

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: November 1, 2010

Published in Print: November 3, 2010, as **How the Arts Lay a Foundation for Learning**

How the Arts Lay a Foundation for Learning

By Kathran Siegel

Children need to develop from the inside out. They must learn [← Back to Story](#)

skills for dealing with the challenges they face at the same time they are gathering information about the world around them. We tell ourselves a lie of convenience when we support the belief that children who can score well on standardized math and reading exams are being equipped for life. Even if we overlooked the shortcomings of testing as a measure of learning, a single-minded focus on reading and math would not be a cure for what ails children in the nation's poorest-performing schools. Why do leaders try to fool us into believing that it is?

Successful adults set goals. They have learned how to delay gratification in order to end up with something more. Adults have patience, and the mental focus to think a problem through and establish a strategy for achieving a desired end.

Experience teaches them to break problems down, so that they can accomplish, incrementally, the otherwise overwhelming. As adults, they are able to harness frustration, using it to drive themselves toward their goals. Earlier successes contribute to the emotional resources that keep them from becoming too easily discouraged.

Although these qualities may be associated with maturity, their foundation is laid in early childhood. Educators know that problem-solving skills must be taught. They do not develop in the same, natural way that sexuality does after puberty, or graying hair in later life.

The development of a capacity to break down tasks, the ability to listen, to analyze, to plan, to set goals, and to delay rewards must be taught to children beginning at an early age and continue throughout their K-12 schooling. These necessary tools for learning are not the same thing as IQ. It is possible to have a high intelligence quotient while lacking the ability to focus on and stick with a problem long enough to learn anything from it. What I see in my inner-city Philadelphia students is not the absence of IQ, but a lack of problem-solving skills. Even the brightest of them often fall behind because of their need to have everything immediately, or not at all.

This problem has been studied, but is not yet being dealt with adequately by educators and policymakers. A May 18, 2009, [New Yorker article](#) on "the secret of self-control," for example, discussed the research of Walter Mischel, who, beginning in the late 1960s, in association with Stanford University, experimented with children's ability to delay gratification. Following his subjects later in their lives, Mischel found a direct correlation between a child's ability to delay gratification by exhibiting self-control, and his or her success

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in life. Mischel suggested that children could be taught different strategies for developing such patience and control.

When I was first drawn to education in the early 1970s, schools thought of mastering problem-solving skills as a key developmental marker and called it "readiness." By fostering readiness, federal Head Start programs helped equalize the opportunities of preschool-age children of different income levels, assuring that each child had a chance to benefit from education, once he or she entered kindergarten. President Barack Obama has called for more Head Start programs, and more Early Head Start programs aimed particularly at poor urban families. Research has shown that these programs work. But it also indicates that by the 3rd grade, any head start that an urban child living in poverty has been given is in danger of fading away, a phenomenon referred to as "Head Start fade-out."

As part of any solution, children must be engaged in the development of problem-solving skills, which provide a means of coping with challenges.

My work in Philadelphia schools convinces me that maintaining and strengthening this foundation is a natural function of the art process. Yet in many urban districts—including Philadelphia, where many schools now include an art teacher—the importance of the subject is minimized, and teaching time is tragically curtailed.

Student burnout continues to present itself as a remarkable behavioral shift, and characteristically takes place between 2nd and 3rd grade. The same child who was alert and receptive a year earlier has, by the 3rd grade, too often become either unwilling or unable to focus. The desire to learn and the excitement over mastering something new remains, but the child becomes impatient, and his or her ability to focus and to listen sharply declines. If success does not come fast, receptivity shuts down. Each year that this continues, the child falls further behind, lacking the attitudinal skills that could provide rescue. The situation becomes vastly more critical during the middle school years. This is a challenge passed along to the next year's teacher, who is held accountable for that child's performance. Even remediation is difficult when the now-older student's foundational-learning readiness has been eroded.

As part of any solution, children must be engaged in the development of problem-solving skills, which provide a means for coping with challenges. For years, arts educators have been defending their place in the schools, insisting that art-making inculcates these skills, preparing children to better deal with real-life choices. Perhaps we have failed to explain exactly what problem-solving skills are, because this defense seems to have had little impact on how arts educators are utilized in K-8 schools. In Philadelphia, the arts are utilized within the school community as a "prep," or break-time activity, presented to some students and not others. The arts are not given anything like equal weight in the curriculum. Unlike in math and reading, solutions in the arts are open-ended. They do not lend themselves to today's testing model. Children benefit from seeing how the visual-art, music, theater, or dance teacher finds positive solutions to problems. And knowing just how far a particular child can be pushed toward an outcome, the arts teacher pushes the child a little further. Children have no idea yet of how much they can accomplish. They need to surprise themselves. As children hone their problem-solving ability, they are also strengthening their character.

We need a curriculum that integrates these developmental markers, which have been neglected in our poor urban population of children, with a challenging academic program. Diluting the arts educator's value

within a school community is a tragic waste and costly for our children.

Reading and math skills supplement the foundation from which a person is equipped to face the world. They do not provide the tools for becoming a whole person. What makes teaching to the test seductive is that it has been packaged as a clean, easy solution to a messy problem. But it is a ruse that will come back to haunt us, as these children step into a world where the test is evasive and the answers are constantly changing.

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Vol. 30, Issue 10, Pages 22-23

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