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Music Can Foster Communication Skills in Middle School Students

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MUSIC CAN FOSTER COMMUNICATION
SKILLS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(Music Education)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2020

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ABSTRACT

Music is important to the development of well-being, and it is part of the reason I am who I am today. In my thesis, I will be discussing how music shaped me, and why I think it is important in the lives of our youth. I will specifically be focusing on how music serves as a form of communication, particularly in the lives of middle school students. I will be discussing how music can be a comfort to students as they transition to adulthood. I will give examples from my childhood development and from data collected through interviews with two middle school teachers about how music impacted them and has further helped them impact others. I include a literature review as well, and conclude with final points on how music can positively impact and grow the communication skills of middle schoolers.

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INTRODUCTION

Music was so important to me growing up. As a place of comfort, it helped my development, shaped me as a person and motivated me to do better academically. Since music has had such a huge impact on me, I felt driven to pursue the topic of how music affects the lives of middle school children, because this time is such a big part of our transition into adulthood as we begin to change physically, emotionally, and mentally. A middle school student could be defined as someone going through these changes of adolescence: "During this remarkable stage of the life cycle, young adolescents, 10- to 15-year-olds, experience rapid and significant developmental change... Research suggests distinctive characteristics of young adolescents with regard to their physical, cognitive, moral, psychological, and social-emotional development, as well as spiritual development," (paragraph 1 and 7 AMLE). Music can serve as a form of comfort to middle school students during this transitional time, because it allows them to properly communicate and express themselves in ways that words sometimes cannot.

Our individual personality traits start to really come through and develop in middle school. "Some kids navigate turbulence with spunk; some struggle with self-awareness and assertiveness. Don't expect them to figure everything out for themselves with little adult supervision. Middle school students are embarking on a two- or three-year journey and they will come out transformed,"(paragraph 3, Kantz). Most of the time, middle schoolers are struggling with common themes during this age such as finding a sense of self, as Kantz states. This can lead to common effects such as anxiety, narrow

self-perceptions, students being shy/quiet in social settings and a longing to connect with other people.

Music can be essential during this transition into adulthood, because it gives adolescents a chance to communicate in different ways. This allows them to enhance their communication skills and address elements of a middle school student's search for self. "Music plays a role in how children learn, communicate, and express themselves," (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry [AACAP], 2020). It opens doors to help children expand their horizons on an artistic level and thus further their communication skills as they establish new connections and friendships.

I come from a military family, and due to my father being on active duty, we constantly had to move around. Consequently, I was able to live in a plethora of different places, meet new people, and learn new things. There were quite a few positive aspects to moving around so much, such as: having the opportunity to meet new people, being able to experience different states and their cultural differences, and being able to try new sports at different schools.

Moving did have these benefits, but it also came with its challenges. As a result of my situation, I was always leaving behind friends and changing schools. I struggled a bit in school because I had to adjust to the district's coursework and expectations. Music was one field I felt I was able to de-stress in and even excel at. Music also helped me make friends within those communities, as I always got into the music-related extracurricular activities in these schools. I had no difficulty conversing with people and making new friends, but I felt that I was somewhat shy when it came to performing in front of people.

It was due to one of my teachers hearing me sing and encouraging me to branch out that I kept pursuing this interest, and it soon became a passion for me.

METHODS

I have met and learned from many experienced music instructors who are knowledgeable in the field of music and in working with children, and I determined they would be excellent resources for my thesis. For this thesis I went through the Institutional Review Board process for working with human subjects, and was able to interview two individuals who have experience as middle school music teachers. The first three questions I asked and their relevant responses that I have chosen to highlight are as follows (full list of questions in Appendix A):

1. What sparked your passion for music/ inspired you to become a music teacher?
 - A. Interviewee 1: “My mother was a piano teacher, and I loved how she was able to make an impact on students’ lives. Seeing this urged me to also pursue a career in music.”
 - B. Interviewee 2: “My father was a math teacher and it was always a joy to see him work with other students. I remember band/choir being my favorite courses, so when I was informed I could do music to earn money I was thrilled. Being able to impact students and do what I loved sounded like a good deal to me!”
2. What effect did music have on your upbringing/character development?
 - A. Interviewee A: “I noticed that music had a huge influence on me, I believe it fostered a good work ethic in me since it was on us to meet up with each other to rehearse our music.”

B. Interviewee B: “Oh yes, I think music for sure impacted me during my youth. It allowed me to meet people of different backgrounds and learn things about people I would not have learned elsewhere.”

3. What is your fondest middle school band/choir memory?

A. Interviewee A: “One of my fondest memories was when me and a couple friends had to meet up and learn how to sing and play a Simon and Garfunkel song. We got to perform it for all our parents, and all of the adults seemed to enjoy it.”

B. Interviewee B: “My fondest memory was probably when I learned I could actually do music and make a living. Getting paid for doing something I actually enjoy, how is that not amazing?”

I heard in their responses to the first three questions mention of middle school music memories that supported my claim that music experiences can have a lasting impact on individuals. Then in the final four questions, I saw the most notable links between middle school music and communication:

4. Do you feel that you made a lot of friends/connections through music programs that you would not have made otherwise?

A. Interviewee A: “Of course, as I said before we often met up outside of class to practice our parts. I remember that I was given the opportunity to play with the high school orchestra while I was in middle school, and this helped me make connections with older children as well.”

B. Interviewee B: “Yes, as I said before being in music programs you get to meet friends from different walks of life that you may not talk to in

another normal class setting. I still even keep in contact with some of my middle school acquaintances.”

5. How do/did you use music to impact the lives of your students every day in the classroom?

A. Interviewee A: “I think it is important to show students that music applies to all areas of life, so I focus on trying to connect music to other aspects of life like history. I have used songs to talk about the Civil Rights Movement, and this seems to help students better connect and remember what we discussed in class.”

B. Interviewee B: “I got the students to give back to the community in a way when we got the chance to go and visit Sarah’s House. This is a house that was built for people with cancer, where they could stay so they did not have to travel back and forth for treatment. I had the students document their experiences in a journal, and then had a musician friend come in. This friend was able to make songs out of these students’ journal entries, and when the students listened to the songs they could not help but feel a bit of pride. Just letting them be part of a process where they made something gave them a sense of accomplishment, and I think this is necessary to a child’s development.”

6. What observations have you made about the role of music in the lives of middle school students?

A. Interviewee A: “Middle school graduation was a huge deal in the town I taught in, and my fondest memory is the class graduation songs the kids

would perform. Even if students had not gotten along throughout the year, formed cliques, or had drama this all went away when they practiced and performed this song together. I think the music brought them together and created that sense of unity, and that was great to see.

B. Interviewee B: “ Like I said before with the Sarah’s House project, these kids felt pride in their work because they were able to contribute to something. Giving these kids a feeling of being needed or being able to assist someone is so important, because it builds self worth, values, and makes them better people. If we can do that through music why would we not do it?”

7. Have you noticed any differences in students who take music courses vs. those who do not?

A. Interviewee A: “ Definitely, like I mentioned before music created that sense of unity, so kids that were more involved in the school’s music programs were also more invested in the school.”

B. Interviewee B: “I mentioned this earlier, but I definitely believe that being involved in music courses helped build a lot of these students’ work ethics. No one is amazing at any instrument or activity when they first start, but if you keep practicing it is a given you will improve. I think seeing these kids build their determination and reach their goals helped me and them realize that music really does help students work harder.”

Both teachers shared responses that illustrated how music had been a primary source in their lives since they were young, particularly in helping them develop a sense of their connectedness with others. These quotes, in particular, supported my broader claims regarding the developmental impact of middle school music in terms of communicating and forming connections: “Music helped me make connections with other children,” or the quote, “Yes, as I stated before being in music programs you got to meet friends from different walks of life,” and even the quote, “I still keep in contact with some of my middle school acquaintances.”

LITERATURE REVIEW

I also considered scholarship related to middle school, particularly references I found regarding development, communication and connection. Joe Lautzenheiser in his article “WHY MUSIC? WHY BAND?” contends that music can aid in helping individuals express their thoughts and emotions. “Music is a language that is universal to all, because it allows us to connect with one another and accurately portray how we are feeling,”(1, Lautzenheiser). This could mean that if a student is struggling to articulate their words, they could use music as a substitute form of communication. The quote by Lautzenheiser can also apply to students from different cultural backgrounds as they transition into the American school systems. Though learning English may prove challenging for a non-English speaking student, music could be an area where this student can excel because it is understood worldwide.

I remember when I was in high school and my history teacher showed us spirituals from the Civil War Era to help us understand the heartaches the slaves of that time had to endure. Spirituals are songs that the slaves would sing that depicted the oppression they experienced. Our teacher tasked us with the assignment of looking at the lyrics of songs such as “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” so we could look at the meaning behind the text. One portion of the song lyrics read, “If you get there before I do, Coming for to carry me home, Tell all my friends I'm coming too, Coming for to carry me home,” and my teacher and the class interpreted this as the slaves’ singing about the freedom from their slavery that they could accomplish through death. I felt that information from this portion of the class was easier to retain, because this teacher had utilized music to

engage us in the lessons. The songs we discussed helped us empathize with the slaves in bondage at the time, and I felt it made us care and gain more of an emotional investment in what was being taught.

Developing a child's creativity skills in the classroom is important for a few reasons: it is a safe environment where they are less likely to be judged, and music can help build a developing student's self-esteem so they feel less scared of being judged. Like any other adolescent, I struggled to find myself and be confident in myself growing up. I loved to sing and play music on my guitar in my free time during my adolescence, and my music teacher, Mrs. Tousignaut, was actually the one who pushed me to try singing in front of other people. I remember feeling hesitant at first, because performing music in front of people means to be vulnerable and in a sense expose yourself. You are not just singing or playing a piece in front of people, you are conveying emotions that you are feeling, and they could either be well received or misunderstood.

I think the best advice my teacher gave me was to sing to the students, but remember that the person I am singing for should be myself. Mrs. Tousignaut told me to try singing as if no one else were there, and would even make me close my eyes when I sang so I could better pretend that no one was around. I did this for awhile until it became comfortable enough to look at the people I was singing to, and I finally got to the point where I accepted that it was all right to be a little vulnerable in front of people. This vulnerability allows students to discover their own creativity, which Elizabeth McAnally contends in her book, *Middle School General Music*. "Music can help students discover and develop their own creativity," (1, McAnally). This creativity can also be used as a

channel to help students better communicate, as they learn to properly convey emotions in a comfortable and natural setting.

The literature also supports that music can be used to build and communicate a student's self-worth, and this is a point Robert Williams makes in his article "How Listening to Music Will Help Your Self-Confidence." "The notion of self-confidence relates to self-assurance in one's personal judgment, abilities, strength, and more. Self-belief has been directly connected to self-esteem, and music has a direct effect on our self-esteem." (paragraph 3, Williams.) Music allows students to develop a stronger sense of self, which is of central importance to middle school students.

Music also connects to other aspects of life, and should not be viewed as a separate entity. "Rather than being an isolated strand, music is part of a complex web of human understanding. To fully understand the discipline of music, our students need to see how it is connected to personal experiences, daily life, history and culture, mathematical principles, scientific laws and varied forms of artistic expression," (94 , McAnally). McAnally's statement is accurate in making the point that music can help intertwine all aspects of our lives, and thus shows students music's role in communicating creativity. This statement can also be used to help students see how music can help in communicating connectivity.

Furthermore, music can be used to enhance memory and thus connectivity, across abilities. Some teachers, such as Jami Jorgesen of Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School located in Hayward CA, have utilized music to help teach their students math principles. Jones says, "Information set to song is easier to remember, and setting math concepts to songs can help break it down/explain it better to students," (Jones,1). Jami's students

exam results also seem to support her theory, as 23 out of 40 of her students received a perfect score on their Smarter Balance Exams. This example can help support the claim that music can be beneficial in the classroom setting and utilized to aid study habits, and to connect to content.

“Music activates three different centers of the brain at the same time: language, hearing, and rhythmic motor control. By inducing emotions, it also creates a heightened condition of awareness and mental acuity. Words paired with music are far easier to retain. As an example, most of us can remember the words and meanings of songs we haven't heard for years. Isn't it interesting how you still remember your ABCs?” (paragraph 3, Elias). Music can not only be helpful to neurotypical students, but it can also aid our students that have learning disabilities: “They are just learning how to be free and expressing themselves that way freely” (Westervelt, Eric, 2014 paragraph 5). This quote comes from an article about a high school music group for special needs teens, and in the article the students gave accounts of being fond of their teacher, feeling safe in the provided environment, and feeling accepted for who they were, which is so important to middle schoolers.

Music has also been used to help individuals with disabilities function better socially, and writers such as Cathy Wong point this out in her article, “The Benefits of Music Therapy.”: “Music has become widely used and important parts of treatment for people with diagnoses on the autism spectrum disorder, helping them engage, calm and communicate.” Music therapists implement music as a tool to assist those with disabilities or conditions such as autism, depression, and anxiety. “Music therapists are trained in more than music; their education often covers a wide range of clinical skills,

including communication, cognitive neuroscience, psychological disorders, as well as chronic illness and pain management,”(paragraph 3, Wong). One can logically conclude from these statements that music benefits are applicable to all students. Anyone who listens to music can gain cognitive and social benefits from their experience.

Another way music helps students with communication issues is by alleviating anxiety. Many children have some form of social anxiety, or difficulty interacting with others in social settings. “Music has positive effects on people's emotions and creativity. When we sing together, we synchronize our breathing and feel more connected,” (paragraph 3, Elias). Music has the ability to bring people together, and this opens doors to new friendships, relationships, and other social connections. As stated in the previous quote, music helps people become synchronized in song; therefore, they are all connected. When individuals work on a piece together, whether it be instrumental or vocal, they are all progressing towards the same common goal. In a sense this unifies the singers, and can bring them closer together.

CONCLUSION

Music can aid adolescents in the following ways: building confidence, imparting social skills, boosting creativity and interests in the arts. Communicating these new perspectives as students transition into adulthood is another benefit music can have for our youth. “What is more clear is the benefit that the arts have on psychological capacities for imagining other perspectives and continually reinventing oneself.”(paragraph 4, Grieving). I remember the time I was able to sing in my first talent show in middle school; I was very nervous but because I wanted to do well, I practiced hard. I had a friend accompany me on piano, and we rehearsed several times a day to work out nerves, build a sense of teamwork and make sure we performed at the best of our abilities. By the time the show rolled around we were still nervous, but the trust we built, the dedication and hard work we put in showed. Had I not participated in musical experiences such as this I feel that a part of me would not exist.

Middle school is the time of the most drastic change that occurs in every individual’s development process. This is the time when most adolescents are transitioning into adulthood, and they may also be taking on more responsibility at home, depending on personal situations. This is usually the time when students’ individual personality traits are solidifying. Some personality traits teachers may see in the classroom include some of the following: The Leader- this is the middle school student that the other students look up to; that being said these students still need guidance and nurturing from teachers. The leader-like qualities should be encouraged by teachers, but

also guided so these children set good examples instead of bad ones. Another type of personality you may come across are the quiet and secluded students, or the quiet and marginalized students. “They won't always participate in class because sharing their ideas in discussions and working with others is well outside of their comfort zone. Find a way to connect with these students so that you can accurately assess what they are able to do, what they know, and what they need,” (paragraph 10, Meador). These students will typically be diligent in the classroom with work, but should be encouraged to get involved with other students as this might be an area of struggle for them.

Another way music can help students communicate is by getting them involved in the community. As stated before with interviewee B's response to Questions 5-4, the “Sarah's House” project helped the students feel needed and gave them a sense of pride, because they were able to create something based on their own personal experiences. The people these students interviewed were also touched by the act of kindness these students showed by going in and speaking to these cancer treatment patients. Having seasonal school concerts, plays, talent shows and other activities that parents and other members of the community can attend builds the bond in these groups. This, in turn, can help students better their familiarity with everyone in the community and improve their communication skills.

As stated before, music can help strengthen the bonds from student to student, and this is due to the fact that when students perform together they are all working towards a common goal. As the interviewees stated, they felt close to their musical peers because of all the hard work they would put into practicing different pieces of music together. According to Maurice Elias in “Use Music to Develop Kids' Skills and Character,”

“Music has positive effects on people’s emotions and creativity. When we sing together, we synchronize our breathing and feel more connected,” (paragraph 3, Elias). When we sing or play in a group we are not performing as individuals; we are performing as a giant unit. This unity can help bond students together, strengthening their connection to one another.

In conclusion, I would restate that I believe a big part of who I am is because of my involvement with music growing up. This lasting impact can be seen in both the interviewees’ middle school experiences that they still remember as well as my own. Most of the time middle schoolers are struggling with common themes during this age such as finding a sense of self, as Kantz states. Some common effects this can lead to are: anxiety, narrow self-perceptions, students being shy/quiet in social settings and longing to connect with other people. The data collected, the literature reviewed and the illustration of personal experiences support the claim that music is important for enhancing communication during a transitional period such as middle school, and can have a lasting impact on students, particularly in helping in their search for self, alleviating anxiety, expanding self-perceptions, engaging different student’s personality traits and providing necessary connections.

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APPENDIX

Introduction:

Before the interview commences, participants will be reminded that they are being recorded; this is voluntary, and the participant can skip a question or stop the interview at any time.

Interview Questions

1. What sparked your passion for music/ inspired you to become a music teacher?
2. What effect did music have on your upbringing/character development?
3. What is your fondest middle school band/choir memory?
4. Do you feel that you made a lot of friends/connections through music programs that you would not have made otherwise?
5. How do/did you use music to impact the lives of your students every day in the classroom?
6. What observations have you made about the role of music in the lives of middle school students?
7. Have you noticed any differences in students who take music courses vs. those who do not?

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Haloye Camille Payabyab Johnson was born on November 4th, 1997 in the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico at the U.S. Naval Hospital in Roosevelt Roads. She was raised in a military family, living in various locations around the world. She began her journey with music singing in a church choir at the age of six and taking singing lessons. She fell in love with music once she began getting more involved in programs at church, making connections with people and mentors she would not have otherwise met. Mainly due to these influences, she decided at a young age to pursue a career in music, auditioning and being admitted to the University of Maine Music program in 2015. She was the recipient of the Music Scholarship.

Upon graduation, Haloye plans to teach music and audition for conservatories and pursue a Master's Degree in Music.