

Natasha Hamid

Mr. McElrath

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The Value of Music Education for Student Development

Whether it comes from a symphony orchestra, a pop song on the radio, or even the ringtone of a cell phone, music has an unquestionable place in people's lives. It has become inescapable because every sound can transform into a form of music. However, it remains unlikely that average Americans realize the many complexities of music when they hum their favorite song at work or tap their fingers to a beat while waiting in traffic. Music has become so abundant in people's daily lives, that many have begun to lose sight of its real value. This has become especially true in the education system where people will overlook music and its innumerable benefits to society in favor of seemingly more important subjects. Although many believe that music education holds less value than other academic pursuits and does not warrant as much recognition or funding, schools should fund music education because it holds a myriad of benefits for students by increasing their aptitudes for academic subjects, enhancing their cognitive skills, and promoting unification in schools and beyond.

In the United States, education has become an increasingly significant area for discussion with common Americans and lawmakers alike. In the wake of this discussion, educators have shifted their focus to emphasize STEM subjects, often diminishing the importance of seemingly less important subjects, such as music. The No Child Left Behind Act caused much of this shift and a decreased recognition and funding for arts programs at schools (Stoll). The lack of recognition for music education has become evident in schools across the country as often

budget cuts come straight from the music department. Because music education requires much funding from schools “due, in great part, to the high costs of sheet music and instrument purchase and repair,” it often receives cuts to funding first (Petress). However, school boards may misjudge the importance of music education in students’ development. Schools must do all they can to nurture, rather than ignore, musical talent in young students.

Music education holds an important place in schools because it can help students excel academically. For example, in the article “Music and Cognition: The Mozart Effect Revisited.” Jesse Hamlin describes a study conducted by Dr. Sylvain Moreno at the University of Toronto in which children ages 4 to 6 took part in a twenty day educational program about music, learning basic rhythm, intonation, theory, etc. The children took verbal IQ tests both before and after the twenty days, and by the end of the program, “more than 90 percent of the music kids improved their verbal scores” (Hamlin). The study proves a strong connection between music education and child intelligence. Additionally, in his article “The Importance of Music Education,” Ken Petress cites studies from the National Association for Music Education (NAMC) which show that students enrolled in music programs at school, such as band, orchestra or choir, “receive more academic honors than do non-musically involved students.” Along with these honors, “the College Entrance Examination Board, 2001 . . . reports that students involved in music education score significantly higher on their SATs” (Petress). Though it seems unlikely, studies such as these demonstrate music’s capability to increase a student’s performance on tests meant to measure academic capacity, proving a significant link between music education and academic performance.

The simple reasoning behind the link comes from the development of skills in musical learning that parallel with cognitive skills and values that improve academic ability. In fact,

“neurological research is cited showing music education enhances abstract reasoning needed in learning math and science” (Petress). Music education has proved to stimulate children’s development of “cognitive modifiability,” a development of skills that help students learn across all curriculums (Popescu). One prevalent example stems from music’s impact on reading and language. Jesse Hamlin quotes Dr. Nina Kraus, a neurobiologist at Northwestern University, who says, “Music and language have common biological mechanisms. Musical training strengthens them.” Some of these strengthened mechanisms include attention and memory which Kraus suggests add to children’s “‘phonological processing’ and [enhance] their reading skills” (Hamlin). Music requires players to process and analyze patterns, further developing a young musician’s cognitive processes much more than a child who has no musical background (Hamlin). In addition, cognitive development from music benefits students in ways other than just academics. The development instills values that prepare them for lives past school and improves their capabilities to achieve success in the real world. Ken Petress quotes Michael E. DeBakey from NAMC who states that “studying music encourages self-discipline and diligence ... promotes self expression, and provides self gratification while giving pleasure to others.” Music education creates a mentality in students to discipline themselves to encourage a strong work ethic. Additionally, the skill of self expression becomes necessary to students throughout their lives. Music expands on this skill by prompting students to form their own views and have a willingness to express them in any way. It remains undeniable that music develops essential cognitive abilities that aid students throughout their lives.

In addition, music acts as a powerful tool of unification that creates connections for students with each other, their schools, and the larger world. First, music education in schools creates bonds between students. Young musicians, whether in a band, an orchestra, or a choir,

must “work as a team for their performance to be appreciated and valued” (Petress). Music programs also help students become more active members of their schools, and thus more engaged in their learning environment. According to multiple studies conducted by NAMC, such as the National Education Longitudinal Study, “music education involvement reduces disruptive students in the school” (Petress). This provides for a more connected overall academic environment. Schools need this kind of student engagement to be successful. Furthermore, a mentality of promoted unification between children and within schools leads students to search for connections and unification throughout their lives. Music teaches more than pitches, or beats, or chords in that “music teaches one about history and culture and builds tolerance of and appreciation of other peoples” (Petress). Students cannot easily attain this kind of learning from other subjects. With music education, students do not just gain knowledge of how to play a scale or a difficult rhythm. They gain appreciation that originates not simply from a use of reason, but from a use of emotion. The result, according to jazz educator Todd Stoll, is that music and the arts “inoculate a new generation against the fear of not knowing and understanding those who are different from themselves.” These lessons remain extremely important in creating well-rounded, knowledgeable children.

While many do not see its importance, music education holds tremendous value for students of all ages. School boards across the country decide that if they must make cuts to the budget, they will reduce music programs first. However, music education deserves just as much funding as any other school subject. An emphasis on music education can help schools see the improvements that the No Child Left Behind program hoped for because music develops skills necessary to cognitive development in children and thus improves their academic capabilities. In addition, music creates more engaged and active community members by unifying students and

connecting them to their world. Music provides an education like no other because it becomes a bridge between a student's knowledge and emotions and requires that they express themselves and their ideas. Schools must protect and promote a process of learning that is so distinctive from that of other academic subjects. However, when schools cut music programs, they often cut off children from their only access to music education. Moreover, schools should fund music education programs so that students never lose their numerous benefits. Music will continue to foster students with advanced academic and cognitive abilities, deep connections to each other and the world, and the strong capacity for self expression.

Works Cited

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