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A Lifetime with Children and the Subtle Subversion of Respecting the Child

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Abstract

In 2015, Dr. Christine Marmé Thompson was the Studies in Art Education Invited Lecturer at the NAEA National Convention in New Orleans. Recently, a related paper was published in *Studies in Art Education*, in which Dr. Thompson wrote about Childhood Studies' implications for Art Education. The paper, *Listening for Stories: Childhood Studies and Art Education*, makes a larger case for considering the field of childhood studies as an avenue for critical and culturally-engaged art educational inquiry, much like feminist theory. While Thompson's paper makes a case for considering issues and themes of early childhood education as part of the larger art education discourse and philosophy of social justice, it also reveals much about Thompson's philosophy. As a former student of Dr. Thompson, I draw connections between her humanistic philosophy, childhood studies, Thompson's approach to working with others, and the possibilities for humanist research and theory.

Introduction

I met Dr. Thompson during my first semester as a transfer student, which was also her first semester as a professor at the Pennsylvania State University. She was my assigned faculty adviser for art education and, having had a different experience with my advising in my other major, art, I was immediately impressed by Dr. Thompson's effortless, capability, and the way that she carefully cultivated relationships. Her ease and interest in others would come into greater focus as I came to know Dr. Thompson better through my master's degree studies at PSU and in her role as an external to the university committee member on my (Ohio State University) dissertation committee. Over the fifteen years that I have known Dr. Thompson, I have always been impressed with her subtle strength, her understated grace, and the fortitude it belied. For this paper I considered addressing the impact of her unparalleled mentorship, but rather than tackle it head-on, I think it is important to discuss the strong humanist belief in the agency of all that underlies her approach to mentorship. Ultimately, it is this humanist philosophy that governs what I consider to be Thompson's greatest contribution to the field of art education and what I believe will be her legacy as it plays out in the students she has and will impact: the subtle, subversive, and pervasive insistence on the importance of the child as part of a larger humanist project within the field of art education.

Dr. Thompson values children and children's culture as both a (minority) culture to be studied and celebrated within its own right and as a perspective and approach with which to think. This paper examines Thompson's childhood studies-based perspective of respecting the child and delves into a few of the concepts that help to communicate it.

Valuing children and the academic study of children's culture

While I have learned and continue to learn many things from Dr. Thompson, the thing I believe that I have learned almost exclusively from her, and emphatically, is that the study of children and children's culture is an academic pursuit. This is important, so allow me to repeat it...the study of children and children's culture is an academic pursuit. While the work may seem easy, or lowbrow, and the content sometimes silly, fun, or frivolous, working with and learning about children and children's culture through careful study is enjoyable (if you enjoy children and they you), though that does not preclude the work from being work. While others may echo this sentiment, in the field of art education Dr. Thompson is largely responsible for the dissemination of this line of thought.

Certainly there are other scholars (Duncum, 2002; Tarr, 2003; Wilson, 2005) who hold this view, and many of my contemporaries are working within this assumption (see Ivashkevich, 2012; McClure, 2009; Schulte, 2015; Sunday, 2015; Trafi-Prats, 2017), but I would be remiss

not to mention how much Dr. Thompson has done to support and perpetuate this viewpoint. Her impact in this regard is quite substantial and I would be further remiss not to mention that many of those who possess an understanding this idea, or are working within this paradigm are in fact former students of Dr. Thompson or are students of Dr. Thompson's students. Because of Dr. Thompson, I believe and know that, in spite of current trends and paradigmatic shifts, children are and should always be at the heart of the mission of art education. While Thompson's research focuses on early childhood education, her championing of the child is not limited by age. She cherishes learning from and working with the youngest in our charge, but her vision of childhood and her view of its importance to the field of art education is not so myopic so as to limit itself to this age or developmental stage. Thompson values the culture and creative contributions of all young people. Beyond her research with children, Thompson's attention and championing of children was also evident in her commitment and steady hand on the PSU Saturday School Art Program, which enrolls children of varying ages from kindergarten through middle school (and in rare cases had enough enrollment to include high schoolers). It is present in her prideful sharing of stories of her young nephew and now-adult son (Thompson, 2009) and in the joy she takes in sharing in the young lives of the children of her colleagues.

Not only does Thompson's (2005b) philosophy of "respect for the child" (a philosophy which is shared by the Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the famed Reggio Emilia Childhood Centers in Reggio Italy (Malaguzzi, 1993)) directly impact her interaction with children and through that create a tangible legacy of relationality, but her respect for the child also called into question often unexamined relationships of power between adults and children. This ultimately questions the assumption of developmental supremacy and hierarchical structures within culture and education (Thompson 2005a, 2009, 2017). This perspective paved the way for the reconsideration of adult-child power structures within art education and was based on a childhood studies platform of stripping bare the assumptions of ageism and scientific epistemologies of developmentalist truth. Thompson's (2005a) claim, "undeniably, the way that adults envision childhood affects the clarity with which we are able to "see" children" certainly calls for a relational understanding of the idea of the child (p.79). Here, the epistemological idea of the child is embedded within ontological perspectives. This implies that our understanding and relationship with the child is based on power structures related to who we are and what we know. Furthermore, these ontological and epistemological perspectives also affect the way in which researchers and research that engages with ideas of children or children themselves is conducted and interpreted (Thompson, 2017). Ultimately our perspectives and the knowledge of or beliefs we hold about children steer the questions we ask of children and the answers we find. Often, what we choose to look for is about us or our being, or ontological position, as adults.

Childhood Studies: A critical, cultural perspective in Art Education

While Thompson makes the case for looking to childhood studies as a field from which to draw theoretical considerations for art education, there is a deeper connection to rethinking the relationships between people that underpins both the work of childhood studies and Thompson's life's work. A researcher of children and children's art, Thompson certainly considers the child, but there is something more to it than merely a programmatic or dogmatic shift from developmentalism (Thompson, 2017). Childhood studies, and those to who seek to meet the child (or any person) where they are by "being there" are engaged in an act of listening and one where the constraints and confines of a developmental paradigm are cast off for a more humanistic, relational philosophy and approach to research (Thompson, 2009). Here, the developmental paradigm is exposed as a mechanism of ageist policy-making and practices. Age, like the other areas of social justice, becomes a space and paradigm to be contested along with other issues of marginalization and misrepresentation within art education's social justice agenda. In an attempt to make plain the detriment of developmentalism's futural positioning, Thompson (2005) utilizes Stremmel's (2002) conception of developmentalism. He says:

We regard childhood as provisional, preparatory, and subordinate to adulthood as opposed to a unique and distinct time and place in the development of a person. We often disregard children's problems, squelch their creativity, deny their emotions, and generally ignore or diminish the significance of their daily experiences. (p. 79)

In other words, this social constructivist view of childhood involves an understanding of the person or child as existing in THIS instant and valuing the position of the child in its now-ness, rather than projecting an adult and futural expectation on the child.

While Thompson is respected and renowned for her championing of the child, her respect for the child is not exclusive to this age-group or "this life stage". Rather, I posit that it is a more general humanist belief about meeting all people, no matter the stage of life, where they are – a process that Thompson herself claims is complicated by one's position or perspective, but is nonetheless an important relational practice that all teachers and researchers should engage in (see for example: Thompson & McClure, 2009; Koon-Hwee, Bressler, & Thompson, 2009; Thompson, 2016). Despite this, Thompson worked alongside or mentored students ranging from school age, as director of the Saturday school program, to doctoral students (this range largely including undergraduates and masters students), and was also active in guiding new junior faculty. Thompson expressed care for others and for the field through gentle guidance and mentorship. Some of the best lessons I learned from Dr. Thompson were about how to be a mentor. She is amazingly patient and understanding, and I strive everyday to be half the

mentor that Dr. Thompson is. As I gain experience with my own students, I learn more and more what that entails, and I realize I might be lucky to be a fraction of the mentor that she is.

**A love of children's culture:
An argument for the childish, childlike, and playful in academia**

A related vein to Thompson's scholarly contribution is her affective contribution. She surely touched many as an academic advisor, teacher, thesis advisor, and as committee member or dissertation chairperson, but her affective influence reached far beyond that in her subtle resistance to futural mechanizations and her joyful appreciation of and participation in children's culture and all things childlike.

I can also say that she was influential in my ability to adopt and adapt to the notion of being an academic (something that can feel at times isolating, elitist, stuffy, if not suffocating), and she was instrumental in helping me find my way within university academic culture. This had much to do with the affective qualities of seeing the childlike, childishness, fun, play, and artmaking as pursuits that were not only enjoyable and a wellspring to me but as pursuits that are, in spite of their joy, important places of study and notions to think within and against. (see Thompson, 2013).

Among other things, I love the aesthetic of cartoons, the stark contrast between a garishly bright red plastic tubular slide and its surrounding greenery, and for me there is a point where sustained seriousness is just too serious. Furthermore, as an artist I possess the typical artist quality of being childlike and enjoying things that are childish. As an adult and an academic these pursuits are often poo-pooed. Like the children who, according to Thompson (2005), knew "that Pokémon is banned (sic) in our school" and "they are not supposed to talk about TV in this school where books are valued, where tapes are rarely shown, where show-and-tell is censored," (p. 73), I realize that this is not a perspective embraced by many in academia. I believe Dr. Thompson also shares in this joy of all things childlike, generative, and playful, and I cannot overstate the importance of this connection and the value I put in our shared appreciation of children's culture. She seems to understand this not only for its importance as a culture and an identity, but she also sees the bigger implications for thought and academics. She realizes the importance of beginnings, of valuing all stages, of generative stories and not just critical perspectives, and she understands their importance, not just in the everyday, but also as something that is inherently of art, children, and art education (Thompson, 2014; 2015, 2016, 2017).

Her ability to see these things as more than merely ket, meaning junk or rubbish and usually referring to childish delights like candy (James, 1998; Thompson, 2005), made a quiet impression on me. It gave me the room to exist in a space that was often exhaustively

competitive and critical, where the very idea of things that are childlike or childish is often antithetical or abhorrent to the institution and its hierarchical, meritocratic structure. It allowed me to persist in a space where serious academic pursuits are pitted against ideas that have yet to bloom or are underdeveloped, in an infantile stage, playful, fun, or whimsical. It allowed me to think differently about ideas and ways of being and knowing that are not yet realized, that are early, young, or juvenile. It allowed me the space to accept their present form and to trust the process of our becoming (Thompson, 2016).

Thompson knew that, in a structure that is often critical and always competitive, pursuits that are generative, artistic, childlike, and fun must struggle against an academic current, often yielding to or losing their character in that arena; yet she was still a champion for this sort of subversiveness. She understood that hyperproductivity in academia is not always the best method to grow ideas, understandings, and communities of learners. She allowed and provided the space for an idea and person to grow, in a time when growth on its own terms is a subversive act against productivity standards and neoliberal hierarchies.

I will be forever grateful to Dr. Thompson for the care she has shown and the confidence and perspective she has imparted to both me and to those who also see the study of children and childhood as a wellspring of academic and artful content and a joyful, enlivening pursuit.

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