

# Thought Ramblings

Upper Arlington Informal Alternative Program • Parent Newsletter

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## Remembering the Whole Child - Part II

“Not everything that matters is measurable, and not everything that is measurable matters...the social and emotional life of the child needs to be as much a priority as measured academic achievement - perhaps an even greater priority. No test score is an adequate indicator of quality education. In fact, an increase in test scores can signal a decrease in the quality of education. It depends on the price paid for the increase.” Elliott Eisner

In the last issue of *Thought Ramblings* I discussed some of the forces that tend to keep us from thinking about children as whole, complex individuals having a range of interrelated physical, intellectual, social, and emotional traits. The forces include things like: 1) historical events in American education (e.g. thinking of the individual child as a “first grader”); 2) the adverse effects of applying principles of production used in the factories of the early twentieth century to schools (e.g. thinking of kids as “bottles of ketchup”); and 3) an irrational, uncritical belief that numbers and statistics *are* reality (a view that even statisticians don’t have.).

### Four Ways to Keep the Child at the Center

Sometimes I’m asked for an opinion. Oftentimes, I’m not, but I give it anyway. With that caveat in mind, I would now like to consider positive, practical ways that might help us to resist forces that cause us to “forget” and move away from thinking of children as anything but whole. Some of these suggestions are ones that I think we are currently doing at Wickliffe...and doing well. Others, I’m not so sure. *None* of the ways are fully explained because there isn’t room to do so here. However, they might make for good conversation starters for staff, parents, and others.

**1. Slow down, slow down, slow down.** When Vermont’s premier educational scholar, Patricia Carini, visited Wickliffe a few years ago, she reminded us that “speed is the enemy of quality.” It’s also the root of fragmentation. Suppose that a class of children are fully engaged in a science experiment at 9am. Now further suppose that an hour passes and the class is scheduled to work on reading-writing workshop, but children are still deeply involved in the science project. My suggestion? Keep going with science. Do reading-writing workshop in the afternoon or even the next day. After all, a basic principle of Informal education is to use time and space *flexibly*. Furthermore, children *are* (or could be) using reading and writing during the science experiment. **Bottom Line:** Everything is valuable, but we don’t have to do every thing all at once. This is good advice for busy adult lives too.

**2. Use the arts as part of a rigorous, academic study in the classroom.** The arts are valuable as a “stand-alone” discipline. However, when integrated into a classroom study, they tend to draw out the best of children’s emotional and social selves. For example, last year our upper grades attended a museum that specialized in issues of slavery and civil rights. It was a

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powerful, moving experience for the children and the adults who attended. I'll never forget the artistic representations that these children created in the days following the trip. Their creations visibly showed how much they had learned. **Bottom Line:** Children express what they know and come to know topics more deeply *through* the arts. Music as well as visual and performing arts nurture and bring out deep responses from the whole child.

**3. Make time for thoughtful oral discussions about important issues.** Recently I observed children returning from recess to their classroom. Rather than say, "hurry, get your journals out and begin writing," the teacher gathered the group in a circle and asked "How did recess go?" "What successes and problems did you encounter?" This took time. But it is through such discussions that the emotional lives of children are honored. For example, one child said "I don't like being picked last for the game". Children collectively then began to offer up alternatives for picking teams together. As a result, the social nature of their lives at school was explored and improved. **Bottom Line:** Children feel empowered when their emotions can be expressed. Living and working in school is not too unlike living and working in a democratic society. Such discussions can build children's skill at living in the world and dealing with its adversities as well as the joy found in contributing to something larger than themselves.

**4. We must continue to care and sometimes caring means not rescuing children from difficult times.** Several weeks ago at recess, I witnessed a group of upper grade boys participating in a spirited game of kickball on the playground. By "spirited" I mean that for every minute these boys were spending actually playing the game, they would take five minutes to argue if the person was "out", or had touched the base, etc. Then I saw a teacher walk over to the group and ask them to let a first grade girl enter the game (this girl had been quietly watching them and secretly wanting to get in the game). Now, despite not being very skilled and being quite a few years younger, the group accepted the teacher's invitation and agreed to allow the girl into their hyper-competitive game. Although I was tempted to go over and tell the boys that they should "dial their game down" a notch or two and be "nice" to their new player, I didn't. Instead, I held my breath...and observed. To my surprise (and relief) these boys not only let her into the game, but suddenly started falling all over themselves to actually *help* her kick, run the bases, *and* score a run. *Both* teams wanted her to be successful. I was glad that I hadn't intervened to head off the *potential* of adversity. I know there are exceptions to this "rescue" rule, but quite often we act to prevent children from experiencing adversity so that we, *as adults* will feel less anxiety. The fact is that children *shouldn't* be free from adversity and difficulties. Although as a parent I hate to see my own children struggle (I still do), I know the painful truth is that encountering "normal" adverse conditions can actually help them to be more resilient in the end. **Bottom Line:** Times like recess are places where the "whole child" is developed. There are many social and emotional lessons to be learned at school. Caring and coaching children through life at school events can help them become more resilient and this learned perseverance can carry over into their intellectual learning as well. And sometimes the best way we can care is to *not* take over as adults or "rescue" a child from a difficult situation.

### Final Notes

Last month I was invited to speak to a group of downtown business leaders on education in general and on leadership in particular. I talked a bit about the "hurried child" and my belief that we ask both children and teachers to do too much -- i.e. that we just try to fit more and more into the curriculum. The result is that both the child and the teacher feel frustrated by the fragmentation of their lives and that the quality of learning goes down. I sensed that these business leaders understood. Then, I talked about the "over-scheduled" adult and that I