



Why teach music: Multiple Choice or Multiple Ways of Learning

by Sam Tsugawa • UMEA President

In my Fall 2013 *Utah Music Educators Journal* article, I introduced NAFME's advocacy campaign "Music Education: Orchestrating Success." This campaign defines and clarifies our advocacy message:

- Music has a demonstrable positive impact on learning
- Music's benefits go beyond school
- As music educators, we must lead everyone to take music education seriously
- NAFME and UMEA is the unifying force for music education.

In my Winter 2014 journal article, I argued that music benefits go beyond school. I supported this premise by citing how music participation influenced successful and influential people such as former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan. The purpose of this article is to continue the argument that music has demonstrable positive impact on learning. In stating my case, I hope to further define our advocacy message and to provoke further dialogue about our message.

Answering the Provocative Questions: What is Music's Impact on Learning?

Why do we teach music? As music educators, we have first-hand experience of the positive effect that music and music making has in our lives and in the lives of our students. Research affirms our anecdotal observations of music's positive influence on students. Over the last two decades, various studies in music education and arts education research attempt to answer provocative questions on music and music making's effect on schools and learning. These research questions include:

- Does music making improve self-esteem and student's belief that they will be successful in school?¹
- Does active music making improve spatial reasoning?²
- What effect does music instruction have on children's spatial, verbal, and quantitative skills?³
- What kind of learning takes place when student's are involved in creating and making music?⁴
- Does involvement in the arts boost general academic performance?⁵

The findings of these and other arts and music education studies imply that music making among school children has a demonstrable positive impact on overall learning. Scripp affirms that recent and current "research now offers a theoretical basis for, and growing evidence of the significant effects of learning shared between music and other measures of academic

achievement."⁶ Although we should avoid making vast causal claims, the consistent positive correlation across all studies cannot be ignored.

Music and the Arts Makes Schools Better

In Roxbury, MA, Orchard Gardens K-8 School experienced a confluence of challenges and problems that labeled the school as one of the worst performing schools in the state of Massachusetts. Opened in 2003, parents, district officials, and community leaders planned for Orchard Gardens to be a school centering on the arts. They built art studios, music rooms, dance rooms, and a plush theater. However, the dream of an arts centered school never materialized as the dance and music rooms became storage rooms, and the instrument cases were rarely opened. Instead of art, theater and music teachers, more guards were hired to quell the increasing security problems at the inner city school. Discipline problems lead to violence that lead to poor attendance and declining test scores. No one wanted to work at Orchard Gardens as administrative and faculty turnover became a problem. With six principals in seven years, faculty and staff from other schools in the district labeled Orchard Gardens a "career killer" for anyone who dared to lead the struggling school.

This perception changed when Andrew Bott took over in 2010. As soon as Bott arrived, he fired all but a few security personnel, took out the metal detectors and reinvested the money spent on security (over \$100,000 per year) into the arts. "A lot of people questioned my decision to shift security money to an arts program," said Bott. However three years later, the dance and music rooms have been resurrected, and more kids are drawing, dancing, singing and playing an instrument at Orchard Gardens. Committed to using the arts as a means to improve academic improvement, Orchard Gardens went from one of the worst performing schools to one of the most improved schools in the entire state. The school went from feeling like a prison to looking like an art museum and sounding like a concert hall. "We still have problems," added Bott. "We have typical adolescent problems, and our test scores are still below average in some areas, but we are definitely on the right path."⁷

Orchard Gardens' neglect of its arts programs for its first seven years may have resulted in its desensitization and prisonlike feel. Consequently, its arts resurgence in 2010 may be its salvation. Orchard Gardens teachers report that art, theater, and music have kept students emotionally engaged as well as academically engaged. Fowler may have had schools like Orchard Gardens in mind when he wrote, "There are many indications that schools

have failed to cultivate and refine the sensibilities. In the process of overselling science, mathematics and technology as panaceas of commerce, schools have denied students something precious: access to their expressive/communicative being and their participation in creating their own world.”⁸

Beyond the Bubbles

One of the teachers at Orchard Gardens articulated his reasoning for increased student engagement, improved academic performance and overall school improvement. According to art teacher Chris Plunkett, “Students need more than test prep. They can’t just believe that there is only one answer to every problem. The arts teach that there are more than one right answer to a problem. Students engage more in the learning process (through the arts). This increased engagement by students helps improve the entire school.”

As music educators I would assert that we believe the “true mission of education lies in shaping students beyond the scores, and ‘bubble tests’ can only measure so much.”⁹ Music has a demonstrable positive impact on learning that: a) improves academic achievement and b) transcends the clinical culture of high-stakes testing by providing students with creative and divergent ways of learning not fostered in courses covered by standardized tests. Fowler affirms our position that the music and the arts “teach divergent rather than convergent thinking. They ask students to come up with different, rather than similar solutions. Unlike many other subjects, the arts usually do not demand one correct response.”¹⁰

Our message of advocacy centers around Aristotle’s proposition that “we must first seek to answer whether music is to be placed in education or not, and what power it has.”¹¹ As we advocate for our craft as a viable and important element in teaching and learning, our message is, “Music has a powerful

and positive impact on learning and in the personal lives of students.” Research supports music’s impact on learning, brain development, improved cognition and student engagement; in other words, music’s effect “inside the bubbles.” Consequently, music’s impact in the personal lives of students shows what students learn “beyond the bubbles,” transcending multiple choice with multiple ways of knowing.

Footnotes:

- ¹ John Roy Kennedy, *The Effects of Musical Performance, Rational Emotive Therapy and Various Experience on Self-Efficacy and Self-Esteem of Juvenile Delinquents and Disadvantaged Children*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 1998.
- ² Lois Hetland, “Learning to Make Music Enhances Spatial Reasoning.” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Fall 2000, 34 (3-4): 179-238.
- ³ Eugenia Costa-Giomi, “The Effects of Three Years of Piano Instruction on Children’s Cognitive Development,” *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 1999, 47 (3): 198-212.
- ⁴ Denise Palmer Wolf, “Why the Arts Matter in Education Or Just What Do Children Learn When They Create and Opera?”, In *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning*, ed. E. Fiske, (Arts Education Partnership, Washington D.C., 1999): 92-98.
- ⁵ John Harland, Kay Kinder, Pippa Lord, Alison Scott, Ian Schagen, Jo Haynes, with Linda Cusworth, Richard White, and Riana Paola, *Arts Education in Secondary Schools: Effects and Effectiveness*, National Foundation for Educational Research, Berkshire, UK, October 2000.
- ⁶ Larry Scrip, “An Overview of Research on Music and Learning,” In *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development*, ed. Richard Deasy, (Arts Education Partnership, Washington D.C.): 132-136.
- ⁷ Katy Tur, reporter, “Principal Fires Security Guards to Hire Arts Teachers—and Transforms School,” *NBC Nightly News*, NBC, May 1, 2013.
- ⁸ Charles Fowler, *Strong Arts, Strong Schools: The Promising Potential and Short-sighted Disregard of the Arts in American Schools* (New York: Oxford, 1996), 12.
- ⁹ NAFME: National Association for Music Education, “Broaderminded: Think Beyond the Bubbles,” <http://broaderminded.com>, (March 2, 2014).
- ¹⁰ Fowler, 47.
- ¹¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, Part V.

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