

# gardner perspectives

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## HABITS OF MIND: AN ARGUMENT FOR ARTS EDUCATION



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The arts have rapidly been cut from school budgets and schedules under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law and Race to the Top's focus on academic achievement. In 2008, a survey conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts found that "rates of childhood arts education declined significantly from 1982 to 2008...and, its decline has been concentrated among low-income children and among African American and Hispanic children in particular" (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011). Similarly, a report on the effects of NCLB on arts education found that 25% of visual arts programs experienced reductions in teaching staff in 2009 alone (Sabol, 2010).

Yet many people strongly believe in the intrinsic value of the arts in students' lives. A 2005 Harris Poll found that 93% of Americans agreed that the arts are vital to providing a well-rounded education for children, and 79% agreed that incorporating arts into education is the first step in adding back what is missing in public education today. Seventy-nine percent of those polled also believed that arts education was important enough for them to get personally involved in increasing the amount and quality of arts education (Ruppert, 2006). My current work with a team of researchers at the Gardner Center, examining the implementation of the Art in Action visual arts program, affirms that these beliefs about the arts remain strong among many in the community.

Elliot Eisner, in his 2002 book *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, described 10 Life Lessons the arts are excellent at teaching:

*The arts* teach children to make good judgments about qualitative relationships.

*The arts* teach children that problems can have more than one solution.

*The arts* celebrate multiple perspectives.

*The arts* teach children that complex forms of problem solving are seldom fixed, but change with circumstances and opportunity.

*The arts* make vivid the fact that neither words in their literal form nor numbers exhaust what we can know. The limits of our language do not define the limits of our cognition.

*The arts* teach students that small differences can have large effects.

*The arts* teach students to think through and within material.

*The arts* help children learn to say what cannot be said.

*The arts* enable us to have experiences we can obtain from no other source and through such experience to discover the range and variety of what we are capable of feeling.

*The arts'* position in the school curriculum symbolizes to the young what adults believe is important.

**Through the arts, children have the opportunity to tackle difficult yet meaningful challenges, and grapple with the uncertainty and complexity inherent in life.**

Over the years, the Gardner Center has been privileged to work with numerous arts organizations as effective partners in youth development. From the Mural Music and Arts Program in its early days to today's work with Art in Action and East Palo Alto's Youth Arts and Music Center project, the Gardner Center has welcomed the opportunity to partner with young people as creative leaders in their communities.

We recognize that high-quality arts programming teaches young people a range of important habits of mind and mindsets that are found infrequently in the traditional, and tested, academic content areas. These habits of mind, which can be effectively developed through disciplined practice of the arts, include the ability to envision, engage and persist, stretch and explore, reflect, and observe (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan, 2013).

In an increasingly complex world where there will be few obviously "right" answers, these habits of mind may be much more important for both success in life and for leading a life of meaning, than being able to perform well on standardized exams. Through the arts, children have the opportunity to tackle difficult yet meaningful challenges, and grapple with the uncertainty and complexity inherent in life: How do you approach problems that have multiple possible solutions, each with their own benefits and drawbacks? How do you relate to people or situations that are outside of your own previous experience? How do you listen, learn, and discern from feedback, and develop a skill over time, while also staying true to your own vision? As John W. Gardner expressed, these habits of mind may provide the kinds of supports needed to encourage lifelong learning:

*"If we indoctrinate the young person in an elaborate set of fixed beliefs, we are insuring his early obsolescence. The alternative is to develop skills, attitudes, habits of mind and the kind of knowledge and understanding that will be the instruments of continuous change and growth on the part of the young person."* — John W. Gardner

Improving access to the arts for all children, regardless of their background, and supporting them to develop the habits of mind only the arts can bring, may allow us to shift beliefs about what is important in education. Because beyond habits of mind, and even beyond the conversation about financial success, the practice and enjoyment of the arts touches on the very core of what it means to be human.

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