

Philosophy of Music Education

Cheri L. Kilanowski

University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh

March 2007

Music is defined as “the art of organizing or arranging sounds into meaningful patterns or forms, usually involving pitch, harmony, and rhythm,” (Kellerman, 1972, p. 629). Music is much more than the sum of its parts. Creating and moving to music is part of what makes us human. The people of the world have incorporated music into their everyday lives for eons. From birthdays to holidays to doing homework to death, people of the world celebrate, relax, think, and cry to music. If the world is to truly understand and appreciate what they are hearing, then the fundamentals and performance of music must be taught from childhood on.

Current research shows that music helps develop the entire brain from infancy. Speech, memory, body rhythms and movement are developed and enhanced by exposure to music. By the time children are in high school they are experts at knowing what they want to listen to (Levitin, 2006). The middle school years are a time for exploration, a perfect time to catch students before their minds are completely set and show them the glories of many kinds of music.

Schools were designed to educate and expose children to the knowledge they need to survive in the world. Music has been part of curriculums because teachers realized its necessity to life and its power to help teach. Learning the ABC’s, how to count in Spanish, or how a bill is passed in government have all been made easier to understand and remember because music comes naturally to children.

The previous examples are one way music is used in schools. To get a full appreciation of music, general music must be taught all the way through the students’ school years.

In a perfect school system general music classes would be required of all students, including band, orchestra, and choir students. Performing groups teach many things, but their time and repertoire are limited. Having required general music gives students the background needed to play and sing and a far superior rounded music education.

General music can teach composition, theory, music history along with keyboard, guitar, hand chimes, or even mariachi and steel drums. Exposing students to many varieties of music will have a lasting effect on their lives.

One style of teaching music that has the potential to influence students in many ways is world music. The multi-ethnic make up of the modern classroom gives teachers a launching pad to teach musical concepts by using the music of diverse cultures. Sharing cultures, celebrating diversity, and learning how music sounds, is put together, and used around the world, teaches students that music is a universal language. World music has the added advantage of being in the curriculum of several basal series music text books. These texts provide the resources and a set curriculum that meets national standards for music teachers to use and adapt as needed.

Having required general music K-12 does pose some challenges for the music educator. Convincing administrators of equipment needs and devising many curriculums and assessments for large classes of diverse students are a few of these challenges.

Inclusion of special needs learners will be challenging also. In the past special learners were separated from the regular school because they were thought to have too many problems to be able to benefit from the regular classroom. Fortunately, time has brought change and laws to include this minority. In 1975 with the passage of PL94-142, special learners were given the right to take their place in public schools and make these

schools whole. The law assures a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. Meaning, classes available to the general student population of a school are also available to special needs students. Making the lessons of music available in many ways is just the beginning to including all students. Music teachers need to be represented at Individualized Educational Program, or IEP, meetings. Putting music into a student's plan will assure that services and aids provided to the student will also be available during music classes. Placing special learners into a music class out of convenience or without their para-professionals is a disservice to the student, class, and teacher. Being on a student's team will show a teacher's concern and willingness to work with others to help students. The team can also help plan strategies and adaptations to make music classes meaningful and fun for all students. Thinking outside the box, having the flexibility to adapt or change, the courage not to fear differences, and the tenacity to keep sending the message that music is important and needs to be included in the planning and programs of special learners are key to the music educator's success. To meet the requirements of the law all teachers have to work as a team and realize that the students deserve a school's collective best.

Another challenge with requiring general music is meeting the national standards requirement of showing student progress. Assessment fulfills this requirement by allowing teachers to document what students have learned. This evidence can then be used to show parents, administrations, and the students what progress has been made. Assessment also allows the teacher to see what content students are ready to learn and how well lesson objectives were met.

Using many forms of assessment in the classroom will allow for fairness in testing. Fairness is “not giving advantages to factors that are irrelevant to the learning process” (Rodriguez, 2001). Allowing special needs learners, students of different ethnic backgrounds, and gender or ages to have help or take an alternative assessment to show what they have learned (Rodriguez, 2001) keeps the grading equitable. Also, students that have a difficult time with written tests but excel at performance tests or do outstanding work because they are keeping it in a portfolio will benefit by having a variety of assessments to measure their progress.

Most importantly assessment allows a teacher to evaluate what they are teaching and how it is understood by the students. Thoughtful teachers use the results to guide their everyday instruction.

Technology is an ever changing challenge for music educators. Most are familiar with tape recorders, computers, and synthesizers. However, sequencers, multi track mixers, or samplers may be frightening until the time is taken to learn and master these technologies. These tools can be a “strong and motivating force in the classroom by engaging adolescent learners and unleashing their creative potential” (Moore, 2001, p.91).

In today’s market place music teachers have an amazing assortment of “toys” to choose from. From software that allows a student to drill and learn musical concepts to the other end of the spectrum, where sophisticated music labs allow students to create their own music, technology can be put to good use in the classroom. Students now days are very savvy about electronics. Technology also allows teachers to organize the stacks of paperwork required to keep a program growing. Keeping track of attendance,

who has what uniform, or finding and ordering lost parts to concert music are just a beginning. Teachers that don't incorporate the best technology the school district will fund are missing a great opportunity to challenge students in an arena that they are already comfortable in.

To meet all of today's challenges in music education requires many things of the music teacher: flexibility, organization, patience, the ability to quickly adapt, a deep passion for teaching children, and the unshakable belief that music is absolutely essential for every student in school. This is a starting point for a good music teacher. To become a master teacher some day the good teacher must push themselves into a leadership position in the school and community by being strong, confident, a cultural source of information, empathetic of student's difficulties and a strong advocate for their students and programs.

“Throughout most of the world and for most of human history, music was as natural an activity as breathing and walking and everyone participated” (Levitin, 2006, p.6). If music educators don't approach their subject with this in mind their programs could be in serious jeopardy in the near future. Music needs to be relevant and indispensable to parents, administrators, government, and of course, the students to survive. Without music everyone loses access to beauty, culture, excitement, self confidence, aesthetics, and emotion. All of which we as humans need to survive.

References

Kellerman, D. F. (Ed.). (1972). *The new Grolier Webster international dictionary of the English language* (Vol. 1). New York: Grolier Inc.

Levitin, D. J. (2006). *This is your brain on music: The science of a human obsession*. New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

Moore, B. (2001). Technology in the middle school, A powerful potential. In J. Hinckley (Ed.), *Music at the middle school level: Building strong programs* (pp. 91-94). Reston, Virginia: MENC: The National Association for Music Education.

Rodriguez, C.A. (2001). Assessment FAQ's for music education. *Spotlight on assessment in music education* (pp. 67-69). Reston, Virginia: MENC: The National Association for Music Education.