

A Balancing Act of Feeding the Brain

As funding becomes scarce, schools today are minimizing the fine arts and performing arts, sometimes to the point of eliminating them. Physical education, too, is often pared down to the bone. In its place are hours of boring test prep. Playfulness is often absent from the atmosphere, replaced by conformity, apprehension and fear of the test. When a school's funding is based solely on test results, changes like this are sadly inevitable. Yet the desired result, improved academic performance and higher test scores, is an uphill fight when accompanied by a lack of arts and physical programs.

Brain scientists have proven that cross pattern movement, such as crawling, running, swimming, and brachiating (swinging from an overhead ladder), improves not just physical coordination but brain coordination. The more we develop our physical muscles, the better our brain muscles work. Scientists have also proven that play is a necessary survival skill, important at every age. Play, it turns out, is an activity that lights up the brain like nothing else. Employing an individual, playful approach in learning naturally increases the learning. In this instance, schools have their approach backwards. More physical activity rather than less, more creativity rather than less, more playfulness rather than less, would dramatically improve academic skills and test scores.

Replacing creative pursuits with repetitive practice only serves to dull young minds. Think for a moment that you are a child struggling to understand and master a skill. As you struggle more, your frustration increases. Is the answer to your problem to heap on extra hours of study? Should playtime now be eliminated, so that your hours of frustrating struggle are increased? Of course not! Rather, you should do the reverse. Shorten the hours and shorten the struggle. By creating shorter time periods of work, the child is likelier to stay focused. When you set shorter, smaller goals, ones that are attained with a sense of playfulness, a child is far likelier to feel a sense of success. Frustration can kill a child's motivation, but a series of small successes can fuel it.

Music makes us better at math, art makes us smarter in history, physical activity and play makes us better at everything. It is the total package that makes a child's mind and body healthy, and keeps his or her spirit alive. I would advise that the ratio of arts and phys. ed. in schools be reversed. The ideal balance might be two thirds, or even three quarters, of a child's day spent in the arts and physical pursuits, with the remaining portion focused on academics.

As we developed our homeschooling routine, we found that we could begin all pencil and paper tasks at breakfast time and be done by lunch, leaving long afternoons for the fun stuff: museums, dance & music classes, science experiments, costume or puppet-making, trips to the park or the skating rink or the hiking trail. Three hours a day for academics turned out to be plenty. (In most schools true learning occupies less than three hours in a day, since much of the time is spent on chaos control and conformity, including rote work and test prep.)

Schools not only have their ratio of time spent on subjects in reverse quantities, they have their ration of students to teachers just as skewed. They use testing in a backwards fashion too, as an assessment tool rather than as a diagnostic tool. They misjudge the amount of time that a

child should struggle with a subject (increasing it instead of decreasing it). Yet the largest mistaken perception is the idea that every child deserves the same education. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The No Child Left Behind Act attempted to standardize education. The idea was that all children would eventually score high on the same test. But children are not standardized children, and neither are teachers. No one is at grade level in everything, and most of us will always be ahead in some areas and behind in others. A good education, it turns out, is a different education for everyone, a unique education. Just as each parent knows how different their children are, they also know that a successful outcome for each child is a different outcome for each child.

The sameness of our educational system is the death of education. Teachers are no longer encouraged to get inspiration from their students, or from their environment, or from their own ideas. Standardization has dulled everything.

It is entirely possible for teachers to allow each of their students to have a different goal, to capitalize on their strengths, and to minimize their weaknesses. I do this in my classes by encouraging students to research what interests them, to write about what moves them, to read what they want to read, to find their own voice and their own style.

I know the luxurious position of a teacher of homeschoolers. I am not faced with an overcrowded room. I have ten or twelve students, a group that I can get to know intimately, and take the time to encourage individually.

Overcrowding prevents us from being able to move around freely, limits our play, and restrains our freedom. Lack of personal space makes us feel threatened; lack of time and atten-

tion makes us feel ignored and misunderstood. It's a recipe for restlessness, resentment, and mean spiritedness amongst the children.

It is also important to recognize that subjects are not self-contained. For example, science cannot be learned without also learning history, math, art, reading and writing. It is a mistake to think that any school subject can be separated from other fields and types of learning. The arts can and should be integrated into every field of learning, while the physical self is kept moving and alert, not stuck sitting still at a desk for hours. This is an integrated, thematic approach, drawing on the interests of teachers and students, and as many learning and teaching styles as possible. In every case the student should have a personal creative voice, the ability to work at their own level and pace, and mutual respect, in an active and playful environment.