motivating and empowering middle school students through social change education

Alyssa J. Hinkell

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Peter Taylor

As a teacher of young adolescents, it is always a challenge to find topics that truly engage and motivate students. Adolescents in their middle school years experience unique emotional, social, and physical changes that often result in them possessing a slightly egocentric view of their world. In my experience, many adolescents tend to focus on their immediate surroundings and therefore, neglect to truly see the world beyond their immediate existence. As a teacher of Social Studies, I feel that I have a specific responsibility to shape students as they become productive, informed citizens of our local, national, and global communities. For three months I have committed myself to answering the assortment of questions that need to be addressed in order for this responsibility to be fulfilled. How can I truly motivate students to become active participants in our classroom community? In what ways can I encourage students to push themselves to become independent, curious, and passionate life-long learners? How can I allow each of my students to see the value in their own education? What will convince my students that, even as young adolescents, they can act as agents of change? How can I make each of my students see the value in their own education and ultimately receive inspiration from it?

Through my research, action, and reflection I have discovered and developed a method of teaching that I believe addresses the questions that I had posed for myself. This report synthesizes my work from this past fall in an attempt to enhance the role of social change education in my own classroom as well as beyond through enhancing the presence of social change education in the subject frameworks of the state of Massachusetts.

I will first share the definition of social change education that I have developed over the past few months. Having reviewed countless sources that all seemed to share a common thread I felt the need to create my own representation. Therefore, I developed a working definition for *social change education* and also defined specific branches (components) of it. Second, I share

two individuals who have become models for my understanding of social change education.

These two men, Myles Horton and John Dewey, were pioneers in the field of social change

education. In my research I encountered the enduring ripples from the work of these two

individuals, finding much inspiration in the ideas they shared and the actions they took. Third, I

highlight the current practices that can be considered social change education, both at the

international and national levels. Lastly, I explore the presence of social change education in

Massachusetts by comparing the Massachusetts history/Social Sciences framework with that of

another U.S. state. My future steps reflect a commitment in this specific area as I plan to

consider ways in which Massachusetts public school teachers can better incorporate social

change education into their classrooms.

The Development of *Social Change Education*

Though it seems slightly cliché to begin this piece with a definition for *social change*

education it is absolutely necessary given the almost fickle manner in which the field of

education amuses itself with terms, phrase, and meanings. Education is a field where a single

term will be revised dozens of times, resulting in countless ways to express one idea, trend, or

method.[1] In this field the newer, more descriptive, and more socially acceptable terms and

phrases constantly usurp those that reigned before. Because of this phenomenon, there are

numerous ways to refer to the ideas that are at the core of this project. A simple search of "social

change education" will point one in several directions chasing a plethora of related concepts. As

someone who has been engaged in this pursuit for the past few months, I found it necessary to

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[1] Take for instance, the division of education that is responsible for assisting those that are in the acquisition stages of the English language. In some school districts the reigning term is *English as a Second Language* or ESL. Recently, some leaders in the field asserted that English should not be considered a second language and therefore developed *English Language Learners* or ELL to refer to this group of students.

create a working representation for the concepts I was developing and am currently, most

pleased with *social change education*. Therefore, it is necessary to explore what *social change*

education will refer to within these pages.

There are three branches to social change education, each focused on a separate layer of a

student's life. One level is an international level, which strives to develop a sense of global

awareness. A second level is a national level, which focuses on instilling a sense of civic

awareness. The last is a local level, which incorporates service-learning opportunities.

Before introducing the idea of social change education to students it might be helpful to

first explore the concept of *community*. Students should perhaps investigate what *community*

means and which communities they belong to in order to make the social change focus genuine

and accessible for them. Students, at any age level, can identify the communities to which they

belong. Using a visual representation of concentric circles will allow students to see the levels of

their citizenship, starting from the smallest level of the classroom, moving outwards to the

largest level of the entire globe. Students should explore what their membership to these various

groups entail, eventually identifying that they have responsibilities and rights within each of

these communities to which they belong.

Figure 1.

Earth

U.S.A.

State

Town/City

Neighborhood

School

Classroom
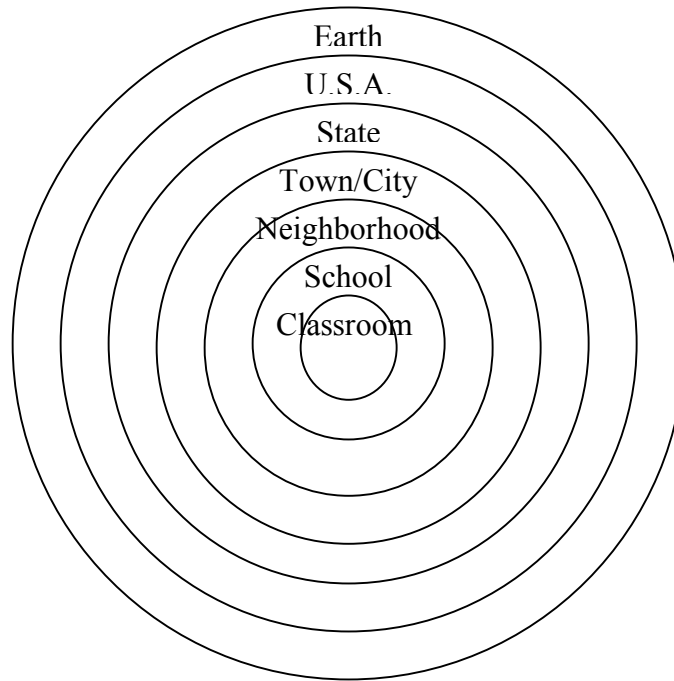
Representing the concept of community using the above visual allows students to see how each community is imbedded and is a division of the next, larger community. Three of these levels are the branches of social change education that were mentioned above. Below is a representation of these three branches of social change education.

Figure 2.

Global Awareness
(International)

Social Change Education

Service -Learning
(Local)

Civic Responsibility
(National)
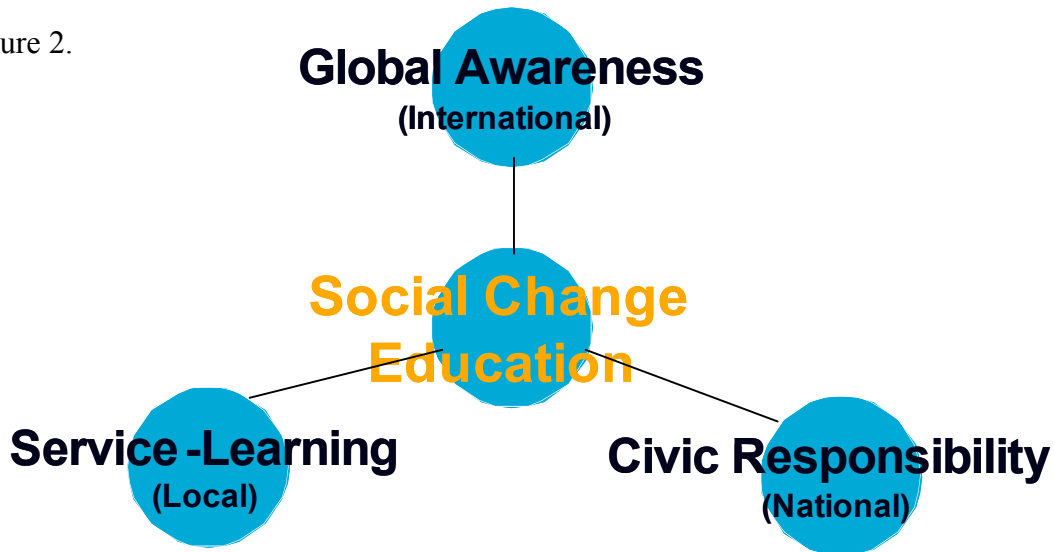
A logical inquiry at this point might be, "So what is social change education?" Social change

education is a method of teaching that allows students to become active participants in their

classroom community. Social change education is a method of teaching that might explore

specific social change movements, highlight key changers and activists, examine groups that

have been affected by social change, and identify the methods by which individual people and

groups work towards social change.

After exploring the history and role of social change students can then become agents of

change as they work together collaboratively to recognize contemporary issues in the various

communities to which they belong. Before they jump into attacking an issue, students must first

explore all facets of it in order to develop a better understanding of what is at the heart of this

problem. Students then participate in problem-based learning to discover potential solutions and

resolutions to these problems. A last, but essential, piece to social change education is reflection.

In order to begin students on a true path of life-long learning, they must be encouraged to reflect

on the learning experience itself as well as to make further connections between the social issues

and problems with which they are working.

History of Social Change Education

John Dewey wrote that in order for a society to be fully transformative, all levels of that

society must have equal and accessible intellectual opportunities. In fact, Dewey states:

> *A society which is mobile, which is full of channels of the*
> *distribution of a change occurring anywhere, must see to it that its*
> *members are educated to personal initiative and adaptability*
> (102).

Today, eight years shy of a century later, Dewey's ideas are yet to be fully realized. Dewey was

speaking of the responsibility of education to encourage, foster, and support a sense of action in

its participants. The action that he was personally and specifically interested in was democratic

action; Dewey believed that the role of education was to communicate the values of a democracy

onto the next generation.

Myles Horton later spoke, wrote, and practiced ideas similar to that of John Dewey.

Horton was most interested in a form of action that would be initiated solely by the very people

hoping for the change. Myles established the Highlander Folk School and, besides a loosely

worded charter, had little idea of what his school would eventually become. Highlander evolved

into a place that united local people, giving them a center to meet and discuss the problems that

plagued their daily lives. Today, the Highlander Research and Education Center has expanded,

but continues to strengthen the voices of the social and cultural groups it serves.

Much has changed in the world since these two men shared their impressions of the role of

education in society. Today's technology is very different from that of the early 20th century and the world that Dewey knew. The social struggles of Horton's life time persist, but some would argue have lost their ability to inspire unity and action. Since their time, a second World War, a Cold War, the wars on drugs, poverty, and terror have consumed the societies of the world. There has occurred a "shift from an industrial to an information-based society"[2] while the demographic composition of our country has experienced a dramatic change in the origins of its diversity. In relation to these radical adaptations in life, the system which strives to make sense of them has experienced little change. In most schools across the United States most students sit in rows and endure a teacher-centered lesson that is delivered from the front of a room. The three Rs of reading, writing, and arithmetic have been adapted slightly; in most school districts the "core" academic subjects are considered to be Language Arts, mathematics, science, and history. We have replaced our blackboards with erasable whiteboards, lashings and whippings with detentions and suspensions, and chalk and slate for paper and pen or in some cases, laptops and flash drives.

Admittedly, our education system has experienced great change in the 20th century. Most recently, the age of standards-based education has taken root across the country with the development of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. NCLB focused on school accountability, educational standards, and school choice, perhaps aspects of education that John Dewey and Myles Horton dreamt would one day be made available to their supporters. Despite these changes, and those that have trickled down from this overarching set of laws, our methods of educating our youth have yet to catch up to realities of the world beyond our classrooms. Many

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[2] *Educating the 21st Century Citizen,* http://www.microsoft.com/education/21stCenturyCitizen.mspx, 12 December 2008.

further modifications are necessary in order to truly prepare our students for the 21t century that they are expected to grow and prosper in.

Instead of workers that can skillfully navigate the industrial age, today's employers are looking for workers with high knowledge and skill sets. Companies are seeking out employees with superior problem-solving, collaboration, and cultural sensitivity skills.[3] Though we have just entered it, a whole new set of skills is necessary for the 21st century. The reality of education in the United States at this juncture in our development is that it does not coincide with the realities of our 21st century existence. History books still leave out varied perspectives, language and cultural barriers continue to disengage students that are from diverse populations, and many students lack a basic understanding of the geography and scope of the globe.

Many organizations and groups have sprouted in direct response to this disconnect in order to support and enrich classroom teaching. I have encountered countless of these groups over the last few months and a few that are intimated connected to my work with social change education should be highlighted. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills was established in 2002 by the U.S. Department of Education along with a variety of companies including AOL, Dell, Microsoft, Apple that each recognized the need to better prepare the workforce of the future. Some of the essential skills that the organization believes all children need in order to succeed in the 21st century include creativity and innovation skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, and communication and collaboration skills. Additionally, The Partnership uses four strands to unite these skills including global awareness; financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy; civic literacy; and health literacy. The Partnership considers a variety of subjects to be "core" including the non-traditional economics, arts, and world languages. The

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[3] *Global Education: Preparing Massachusetts Students for Success in today's Interconnected World* (video), Primary Source and EF Educational Tours, narrated by R.D. Sahl.

Partnership supports teachers and schools through their website which includes suggested a curriculum framework and assessment tools.

Two other multi-national organizations have a similar focus to The Partnership for 21st Century Skills. The United Kingdom's division of Oxfam Education and the Earth Focus foundation highlight the importance of engaging students in global change. These organizations believe that it is absolutely necessary to engage students in social change because as young people they are still actively developing their opinions of diverse peoples and lands. It is essential, according to many organizations, to reach students at this stage when they are still idealistic in order to turn this passion into action.

These organizations fill a unique role in the pursuit of social change education as support networks for teachers and schools. Each organization provides an interpretation of social change education and then offers practical applications of their particular understanding. At each of their websites suggestions for skills, themes, strands, and activities abound. Admittedly, the work of these organizations needs to be pieced together by teachers and districts in order to develop true social change education. Some educational systems have synthesized resources such as the aforementioned to develop their own version of social change education.

Embracing the Global Branch of Social Change Education

Currently, many education systems across the globe particularly endorse one of the key concepts of social change education. Global awareness, or the international branch of social change education, seems to be more in vogue than its domestic counterpart focused on civics and national citizenship.

An international program is currently being incorporated into school systems in 131 different countries across the globe. Founded in 1968, the International Baccalaureate is based in Geneva. IB accepts applications from schools across the globe to be allowed to offer the three different IB divisions: primary years, middle years, and a Diploma Programme. The International Baccalaureate "aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect."[4] The Middle Years Programme is aimed at students aged 11 to 16 and directly address the unique personal, social, and intellectual changes that a student in this phase of life experiences.[5] At this level the curriculum is separated into several subjects and the interconnectedness between these subjects is frequently highlighted. The years of study result in each student initiating a unique and personal project. Students are required to choose a topic which they plan, research, and continuously reflect on under the guidance of a teacher. Students are assessed in a variety of ways, including the traditional tests as well as some other, somewhat non-traditional methods of assessment including problem-solving and investigative activities, class-wide debates, experiments, and analysis and reflection. IB supports teachers as they develop the assessment and teaching tools necessary for the IB program. There is an annual continental conference as well as numerous smaller conferences for each region offering IB programs of study. In addition, the IB website offers virtual professional development workshops to its members.

The International Baccalaureate also offers a community strand. Currently, the community strand's theme is "sharing our humanity". Within this theme, IB students explore

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[4] *Mission and strategy,* International Baccalaurete, http://www.ibo.org/mission/, 4 October 2008.
[5] *What is the Middle Years Program?,* International Baccalaurete, http://www.ibo.org/myp/, 4 October 2008.

many issues that unite communities across the globe including global poverty, peace and

conflict, education for all, infectious diseases, the digital divide, and disasters and emergencies.[6]

Though the International Baccalaureate mostly focuses on only the international branch

of social change education it mirrors many of the most important facets of it. Just as in social

change education, students explore issues through a problem-based learning approach and are

also encouraged to be reflective in this process. The most direct connection between social

change education and the IB is the idea that the students are *creating* a better world. Instead of

being passive vessels, students are the agents of change.

Great Britain's national curricula currently offer a global and national citizenship strand.

In the United Kingdom, "citizenship" is considered a subject on its own. At the adolescent level

(stages 3 and 4 in the U.K. when students are between ages 11-18) the citizenship subject gives

students an opportunity to

> play an active role in the life of their schools, neighbourhoods,
> communities and wider society as active and global citizens.[7]

In addition to the above international organizations, some universities here in the United

States, including Franklin Pierce College and the University of Delaware, offer a global

citizenship certificate. Franklin Pierce College offers its global citizenship certificate to students

who have completed four courses including an introductory course titled "Global Problems".

The program encourages students to become more committed to the communities to which they

belong, global and otherwise. Additionally, global citizenship students must either complete a

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[6] *About the Community Theme,* International Baccalaurete, http://communitytheme.ibo.org/eng/about-ib-community-theme, 4 October 2008.
[7] *The importance of citizenship*, National Curriculum: Responsible citizens. http://curriculum.qca.org.uk, 4 October 2008.

semester abroad or participate in an internship "that involves international and citizenship dimensions."[8]

On an even more local level, one state within the United States has incorporated concepts of social change education into its educational standards. The introduction of California's state History- Social Science standards highlights the need for social change education:

> We want them to develop a keen sense of ethics and citizenship. And we want them to care deeply about the quality of life in their community, their nation, and their world... This framework provides opportunities for students' participation in school and community service programs and activities.[9]

An analysis of the History/Social Science frameworks of Massachusetts and California provides a unique opportunity for comparing and contrasting the values that drive the two documents. I have isolated terms that are closely linked to social change education and carefully examined the two documents for the prevalence and relevance of these terms.

Terms that are associated with social change education	**Massachusetts** History-Social Science Framework (updated in 2003)	**California** History-Social Science Framework (updated in 2005)
Global	*Global* is used 3 times in total, each pertaining to events in U.S. History: - the Great Depression, - the Cold War, and - America's "global influence" on other nations	*Global* is used 3 times in total, each time linked with terms related to interdependence: - "Knowledge of the history-social science disciplines…is essential in comprehending *global interrelationships*." - "It is commonplace to acknowledge that we live in an *interdependent* world and function in a *global* economy." - "The world history sequence stresses

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[8] *Global Citizenship Certificate,* Franklin Pierce College, http://franklinpierce.edu, 8 November 2008.
[9] 2005 Edition, http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/documents/histsocsciframe.pdf, 1 November 2008.

		the concept of *global interdependence*.”
citizen or *citizenship*	*Citizen* (or *citizenship*) is used over 20 times, each time linked with the following terms: - United States, - America, - American, or - Commonwealth (referring to our state). - *Citizen* was also used once referring to the French Declaration.	*Citizen* (or *citizenship*) is used 16 times in phrases such as the following: - “We want them to take an active role as *citizens* and to know how to work for *change* in a democratic society (introduction).” *Citizen* was also used numerous times in the following pairings: - “responsible *citizens*” - “active *citizens*”
social change	*Social Change* is used twice when referring to events in past United States history including: - westward expansion and - the American civil war	The term *social change* was used a few times in the introduction, for example: - “They should have the capacity to make wise choices in their own lives and to understand the swift-moving *changes* in state, national, and world affairs.” - Searching simply the term *change* found that it was mostly used as in conjunction with the “time, continuity, and change” strand.
Civic	*Civic* was used 10 times in the document, only appearing in the a 12th grade Elective called “American Government”.	*Civic* was used 3 times in the Introduction’s section on “Distinguishing Characteristics”: - “…reflecting on individual and social responsibility for civic welfare in the world today.” *Civic* was also used twice referring to American civic responsibility.

These terms that are associated with social change education appear most often in the Massachusetts’ document in reference to an event in the American past. In direct contrast, the same terms often appeared in the California text in the present or future tense and always in relation to a student’s development as a responsible citizen and his/her capacity to understand other perspectives and to make well-informed choices. The California state History- Social Sciences standards more accurately reflect social change education and I believe, point out the changes that need to be incorporated into the Massachusetts state standards.

The State of Social Change Education in the Massachusetts Standards

Currently, the state of Massachusetts has made a promise through its application to The Partnership for 21st Century Skills to review the standards of other states in order to identify potential gaps in its own state standards.[10] For the state of Massachusetts, standards that reflect at least a modest level of global change education most commonly fit into the history/Social Sciences or World Languages frameworks. Though the Massachusetts history/Social Science standards are scheduled to undergo a review in the spring of 2011, they might not experience the same level of change as they did in the 2003 revisions. As my interview with Mr. John Keh, the chairperson of the Massachusetts Global Education Advisory Council, pointed out there is a distinction between *reviewing* and *revising* suggesting that although the current framework is up for review, this does not necessarily suggest a revision.

The Urban, Middle School Classroom

There is absolutely no doubt that students in middle school classrooms face unique social, emotional, and cognitive changes. Furthermore, realities for middle school students living in urban settings sometimes provide additional challenges and opportunities. Many educators acknowledge, albeit informally, that middle school is the last chance that we have to inspire and motivate students before they officially enter adulthood. Students living in a diverse urban setting have a unique opportunity to experience the three branches of social change education given the diversity of their community as well as the issues that often plague urban communities.

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[10] *Route 21,* Massachusetts: Standards, The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/route21/, 6 December 2008.

Social change education, if implemented authentically, is the ideal method to tap into each of these elements.

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) published a report that specifically links the development of adolescents with the social studies classroom. In "Social Studies in the Middle School" (1991), the NCSS pointed out the importance of a strong social studies curriculum at the middle school level. According to the NCSS, the characteristics of early adolescents that should become the driving force behind a social studies curriculum are as follows:

- concern with self: development of self-esteem and a strong sense of identity,
- concern for right and wrong: development of ethics,
- concern for others: development of group and other-centeredness, and
- concern for the world: development of a global perspective.[11]

Adults familiar with students of the adolescent age often point out the self-centered nature of this developmental stage. Turning this focus outward and broadening the perspective of a middle-schooler can be daunting, but essential task. Social change education can be a vehicle for this transformation.

Additionally, schools that serve diverse communities have a responsibility to incorporate the branches of social change education, especially the local branch which offers service-learning opportunities. In an article for the Harvard Educational Review Radhika Rao, an editor of *The Opportunity Gap: Achievement and Inequality in Education*, stated that social change

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[11] National Council for the Social Studies. January 1991. http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/middleschool, 27 September 2008.

education is especially crucial in

> urban, public schools that have tremendous racial and class
> diversity, as well as large numbers of first- and second-generation
> immigrant students.[12]

Social change education is a manner in which to connect these students to the communities to which they are either new members or to which they feel little connection.

Where to next?

I.   Recommendations to the Massachusetts DOE

In my interview with Mr. Keh I asked him to what extent he thought the Massachusetts state history/Social Sciences standards would be updated to include elements of social change education. Mr. Keh responded that any potential change is to the framework would be entirely up to the "democratic process".[13] As someone who is invested in social change education I would like to advocate these changes. I plan to apply for a 2009 Global Education Massachusetts Grant to in order to facilitate the planning of a social change education model with a strong global education for my school district. The Global Education Massachusetts (GEM) grants "encourage districts to create concrete initiatives worthy of statewide and nationwide replication"[14]. If granted one of the 3 awards, I am hoping to develop a social change education model that can be adapted in the form of recommendations to the Massachusetts

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[12] Rao, Radhika. "The Aesthetics of the Oppressed/The Theatre of Urban: Youth and Schooling in Dangerous Times." Harvard Educational Review 78.3 (2008): 549-563.

[13] November 18th, 2008 Interview with Mr. John Chiang Keh, Chairperson of the Global Education Advisory Council for the Massachusetts Department of Education.

[14] *What we do,* 2009 Global Education Massachusetts Grants, Primary Source http://www.primarysource.org/, 8 November 2008.

Department of Education in order for the DOE to acknowledge and mend any "gaps"[15] within its history/Social Sciences framework.

II. *Assessing Social Change Education*

Social change education provides a unique challenge when faced with standardized testing. As exhibited by The Partnership for 21st Century Skills and others, we can more easily identify learning standards than actually assess them. As Bob Regan points out in an article entitled "Why we Need to Teach 21st Century Skills--and how to do it" (2008), "As student work becomes more varied and sophisticated, so too does the effort required to evaluate it." Regan himself suggests portfolio assessment, while the International Baccalaureate also proposes a variety of assessment tools. In order to make social change education more realistic I must acknowledge and address the need to assess the skills necessary to it. I would like to explore potential methods of assessment in order to make social change education accessible and justifiable for schools.

Conclusions: *Social Change Education as Values Education*

Some denounce social change education as simply ways "to replace crumbling religious values" or "to deliver a particular view of society".[16] This objection reflects the issue of values education which has, for some time, been an area of contention and debate. The reality that we live with in today's American society is that values are transmitted in a variety of ways. Families, schools, the Internet, media, celebrity, and other forms of pop culture all transmit

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[15] *Route 21,* Massachusetts: Standards, The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/route21/
[16] Carvel, John. "Schools Adviser Urges Moral Code to Replace God." The Guardian (London) March 23 1998: 1.

values. I believe that today the charge of teaching values to the next generation should be a central focus of our education system. The other aforementioned entities that transmit values to today's youth are entirely free, and sometimes completely unchecked. By incorporating values education into today's schools we can ensure that students are armed with a reliable set of values and beliefs that can shape their decisions and action in the future. There is, in this case, the obvious challenge of determining which values should be considered "core". In other words, schools must determine what values are shared among our citizens. The Department of Education has already done this for us. Most recently in 2007, the Department of Education stated that the school is responsible for "creating a culturally and socially literate population, **able to think critically and contribute to society**" [my emphasis].[17] Social change education is *the* opportunity for students to think critically and creatively in order to contribute to their community through taking action and implementing change. Perhaps social change education does replace crumbling religious values and maybe it indeed presents one particular view of society. However, the purpose of social change education is to give students an opportunity to act as responsible citizens as they collaborate with their peers to identify, define, and then solve the problems and challenges that plague the communities to which they, and the rest of us, belong. In this way, social change is the essential practice that students need in order to become the leaders of the future that we all share. Ultimately, I cannot imagine that many would oppose the worth and magnitude of this charge.

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[17] Fisher, Ericka J. "The N-Word: Reducing Verbal Pollution in Schools." The Clearing House 81.6 (2008): 278-282.

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