

# Towards a Unified Theory of Education

Categories: Uncategorized

I have always thought that many of the great failures education are created by a lack of context. We tend to act in a piecemeal fashion and hope that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts without really understanding how the parts fit together or what holds them together and what creates the whole.

For example, I have always be a supporter of the arts. But they have fallen on hard times in schools because they lack the general support to thrive. Most of us do not consider ourselves artistic and those who are artistic can sometimes make the rest of us see them as so rarefied that most of us mortals have no idea the depth of what is happening. Further, in schools the arts have been treated as an add on. It has always been “readin’, writin’, and ‘rithmetic.” No art or music on that list. As schools fell on hard times and cutbacks were required, the arts took it in the backside because there wasn’t a natural constituency for them and because they were something that was considered nice but not necessary.

I once wrote an article I called “Arts, the Surrey, Not the Fringe” to try to shift the perspective on the arts to build a case that all the subjects should be taught through the arts and that rather than being an add on, they were central to creating an educated human being. The continued struggle for saving the arts shows you how influential my article was, but I stick with the premise. There are some things in education that are central.

The curriculum of school has sometimes been described as a Christmas tree with various ornaments being added to the point that the bough is breaking. I would like to focus, not on the ornaments, but the tree itself. Yes, most the of things we teach in school are important, at least to someone. So it is hard to argue against the individual ornaments, but I would like for us to focus on the tree itself because it is the tree that that holds all the pieces together.

As I said, I see the arts as playing the critical role of allowing education to separate itself from simple training. However, I think there is something that is even more central to the role of educating the young and that is what is commonly called social and emotional learning. The arts allow us to become human. Social and emotional learning acknowledges that we are human.

There is a concept in quantum physics that has baffled scientists and that is the question of what holds the universe together. Einstein spent much of his life trying to understand what tied it all together. Since most of space is not made up of “stuff,” but rather seems empty, what keeps everything from flying apart? At the micro level, the same question arises of what holds the neutrons and protons together? Scientists have recently come up with their answer to the problem that plagued Einstein. It is the notion of “gluon” which they use to explain how everything hangs together. Gluon keeps the universe running. At the macro level, it is that “dark matter” (gluon at a grand scale, if you will) that takes up the space of space. We have now officially exceeded my understanding of this phenomenon but I think it serves as an apt metaphor.

I would argue that the gluon of education is the area we commonly think of as social, emotional learning. If I am right, we have taken a really bad turn with how we have approached social and emotional learning historically. We have allowed it to be treated as another

subject, just as what has happened to the arts. It has become another ornament for the tree instead of understanding it is the tree. We should make certain that it is embedded firmly in the DNA of what happens in school and that it is understood that NOTHING else that happens in school will work unless this basic “force” is not understood, affirmed and supported.

Social and emotional learning has to be immersed in every aspect of the school experience. Research is pretty clear that good things happen when it is present and bad things happen when it is not. Educators have a hard time standing up for the things we know to be true because the forces of those things that are not true are so powerful. But this is crucial. If we continue down the path of what I call “more and harder” with school reform without taking the time to put all that is being demanded into the context of what it means to be human, not only will we fail to succeed, we will fail our society.

Social and emotional learning isn’t just another subject that we should fight to keep. It is the very essence of what education is about. If we cannot realize what our children feel trumps everything else, they will never truly learn to think.