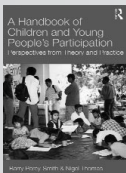


In spite of the wealth of references and academic arguments for play, for creativity and for the arts, I am unsatisfied after reading the book. Something of substance is missing – a drilling down into what a group’s engagement with the arts will look and feel like, what their experiences will be and how it can be facilitated in a meaningful way.

The book feels like it wants to present a ‘can do’ attitude but I worry what will happen to the workshop leader with no background in the artform in which they’re working if the workshop goes off track, is rejected by the group, or if the group move through the material quicker than expected and need to be challenged. I often use the analogy in my own work of a wet box to describe the pitfalls of repeating someone else’s workshop without the expertise that underpins it: like putting a wet box back together, it will have the outline shape of the original but is in danger of not being fit for purpose in any other way. The reader, presumably a student about to move into one of the caring professions, is not given enough support or depth to confidently move through many of the suggested workshops and activities.

There are some great ‘treats’ to be found. In general any of the shaded text boxes provide an interesting and useful coda to that chapter, such as the twenty top theorists on children’s art, and the compilation of various factors that inhibit or promote creativity in workshops. The witty sketches in Paul Timoney’s chapter were a treat also and it’s a pity they were not used throughout the book.

Some chapters presume a certain amount of knowledge and common ground on the part of the reader, others presume you know nothing. This again made me ask what this book wants to *be* – a handbook, an argument for the arts, an academic text? Perhaps the problem is that in its ambition to be all of those things, it’s in danger of being none and much of the worthwhile content falls through the cracks in the process.



Edited by Barry Percy-Smith and Nigel Thomas

A Handbook of Children and Young People’s Participation: Perspectives from Theory and Practice

Oxford: Abingdon, 2010, 378pp. £24.99

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Interest in children and young people’s participation has flourished since the establishment of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989. The UNCRC specifies a broad range of children’s rights, including their right to form views and to express these views freely in all matters affecting them (Article 12). Article 12 has resulted in the emergence worldwide of a myriad of participatory initiatives aimed at ‘hearing young voices’ and involving children and young people in decision-making on matters concerning them. In Ireland ratification of the Convention in 1992 was followed by the publication of the National Children’s Strategy

(NCS) in 2001 and the subsequent establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA), which has been responsible in turn for a range of initiatives that include *Dáil na nÓg* and *Comhairlí na nÓg* and the Office of the Ombudsman for Children. In this book Percy-Smith and Thomas acknowledge the ‘wealth and variety of activity’ (p. 1) under the rubric of children and young people’s participation but point out that practice has outstripped theorisation of the area. Their aim in producing this text is to ‘achieve a better understanding of the diverse ways in which the participation of children and young people is understood and enacted across the world’ (p. 1).

This ambitious text consists of 31 chapters and six associated commentaries and is divided into three parts: Children’s Participation – Progress and Challenges; Learning about Children’s Participation in Practice; and New Theoretical Perspectives. The book also provides a significant foreword, introduction and conclusion that address and sum up the wide-ranging issues covered. While the editors are British, this is very much an international text that brings together contributions from many countries, including several not previously known for a commitment to human rights, such as Rwanda, Nicaragua and South Africa. Initial curiosity as to why there is no Irish contribution in the book is assuaged by the realisation that many of the most noteworthy and innovative child participation initiatives are being undertaken in so-called ‘developing’ countries or the ‘global south’ as it is referred to in this volume. Ironically, amongst the reasons for this innovation has been the lack of public services in these countries, precipitating children’s involvement in development and acceptance as ‘public actors’ (Shier, in volume reviewed).

The Introduction and Part I, which consists of three chapters, raise substantive issues about children’s participation. In the Introduction Percy-Smith and Thomas point to some of the limitations of Article 12 of the UNCRC. These include a restrictive emphasis on the expression of children’s ‘views’ and the inherent implication that the Convention is principally concerned with participation in areas that affect children’s individual and private matters. Chapters by Gerison Lansdown, Karen Malone and Catherine Hartung and Sarah White and Shyamol A. Choudhury highlight issues and challenges associated with the realisation of children’s rights, including the difficulty of holding governments to account, the presumption of children’s incapacity, differences between children and adults in how ‘participation’ is understood, and the reality that children’s agency is inevitably influenced by the structures and cultures from which it emerges.

Part II, which focuses on practice, consists of 23 chapters interspersed with six commentaries and divided into two themes: Contexts for Practice and Approaches to Practice. The chapters cover a bewildering array of contexts and examples of practice in countries around the world, while the commentaries serve to summarise and encapsulate the learning from clusters of chapters. A sample of the themes is as follows: children’s participation in armed conflict and peace-building; participation by children in the poorest and most difficult situations; participation of children with mental health issues; cross-cultural understandings of children’s participation; cross-European perspectives on children’s participation in education; child reporters; children’s participation in citizenship and governance. Contributors are academics or practitioners, or both, and all have direct experience of the situations about which they write. While the diversity of context and practice underlines the complexity of children