

Solitary Confinement in Education and the Perils of What We're Not Teaching

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If you put a musician in a place where he has to do something different from what he does all the time, then he can do that—but he's got to think differently in order to do it. He has to use his imagination, be more creative, more innovative; he's got to take risks....I've always told the musicians in my band to play what they know and then play above that. Because then anything can happen, and that's where the great art and music happens.

- Miles Davis, Reading Jazz: A gathering of autobiography, reportage, and criticism from 1919 to now

Arts Education is, technically, core to the school curriculum according to [federal mandates](#) and certain state mandates. However, it is rarely made accessible to all students despite earnest advocating on the part of dedicated organizations and individuals. Advocates in the arts have developed many compelling arguments

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defending art's value within schools. Many of these advocacy efforts focus on art's impact on "soft skills" such as: children's self esteem, ability to care, and insight into cultures and ways of communication across cultures. Other efforts focus on art's more quantifiable impact, such as test scores or better daily attendance. While these efforts have merit they just haven't made a true impact in terms of changing school policy toward the arts. I suggest a different tact.

Education entails the balancing of the acquisition of knowledge with the nurturing of skills such as imagination, engagement, and participation. Miles Davis, the great jazz trumpeter and composer understood the potential to create great art and music when his musicians played "above" what they knew. Much like performing ensembles seeking to make great music happen, schools are the ensembles where society's children learn the skills that will enable them to create a world where great things happen.

Democracy, according to Webster's Third New International Dictionary (quoted in Woodford, 2005, p.1), is

a state of society characterized by tolerance toward minorities, freedom of expression, and respect for the dignity and worth of the human individual with equal opportunity for each to develop freely to his fullest capacity in a cooperative community.

Public education's historical purpose is to develop a citizenry according to the values of a democratic society. This is exemplified in many ways, one such can be found on the introduction to my own third grade report card from 1967:

The school aims to assist in making a good future citizen of your child. To gain this end, home and school must work together. [His] training to be citizen of worthy character is as much a matter of developing the right attitudes as it is of teaching [him] facts. It is important that every child should know where his work needs strengthening. - Beverly, Massachusetts, 1967

Education as character education, or education for a citizenry in society, has been a topic throughout the history of education, from Aristotle to the present (Dewey, 1985, Noddings, 2003; Chomsky, 2003). However, there is an increasing mismatch between educational practices and democratic values. As a contrast to my third grade report card, consider the introduction on my daughter's third grade report card.

The mission of the Carlsbad Unified School District, a global community of learners, is to guarantee that our students flourish in life as enthusiastic, confident learners in a world class educational system characterized by vigorous personalized curriculum, dedicated teaching, and total community involvement. -Carlsbad, California 2008

“Modeling of democratic values and principles in the schools has gone off course, but it is not too late to change direction.”

My daughter's report card focuses on the process of personal learning and achievement, while neither contextualizing it in the development of future citizens, nor a role for the student in society. Another difference between the two report cards forty years apart, is that my report card had letter grades for both music and art. My daughter's report card has a line for “visual and performing arts” and grades only for “effort.”

In order for a democratic society to function successfully, its members must be invested and participate. There are striking similarities to be drawn from comparing the report cards. There are also striking differences that can be drawn from the descriptions of a working democracy with what musicians like Miles Davis describe as the underpinnings of the creation of great art and music.

The arts and physical education are two curricula areas that have close ties to democratic practices and principles. The arts and physical education teach students much more than disciplinary content. They teach lessons that enable students to look at their world with a more complex lens by building critical thinking skills (Curva, 2005; Adams, Foutz, Luke and Stein, 2007), and they engage students in learning how to play well together, to be team players, to be responsible, and to take

risks (Deasy, 2002, Catterall, 2006, Pollard, 2006). Unfortunately, they are also the two key curricular areas that are often cut back or eliminated from schools.

“With mandated, standardized tests in mathematics, reading and language arts administered each year” write Lois Hetland et al. (2007), “the focus of schools shifted to raising test scores in these areas since negative consequences resulted for schools if scores did not achieve specified levels. Because the [No Child Left Behind](#) emphasizes accountability in literacy and numeracy and not the arts, even though the arts are included in the Act as a mandated subject area, the result is even less support now for the arts in many of our schools than there has been in the past (p.1).

Our current attention to, even idolization of, test scores undermines the teaching of democratic values. For me, this issue has hit very close to home. My daughter attends a really good school by current standards. Her school has the highest test scores in a district that already has outstanding test scores. Teachers in the district are committed, many are highly experienced. The district’s parents are primarily middle- and upper-class. PTAs at each school in the district have raised enough money for arts and physical educational instruction, though the teachers hired to teach these subjects are not necessarily credentialed.

My daughter returns home everyday with the worksheets she has completed during school. We also have weekly flashcards requiring rote memorization of science and social studies facts which are tested weekly. Unfortunately, only the tests are a measure of my daughter’s memorization and test-taking skills, for in the third grade she doesn’t have the developmental readiness to understand the concepts

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presented. About half way through last year she was identified as needing extra help with test taking and she was pulled into a daily test preparation session for several weeks before the start of standardized testing. Months of in-class test preparation took up of a good portion of the teaching time each day.

Test taking and worksheet assignments are solitary activity, and [teachers are devoting more and more of class time this individual practice](#). What are we *not* teaching kids with all this solitary practice? And what are the consequences of such actions? “If teachers, administrators, politicians

and others have a stake in raising test scores of students—as opposed to improving student learning, which is not the same thing,” writes Bob Hebert a *New York Times* columnist in an editorial (10/9/07 *San Diego Union Tribune*), “there are all kinds of incentives to raise scores by any means necessary.”

Advocates for the arts and physical education need to stop looking toward test scores as a way to promote their agenda. While there is a growing body of research that persuasively shows that children who engage in the arts do better on standardized tests (Deasy, 2002; Ruppert, 2006), it should not be used as an advocacy tool to keep arts in schools. Ultimately, it diminishes education purposefulness overall, for what is learned by engaging in arts and physical education is ultimately far more important than the ability to raise test scores.

The voices advocating a return to arts education are getting louder and are being driven home by politicians such as Mike Huckabee, former Governor of Arkansas, who can be quoted as advocating for "[arts as weapons of mass instruction](#)" for schools (Henderson, 2007). During his presidential campaign, Governor Bill Richardson (D-NM) talked about a "major federal program of arts in the school." In October 2007 Governor Richardson announced his proposed, federal education plan in a speech in New Hampshire, which included \$250 to \$500 million annually for arts education "...[And I will put the arts back into our schools](#)." Arts education is not a silver bullet, but it is a lighted bridge. It's long past time the president ordered a comprehensive analysis of the quality and extent of arts education in our schools. I will do that. I will provide 250 million dollars for the NEA's Arts in Education programs." Other candidates have also weighed in strongly suggesting that congress earmark funds specifically for arts education (www.ArtsVote.org).

The message of restoring arts is being advocated at state and federal levels through political processes. This path has merit and needs to be supported, and supported for *all* children. Children who attend schools in poorer districts must be afforded the same rights and educational opportunities as students in more privileged districts. Arts and physical education funding must not be dependant on PTA funding.

"It's time to reign in the test zealots who have gotten a hold on the public schools in the United States," continues Bob Hebert of the *New York Times*. Rather than reign in the zealots, I believe we are better off resisting acquiescence and changing the arguments of advocacy. Arts and physical education teach valuable lessons of democracy, especially with regard to being fully present and engaged. It is not necessary to leave the teaching of democratic values to a civics class when all areas of the curriculum, and especially the arts and physical education can be vehicles of democratic principles.

Recent economic reports outline how the work force relies more and more on workers who have creative skills such as the ability to imagine, create, build consensus, and adapt to situations (Florida, 2004). It is essential for business leaders to step forward and become engaged in understanding and advocating for an education that will best serve our country's future. Modeling of democratic values and principles in the schools has gone off course, but it is not too late to change direction. Let's pause and move forward to what we really should be teaching. Rather than eliminate the arts and physical education to concentrate on improving test scores, let's restore the arts and physical education and provide the skills that enable and motivate young people to engage in society.

Education at its best will always be a balancing act of multiple factors from curriculum to philosophy to practice. In order to revive the essence of education as

preparation for an engaged citizenry, school leaders must begin to review how current practices such as attention to scoring well on tests have undermined rather than supported learning in the context of citizenry. Standards and benchmarks for learning provide outlines for curriculum. There are standards and benchmarks for all areas of the curriculum, including all four art areas and physical education. They are only successful, however, as balanced in practice, that is, that an attention to all areas is the order of the day, rather than favoring a few areas over others.

The arts provide many important lessons to children, and perhaps none are more crucial in our time than the lessons they provide in supporting creative and critical thinkers as well as risk takers. Maxine Greene (1992 in Goldberg and Phillips) puts it another way, "I would argue for aware engagements with the arts for everyone, so that—in this democracy—human beings will be less likely to confine themselves to the main text." I am counting on my daughter to grow up and be an engaged citizen. I am also counting on her schooling to be in Miles Davis' words, "above" where it is now, mired in test score accountability, and instead, filled with the freedom of possibility.

About the Author

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