

The Importance of Music Education

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Deciding what is taught in American schools is the province of teachers, principals, local school boards, state education agencies, regional accrediting bodies, and, in the case of colleges and universities, department, college, and institutional curriculum committees. Academic subject selection goes beyond just deciding what is best for students to learn; factors such as school finances, staff training and skills, local traditions, and community and parental support also impact such decisions. Various subjects have had a centuries old stability in the schools such as mathematics, reading, science, English, and history. Others subjects are common but not universal over time or place such as economics, foreign languages, and the arts.

In the past fifty years, instruction in the arts have alternately ascended and descended in their popularity, vitality, and support, especially in the K-12 grades. Music has taken some of the biggest and more frequent cuts among the arts due, in great part, to the high costs of sheet music and instrument purchase and repair. Other arts instruction such as visual arts, dance, and choir have suffered greatly from time to time, but music seems to have taken the greatest hit. It is the author's position that music is among the most important subjects taught in our schools; it is important physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially, and spiritually. Music ought not be high on anyone's list for excising when schools are faced with financial woes. All efforts need to be taken by parents, teachers, administrators, and the public to keep music in the curriculum.

Classroom instruction includes, as it should, teaching values as well as content.¹ The Power Chord Academy² teaches and extols the virtues of several values learned as a result of musical learning and performance; these values include: *self discipline*, one needs to learn and be self disciplined to practice, take instruction and criticism, and to perform whether solo or as a member of a group; *dedication*, musicians need to be dedicated in order to spend the necessary time to learn and perform music; *teamwork*, in multi-person performances, musicians have to work as a team for their performance to be appreciated and valued; *knowledge*, studying music demands that one also learn some level of music theory, history, and cultural sensitivity; *continuous improvement*, musicians almost universally seek to always improve their skills and their musical repertoire; *self confidence*, being able to perform musically, to entertain

audiences, and to understand and follow a composer's intentions offer the musician a significant boost in self confidence, one that transfers into all of life's venues; *humility*, being able to be the performer without making one's self the center of attention rather than the music and being able to be a vicarious extension of original composer's work instills a sense of humility in musicians; *hard work*, it takes significant hard work to master good musicianship; *goal setting*, successful and accomplished musical performance and practice require goal setting; goals for sharpening skills, taking on more demanding and sophisticated performances, keeping physically and mentally fit, and striving to remain audience centered.; and *practice*; practice is both the bane and essence of quality musicianship. Arthur Rubenstein, the late renowned concert pianist, once said in an interview that he practiced more as an accomplished artist than he did when learning his craft. These values are vital for people to learn. Few other school subjects offer such a wide and utilitarian value palette.

The National Association For Music Education (NAMC) suggests in their Music Education Facts and Figures website³ four categories of benefits of music education; these categories are: success in society, success in school, success in developing intelligence, and success in life.⁴ Select examples of these benefits follow below.

In the group labeled success in society, NAMC cites the Texas Commission on Drugs and Alcohol Abuse Report as reported in the January 1988 Houston Chronicle that said "Secondary students who participated in band or orchestra reported the lowest lifetime and current use of all substances (alcohol, tobacco, [and] illicit drugs).⁵ Any activity that reduces substance abuse ought be viewed as a worthy one. NAMC also cites Michael Greene, Recording Academy President and CEO of the 42nd Annual Grammy Awards, February 2000 as claiming "...scientific evidence proves that an education in the arts makes better math and science students, enhances spatial intelligence in newborns, ... and are a compelling solution to teen violence."⁶ An activity that both increases intellectual development and success and aids in social control certainly needs to be seen as most worthy of inclusion in the curriculum. The American Arts Alliance Fact Sheet, October 1996 is cited by NAMC as asserting the fact that the arts aid in creating jobs and increasing the quality of life for communities.⁷

In the group labeled success in school, NAMC cites the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, Title IX, part A, Sec. 9101 (11) as including the arts as a vital component of a school education.⁸ The College

Entrance Examination Board, 2001 report College-Bound Seniors National Report: Profile of SAT Program Test Takers is cited by NAMC reports that students involved in music education score significantly higher on their SATs.⁹ NAMC also reports that the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 followed up in 1992 indicates that music education involvement reduces disruptive students in the school. This same NELS study reports musically involved students receive more academic honors than do non-musically involved students.¹⁰

In the group labeled success in developing intelligence, NAMC quotes Dr. John J. Ratey, M.D. as saying “Dedicated [music] practice... can have a great payoff for lifelong attention skills, and an ability for self knowledge and expression.¹¹ Neurological research is cited showing music education enhances abstract reasoning needed in learning math and science.¹² Researchers found that “lessons on song bells (a standard classroom instrument) led to significant improvement of spatial-temporal scores for three- and four-year olds.¹³ NAMC relates an Auburn University study that reports “significant increases in overall self-concept of at-risk children participating in arts programs that included music...as measured by the Piers-Harris Children’s Self Concept Scale.¹⁴ Music is thus shown to cross disciplines in aiding students development and performance and these benefits seem to transfer and enhance later lifetime needs.

In the group labeled success in life, NAMC quotes Michael E. DeBakey, M.D. a leading heart surgeon with maintaining “Studying music encourages self-discipline and diligence ... promotes self expression, and provides self gratification while giving pleasure to others. He also reminds us that “medicine has a proven healing effect on patients.”¹⁵ Ted Turner, CNN founder, is quoted as stating “Music has a great power for bringing people together. With so many forces in this world acting to drive wedges between people, it’s important to preserve those things that help us experience our common humanity.”¹⁶ “The nation’s top business executives agree that arts education programs can help repair weaknesses in American education and better prepare workers for the 21st century.”¹⁷ These benefits seem so compelling that it is appalling that we would consider dropping music from the curriculum.

With the great and mounting costs in money, staffing, remedial efforts, and dropout rates, saving and enhancing music in the curriculum seems the sensible, even necessary move to make. There needs to be greater effort made by parents, teachers, school administrators, and accrediting agencies to promote and illustrate the multi-layered benefits of music education. Media outlets need to be alerted to these benefits.

We can not afford to allow a proven educational experience to be used as a political instrument or to be labeled, as it has sadly been in some arenas, as a frivolous luxury. Music education is not only for the wealthier schools; it is fit for all schools. We must promote, explain, and act to get music to all our students.

In numerous discussions over the years with colleagues and friends, many other valued and experienced advantages to music education have emerged; among these advantages are: music teaches a transfer of abstractions (notes) into concrete realities (music); music teaches patience with one's self and with others as well as with tasks; music performance aids in building and refining coordination and grace; music aids in mental coordination and timing; any instruction in the arts advances a sense of aesthetics; music teaches one about history and culture and builds tolerance of and appreciation of other peoples; music offers useful sensory stimulation; so much so that there are music therapists who use music to calm, quiet, and heal patients; the arts foster greater social interaction; music incorporates a spiritual dimension to life; musical performance opens a vehicle for improvising; and performance allows the musician to learn to accept and recognize the value of criticism.¹⁸

Endnotes

¹ See Arthur J. Schwartz. (2000, June 9). It's Not Too Late To Teach College Students About Values. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. A68. Schwartz advocates teaching values at all educational levels.

² This organization provides camps for children to learn and perform music. See website URL: <http://www.powerchordacadamy.com/newSite/values.cfm> for more information.

³ National Association for Music Education <http://www.menc.org/information/advocate/facts.html>

⁴ NAMC, p. 1.

⁵ NAMC, p. 2.

⁶ NAMC, p. 2.

⁷ NAMC, p. 2.

⁸ NAMC, p. 3.

⁹ NAMC, p. 3.

¹⁰ NAMC, p.3.

¹¹ John J. Ratey. (2001). *A User's Guide to the Brain*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Cited in NAMC, p. 4.

¹² *Neurological Research*, vol. 19, February 1997 as cited in NAMC, p. 4.

¹³ J.E. Gromko and A.S. Poorman. (1998). The Effect of Music Training on Preschooler's Spatial-Temporal Task Performance. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 46: 173-181 as cited in NAMC, p. 5.

¹⁴ N.H. Barry. (1992). Project ARISE: Meeting the Needs of Disadvantaged Students Through the Arts, as cited in NAMC, p. 6.

¹⁵ NAMC, p. 7.

¹⁶ NAMC, p. 7.

¹⁷ The Changing Workplace Is Changing Our View of Education. *Business Week*, October, 1996, as cited in NAMC, p. 6.

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