

Defending arts education funding: we're doing it wrong

Description



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Oh, there's good reasons for that. We've fallen into a trap, you see. The justification for funding education in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics is "it prepares our children to get a job in tomorrow's economy." And we don't need justification for training doctors, lawyers, or financial gurus. Everybody nods their heads and says "oh yeah, we need those."

This trap has two snares in it. One is the idea that people are typed by their profession. But consider humans about 10k-30k years ago: there was no such thing as "science" as a separate activity from just "being human." There must have been some division of labor roles, sure, based in part on physiology and age. Men probably didn't nurse babies, and the very old probably didn't hunt. You ask the big person to carry the heavy thing. But apart from the tribal leader and maybe also a shaman-type, when it came to architecture or clothing, hunting or gathering—you did it, or you died. The professions weren't siloed. To simplify, and adopt a bit of an idyllic view: people were just people.

The other snare is the idea that the sole (or primary) role of education is to prepare children to perform a job in the economy for about 50 years. We no longer make an investment in developing people to be fully human; that's an extra-vocational activity, done by few and on a purely voluntary basis, largely on their own dime—a dime they earn from participating in the economy.

Should that be what school is for? Just to prepare tiny humans to be a part of our economy once they're big enough?

Come with me again back to 10k-30k years ago. Humans—all of them—did more than gather, hunt,

make clothes, and build shelters. We made fires, we cooked. We raised our young; we buried our dead ceremoniously, in honor. We told stories, we told jokes, we painted, we sang, we danced. All of us, not just the “dancers.” To do so was to express part of what it meant to be human.

“The Arts” isn’t some separate discipline. They are a central feature of the human experience.

And today, *most of the people I know* are cut off from most of these experiences, by personal choice and/or by the circumstances of their upbringing. We live these experiences by proxy. We let the television tell us stories, the pop stars sing our songs, the restaurants cook, and the photographers adorn our walls.

Is it any wonder so many of us feel so off-balance?

These things are so lacking—we crave them so much—that they have turned into entertainments, ones that we will pay for. Most of us only have the chance to participate in mere shadows of the kinds of activities that make us fully human, and only in the time not taken up by our role in the economic engine, and only (to reiterate) using money we ourselves earn fulfilling that role.

Defending arts education funding by pointing to the well-documented benefits it gives students—increased retention in schools, increased performance in STEM classes—plays into this assumption that it is only okay to spend money if it will better prepare students participate in the economy. It’s complicit—usually unknowingly so—in the argument that the arts ought to be an add-on entertainment, another way to extract money from people.

So, no, that’s *not* what school should be for. School should be for preparing people for life, not just for a place in the economy.

Society should prepare people for the complexities of falling in love, the joy (and challenges) of raising children, and the grief of losing loved ones. We should *at least* be teaching people where carrots and eggs come from, and how to make those things into a meal. We should be teaching people to make images that express the worlds they see in their minds; to sing together in harmony and to dance together with abandon; to tell their stories eloquently and meaningfully. These things are life, and a society that fails to prepare its people for these things, fails its people.

And by that measure, we’ve been failing miserably for decades.

When we fund arts education in schools, we take just one of the many—desperately needed—steps toward restoring to education its rightful role of preparing people to live full, happy lives.

Category

1. Uncategorized

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