



Arts Policy, Society, and Children: Towards Guidelines for the Inclusion of the Arts for Children in Arts Policy in English Canada by Rita Shelton

Deverell, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Toronto, 1983.

Reviewed by

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I am intrigued by this dissertation, completely sympathetic with its goals, and impressed by the care and commitment that have gone into this monumentally innovative analysis of data. Rita Shelton Deverell has undertaken a daunting task indeed, and she has handled it with admirable thoroughness and thoughtfulness. I commend her for many things, which I shall enumerate here in some detail; I trust that both the reader and she will see my occasional criticisms as ultimately a commendation as well, for this pioneering study tells us a great deal both in its strengths and in the questions it leaves unanswered.

Deverell is, I think, a rare breed. Many professional educators, practicing artists themselves, develop an interest in more effective art teaching and contribute much to the literature of the practical from that perspective. It is rarer for artists to undergo the further metamorphosis that places them squarely in the realm of policy-making, particularly policy-making that claims to have a rigorously theoretical basis. Indeed, this transformation from grass-roots practitioner to theoretician comes infrequently in many educational fields—the rarity of “curriculum theorists” and the predominance of “methods” instructors in most colleges of education seems to attest to this. The field of art is not alone in this respect. But it strikes me that the leap from art practitioner to policy theorist may be bigger than most leaps our field offers us as professional choices, due in large part to the special demands made by the daily practice of art and the rather different sort of syntheses required of fruitful theoretical thinking. The sorts of practitioners-turned-art-administrators who populate Deverell’s dissertation, thoughtful and dedicated arts educators all, are more what I have come to expect and to hope for in the search for arts advocates. Deverell’s thoughtful and rigorous theoretical analysis of the sources of public arts policy is a welcome treat within an already-rich field. Her research adds an important dimension to our understanding of both the “limits” of educational research methodology and the potentially valid sources of arts policy itself.

Deverell argues the validity of arts practitioners as a source of public arts policy. This practitioners' perspective on arts policy-making is perfectly obvious and should scarcely seem revolutionary. After reading Deverell's dissertation, it is astonishing to remember that public arts policy in North America *isn't* necessarily based on artists' personal experience, that it seems to emanate instead from somewhere more remote, that those experiences and qualities in artists' lives that worked in encouraging *them* to appreciate the arts have rarely been consulted as a starting point. Deverell's basic point is deceptively simple: practicing artists had early encounters with the arts that nurtured their love of and their growth in art, and public policy should seek to maximize such experiences for all children. *Arts Policy, Society and Children* soberly and painstakingly develops this case in the rigorously methodical terms that policy-makers and educators at all levels should be able to accept. That Deverell maintains her evident passion for the problem through nearly 500 pages of text is testimony to her commitment both as arts practitioner and as an educational scholar.

Deverell's approach is a biographical one, and her attention to detail is so tenacious that the simplest lines of the story are easily overlooked. It is best not to attempt a casual reading of this work: even the summary Table of Contents offered at the beginning is immensely detailed, and it pales in comparison to the voluminous detail offered in the sub-tables of contents presented as road maps here and there throughout the dissertation. In general, though, the argument is this: few sources of public arts policy are specifically attuned to the nature of children's aesthetic experience, and most reflect the generally lower prestige of "children's art" within the already-tenuous status of the arts in society generally. Public policy on children's art is generally informed by a distillation of policy on adult art and heavily influenced by traditional aesthetic theory. Yet there are many gifted and able arts practitioners in Canadian society, adults whose commitment to arts programs for children is strong and productive. The personal experience of these adults, who learned their love of the arts early in life, should tell a lot about how to help generations of children to love the arts and derive meaning from them. Thus, a fruitful source for public policy on children's art is the dedicated adults whose commitment to children's art is unabated. But research on such a question poses difficult problems, for the basic problem is to illuminate individual practitioners' own experiences in such a way as to suggest direct implications for public arts policies for the society as a whole. This is no easy task, but handled responsibly it can illuminate our understanding of what makes art programs "work" in a way that traditional aesthetic theory cannot. Deverell undertakes to do this, and concludes with a suggestion of the kinds of children's art policy guidelines that such an analysis might (in her case, does) allow.

Ten practicing “children’s artists” (people whose job is to produce art that children can enjoy and even participate in) are interviewed in this study. They are identified by name and by profession. Their positions cover children’s television, public school district offices, school administration, community theatre, public arts councils, community dance companies; they cover the visual arts, theater, dance, and television—the only arts medium missing seems to be music. Six of these professionals are sketched only briefly, their biographies summarized and their concerns synopsised. Four are analyzed in depth in an exploration of what an artistic biography can reveal about both explicit and inadvertent arts education. From these four especially are distilled some basic principles, or “themes,” that seem to run through a successful career as a children’s artist—children’s arts “as experienced” and policy implications of these experiences for a more explicit shaping of children’s encounters with the arts. These basic principles in turn are distilled into a set of “guidelines for the inclusion of the arts for children in arts policy in English Canada.” The dissertation begins and ends with a thorough explication of the methodology applied in this biographical study; it is shaped by a reflective and thoroughly responsible concern both for “the field” (of educational research) and for the reader (to whom numerous “notes” are addressed throughout), and by a concern that the methodology be subject to close scrutiny every step of the way.

Biographical/phenomenological studies such as this are bound to be more self-conscious than most. The density of the analysis, the careful steps that lead from one observation to the next, the amazingly complex sorting that was necessary to create the three alternative “story-lines” (and their modularly re-arrangeable chapter order)—these and other indices of methodological caution bespeak a humility and a sense of effort that make me wonder at the easy self-confidence of graduate students who approach traditional five-chapter applications of standard experimental procedures to tidy discrete problems. This dissertation was hard work, and it was hard work in the most positive sense: the author has understood and analyzed her problem and her data more thoroughly than many of her peers in the profession. I am reminded here of an adage whose author I can no longer trace: “A dissertation is only an exercise; it’s not your life’s work.” This dissertation is in no sense “only an exercise”; it bespeaks a deep and passionate commitment to the social-policy problems it addresses. It is equally responsible to the explicit issue at hand (arts policy for children) and to the methods by which that issue is explored (biographical/thematic accounts). Rita Shelton Deverell has given us a dissertation that rings with ethical consistency and honest labor.

A quick synopsis of the actual findings for readers who may never read the complete document: the core of the study is the set of detailed “thematic accounts” of four arts practitioners. They are the

head of children's television for the CBC (English Services Division), a producer/director for British Columbia Television, the artistic director of Alberta Theatre Projects, and a principal and former drama consultant with the Moose Jaw (Saskatchewan) public schools. Six other "children's artists" are also given "brief introductions," in a chapter which serves chiefly as context and as evidence that Deverell knows what she's talking about; none of these six reappears for very long stints in the body of the dissertation, but they clearly serve as a kind of validation of the points made in greater detail in the chapters on the four principal characters. From each thematic account of the four principal characters, a number of "themes" emerge—conveniently, three in each. These 12 themes are compiled to identify the "crossing points" which in turn become the basis for a composite "characterization of the person/artist who creates for children." Ultimately this characterization itself leads first to some "considerations for arts policy" and finally to some specific guidelines for including children's art in English Canada's arts policy generally.

The three major "crossing points," or common elements emerging from the artists' backgrounds, are these: A first set of themes has to do with the artists' perceptions of themselves as artists, and of how they came to define themselves as such. One television producer's "rich memories of television viewing in the past" is an example of this theme. A second theme defines the artists' relationships to the professional demands of the field of making art for children; the drama consultant voices her priorities by saying "I would sacrifice the production for the person," articulating the individualized approach to artistic production that all four saw as central. The third set of themes describes the artists' visions for the future, both personally and for the field as a whole: a theatre director pins his hopes for theatre on its reflecting and affecting the community that nurtures it, others worry about needing a grand plan or about the inherent "uncertainty" about children's television. Deverell sees the three themes as essentially "person-oriented," "work-oriented," and "vision-oriented," respectively. The three in turn become the basis of a "person-oriented" set of considerations for arts policy, which would guide arts policy to foster the kinds of intensive personal experience that had led these practitioners to pursue the arts beyond childhood. The "person-oriented" arts policy would proceed from a concern for the new participant (the newcomer to whom art may still be a revelation and a discovery), and from an emphasis on the process of art-making rather than on the final product. Arts policy so derived would foster the play of creativity and imagination, and would be more responsive to the "connectedness" between arts practitioners and children than to standards of excellence of some final product. The dissertation does not use the term, but it seems to argue above all for an *artful* approach to life. And it argues that pol-

icy that nurtures artful living must be informed by those who have succeeded—against all odds—in doing so.

Of each major interviewee, Deverell asked two basic questions: What is the place of the arts for children in society? What are the conditions affecting practice? Their answers to these questions, interwoven with the twelve “themes” in the four major interviews, result in policy guidelines for arts policy which would foster (for example): relationships with caring adults, interactive arts programs, opportunities for children to learn through the doing of art, promoting arts administrators with background in children’s arts, and others. These recommendations appear as a list on page 424, and they appear only after a thoroughgoing analysis of the respondents’ backgrounds and present day-to-day experiences and frustrations. The recommendations are earnestly phrased and believable.

While the recommendations bring the arts-policy discussion to a conclusion, they are not the core of this research. The analysis leading to them *is*, and concomitantly the analysis of the analysis is ultimately the real concern here. Deverell asks us, finally, to be willing to look at artists’ biographies as a source of arts policy that (tacitly for them, explicitly for future generations) *works*. The specific recommendations offered here are less important than the argument that they can be defended by research that some may call phenomenological but that is in any case strongly personalized. The sheer weight of Deverell’s effort testifies to the degree of rigor that this approach to research and policy-building can command; as such it demonstrates to any skeptics that “person-centered” research, like art itself, is no frill. Deverell has shouldered an enormous intellectual task, and she has succeeded admirably. Indeed it is one of those pieces of research about which we can confidently say after reading it—but not before—“Of course. Why not?”

The dissertation is not without its flaws, however, and I enumerate some of them here both for the sake of balance and because some pose potentially serious challenges to conclusions that seem otherwise solid.

A number of stylistic and logical flaws may prevent this dissertation from becoming a bestselling book in its present form. It is far too long despite its well-argued need for painstakingly detailed caution. Salient points of various interviews are repeated at several points in the argument, either fresh or prefaced with the phrase “As mentioned”; the redundancy and length of the work stem from the author’s concern to tell the whole truth and to remind the reader that she is doing so, but it slows and muddles the argument. It is unnecessarily complicated and could have been told more simply (at one point I even envisioned a terrific newspaper feature story). The three alternative “storylines” outlined in stages in “notes to the reader” at various points along the way are confusing to a reader who

is not as dedicated to the project as the dissertation chairman might be. I appreciate the thoughtfulness, but on the whole I would rather get on with the case. The chapters are structured so complexly as to apparently demand two-page detailed "Table of Contents" prefaces to each major section, a device that succeeds chiefly in overwhelming the reader with the complexity, rather than dazzling her with the elegance, of the argument.

And while it is clear why Deverell has included so much of her own life history in the narrative, this story is presented in surprise fragments (sometimes in "notes to the reader," or "Personal commentary, responsive chord" sections) that disrupt as often as they illuminate. A skeptical reader has plenty of ammunition for criticizing the work as something other than objective. There is a surfeit of information on the research itself, and ultimately I don't think we need to know that Deverell telephoned a prospective interviewee and the call was returned two hours later and *then* an appointment was set up. The complete honesty has an endearing quality to it but finally I found it unnecessary and unhelpful. There is an alternation in tone and voice between the ultrapersonal "commentaries" and other personal footnotes on the author's own past and the oddly detached tone in which the interviews are reported ("Harrison was asked whether . . ." and so on); the author has not found a consistent voice, and the inconsistency works against elegance. Stylistically, in short, the dissertation is thick, self-conscious, redundant, and structurally confusing—none of these all the time, but all of them often enough to be noticeable and to weaken an essentially powerful piece of both methodological and policy argument.

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More interesting than the stylistic difficulties of the dissertation, however, are the substantive questions raised by this research. Some of the questions are raised explicitly by Deverell, and she makes a major contribution in doing so. Others are raised implicitly by virtue of her bypassing them. I shall mention a few examples of each.

One confounding factor that dilutes the sense of focus in this work is the reader's ultimate confusion as to what the real subject of the study is. I suspect that Deverell experienced some of the same uncertainty; at any rate she has not fully resolved the issue for us. Is the focus of the study the phenomenological method of case-study biography as a source of policy? Or is it the actual policy guidelines that evolve after 400 pages of text? The early chapters and the last (Chapter XI) argue that the *method* is the focus here. The title as well as the space devoted to the practitioners' actual concerns (and the redundancy in their presentation) suggest that a critique of Canadian arts policy and recommendations for change are the real goal of the research. Clearly *both* the method and the findings are given heavy billing, and Deverell is at her most persuasive in her introductory chapters where she makes the case for the one being the basis

for the other. But perhaps because of the density and detail of the analysis, or perhaps because of the complex structure of the chapters and sections, the net effect is less of a dual emphasis than of confusion: Deverell may be trying to do too much. She examines public policy statements, aesthetic theory, her own autobiography as an artist, four detailed case studies, six quick synopses; she develops guidelines from all these and goes back to 50 pages of reflection on the method. Some of these analyses she handles very ably, and in most she seems at least on the brink of something major; her ability to get inside her participants' childhood experiences and to appreciate their present value, for example, is uncanny. But ultimately her own autobiography is not complete enough to serve as much more than an explanation for her point of view (she has not done an *Education of Henry Adams* here), her analysis of aesthetic theory is sketchy, her fortuitous finding of three parallel themes in each of the four case studies is suspiciously tidy. There is a lot here, and I'm quite certain that Deverell could analyze her data responsibly from many different angles. Her enthusiasm for her subject and her evident interest in treating it responsibly and fully have led her to dilute her attention among several related lines of thought. The dissertation lacks a single driving focus. I hasten to add, however, that I realize this criticism may be moot. Deverell clearly intended to cover more than one line argument here. I merely observe that the final package has some fuzzy edges as a result.

The vastness of her subject(s) probably accounts for a frequently-unexplained selectivity in both focus and method. Had any one of the lines of argument mentioned above been selected as the single subject of the dissertation (aesthetic theory, say, or her own artistic autobiography), the exhaustive review that we have come to expect from the first two chapters of dissertations might have been possible. As it is, however, Deverell has opted to draw on only five fairly standard works on aesthetic theory (including John Dewey, Susanne Langer, and Herbert Read—wonderful sources but not sources likely to shed any *new* light on the question); sources that should have been background to a much more intensive analysis of aesthetic theory's role in public policy are offered instead as the full story. Likewise her treatment of her own background: we know nearly as much about her as we do about the four principal characters, yet she does not develop her own story with the same rigorous structure she imposes on theirs (nor give herself a whole chapter)—so is her story explicitly integrated into the policy guidelines, or is it merely interesting preamble? Why is she herself not included as a chapter, as we are seeking “person-centered” bases for policy and an understanding of art “as experienced?” Her story would seem, according to her rationale, to be as crucial to her view of arts policy as the others', yet it is presented chiefly in surprise fragments and as background. The problem here is a variation on the basic problem of uncertain focus. Deverell is unwilling to surrender any line of think-

ing, and as a result she dwells on a number of them, none quite as completely as a more selective focus might have allowed. The dissertation remains always interesting to read, but the chief danger in the diffusion of focus is the extent to which it invites charges of being less than fully rigorous. Such charges are exactly the kind of criticism that this kind of research must work especially hard to avert.

Most interesting to me, however, is that while Deverell's deep commitment to "person-centered" arts policy may make the distinction between person-centered and its opposite clearer to her than to me, I am still not entirely sure what the *alternative* to "person-centered" really is or whether there might be several different alternatives. The meaning is clear by implication: person-centered arts policy derives from an analysis of successful personal experiences. Yet the guidelines offered on page 424, after all this, are not so vastly different from the guidelines derivable from a number of available aesthetic theories. So if the person-centered arts policy develops from different sources from others, is it demonstrable that the policy itself is necessarily different? Couldn't we arrive at guidelines urging interactive arts projects without a phenomenological analysis of ten practitioners? I do not question the value of the method used here; indeed I find it ingenious and enriching. But I do wonder whether the case might not be made more strongly for taking this long route when shortcuts might get us near there just as well. I know I oversimplify here, and I do not mean to do an injustice to Deverell's admirably thorough method, but if I were a skeptic—or, more to the point, a public arts policy maker—I would need to know whether the approach so eloquently argued here actually suggests a public arts policy for children that is demonstrably different from policy that might be derived from other sources. I am willing to grant that the public arts policy for children *now* in effect is shallower and less persuasive than that argued in Deverell's guidelines. But I'm not fully persuaded that good arts policy could not *be* derived from the same premises as it is today, in the hands of more enlightened policy-makers. Deverell has shown us that a "person-centered" policy derived from themes in parts practitioners' lives can be exciting and rich; she has not had the time or space to show that such phenomenological study is the only or best source of good policy (and of course we may never know whether these or any policy *guidelines* actually result in a better arts *policy*: the implementation question is for someone else's dissertation).

To sum up the weaknesses of this dissertation, then, I see three things: a style that is too complicated and too inconsistent for the argument, some conceptual weaknesses that emerge in thin concepts and methodological glossing, and ultimately a zeal for this project that blinds the writer to any serious consideration of legitimate alternative approaches. This last point is evident both at the beginning, where aesthetic theory and current policy are treated lucidly

but sketchily, and at the end, where the possibility that other frameworks might lead to similar policy recommendations is overlooked. The flaws that come most clearly to mind are the occasional clouds around a very good silver lining. They are the result of a breadth of perspective that we too rarely see in educational research by products of a commitment to base public policy on ethical principles of human interdependence. I wish I saw more student work whose weaknesses lay in a commitment to taking on too much, too completely.

I am led by this comment to a final comment on the contribution that this dissertation offers to the worlds of educational theory and educational practice. *Arts Policy, Society, and Children* offers many lessons to many of us. The “publics” of this dissertation should include more than most: they should include policy-makers in the arts, artists involved in making art for and with children, and that most staid of all categories, educational researchers. To arts policy-makers, Deverell offers simultaneously exciting and cautious insights: she helps us to identify and appreciate practical sources for long-term policy (that is, artists’ lives) and provides access to a way of arguing the legitimacy of those practical sources. She offers us the practitioner’s perspective as a counterbalance to the perspective so readily available through the traditional routes of aesthetic theory. As such, she provides a means of opening the abstract world of policy-making to the voices and claims of practice.

To artists making art for children, Deverell offers a legitimacy in arenas they rarely dare claim for themselves: the arenas of educational theory and research methodology. Society has long granted artists at least grudging respect: artists are different, and while the best of them may know more than you or I do, they speak a strange language that is difficult to translate into practical policy guidelines. The artists themselves don’t offer us the guidelines; in this study, they are free to describe their own growth in terms they understand. Deverell, as their interpreter and as the synthesizer of many different perspectives on arts policy, places their concerns in a context that can inform our own priorities. Her own perspective as an arts practitioner allows her to accept and validate their observations and insights in a way that many traditional educational researchers might not. That she does so with four diverse arts practitioners in some depth, and with ten (even more diverse) artists with real seriousness provides the reader with a window into the arts world that few non-artists bother to seek. Deverell has found a methodology for opening arts practitioners’ experiences to the world of non-artists. Most importantly in this respect, she has found a means of making arts practitioners’ experiences salient to those non-artists whose decisions have a direct impact on art and the lives of artists.

This point leads me to my concluding observation. It is perhaps to traditional educational researchers that Deverell offers the most enduring lessons. After all, arts policy-makers *should* be attuned to the kinds of experiences that make the arts meaningful both to children and to the adults they become. If they aren't, Deverell reminds them of the option, but the importance of "art as experienced" for the elaboration of art policy for children should come as no surprise. Likewise, artists already making art for children will scarcely be perplexed by Deverell's conclusions, though they may well be amazed to see a serious educational researcher actually listening to them to this extent. It is the traditional educational researchers who have the most to learn from Deverell's study. I acknowledge that those to whom this study might come as the biggest surprise are not likely to be reading this journal. But let us assume that they do. In that case, Deverell has provided the educational research community with a solid illustration of the degree of perspective and rigor that can be brought to bear in research that derives from practical considerations and results in practical recommendations, passing through a dense forest of theoretical consideration en route. It is a thoroughly responsible and thoughtful study, an elaboration of the kind of assessment of practice that informs most of our practical decisions anyway. Deverell has done us the great service of taking this kind of thinking seriously. Most of us engaged in applying research knowledge to practical program decisions cannot, in fact, do the kind of controlled statistical comparisons we are trained to respect. Usually we don't have the time. We do, however, daily make decisions based on our own experience and that of others, and we try to balance these judgments against those suggested by our knowledge of "the field." Deverell has demonstrated that this sort of "person-oriented" decision-making is every bit as difficult and as thorough as any MBO scheme or flow-chart. She has given methodological life to the rational, though tacit, bases of many decisions influencing the quality of our lives. And she has added to our vocabulary for justifying this approach.

Rita Shelton Deverell's dissertation has taken on a rather large universe. It is to her credit that she speaks eloquently and forcefully to so many of its occupants.