The Power and Promise of Music Education in the Accountability Era

American music education is located at a paradoxical crossroads. On one side we have the demands of the corporate education reform movement that all students exit their K-12 schooling being “college and career ready”, regardless of each student’s socio-economic status, family and community support structures, and ability to learn. This agenda is predicated on the belief that the public schools are “failing”, and insists that the only solution lies in a combination of accountability measures including increased testing requirements, elimination of teacher tenure, attacks on teachers unions, and the unregulated proliferation of charter schools. These reformers, consisting largely of CEOs, technology entrepreneurs, venture capitalists and other business leaders, claim that the goal of public education should be the production of a workforce inculcated with what have been referred to as “21st Century Skills”: critical thinking and problem solving; communication, collaboration; and creativity and innovation[[1]](#footnote-1).

At the same time, the results of these accountability measures have led to a noticeable and problematic narrowing of the school curriculum[[2]](#footnote-2), placing an unprecedented emphasis on the subjects now known by the acronym of “STEM” (i.e., science, technology, engineering and math). Ironically, it is the very subjects that have been crowded out of the curriculum (i.e., social studies, history, music, art, and other humanities disciplines) that offer the most promise as incubators of the 21st Century Skills that the reformers claim are so desirable.

Leaving aside the problematic and highly suspect notion that the purpose of education is to provide the nation’s workforce, we can also observe a reconceptualization of the goal of schooling at play in the reformers’ rhetoric here. While the goal of education was once the development of rich and meaningful relationships between learners and teachers—and among learners—it has now shifted to nothing more than a simple transfer of information from teacher to student; a sort of educational “banking transaction,” in which knowledge—in the form of easily digestible and testable facts and figures—is “deposited” in the “accounts” of students[[3]](#footnote-3). This change in the goals and purposes of education represents a foundational shift in educational philosophy, one that has not been discussed, studied or vetted by those engaged in the educational enterprise in our country.

We find a similar paradox within our own professional discourse in music education. While music programs are increasingly marginalized, “hollowed out[[4]](#footnote-4)”, and/or cut[[5]](#footnote-5) from school curriculums, some of our professional organizations seem mired in an endless and confusing cycle of advocacy efforts that appear to be focused on the extrinsic benefits of music instruction for other areas of learning—even as one of these organizations proclaims a “fully reinvent(ed)” advocacy campaign that is still based entirely on extra-musical characteristics, such as “grit”, “higher GPAs,” and “spatial reasoning abilities.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Noticeably absent from this initiative is any mention of the intrinsic benefits of learning music; singing, playing a music instrument, composing, arranging, improvising, listening, moving to music, learning about the historical and cultural traditions of music, and so much more. It is as though we are either embarrassed or uncertain of what music has to offer students and schools as an academic subject in its own right, and feel compelled to make arguments for its inclusion in the curriculum based only on what we think music may offer in service to other disciplines and learning outcomes.

To be sure, teachers of every discipline understand that the impact of learning has its expression in areas both within and outside of their own domain. Further, a purist stance has its own limitations in an educational environment in which integration and permeable boundaries between disciplines are valued as worthwhile learning aims. Towards this end, music educators have always embraced the power of music to bring together diverse groups of students in ways that allow for accomplishments far greater than any individual student could achieve alone. Indeed, feeling connected to a part of “something larger” than oneself has been cited as a critical element of the motivation to learn[[7]](#footnote-7), and this aspect of group belonging and performance can be a powerful response to the largely individual and isolated nature of many learning settings in today’s accountability-driven school culture.

Music also offers a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students. Unlike sports and other competitive domains, all learners can find a space and a place in school music classes—from elementary general music classrooms, to high school performing ensembles, no one “sits on the bench” in music, and each individual’s contributions constitute a welcome addition to the group.

Music study also provides students with the knowledge and “feel” to understand and embrace nuance—to feel comfortable in settings where conditions are unfamiliar or changing, and the confidence to make decisions in the absence of clear guidance or direction. Key to this goal is the ability to communicate wordlessly and imaginatively with one’s peers, relying on subtle cues of expression, dynamics, tempo, phrasing, style, body movement, and eye contact—all of which are nurtured and encouraged through participation in music classes and ensembles.

The study of music shows students how to appreciate beauty; to make critical judgments that require deep and thoughtful listening and consideration; to be aware of their feelings and emotions in ways that no other subject demands; to understand that vulnerability is not a weakness, and that improvement is more important than perfection.

But the true power and promise of music education is in the inherent and unique value of what music study and participation offers to our children:

* The aural and cognitive skills to distinguish between music in duple or triple meters; major or minor tonalities; flat or sharp intonation; and woodwind, brass or stringed instrument timbres.
* The embodied skill and understanding to play or sing music from a variety of stylistic and historical periods, genres and traditions with confidence, elegance and understanding.
* The musical vocabulary and skill to create new music, by means of arranging, composing or improvising, and the creativity to use technology to create new forms of music practice.
* The sensitivity to turn a phrase so that one’s intent and emotional conviction is communicated clearly through performance.
* The knowledge of performance practice and theory to interpret the same set of notes and rhythms in multiple, yet appropriate—and even revelatory—ways, depending on the composer, stylistic practices and historical understandings.
* The patience and judgment to continuously revise, reconsider and reformulate one’s musical decision-making in response to changes in tone, texture and articulation.
* The insight to critically examine one’s own, or another’s, musical performance, develop substantive ideas for improvement, and provide new or alternative suggestions for enhancements and extensions of that performance.

Perhaps most importantly, music, when taught well, provides the “antidote” to today’s “teach to the test”, assessment-driven culture. Comprehensive, sequential music study, delivered by certified music educators, offers the very things that employers say they are looking for in the workforce, and for what school leaders emphasize in mission and vision statements: critical thinking, teamwork, problem-solving skills and creativity. Music can do these things without sacrificing its inherent value as an art form, and while contributing a unique set of skills, abilities, knowledge and understanding to our children’s learning, and to our society.

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