

Thought Ramblings

Upper Arlington Informal Alternative Program • Parent Newsletter

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Remembering the Whole Child

Can a child be anything *but* whole? Perhaps you're thinking that this is a ridiculous question because *of course* children are whole beings. Well, the question *should* provoke such a response or at least produce a feeling of bewilderment.

Here's the good news. Most people realize that children cannot be reduced to a test score. I believe most people know that all children (and adults for that matter) bring a unique emotional and social history to school. And we know that this social-emotional development affects their intellectual rate of growth. Oh, and we shouldn't forget to factor in children's physical development and the effect that this has on each of the other areas of development. Furthermore, there's also heredity -- i.e. the fact that we sometimes take on the mental and physical dispositions of our family members. Finally, all of this is related to our *environment*. Each of us continues to develop and be influenced by the presence of others (and that these "others" have *their* own individual, complex histories that they bring to us).

And so, I am certain that parents, policy-makers, your neighbors, and everyone else really do know deep down that children are whole, complex, human-beings. However, I'd like to put the emphasis on the first word of the title of this issue of *Thought Ramblings* -- "*Remembering* the Whole Child." Because "remembering" implies that although we once knew, there are times that seem like we have forgotten.

Why It's Easy to "Forget" the Whole Child in Schools

There are a number of reasons that make it easy for us to forget the whole child. Here are a few:

#1 *Historical events in American education subtly keep us from remembering the whole child.* It's hard to imagine, but our thinking and views are heavily influenced by events that happened well over 100 years ago. For example, everyone knows what a first grader is, right? Well, not exactly. The concept of a "first grader" didn't exist prior to 1859 because it was in that year that the graded school was born in Boston. Now, you might be thinking, "Well, that's a nice bit of history, but how is that relevant?" It's relevant because at that moment -- i.e. the point that we as parents, teachers, and policy-makers refer to an individual child as a "first grader" -- we are making some false assumptions. That is, while identifying a child as a "first grader" may seem harmless enough, it does put us in the precarious position of assigning the child a *group identity* instead of an individual one. We then sometimes go on as if the *real* child with all of his or her unique physical, social, emotional, and intellectual aspects, didn't exist. We unintentionally do so by saying things like, "Well, young Johnny *is* a *first grader* which means he knows this...or *should* know that."

Let's say Johnny isn't doing so well and a test indicates he is reading at the *kindergarten* level. That's like saying a 6 year-old (the typical age of a first grader) is achieving like a 5 year-old (the typical age of a kindergarten). Yet, we never say a 29 year old is achieving like a 28 year old! My overstated point here is *not* to say that we shouldn't have grade levels (although that could be debated), but to say that if we *only* talk about Johnny as a "first grader", then we've lost the "whole child" that is *truly* Johnny and that we talk this way because of an event in the history of American education.

#2 *Using a factory model for schools can keep us from remembering the whole child.* The development of factories in the early 1900s may seem to be miles away from how we think about individual children. Yet, in the early 1900s, the thinking of a factory management consultant named Frederick Taylor began to define schools in ways that still exist today. Mr. Taylor's ideas for breaking down production into specific tasks was brilliant in many ways. He could take the production of something like bottles of ketchup and efficiently mass produce them at affordable prices. This process became widely adopted

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by schools and suddenly children became “products” that could be managed (like bottles of ketchup) in an efficient, cost-effective manner. In fact, with a great deal of support from psychologists working with rats, it was believed that “learning” could be broken down, controlled, and managed as well. Then along came the testing industry, which alongside the factory approach to school, pretty much eliminated the notion of seeing children as individual, unique persons.

Time studies and hard quantitative data became valuable assessment tools for measuring the effectiveness of producing ketchup. And although there was a great deal of misery and hardship experienced by factory workers as a result of Taylor’s ideas, the people in these factories were seen as secondary. They were only the *means* to achieving the *ends* -- i.e. large numbers of efficiently produced bottles of ketchup that would turn a fine profit for a few lucky owners. In a recent essay, Harvard Professor, Howard Gardner, gives many reasons why focusing on test scores as the main goal of education is wrong-headed. To sum up this point, he states:

“...improving performance on a particular test is a terrible goal for an education system. A transient numerical result, due to any number of reasons, becomes the raison d’etre for the whole educational process. What a depressing prospect.”

Alas, children are *not* bottles of ketchup. What works for ketchup production does not work with children. And so, I’m guessing that you can see how our national obsession with numbers, efficiency, and the use of test scores as the means *and* ends serve to move parents, teachers, and the community away from thinking about the whole child. And that’s too bad -- especially when considering an efficient school (or efficient family) may not be a *good* school or that there may be a high price to be paid for thinking of individuals as scores on tests.

Which brings me to the third and final thing that moves us away from the whole child.

#3 We trust numbers more than people. We define ourselves and our children by numbers. One day, many years from now, I believe that some historian will look back on this current age and be amazed by how we as a society bowed down to numbers. Others might even ruefully laugh and wonder how in the world we could define our children as well as our self-concept as parents and teachers by abstract formulas found in mathematics and statistics. In fact, today’s statisticians are already amazed by this. These experts know how fickle numbers can be and that there are serious problems with equating a single test score with truth statements about individuals and schools. In fact, earlier this month, Kurt Landgraf, President of the Educational Testing Service (which is the largest developer of standardized tests in the United States) recently echoed this concern about the misuse and limitations of testing when he said *“We’ve got to stop using assessments as a hammer and begin to use them appropriately, as a diagnostic and learning tool.”*

Here’s a real-life example of how flimsy numbers and test scores can be at the school level. Each year Wickliffe children take a proficiency test. We’ve basically had the same staff over these years. Yet, sometimes our school scores go up and sometimes they go down. Why? What’s the variable? Well, some groups of kids are simply better at taking tests during some years than others. Another variable is that sometimes the writers of the tests create a test that is harder or easier in a given year. Also, during some years (like this one), we may have several parents who (for good reason) do not want their child to take the test. The Ohio Department of Education responds to this by averaging in a zero to our school’s average score -- that’s a zero for *each* child who doesn’t take the test. Of course, our average school score goes down. But take heart, in years where everyone takes the test, the school score will most certainly go up. Of course, this tells you little about the quality of our school despite the fact that the media reports these scores in much the same way that they report scores on the sports page.