Book Review

Young at Art

Liora Bresler and Christine Marme Thompson, eds.
The Arts in Children’s Lives: Context, Culture, and Curriculum
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Coediting an anthology is a delicate balancing act. One task is defining the publication’s objectives; another is articulating its broad themes, which the individual writers illuminate or expand upon. At the same time, editors seek out writings that merit readers’ attention on their own, either for originality, syntheses of current knowledge, or suggestions for future inquiry. Keys to gauging how well the editors achieve these goals are the prefaces and section introductions, which guide readers through the book’s themes and capture the insights and key points of each contributor.

The coeditors of The Arts in Children’s Lives: Context, Culture, and Curriculum—Liora Bresler, professor of education at the University of Illinois and Christine Marme Thompson, associate professor of art education at Penn State—have succeeded on most of these counts. They state in their prelude that “the purpose of this anthology is to generate renewed dialogue on the role and the significance of the arts in the education of children from age 3 through age 8.” Bresler and Thompson hope to redress a situation in which arts educators and early childhood specialists maintain divergent and even conflicting attitudes about the arts in young children’s lives.

Too many early childhood educators view art as only a developmental phenomenon that children eventually outgrow; arts educators tend to concentrate on matters of artistic form and technique, “forsaking opportunities to build upon children’s interests as the basis for early artistic learning.” These divergences also have policy implications. If the two groups with primary responsibility for educating young children in the arts are working at cross-purposes, prospects for effective policies in the future are dim. The book’s editors are also seeking to foster dialogue between educators in dance, drama, music, media arts, and the visual arts. “The volume is an opportunity for arts educators to learn from one another.” The book, accordingly, contains contributions from distinguished researchers and educators in each of these disciplines, as well as from early childhood specialists.

What, then promises common ground between these groups? The coeditors find it in the emergence of new perspectives in education and psychology, following the scholarship of Buber, Vygotsky, Gardner, and Bruner, among many others. These perspectives, in contrast to the historic search for universal steps in human development, entail “a recognition that young children are capable of far more than previously supposed and that the developmental process itself is far more idiosyncratic, culturally specific, and malleable, than we had thought.” Human development is a complex interweaving of circumstance and cultural assumptions and practices—even the most basic learning of young children is socially and culturally mediated. Within this paradigm, the arts are viewed as symbolic languages. As intellectual and interpretive activities, they are increasingly seen as central to early learning.

These core premises are elaborated in the book’s three sections: “Context”; “Development”; and “Curriculum.” Their arguments proceed as follows.

The “Context” section explores how children’s earliest experiences in the arts are shaped by the schools that they attend, their communities, families, and the broader culture. Karen Hamblen examines the predominance of “school art” in educational settings and finds it disconnected from the professional art world, local contexts, and traditional cultures. These resources, she suggests, should be drawn upon in leading young people’s travels through worlds of art. Ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl poses dilemmas about how world music—for example, the classical and folk music of Persian culture—might be represented in American music education. Brent Wilson, in contrast, discusses popular culture and visual media and their influence on children’s drawings. His study of manga, the visual narratives in comic books that permeate Japanese culture, traces how images that are commercially driven can be significant graphic models for young people. Minette Mans shows how the experience of young Namibian children in dance and music embodies existing cultural values and beliefs, while also offering opportunities for reinterpretation. Finally, music
educator Patricia Campbell considers relationships between the enculturation and education of young people. She urges educators to stress children’s informal experiences with musical cultures outside of school as the foundation for constructing formal opportunities in music education.

Chapters in the next section examine how the paradigm of development as a socially mediated process can influence interpretations of young people’s experiences in the arts. Daniel Walsh calls for the abandonment of traditional quests for rules of development, while Graham Welch stresses that development is far more specific to particular domains, including arts disciplines, than was assumed in the past. Kieran Egan and Michael Lang also challenge traditional developmental theories. They argue that young children, far from being incapable adults, actually surpass adults in the imaginative thinking that is central to the arts. Christine Thompson looks at the roles of peers in the artistic development of young children, an increasingly prominent phenomenon, by describing instances of collaboration and peer tutoring in pre-K and kindergarten art classes. Finally, Shifra Schonmann explores how relationships between imagination and reality develop in young drama students’ understanding of the world.

Contributors to the “Curriculum” section reflect on learning experiences in the arts that are both artistically authentic and developmentally sound. Susan Stinson encourages teachers of young children to reflect critically on their practice. Liora Bresler reports on her three-year research study examining how the “operational” curriculum in elementary visual arts classes diverges from and even conflicts with the stated goals of the “ideal” arts curriculum. Dan Thompson contends that the marginal position of the arts in school curricula frees teachers to assist students in constructing personal meanings rather than absorbing predetermined content. Donna Grace and Joe Tobin report on how the everyday interests of children can be brought into the curriculum through video production projects, and Peter Webster looks at the impact of computer technology in early musical education that is exploratory, interactive, and driven by the interests of students.

These summaries of sections and chapters capture only a few of the many insights that readers will find in this important anthology. The Arts in Children’s Lives is an invitation to reflection and further inquiry into the place of artistic experience in the developing lives of young people. The book, to its credit, raises more questions, perhaps, than it answers. I found myself asking pedagogical questions about how best to gauge the influences of student interests, teachers, communities, and the broader culture in constructing curricula, and wondering how the products and processes of popular culture can best be used as the basis of inquiry and learning in young children. Other readers will surely pose questions of their own. In addition, all readers will enjoy the personal accounts of early learning in the arts that many authors shared.

The Arts in Children’s Lives has a clear sense of purpose and objectives, well-articulated themes, helpful prefaces and section introductions, and chapters which can also stand on their own. I found chapters representing critical points of view and policy orientations, such as those by Hamblen and Bresler, of special interest. Readers with interests in specific arts disciplines or issues of pedagogy, curriculum, or development, will find much of interest here, as will anyone committed to making the arts central in young children’s lives.

The book, however, could have been improved in several ways. I wish the editors had talked about actors other than arts educators and early childhood specialists who influence policy and practice. In America, many nonprofit, “out-of-school” organizations provide opportunities for young people to learn in and through the arts. Members of the National Guild for Community Schools in the Arts and the Wolf Trap Institute for Early Learning Through the Arts network come to mind. Perhaps examination of the institutional contexts of these kinds of providers and those that preserve cultural traditions could be a subject of a follow-up volume. Further, arts education programs of nonprofit organizations have also yielded research and evaluation studies of note. Acknowledgement of these inquiries and other forms of research (such as “brain research”), if only critically, would have been welcome. Also, the anthology relies a bit too heavily on adaptations of articles printed initially in journals such as Visual Arts Research. The book needed more original writings. Finally, copediting, at a few points, could have been more thorough.

These points aside, The Arts in Children’s Lives is highly recommended to anyone seeking an enlarged understanding of young children’s artistic learning. As noted, visual arts educator Laura H. Chapman states in her lovely introduction, “this book reveals the surprising complexity and wonderful subtlety of early learning in the arts.” For that alone, many readers will be grateful.

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