

## Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies

### *The Biopolitics of Art Education*

#### Editorial

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This issue of JLCDS offers a timely opportunity for an extended discussion of current practices at the intersection of art education and disability studies, a discussion that has the potential to further practice and theory in both domains. Art education has an obvious role in the development of our understanding of culture and is, like all forms of education, shaped by explicit as well as implicit processes of cultural production. Literary and cultural disability studies have considerable potential for enabling us to understand the relationship between disability, culture and society at a deep ideological level that impacts on art education at a curricular level and into arts practice. The papers in this special issue further the argument that art educators are particularly well placed to respond in creative and innovative ways to potentially restrictive normative practices and rigid assessment regimes at the heart of disabling school practices. Emerging in these papers are highly reflective insights from disabled and non-disabled art educators who acknowledge disability as a creative resource.

It is useful to offer an initial definition if only to set some workable parameters for the papers that follow. Art education, for the purposes of this special issue, is the field of education that has emerged from visual art education. It is concerned with enabling children and students to respond to their experiences of the world through practice, principally by making artefacts. Although it draws on theoretical, contextual and historical perspectives, it has a clear and distinctive place in the school curriculum since it prioritises material forms of knowing and being.

The Biopolitics of Art Education is a further stage in our efforts to engage with issues concerning access and equity in art education. In our role as editors of the *International Journal of Art and Design Education* (iJADE) we have been keen to acknowledge the centrality of disability in enabling us to celebrate and critique art education. This is most clearly illustrated by two recent conferences and the corresponding special issues hosted by iJADE and the National Society for Education in Art and Design (NSEAD), entitled 'Art for life: race, gender, disability and class. Critical discourses around participation in arts education' (2014) and 'Creating spaces: Inclusivity, ethics and participation in art and design education' (2019, forthcoming). As editors we have a shared commitment to equity and democratic pedagogies and a clear belief in the power that art education can exert on the lives of children and young people.

It is worth noting that this special Issue enables us to engage with debates at the intersection of art education and disability studies at a time when art educators in many places around the world face hostile environments and reduced resources as a result of governmental and economic policies (Branwen). This worsening in the conditions conducive to practical and creative education is also particularly detrimental to the lived experiences of disability, as witnessed in England where mental health in schools has deteriorated, according to the NSPCC, a trend which, perhaps more than coincidentally, corresponds with the decrease in arts subject time in the curriculum (Jeffreys). Art educators and scholars in disability studies have independently acknowledged the threats generated from global insecurity, environmental change and austerity, and have nonetheless offered sites of resistance. Neo-liberal capitalism domesticates and contains bodies, as Robert McRuer and Merri Lisa Johnson have argued, and art education has not escaped this corrosive process, as many of the papers here testify. This special issue emerges as a response to McRuer and Merri-Johnson's demand for radical reform through curricular Cripistemologies explored in a previous special issue of JLCDS.

McRuer and Johnson explicated crip theory and further examined the role that cripistemology, a way of knowing and being from a 'decentered' or crip way of knowing/being, might play in radical curricular revision. Of particular significance for us was a paper by David Mitchell, Sharon Snyder and Linda Ware (*Every Child Matters*) which challenged educators to move beyond inclusionism, an inauthentic form of inclusion, in order to more fully acknowledge and value the bodies and minds that sit beyond apparent educational norms.

Work by Robert McRuer, David Mitchell and David Bolt has prompted a deeper interrogation of the ways in which art education can be celebrated but also progressed by moving beyond access to consider difference as a stimulus for generating creative practice. Importantly, the application of this thinking enables us to explore opportunities as well as tensions for taking theory into practice. Our study of disability in this special issue, aims to demonstrate the ways in which disability studies has enabled art educators to think deeply about the meaning and purpose of art education and respond from a critically informed anti-ableist position. It is the particular nature of art education that enables us to consider curricular revision and how this might be played out through and with material forms of knowing. Taking theoretical ideas into the processes of making can offer particular insights to emerge that would not otherwise be explored. Art education is well placed to respond in creative and innovative ways, recognising the opportunities that diverse perspectives bring for making.

Art education has a vital role then in exemplifying curricular cripistemology and its potential for stimulating possibilities for creative practice. It is, however, implicated in neoliberal discourses dominating contemporary experiences of education and is, in UK and US, subject to debates about its nature, purpose and validity. Biesta (*Art Education After Joseph Beuys*) claims that art education has become distanced from both art and education, with a reduced capacity to make any significant contribution to either (**this needs some further explanation**). Some might question whether art education is possible at all given the

tensions between the necessary freedoms for creativity to flourish and the regulation inherent in unhelpful assessment regimes, increased surveillance and control of art teachers, reduced autonomy and an overall decline in the status of the subject. However, art education persists in enabling education to take place in ways that would not otherwise exist within the school curriculum. Art offers alternative modes for learning and is itself alternative and peripheral in the ways in which it functions within school. It might appear then as a subject that is 'othered' by this present context.

Its position occupying a marginal space at the periphery of the curriculum provides freedoms for both teacher and learner that are not available to higher status subjects that are subjected to greater regulation and scrutiny. Particular advantages of this subjugated position are the opportunities for a diversity of pedagogical approaches, and the possibilities of opening spaces for deeply subjective explorations of identity and situation not often found or permitted elsewhere in the curriculum. As Dennis Atkinson reminds us, learning can be intangible and unpredictable, and far less amenable to regulation and proscribed outcomes than mainstream education practices would have us believe. If learning can be thought of as an event, as Atkinson argues, conditioned as much by cultural and social contingencies as it is by rehearsed programmes of study, then teaching practices must be constantly open to question. Moreover, the epistemological foundation of the subject itself becomes uncertain and ambiguous. For the art educator familiar with the practices of contemporary art this can be less a problem and more an opportunity to explore relational pedagogies that privilege the more democratic practices of researching and practising alongside the learner, as a fellow producer, rather than the more familiar hierarchical pedagogy of leader and follower (Adams and Owens).

However, we must also acknowledge that art education can also be implicated in processes of othering. Desperate to assure its survival, proponents marshal arguments for its contribution to the creative arts economy whilst others might offer it as a 'cure all' for an

apparent mental health epidemic in schools. Whilst the therapeutic dimension of art making cannot be dismissed, it is important to acknowledge the potential for a disproportionate emphasis to be placed on this feature when discussing art education for disabled children and young people. Art education has been advanced for some as a means for establishing particular forms of communication or insights into a mysterious other world. Those described with 'peripheral embodiments' or 'alternative corporealities' can have their place on the edge of educational value confirmed if we are not attentive to historical approaches that prioritise the identification and remediation of difference over its value.

In some texts designed to promote inclusive practice, Art education is implicated in processes of othering by rendering practice as exceptional and peculiarly special with disabled children and young people requiring particular sensitivity and attention. The arts in these circumstances are promoted as a means of enabling an inner voice or an opportunity for us to gain access to a mysterious other. However, this is a difficult line to navigate. We might emphasise the importance of art education by drawing on disability to make a case for its continued importance. Disability in this instance might be perceived as a prosthesis for 'shoring up' a sick subject. In this instance difference becomes reified in practice where it has no real relevance (Mitchell and Snyder).

Instead we consider the capacity of art education to be actively transformed by the alternative corporealities described by Mitchell et al. This can occur in several often overlapping ways, principal amongst which is the enabling of the construction of diverse identities through practice, and providing access to practice itself by supporting unorthodox means of making. Another is the valuing of the arts themselves and their place in the curriculum and therefore ensuring access to a meaningful art education for all children and young people to have access to high quality arts and cultural education as a global priority. This preliminary level of access is vital, although it is equally important to avoid merely placing an emphasis on inclusion to existing practices without considering the restrictions

and disparagements which may be inherent in those practices themselves, and which can obscure the creative potential of 'active transformations that the alternative corporealities of disability creatively entail' (p. 42).

How might art educators learn from such active transformations without encounters with difference? What opportunities do we have to learn about others who may have very different ways of experiencing the world? If we only allow particular bodies/minds into our art studios, we are in danger of limiting our own abilities to learn and make. As well the diminution of the value of arts education in many places in the world, there may also be a reciprocal crisis in art education itself. Its incapacity to accommodate epistemologically as well as practically significant numbers of children and students with so-called special educational needs results in a restriction in their contribution to the development of new and diverse practices within the discipline. This fundamentally limits the potential of the subject itself and its contribution to education as a whole (Penketh).

**In this special issue contributors** consider these and other issues pertinent to the state of art education as it is experienced currently. Yayoi Mashimo encourages us to reconsider multi-sensory pedagogical approaches for teaching art history by taking account of ocularnormativity. Lucienne Dorrance Auz exemplifies the application of disability studies to the teaching of art history. Jennifer (Eisenhauer) Richardson, engages with the politics of inclusion, exploring her experiences of art making and creative writing from the perspective of person labelled as schizophrenic. Jenna Reid, Danielle Landry, Jijian Voronka, Sarah Snyder and Kathryn Church employ theoretical ideas from mad art as a way of reconceptualising practices in art education. Aaron Knochel negotiates the tensions of role playing in developing prosthetics in design education and Maree Tambasco-Roche and Ben Whitburn offer shared insights into the therapeutic dimensions of art education. What emerges in this work is a realisation that our creative capacities as educators and

practitioners can be significantly enhanced by working at the intersection of disability studies and art education.

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