

# Chapter 13

## Music in Schools: The Importance of Meaningful Relationships in Music Education



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**Abstract** Having a love of music within my home environment and experience using music within educational settings, I decided to investigate the impact a school music programme could have on children. Through an ethnographic process, I observed the interactions between staff and students as they prepared for a concert. What became apparent during my observations was that it was not just the musical curricula or students' proficiency with instruments that made effective programmes rather it was the interpersonal relationship between staff and students that allowed for an effective programme. By forming strong bonds through music, educators were able to create an environment where children, even those from disadvantaged backgrounds, felt empowered and issues such as behaviour management were lessened owing to the strong connections formed.

Journal entry, Christie Downs, South Australia:

When I walked into the music room, there were 50 students, lined up behind xylophones, keyboards, guitars, drum kits and microphones. They were mid-song, and while certainly not concert quality, they were definitely a tight band for their age. They finished up their song, a Coldplay medley, and the Principal asked them what they would like to play next. Hands shot up, ready with suggestions. He pointed to one and was answered with an enthusiastic "Reckless"! There were noises of agreement, and the Principal said: "'Reckless' it is"! This song is more than 30 years old, so it was fascinating to me that these kids, aged between 8 and 13 were so keen to play it. What was even more fascinating was the sudden hive of activity once the song was chosen. Most of the students leaped up from their current instrument and raced to another position, for example, some keyboard players moved to guitars or mics, xylophones moved to drums or keyboards, singers to drums and guitars. They were so quick! Within a couple of minutes, the whole band was a different creature, and they were ready to play. The band did an amazing job of "Reckless", and an incredible job of Vance Joy's "Fire and the flood", after another quick change of instruments. I found myself absolutely awestruck that one adult could wrangle 50 kids into a quality band with barely a word.

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## **Introduction**

Throughout my 25-day placement, I also had the chance to see a production rehearsal and was equally inspired. Unfortunately, I did not get a lot of opportunities to spend time with the band other than this particular practice. However, in the weeks following my placement I chose to complete my community service for my Bachelor of Education at the same school, working with the band, the production and the school's Breakfast Club programme, giving me greater insight into the benefits of these excellent programmes. I walked away incredibly inspired and disappointed that my time with the school would be diminished by the need to complete my final pre-service placement. Moreover, I walked away with a greater understanding of music education.

## **The “Facts” About Music Education**

It is easy to find research on music education, but it is harder to get a clear answer. Some research notes improved academic outcomes, with studies showing that music instruction appears to enhance verbal memory ability (Rickard et al. 2010), and that language development, in both native English speakers and EAL/D learners, can be positively influenced by music lessons (Paquette and Rieg 2008). Other research suggests that there are positive impacts on students' overall well-being, self-identity and tolerance, student engagement and attendance if an effective music programme is in place (Crooke and McFerran 2014; Power 2014).

However, it is apparent that the current research is relatively sparse, and not always well executed (Crooke and McFerran 2014). At the same time, it is also clear that there are massive amounts of anecdotal evidence supporting music programmes, and in reality, teachers are often in the best position to make these kinds of judgements, being on the coalface as it were. While the formal studies are at times contradictory, this is less often the case with anecdotal research, which in general is supportive of music curriculums (Paquette and Rieg 2008).

## **I Thought I Knew**

As an aspiring educator, both as a volunteer for 11 years and an education student, I thought I knew all about the benefits that can be gained from including music programmes in schools. I had been involved in a number of projects during my years as a volunteer, including coordinating choirs for school musicals, teaching a Learning Assistance Programme (LAP), student ukulele and recorder and running a lunchtime singalong session. In fact, one of my first experiences as a school volunteer involved helping my initial LAP student to write a fun song, giving her confidence in her spelling and writing abilities.

I had also seen the negative effects that less than ideal music teachers could have. My son, despite being surrounded by music in my home, had nothing positive to say about music class during his primary school years, due to two music teachers. Both spent a lot of time yelling, gave predominantly negative feedback and expected students of all ages to perform like veteran musicians, rather than like children having fun with sounds and beat. Naturally, students of both were more often than not cringing as they went to class and developed a dislike of music as a result of their teaching styles. Fortunately, my son was exposed to positive music experiences at home, and as he grew older came to enjoy music, continuing with school classes until Year 10. Unfortunately, not all students have these positive music experiences available to counteract negative experiences with music teachers in primary school.

I have always had a firm belief that the famously misquoted line, “music soothes the savage beast”, was relevant to all aspects of life, and especially so in education. There are few people who have no interest in music, whether as listeners or performers, and the same applies to children. In my capacity as a volunteer and pre-service teacher, I am yet to find a student who did not react positively to music, as long as it was presented to them in a positive way. Therefore, throughout my journey as an educator, I have taken all opportunities to include music into the curriculum wherever appropriate and have been looking forward to taking this further as a teacher. However, I do not think I could ever have imagined a music programme as inspirational as that run, almost singlehandedly, by the Principal at my placement school.

## **Now I Know**

During the course of my placement, I was able to, at least briefly, become quite involved with the band and the production. In fact, I was fortunate enough to be in charge of filming the production’s Friday night performance and attended a number of band sessions. I had the opportunity to see first-hand the benefits of the music programmes, as well as being able to discuss them with the Principal—the driving force behind these programmes.

The most important lesson that I learned during my time at the school was that a music curriculum is not enough. For music programmes to provide a wide range of benefits that are possible, dedicated staff, patience and an understanding of the individual needs of the students are also needed. It is clear that the music programmes themselves are only a small part of the overall experience, with a range of other factors equally important.

Having told the Principal how inspired I was by his ability to run a band session involving 50 students with barely a word spoken to keep them “in line”, he was quite humble and explained that this was something he had been doing for a number of years. The band consists of students from Year 3 to Year 7. Over the course of their schooling, these students learn a number of instruments, and my observations indicate that the Principal works with them as fellow musicians, rather than simply as students over whom he has authority. He has worked tirelessly to build up the

band programme, working with small groups of students to teach them the basics of each instrument. In turn, these students help him to teach children who were new to the band, acting as instructors as well as band members.

The school production, with script, music and lyrics entirely his work, was just the latest of 19 years of productions for the Principal. They are clearly a labour of love for him. However, it is also clear that it is as much about the students as it was about the writing. He told me proudly that the productions were renowned throughout the state, and that the matinee sessions were always full, with other primary schools attending. We also discussed the band, and the importance of learning an instrument, particularly given that most of the students at this school come from homes where music lessons are an unaffordable dream. I pointed out that band would stand the students in good stead for high school, but sadly he informed me that the local high school had a less than a quality music programme. This is one of the unfortunate realities in low socio-economic schools, where funding is tightly managed and usually directed at academic programmes. In fact, it is only due to private donations that the school band has such a wide range of instruments at their fingertips.

One of the greatest benefits of these programmes at this school, particularly given the difficult backgrounds of many of the students, is the relationships that are formed. Watching the students work with the Principal, it was clear that there was a high level of respect on both sides. This was made even more apparent by the differences in student attitudes. The younger students were more likely to be less focused and more disruptive, although these behaviours were significantly less marked than the behavioural issues I had observed in the classroom during my pre-service placement. It was apparent that the older the student was, the more focused and appropriately behaved they were. This could be put down to age, however having dealt with some of these students in an academic setting, it was clear that age was not the only factor in play.

My observations of the band, as well as of the production cast, suggest that they had a close relationship with the Principal. Not as equals, given his level of authority, but not far from it. This allowed the students to truly collaborate with him—choosing songs for the band to play, suggestions for blocking of the production or offering new interpretations of the melody or harmony in the band. While the Principal was still an authority figure, he was also a real and relatable person with a shared interest. I believe that this explains the deeper relationships between Year 6 and Year 7 students and the Principal, as well as their better behaviour. The level of mutual respect that had developed between musicians over a number of years meant that there was little need to bridle against authority.

It was also heartening to see that students facing difficulties with academic subjects were able to build high levels of confidence by performing. One student, in particular, transformed on stage during his time in the production. A quietly spoken Year 7 boy, who was usually shy and guarded, became an incredibly talented performer far from lacking in confidence. In fact, with only a few hours' notice he took on an additional role, not only perfecting the lines but creating an incredible characterisation that was entirely different from his own role. To see this student blossom into a young man with the appearance of a seasoned performer, after seeing him in the schoolyard

with eyes downcast when speaking to adults, was a testament to the power of the programmes at this school to make a real difference in the lives of these students. Importantly, the Principal's response to my positive feedback about his performance attested to the two-way nature of this relationship, as his face lit up with pride and he talked enthusiastically about how far this boy had come.

I now know for sure what I have always suspected—a well-run music programme can have enormous benefits for children. This is even more relevant when applied to children who are facing some kind of life challenges, whether it be related to low socio-economic status, disability, abuse, or the wide range of other issues that children are too often faced with.

## **A Change in Perspective**

For most of my journey as an educator, I have thought of music as an incredible tool—one that the literature tells me can be used to improve literacy results and can stretch across the curriculum, from maths to art. However, after experiencing the inspiring programmes at my placement school, I have realised that I partly missed an important point. I had believed that the music itself was the most important factor, but I have now come to believe that the relationships that are formed while performing or consuming music are equally important. While the studies indicate that there are clear academic benefits to music instruction (Paquette and Rieg 2008; Rickard et al. 2010), the positive impact on students' well-being may well be more heavily influenced by the positive relationships formed with educators and other students.

Conversely, if negative relationships are formed, particularly with adults, music does not appear to have such a positive impact on students. I have experienced this phenomenon, having seen students exposed to very negative experiences in music classes, due to teachers who were more focused on the quality of the music performance than the enjoyment of the music making. I have seen students faced with this situation draw back from the musical experience, disliking going to music class, privately mocking the teacher and even at times teasing those who professed to enjoy the lesson. This has always saddened me, as I believe wholeheartedly in the value of music instruction. However, despite being a performer myself, I failed music in early high school, the only failing grade I have ever received, for much the same reasons. I realise now that that failure was less about my ability or even my interest in music than it was about the structure of the music programme and the lack of quality relationships with the instructors. Of course, I have continued to love music throughout my life, because I have been able to choose the people I have a musical relationship with, and form strong bonds.

## Of This Much I Am Sure

Having been fortunate enough to be involved in the inspiring music programmes at my placement school, I am sure of one thing. I will always continue to use music as an educational tool and look forward to forming powerful relationships with my future students. In my final placement, I was able to teach a number of music lessons with my class, and I was able to do so with a deeper understanding of a principle that I have intuitively applied to all areas of my educational journey—the importance of meaningful relationships with students. Not surprisingly, working with students as an instructor and collaborator, rather than as an authoritarian teacher, has led to quick success in my early lessons. Naturally, outside of the music classroom, this same principle should be applied, with teachers able to form collaborative relationships with their students that will allow them to most effectively discover their strengths and weaknesses to improve their academic outcomes.

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