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Music Is Food for the Soul, Not Fodder for Learning Standards

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My third grade granddaughter came home from school with a note announcing the children would be learning to play the recorder. In one way, things sure haven't changed much since my kids practiced playing the recorder at the same age in the same public school.

But I'm sure the note sent home with my kids did not say this:

"The playing of the recorder meets criteria set by national, state, and district learning standards. Playing a musical instrument is shown to help increase standardized test scores."

OK. Let's admit that the sound of 8-year-olds playing recorder is only slightly better than nails on a chalkboard. The kids do learn a bit about reading music, and they do get to perform at an assembly at the end of the year. So I guess this is a worthwhile activity for some kids, especially those with no previous exposure to playing an instrument. Maybe it even motivates some to want to learn to play trumpet or piano or violin. What I question is not that *what* here but the *why*.

Music is known to help brain development, especially for language, reasoning, spatial intelligence, and math. As with all arts, music helps kids become more creative and gives them another avenue of expression. They learn that to become good at something, even the recorder, you need to practice. So there are lots of great reasons to have music education in our schools. It's just my opinion that raising standardized test scores is not

one of them.

And while I am on the subject of playing the recorder in third grade, I wonder if this is the best choice for every child. If even I find the sound painful, what about kids with sensory issues? Last time I went to the third grade recorder concert, there were kids who covered their ears the whole time and a few kids who had to leave the room. I guess for these children I am questioning the what. Is there another way for them learn a bit about reading musical notes and appreciating music without assaulting their sensory systems?

I'm guessing there are those who think music education takes precious time away from test preparation. After all, the M in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, & Math) stands for math, not music. And schools are all about STEM these days, as it leads to the promised land of good jobs. Maybe that's why the music teacher felt she had to justify playing the recorder by linking it to standardized test scores.

In a wonderful website dedicated to teaching music to children, *The Singing Classroom*, Deborah Skydell addresses [why music education matters](#):

"Because administrators and politicians generally view music as an *add-on* or *special*, it can be the first program cut from a school facing budget constraints. As a result, supporters of music education constantly struggle to justify music's importance. They might show how music improves math scores and increases school attendance, or they may demonstrate that the focus and discipline required to master an instrument improve students' overall academic performance... Music is unique in that it is both a discipline and an immediate gateway to human emotional life. Children who participate regularly in music not only hone their abilities to focus, think, analyze, organize, and work with colleagues, but begin to master their own emotional lives."

I'm glad the students at my granddaughter's school get to have music, drama, and art classes a few times a week. That's probably more than many kids receive these days. I just wish teachers didn't have to feel defensive about the value of exposing children to music and the arts.

In her blog *The Answer Sheet*, Valerie Strauss features an article by Lisa Phillips - [Top ten skills children learn from the arts](#).

Her list includes creativity, confidence, problem solving, perseverance, focus, non-verbal communication, receiving constructive feedback, collaboration, dedication, and accountability (here it means acknowledging mistakes and understanding how they impact the group). These so-called "soft skills" have a greater impact on success in life than standardized test scores.

I just wish the music teacher's letter had included ideas from *The Singing Classroom's* post on the value of music education as well as Phillips's list of what children learn from the arts. That would have helped parents understand why learning to play the recorder was worthwhile. Maybe it would have even helped me to feel better about sitting through my granddaughter's year-end recorder concert that is sure to assault my ears.

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