

## **Wellness and Music: Creating a Musical Toolbox**

Evidence, both formal and anecdotal, demonstrates that people, particularly children, often use music to help regulate emotion. This, combined with the district's commitment to wellness and the opportunity to take Linda Lanteri's workshops this fall, naturally led to developing a project to combine music and wellness.

I decided to implement this project with our second grade class, based on the individual student and curricular needs in this grade level. Students spent time reflecting on physical experiences of both imaginary situations and musical stimuli (recorded and created) before building their own instruments (either a rainstick or a hand drum). We are finishing the project in the next three weeks by exploring possible uses for the instruments and music making and creating a "coping card ring" of various ideas.

### **Detailed Overview:**

#### **Class 1:**

Instead of beginning with a direct discussion or reflection about emotions, I used and modified a lesson written by Lanteri for her younger students. In this exploration, students take an imaginary (narrated by the instructor) walk through the woods. Along the way they discover many different trials: mud in which their feet stick, a rickety bridge they need to cross, a tree they have to climb. After the exercise, we discussed how our bodies felt while on our imaginary journey. How did your breath feel? How did your muscles feel? We contrasted this experience with another journey to a peaceful meadow on a clear and sunny day. These physiological reactions are similar to those we have when experiencing difficult emotion (or feeling calm!). However, during this lesson, we did not talk specifically about emotions, as I wanted students to begin developing a stronger awareness of their bodies. Students also reflected on these two experiences in their journals. They wrote, drew, or combined writing and drawing about how their bodies felt in both scenarios.

#### **Class 2:**

In our second class, we reviewed some of these physical reactions students had with our two journeys before bringing music into our exploration. After doing some reading regarding neuroscience, music, and emotion, it became clear that music can incite similar physiological reactions as emotions. While emotions are experienced subjectively, researchers have discovered some musical characteristics that align with particular physical reactions. For instance, disjunct and unpredictable music can speed up our breathing and mimic physiological changes in our bodies that some people associate with anger or anxiety. Conversely, music with predictable phrase and harmonic structures can help slow our breathing and relax our muscles.

Based on this research, I chose two pieces of music to help students experience these separate reactions. First, we listened to the piece of music designed to agitate our bodies and contrasted it with a calmer piece of music (again, we reflected on this using our journals and also sharing with the class). We experimented with moving to these pieces of music versus simply listening.

#### **Class 3:**

Our third class alternated listening to the Shostakovich piece (used to create a bit more agitation) with playing hand drums along with a piece of music filled with African drumming and playing a rainstick with the background sounds of rain and Native American Flutes. Students used only their journals to reflect on each experience, using the prompts: "After listening to the music my body felt \_\_\_\_\_" or "After playing the drums, I felt \_\_\_\_\_." Each musical playing experience (the drums or the rainstick) was alternated with the Shostakovich. At the conclusion of the class, students wrote down whether they felt better after playing the rainstick or the drum.

#### **Class 4:**

We read a book recommended by our school psychologist, Dr. Smajlaj, *In My Heart: A Book of Feelings*. We followed it by thinking about and sharing, if comfortable, what moments/times we had experienced any feels found in the book. We had a brief discussion about the correlation between how our bodies sometimes experience the emotions they same way they did during both our journey through imaginary landscapes and also while listening to music. Students then spent the remainder of the class making the instrument they felt better after playing (either the rainstick or the drum).

#### **Class 5:**

A couple months after creating instruments, we gathered again for some reflection and brainstorming about ways in which students had already used their instruments and how they might use them when feeling anxious, angry, excited, or happy. For instance, could you put on some music and play? Make up a song about how you are feeling? Play with friends? Play alone? Start playing at one tempo and then change the speed? Change the dynamic level (volume) to mimic or alter how you are feeling? Students talked to one another and recorded their ideas in their journals. They wrote down three different ways they would try to use their instruments over the course of the next month.

#### **Class 6:**

Our final class of this project will be to create “coping cards” to laminate and put onto a ring. These will contain ways students have used their instruments and music at home when experiencing a strong emotion (or ways they want to continue trying!). This will serve as an easy tool to use to help jog students’ memories about musical coping strategies to utilize when the heat of the moment is overwhelming.

### **How This Changed My Teaching**

The development and execution of this project has continued to emphasize the importance of helping students make explicit connections to all the uses music has in our lives. While valuable in its own right, music also offers us benefits that correlate with many aspects of life and learning. For instance, it fosters focus and concentration, improves our communication skills, offers us new ways of hearing and listening, teaches us to collaborate. Music helps regulate emotion, increases concentration, fosters mindfulness, and can give inordinate joy. But I could do a much better job at helping children reflect on some of these benefits, even in less formal and elaborate settings than this project. I would like to continue integrating moments of reflection and connection-building into my lessons more frequently. Students’ reflection and discussion of music-listening and making was astute and allowed all of us to think about the visceral ways we are affected by both emotion and sound.

Additionally, the project illustrated the importance and benefits of mindfulness work. Again, I think there are ways in which I can make these musical/mindfulness connections more explicit and reflective within my classroom. As a musician, I have come to understand the importance of mindfulness in music-making: how it helps calm nerves, focus attention, and allow for more fulfilling experiences. These are skills that can be honed and taught. I’d like to invest more energy in helping students find these moments throughout their music-making and listening.

### **How This Impacted Student Learning**

Through this project, students experienced music through a new lens. They made conscious connections between their imaginations, physiological reactions, listening, and music making. Additionally, students have gained more awareness of their own bodies’ reactions to various stimuli (difficult or calm situations, emotions, particular types of music, and making music). Next, they created a tool they can choose to utilize on their own or with friends. The culmination of this project

allowed students the opportunity to work on their self-reflection skills while also having fun making and playing their instruments.

My hope is that students have begun to think about both music and emotion differently, not as a negation to previous experiences but as an expansion. We explored a new way music can be integrated into our daily experiences and a different way of understanding our emotional lives: through the physical reactions we have. We can, perhaps, tolerate a few minutes of shallow breathing (especially when a rain stick could help us breathe more deeply) or tight muscles (that could be loosened with some fervent drumming) whereas - perhaps - facing a difficult emotion such as loneliness or anger might seem impossible.