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COMMENTARY

Three Rs Are Essential, but Don't Forget the A -- the Arts

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Recent efforts to assess and reform our schools — such as global education rankings released in December and the No Child Left Behind law — have focused attention on four so-called "core" subjects; reading, writing, math and science. No effort has been made to address more fundamental questions regarding what we teach and why.

Although we don't think about it this way, a school's curriculum is a mind-altering device, a means through which children's minds are shaped with ideas, skills and beliefs about the world. Because what we teach the young is so important, we need to be particularly careful about what we include and equally as careful about what we don't.

What we do teach is far more likely to be the offshoot of embedded traditions and our efforts to boost test scores, as if test scores were a meaningful proxy for the quality of education our students receive. They are not.

One of the casualties of our preoccupation with test scores is the presence — or should I say the absence — of the arts in our schools. When they do appear they are usually treated as ornamental rather than substantive aspects of our children's school experience. The arts are considered nice but not necessary. Just what do the arts have to offer to our children? Are they really important? Put most directly, what do the arts have to teach? Join me on a brief excursion.

First, the arts teach children to exercise that most exquisite of capacities, the ability to make judgments in the absence of rules. There is so much in school that emphasizes fealty to rules. The rules that the arts obey are located in our children's emotional interior; children come to feel a rightness of fit among the qualities with which they work. There is no rule book to provide recipes or algorithms to calculate conclusions. They must exercise judgment by looking inside themselves.

A second lesson the arts teach children is that problems can have more than one solution. This too is at odds with the use in our schools of multiple choice tests in which there are no multiple correct answers. The tacit lesson is that there is, almost always, a single correct answer. It's seldom that way in life.

A third lesson is that aims can be held flexibly; in the arts the goal one starts with can be changed midway in the process as unexpected opportunities arrive. Flexibility yields opportunities for surprise. "Art loves chance. He who errs willingly is the artist," Aristotle said. Creative thinking abhors routine. Routines may be good for the assembly line, where surprise is the last thing you want. As our schools become increasingly managed by an industrial ethos that pre-specifies and then measures outcomes, there is an increased need for the arts as a counterbalance.

The arts also teach that neither words nor numbers define the limits of our cognition; we know more than we can tell. There are many experiences and a multitude of occasions in which we need art forms to say what literal language cannot say. When we marry and when we bury, we appeal to the arts to express what numbers and literal language cannot. Reflect on 9/11 and recall the shrines that were created by those who lost their loved ones — and those who didn't. The arts can provide forms of communication that convey to others what is ineffable.

Finally, the arts are about joy. They are about the experience of being moved, of having one's life enriched, of discovering our capacity to feel. If that was all they did, they would warrant a generous place at our table.

These are but a few of the lessons that art teaches. What is ironic is that the forms of thinking the arts develop and refine are precisely the forms of thinking that our ever-changing world, riddled as it is with ambiguities and uncertainties, requires in order to cope. Can we make some room for the arts? Perhaps.