

CHARLOTTE SVENDLER NIELSEN

## Crossing Borders of 'Place' and 'Space' to Open New Understandings of Meanings of the Cultural, the Aesthetic, and the Arts in Education

### Introduction

The birth of the *International Journal for Research in Cultural, Aesthetic, and Arts Education* as a new means of publication in the field of arts education with a strong base in philosophy will contribute to sharing different conceptions of phenomena that are experienced in various places of the world, but also cast light on assumptions we might make about 'the other' and ways of using what at the outset appear to be the same concepts. In a nutshell, "how and what we *see* depends on who and how we are in the world" (van Manen, 2002, p. 23). Crossing the borders of both physical places and educational spaces through the sharing of research in the formats that this journal will enable, can hopefully contribute to the opportunity for both writers and readers to have a new understanding of the meanings of cultural, aesthetic and arts education. It will also shed light on the aesthetic paradigms (Guattari, 1995) that prevail in different educational practices and to discuss the deeper meanings and consequences that different practices might have for children and young people's experiences. Contributing to creating conscious practice in the field of arts education seems to be of paramount importance as teaching cannot avoid foregrounding certain ethics and politics since the teacher acts on the base of what one finds important and valuable (Bruner, 1990). In order to spark such discussions in the field, this entry will question the concept of resilience and the role arts education might play in fostering resilience looking from a place in the Global South and dialoguing with an understanding stemming from the Global North. Finally, this contribution will discuss how such south-north-dialogues around the notion of "resilience" might be able to inspire arts educators to reflect on what it means to support "good lives" and to open up "possible worlds" (Bruner, 1986) for children and young people.

## Education, culture and arts

If we go back in time, the arts were not divided in the faculties that we are dealing with today (Guattari, 1995). In a similar vein, Jerome Bruner (1990) argues that it really makes no sense to divide any educational programs into disciplines because the questions we ask about human life can hardly be explored or answered by any single discipline. As he puts it: “[...] frontiers that separate fields such as psychology, anthropology, linguistics or philosophy were more a question of administrative convenience than intellectual substance” (Bruner, 1990, p. 16). John Dewey (1902), as an educational philosopher who has had tremendous influence in the field of arts education, stated as early as 1902 that it seemed contra-productive to children’s learning to divide school curricula into different subject areas, and he also, already at that time, emphasized the connections between arts, culture, and nature (Dewey, 1934). The attempts to cross borders, or to break down silos that we see in current discussions in the field of arts education, leaning on new materialism as a philosophical approach to understanding the world and the lives of its species in a more integrated and holistic way (e.g. Hickey-Moody et al., 2016), is thus not a new understanding, but can be seen as a useful new frame to create renewed focus to consider life and the way it works (including education) in its most basic form. Jerome Bruner (1990, p. 11) – who, however, is only focusing on the human being and as it could be said, the human being in only some (Western parts) of the world – states that “symbolic systems that individuals use in constructing meaning [...] constitute a very special kind of common tool kit whose tools, once used, makes the user a reflection of the community”. Further, he argues that the goal of education is to make people able to act independently and to use many ‘languages’ and methods to change the world for the better (Bruner, 1990).

## Resilience – a concept in need of a cultural and contextual grounding

Children around the world are currently experiencing the world as a challenging place. This is due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also in some places to war and poverty leading to many social ills. UNICEF and Save the Children<sup>1</sup> emphasize that the social and emotional wellbeing must be at the heart of education in challenging times, as this is a prerequisite for continuing to learn in school. UNESCO specifically notes the importance of continuing to focus on cultural expression in times of crisis.<sup>2</sup> At the same time there is a need for more support and training on “how to maintain good mental health and boost resilience” of both pupils and teachers as a result of COVID-19 lockdowns (Carretero Gomez et al., 2021). Social and emotional

<sup>1</sup> [https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/learning\\_must\\_go\\_on\\_advocacy\\_briefing\\_april\\_2020.pdf/](https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/learning_must_go_on_advocacy_briefing_april_2020.pdf/)

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/creativity/covid-19>

wellbeing is connected to resilience which can be understood as “an interactive concept that is concerned with the combination of serious risk experiences and a relatively positive psychological outcome despite those experiences” (Rutter, 2006, p. 2). South African resilience researchers Linda Theron and Adam Theron (2010) note that there is a gap in the literature in considering cultural and contextual roots of the ways the concept of resilience is understood. Adrian D. Van Breda (2019), also a resilience researcher from South Africa, seeks to bridge the gap indicated by Theron and Theron (2010). He has compared what resilience means in the Global North and the Global South and notes that resilience in the North refers to “how one overcomes or recovers from a discrete, traumatic event” and highlights that this definition does not have much value in South Africa, for example, where life for many is a “life-long trauma in the form of colonialization, war, poverty, death, illness, starvation, gender-based violence and exploitation” (Van Breda, 2019, p. 10).

### **The potential of arts-integrated educational practice to foster resilience in the context of South Africa?**

Understanding resilience from a Global North perspective, it would be possible for children in Cape Town – a group in focus of a research project we recently conducted (Svendler Nielsen, Hartman & Samuel, 2022) – and similar places to ‘bounce back’ from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions of lockdowns once they were released. However, the adversities of these children’s daily lives had worsened during the pandemic caused by the consequences of the lockdowns. According to their teachers, the negative and long-term impact of the lockdowns was not something they would easily get over, if at all.

According to Van Breda (2019), ‘acceptance’ is a common sign of resilience among groups from South Africa involved in his research. Our research shows that during arts activities the participants learned to not just ‘accept’ what is, but to question and be critical based on what they felt. It is also clear that they learned techniques for letting go of tension and feeling and being aware of embodied sensations, they have had experiences of relating to their peers in new ways, learned to use their imagination to create and express ideas, and to make use of a variety of what Bruner (1990) would term ‘languages’ to express themselves. But our group’s interest in the embodied perspective may very well stem from “Western notions of self-awareness and being in touch with one’s emotions” (Van Breda, 2019, p. 11). We had to constantly consider and discuss this issue and we found that we needed to introduce alternative possibilities for engaging in the different tasks. We ask whether the personal capabilities to live a resilient life can be strengthened through embodied learning processes and whether this might be possible at the same time as educational activities are “culturally sensitive” (Theron, 2012, p. 340)? Future research in this field could consider how a focus on arts education and an embodied perspective on resilience, might have an impact

for opening of “possible worlds” (Bruner, 1986) and for supporting good lives of children and young people in South Africa and elsewhere.

## References

- Bruner, J. S. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674029019>
- Bruner, J. S. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Harvard University Press.
- Carretero Gomez, S., Napierala, J., Bessios, A., Mägi, E., Pugacewicz, A., Ranieri, M., Triquet, K., Lombaerts, K., Robledo Bottcher, N., Montanari, M., & Gonzalez Vazquez, I. (2021). *What did we learn from schooling practices during the COVID-19 lockdown?* Publications Office of the European Union.
- Dewey, J. (1902). *The child and the curriculum*. University of Chicago Press.
- Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as experience*. Perigee Books.
- Hickey-Moody, A., Palmer, H., & Sayers, E. (2016). Diffractive pedagogies: Dancing across new materialist imaginaries. *Gender and Education*, 28(2), 213–229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1140723>
- Guattari, F. (1995). *Chaosmosis: An ethico-aesthetic paradigm* (transl. P. Bains & J. Pefanis). Indiana University Press.
- Rutter, M. (2006). Implications of resilience concepts for scientific understanding. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1094, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1196/annals.1376.002>
- Svendler Nielsen, C., Hartman, L., & Samuel, G. M. (2022). An embodied perspective of resilience: The impact of integrated arts education on experiences of South African primary school children post COVID-19 lockdown. *Culture Crossroads*, 20, 20–45. <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol20.2>
- Theron, L. C., & Theron, A. M. C. (2010). A critical review of studies of South African youth resilience, 1990–2008. *South African Journal of Science*, 106(7/8), art. # 252, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajs.v106i7/8.252>
- Theron, L. C. (2012). Resilience research with South African youth: Caveats and ethical complexities. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 42(3), 333–345. <https://doi.org/10.1177/008124631204200305>
- van Breda, A. D. (2019). Resilience and culture in South Africa: The case of ‘acceptance’. In U. Straub, G. Rott, & R. Lutz (Eds.), *Knowledge and social work: Volume VIII: Social work of the South* (pp. 327–344). Paulo Freire Verlag.
- van Manen, M. (2002). *The tone of teaching*. The Althouse Press.