The Habits of Mind Fostered by Arts Education
(Originally titled “Hitting the Right Note”)

“Making art involves discovery, risk taking, and being vulnerable to the unknown,” says school leader/author Linda Nathan in this article in Educational Leadership. But for too many disadvantaged students, the arts have been marginalized in favor of double doses of reading and math and test prep. This is a shame, says Nathan, because artistic habits of mind are essential to an engaging and balanced education.

The K-8 Boston school that Nathan works with (Conservatory Lab Charter School) strives to find the right balance, combining intensive music instruction, El Sistema, and EL Education. “Musical training,” she says, “is an excellent way to teach social-emotional skills, including waiting your turn, perseverance, assuming best intent, prolonged focus, and the willingness to prioritize the good of the greater whole over one’s individual desires.” All this carries over into the academic part of the curriculum. Here are the “studio habits of mind” the school strives to inculcate (from Studio Thinking, Hetland, Winner, et al.):

- Developing craft: Learning tools, materials, and artist’s practices;
- Engaging and persisting: Learning to pursue topics of personal interest and develop focus and perseverance;
- Envisioning: Picturing and imagining what cannot be observed;
- Expressing: Creating works that convey ideas, meaning, or emotions;
- Observing: Viewing visual, audio, and written resources more critically;
- Reflecting: Thinking and conversing about their work and processes of making;
- Stretching and exploring: Going beyond perceived limitations, exploring freely, and learning from errors and accidents;
- Understanding arts in the world: Learning about art history, artistic practices, and engaging the arts community.

In the school, students compose their own music as early as kindergarten, conduct their peers as they perform it for internal and external audiences, interact with performing artists, and continuously reflect on and improve their work. “There is so much bad stuff happening in the world that it’s hard to shut out all of that,” said one student, “but when we play music, we are in control and it’s beautiful.”


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