projects first, and being available for explanation and questions, as the other half of the class tours the "gallery." The students then switch roles so that the other students' projects can be viewed.

## Classroom Epilogue

As the end of the class period approaches, Sarah asks students to continue to think about proverbs used by family members or heard throughout their neighborhood. Then Sarah projects the homework assignment on the screen:

## Teaching Ideas

### **Family Snaps (2001)**

<https://slideplayer.com/slide/10135759/>

Sociology and psychology teachers can use Cox's *Family Snaps* (2001) to have students consider how photographs represent family or social groups, and to encourage students to examine how their own photographs represent their family or social group.

To begin a lesson utilizing *Family Snaps*, a teacher can have students examine Cox's photographs and describe what they see, elaborate on how the photos may be connected to one another, discuss if the photographs are arranged in a certain way, and share what photographs stand out to them. Students can contemplate what they think the artist is trying to communicate through this collection of photographs. Then, using this as a catalyst, students can consider how photographs represent their family or their social group by creating their own "family snap." Allow for differentiation of process and product. For example, students can use existing family photographs, take pictures of family or friends, or symbolically represent their perception of their family and social circle through clipart images, multimedia sources (video, music), etc. They can recreate Cox's format (picture of pictures) or they can create a digital photo collage using such online sites as Glogster (<http://edu.glogster.com/?ref=com>) or Canva ([www.canva.com](http://www.canva.com)). The goal is for students to represent their perception of their family or social group in a process that is comfortable for them with a product that has personal meaning.

To showcase their work, students can engage in a gallery walk. Have 25 percent of the students display their work and place the remaining 75 percent of the class into groups to rotate around the room to visit each student's work. Have artists stand by their work to talk with their peers and answer questions about their piece. Flip roles so that everyone has a chance to share his or her work. As students preview the work of their classmates, have them consider the question, "What do you think the artist is trying to communicate through his/her work?" Students can talk with their group mates and the artists about this question. (Files can also be accessed at [http://ira.usf.edu/InsideART/Inside\\_Art\\_A\\_Family\\_Affair/InsideART\\_2015\\_AFA\\_files.html](http://ira.usf.edu/InsideART/Inside_Art_A_Family_Affair/InsideART_2015_AFA_files.html))

### **My Pie Town (2010)**

Students can be prompted to compare the works of Lee and Grossman, one at a time and side by side, observing as many characteristics and features of each image as possible, and considering how each image is similar to, and different from, each other. Class discussion can then turn to the changes and shifts in families and family structure that have occurred in U.S. society in the past century. Working in pairs, students can also select images by both Lee and Grossman and imagine the dialogue the characters in the photographs might have. Students could also write out their dialogues and perhaps even present it to peers in an interactive presentation format. Studying the works of contemporary artists can spur students to create works of their own. (Images are available at [http://usfcam.usf.edu/InsideART/Inside\\_Art\\_Enhanced/InsideART\\_2015files.html](http://usfcam.usf.edu/InsideART/Inside_Art_Enhanced/InsideART_2015files.html) or [www.debbiegrossman.com/index.php?/projects/my-pie-town/](http://www.debbiegrossman.com/index.php?/projects/my-pie-town/))

### **Words to Live By (2008)**

Students can consider how adages in Thomas and Willis Thomas's collaborative work reflect the social institutions of family and culture. Teachers can then facilitate a class discussion by asking students to think of a proverb or saying they have heard in their own family, home culture, or neighborhood. To ensure that everyone participates, the activity can be developed as a "Think-Pair-Share" cooperative learning activity. Students should first write down the proverb or saying including:

- the proverb or saying (for home languages other than English, it should be first written in the home language with an English translation provided);
- the meaning of the proverb as the student understands it;
- a description of the context or situation in which the proverb is typically said or heard;
- who usually says this proverb.

Opportunities to share written responses should be afforded in either pairs or as a whole class, or both. As an extension activity, students could also be given opportunity to create an artwork based on the proverb they wrote about. (See [Willis\\_and\\_Willis\\_Thomas\\_Culture\\_and\\_Family.ppt](#))

Think of a proverb or saying you have heard in your family, home culture, or neighborhood. In your student journal, write:

- The proverb (if your home language is not English, write it in your home language and include the English translation).
- The meaning of the proverb.
- In what context or situation is the proverb typically said or heard?
- Who usually says this proverb?

With just a couple of minutes before the end of Sarah's class, two students raise their hands to share the proverb they will be writing about. One says, "In my house, I always hear, 'Remember that it's always 80/20.'" Sarah probes, "Who says that and what do you take it to mean?" The student replies, "My mom reminds me that just about everything is 80 percent mental and 20 percent physical. That if you have mental strength, you can get it done." Another student offers, "My mom is always saying, 'You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.'" Sarah presses the student to explain and the student replies, "My mother points out that although she can give me all sorts of things and opportunities, it's ultimately up to me to make it happen."

The students' contributions and classroom discussion show ways an art-based approach to learning using contemporary visual art can be implemented to promote active learning, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication, while exploring sociological concepts such as teaching about the family. By carefully curating contemporary visual artworks, students can learn about and reflect on the changing structure of, and relationships in, the "family"—a topic that relates and connects to their lives. 🌐

#### Notes

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The authors would like to thank the following sponsors for their generous support: the National Education Association; the USF David C. Anchin Center; and the USF Institute for Research in Art ACE Fund.

Connections to the theme of family can be found in the curriculum standards developed by the National Council for the Social Studies. The fourth theme (**INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY AND DEVELOPMENT**) of the NCSS curriculum standards, for example, can easily be used to "examine contemporary patterns of human behavior, using methods from the behavioral sciences to apply core concepts drawn from psychology, sociology, and anthropology as they apply to individuals, societies, and cultures." The fifth theme (**INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS**) asks social studies programs to provide learning experiences for students that allow them to examine the interactions among people that help them "carry out, organize, and manage [their] daily affairs," among them the formal and informal institutions of schools, government agencies, and the family. The *C3 Framework* similarly points out the value of considering the family in studies of the formal and informal economy, income distribution, transnational flow of remittances, civic responsibility, and the social construction of status.