

Aesthetic Education for Young Children in Three Early Childhood Settings: Bank Street, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf

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Abstract

This study selected three early childhood schools that use the Bank Street, Reggio, or Waldorf approach, and investigated perceptions of aesthetic education by educators and the ways of implementing it in real classroom settings. The data sources included documents, observations, classroom artifacts, and formal and informal interviews with directors, classroom teachers, and art teachers. The overall findings revealed that educators at each school have a variety of perceptions of aesthetic education, consisting of some common images of aesthetic education, but leading to very different implementations based on different images of child by educators. The findings suggest that each school's unique interpretation and implementation of aesthetics in an educational context provides early childhood educators with numerous practical suggestions to embark on a comprehensive aesthetic education, while leaving open some interesting issues in terms of theory and practice and inquiries for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Aesthetics as a branch of philosophy is concerned with the nature of beauty, the nature and value of the art and diverse expressive behaviors which are embodied through art and other intellectual areas. Recently educators have advocated adding aesthetics to school curricula, as a way of overcoming a traditional, rigid concept of education that often delimits childhood intelligence to the narrow concept of cognition only associated with logical and mathematical knowing (Arnheim, 1985; Burton, 1994; Eisner, 1972:

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Gardner, 1990; Greene, 1994; Perkins, 1994). Aesthetic education is generally understood as a process that involves a much broader range of learning occurring through large intellectual processes and makes deliberate efforts to foster increasingly informed and involved encounters with the arts and artistic sensibility.

Ideally, aesthetic education should begin during early childhood because young children live in an enriched sensitive and imaginative mode that is closely tied to the world of aesthetics. Hayakawa (1949) pointed out that young children are often more capable of noticing and paying attention to some qualities in surroundings than adults which habitually miss things. This ability, along with a childhood joy in unrealistic, illusory, or imaginative thinking, should be seen as rich sources for engaging them with the world of aesthetics. These potentials must be nurtured at an early age (Feeney, 1987; Stahl, 1995; Werner, 1948).

Despite increasing attention to the significance of aesthetic education, the discussion of aesthetic education at the early childhood level is still marginal. Aesthetic education is an area which has often been omitted from discussion of early childhood curricula, so that early childhood educators have been given little opportunity to become familiar with the term aesthetic education and to expand the understanding of it. Some theoretical approaches have been provided, but few studies have broadly discussed aesthetic education—simultaneously covering visual art, music, dance, literature, and childhood aesthetic experience, and addressing how theoretical interpretations are realized in the early childhood classroom.

This study investigated the various approaches to aesthetic education at three early childhood schools—Bank Street, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf. These three schools have been chosen because of the distinctive philosophies underpinning arts education and unique curricula designed to deepen childhood aesthetic experience. These three schools as appropriate research sites were carefully selected based on four criteria: (1) the educational reputation of the school for offering aesthetic curriculum; (2) self-identification of the school as doing aesthetic education; (3) “integration of the arts” for a holistic approach to aesthetic curriculum; and (4) the presence of special arts teachers who were able to provide the researcher with rich information and knowledge regarding aesthetic education at each school.

The Bank Street College of Education, initially called the “Bureau of Educational Experiments”, has conducted evolutionary studies of young children partly based upon Deweyan Progressivism