

Teaching the Arts in School

School subjects often fall into three groups of perceived descending order of importance: 1) basic and essential (reading, writing, mathematics); 2) contexts for learning process and facts (social studies, science); and 3) nice but not necessary (music, visual arts, drama, dance, physical education). Most parents and children want more from school than just to learn to read, write, and do arithmetic. School is also the context for children's social development, and for experiencing and understanding their culture. A key cultural resource is the arts.

Research has shown the arts develop the mind in ways different from say mathematics—this is the concept of multiple intelligences. Teaching and learning the arts focuses children on seeing and experiencing the world, rather than labeling it or seeking a single correct answer. In art there are no right and wrong answers and so the development of the most central form of human thought—*judgement*—is fostered.

Schools that have demonstrably good arts programs do not focus on unleashing the natural creativity of children, but rather have disciplined instruction in the skills of the arts (for example, recognizing a major and minor chord or basic drawing) and substantive content about the arts (the role of Group of Seven artists in Canadian art, cultural meanings of dance, the political nature of cartoon art). Good arts programs integrate teaching and learning the arts across the curriculum, for example seeing the aesthetic in science (the beauty of a crystal) or math (the art in tessellations or an elegant solution) or geography (the art of map making). Good arts programs are characterized by the expectation that children can learn to see, to understand and to create artistic expressions. When the arts education program has these elements, it is as basic to education as reading, writing and arithmetic.

An interesting set of essays on the role of arts in schools and especially in school reform can be found in *Putting the Arts in the Picture: Reframing Education in the 21st Century*.

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