

Alcott Elementary Drumming Program

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Abstract

This report on an inner-city drumming program at Alcott Elementary school in Pontiac MI demonstrates the value of such a program. There has been no music program at Alcott Elementary for fifteen years, and the school is in need of a musical outlet. This program allowed some sixth grade students at Alcott the opportunity to engage in authentic musical experiences with their peers and learn about the value of music as a part of community. Furthermore I was able to deepen my understanding of elementary pedagogy. Through this program I have grown in my confidence as a music instructor and feel able to implement such a program in any other area again.

Introduction

The program implemented in this project is similar to several other programs implemented in other countries. La Sistema, for example, first introduced in Venezuela, provides after-school music opportunities for at-risk students from poor, urban areas. Another program, Kalikolehua, implemented in Hawaii, provides after-school music opportunities for isolated, but not poverty-stricken students. The after-school program that my mentor and I created at Alcott Elementary is similar in nature to these, but much more isolated and individualized.

Jamie Simpson Steele cites the results of a report conducted by the Inter-American Development Bank in regards to the effectiveness of El Sistema. The conclusions of the report indicate greater academic achievement, employability, and conflict management skills in students that participated. The scope of this project did not allow for a foray into such statistical data as employability and academic achievement; but it should be noted that both my mentor and I observed students growing in their musical understanding and ability during the time that we were with them.

Programs like La Sistema and Kalikolehua seek to develop musical excellence among students through hands-on experience, practice, and performance. While both programs reach a wide variety of youth and engage in musical development through an after-school program, neither reaches the students through an African Drumming window such as this project. Both other programs chose their repertoire from a variety of sources including Classical European music, traditional Hawaiian and Hispanic music, as well as pop music. The rich history and tradition of African Drumming (particularly Ghanaian drumming) with its emphasis on community, and call and response was the source of much of our musical material.

African Drumming is an excellent musical experience that deepens one's musical understanding while at the same time providing a fun communal atmosphere. My own participation in an African Drumming experience at Oakland University has been a highlight of my time here and indicates to me

the value of learning musical concepts through various modes that are different from my typical western-music ensemble experience.

One of the goals of this project was to create a musical outlet for the 6th grade students at Alcott Elementary. There has been no music program at this school for fifteen years and the students are missing out on the value of a structured musical experience. Having formal music education at school allows students to express themselves creatively and musically in a group setting while learning about common musical ideas.

Another aim of this project was to help students achieve their musical goals. During this project we allowed ample time for students to express themselves in improvisation and free composition. Many decisions regarding repertoire and rehearsal order were made in conjunction with student input. Students were able to see their own progress and experience creating a product in community and appreciate the role they played in adding to that product.

A third goal of this project was to introduce students to African music. By using authentically sounding arrangements of Ghanaian music we were able to introduce students to the basics behind African drumming. The best proof of this fact was when my Nigerian friend Joseph visited one day and immediately recognized the rhythms as Ghanaian. African drumming music is community driven, simple enough to learn, rewarding to make, and rich in historical context. It provides an excellent doorway into a concrete understanding of a main component of African culture.

The fourth goal of this project was personal. It was my aim to experience the work necessary in implementing a program such as this. I am extremely grateful to my mentor for all her help with this program and am convinced that I could run a program such as this some other time on my own due to the experience that I received during this project.

Methodology

For this project I implemented an after-school African-Drumming program with my mentor at Alcott Elementary school. We used instruments donated from my mentor's church and stored them at the school. Each week about twenty 6th grade students were pulled out of their classroom to join us from 12:30 to 1:15 on Tuesdays. Our goal was to have the same students each week, but inevitably we had students drop out, others join, and a fair number of absences. This tends to be the story in at-risk populations where students home situations are less stable and it is harder to be consistent.

Each week we would warm up together with a few different drumming exercises that promoted listening and correct technique. A particular exercise that the students really enjoyed was called “Add on”. In this exercise the leader of the group (myself) would play a simple repeated pattern on the claves. The students would then take turns (moving around the circle) adding on to the music with a repeating pattern of their own. Following the warm ups we began to introduce the students to two pieces that emulated traditional Ghanaian pieces. One of our pieces, called “Fun Fun Fun” had an emphasis on listening due to large amounts of call and response (a traditional African musical element). The other piece, “Keep the Rhythm Going” introduced the students to music with multiple layers and challenged them to maintain their rhythm while others played different rhythms simultaneously. Each week we would practice one or both of these pieces along with various exercises.

One thing that quickly became apparent was the continuous fight against distractions. Students would invariably bring small toys or candy to class that would prevent them from being able to play well. Or they might talk with their friends instead of pay attention. The most effective way to combat this was through engaging material and giving each distracted student an exciting job to do. Once students were given ownership of some aspect of the music they were more likely to take a greater interest in the quality of music produced and the role they held in creating that quality. One particularly special moment we had was when my friend from Nigeria came to visit and after recognizing the music

as Ghanaian, encouraged the students in their music making and inspired them to give more to the group. Many of the students were African-American and were excited to be encouraged by an African. He taught them about his traditional clothing, the school systems in Africa, and the importance of listening to the leaders. Our final performance was in conjunction with the dance company at Oakland University at the school assembly. Through this program students felt encouraged and empowered to be performers for their school.

Results

Each of the four objectives for the project were clearly met throughout its duration. The first, to create a musical outlet at Alcott, was accomplished simply by the project's existence. It offered musical experiences for about twenty sixth-grade students from November to March of the 2016 – 2017 school year.

Objective number two was to help students achieve musical goals. Here is some of the feedback that the students gave us in response to the drumming program. It is rewarding to hear about what the program meant to them and how they were having a fun time learning an instrument.

“Dear people, I liked that I got to join drumming because I think it's a great program and I hope you get your job soon Darren. I appreciate the experience you had in drumming and then you taught the drumming lessons to us so you can finally get a job good luck Darren.

Sincerely, Shatoriea”

“The great thing about drumming is the practice because I get to see you and Darren and I loved how we went on the stage that's the experience of the drumming.”

“Vincent

Dear drumming team,

Drumming was so fun I love drumming with Dr. Van and Darren It was an awesome experience. The thing I like about being in drumming where we all get to work together as a group and creating things as a team. We have grown a long way from last drumming day. Darren is my friend he plays very well and he says I play ver well too and Dr. Van she is nice whenever I need help she helps me she makes sure steps are understandable. Thank you for teaching us drumming skills."

"Dear people,

During my drumming experience it was very fun! It was fun because we got to play African drumming. We also got to do our own beat that Darren let us do and I loved it.

Sincerely, Demetrius"

"Jessie

I liked the Drumming it was pretty cool. At first I thought it was going to be scary but it wasn't. I had fun drumming for people I want to do it again."

"Dear People,

Thank you so much for coming to Alcott and taking your time with us, and all of your free time just to help us kids have a great experience with drums. I

liked how we got to do different things with the drums. and that it was never boring. Every week I was excited to go to drumming. I appreciate all the things you did for me. So again, thank you.

Love, Kamayae”

Objective number three was to introduce students to African music. This was accomplished through the curriculum used and the drums that we played on. We used seven sets of three differently sized Remo hand drums for our drumming. When played between the knees while sitting they replicate traditional African skin head drums. The curriculum used consisted primarily of four parts: two songs and two exercises.

The first song, Keep the Rhythm Going, is an easy to learn repetitive piece with multiple layered drum parts. This is highly African in nature as much African drum music is characterized by layered drum rhythms that interweave with each other to create an intricate soundscape.

Fun Fun Fun was the name of the second piece, and it emphasized playing different sections, listening, and solo breaks. It is highly typical of African drum music to be composed of multiple sections with drum cues as the signals to transition from one section to the next. It is also characteristic of African drum music to contain breaks for the master drummer to play different calls or a solo section. For our purposes we let everyone who wanted a chance for a solo have a turn regardless of “master drummer” status (that would have been totally irrelevant when considering that our goals were for learning and not flawless performance).

An exercise that we used was called Add On and it emphasized the African musical concept of layering. It is typical in African music to have multiple intricate repeating layers that form the groundwork of the piece. This exercise would begin with myself or Dr. VanderLinde playing a very

simple repeating pattern on a pair of claves. Each student around the circle would then add their own repeating pattern one at a time. By the time we would get to the end of the circle the air would be reverberating with a full soundscape of drumming patterns. Each student free-composed their pattern and tried to fit it into what they could already hear, perhaps filling in some space left open by another's pattern, or emphasizing a certain beat.

The most common exercise that we did was a simple call and response exercise where each student would have an opportunity to create their own rhythm. The lead drummer would play a simple repeating pattern with a measure of rest in between each time he/she played it. In that space each student would take turns creating their own call, which the other students would respond back to them by repeating during the next break. Call and response is extremely evident in most forms of African music. By teaching the students how to listen and respond to what they hear we were teaching them a traditional African drumming skill as well as a foundational musical skill.

Objective number four was to learn how to create a program like this on my own. Throughout this project I picked up many concepts that have aided me in my teaching career. Not only do I now feel confident about being able to create a program like this wherever I go to teach, but I have also garnered valuable information regarding teaching in general.

I learned that it is very important to develop rapport with the students so that they respect you and are interested in learning from you. They care more once they know that you care and that you can bring something to the table. I also learned that, when teaching, it is crucial to keep the class moving and to have plenty of material. Kids are easily bored and will stop being engaged even before they've mastered something. The tolerance for dedicated hard work is not very high at the elementary level.

It also came to my attention, through observation, that much of what I consider to be innate may simply not be there. Because the students at Alcott had never had music before they lacked a lot of the

musical basics that I assumed they would have. Skills such as finding the main beat, and creating their own material were not as easily carried out as I had initially imagined. As it was then, we had to rely heavily on repetition, call and response, and icon maps to help kids understand what was being played. We also used words to help us remember the rhythms. Phrases like “keep the rhythm going” helped students remember a rhythm that is played very similarly to how you might say it and has the same number of syllables.

As far as teaching in an at-risk area, I learned that we constantly had to deal with absences and behavioral problems. The strangest thing about the behavioral issues, in my opinion, was the apparent pettiness of most of the issues. We had many instances of children insolently refusing to put away a simple toy or piece of candy so that they could play drums. They would try to play one handed or sit out while they used the toy. Most of the things were not even that interesting or valuable; sometimes just a piece of string. Why this caused such a power struggle is unknown to me. Perhaps it is because they struggle to have much control of areas of their life and so when they have something that they can potentially control they fight for that. It could also be that they are trying to test us and see where the relationship is. It was certainly difficult to walk them back to their classroom after drumming each week and they were always running around out of line and making a lot of noise. I think that there simply is not enough positive structure at the school, and that they are able to get away with poor behavior enough of the time that they aren't afraid to misbehave.

We used three differently sized drums as well as shakires and claves for our music making. Most of the kids preferred the big drums and would squabble over them. An interesting thing that I noticed was that some of the most contentions students in class were the best helpers when putting the instruments away. Once offered the chance to be a leader and take control of something, one student, Demetrius, lit up and became an incredible drum organizer. I think it stemmed from being given control

and being trusted with a job. I think that many of these kids are simply told what they need to do and that their efforts are never good enough. I was happy to see Demetrius light up in that way.

One of the big concepts that we focused on during this project was the African concept of call and response. We practiced this many times in one of our exercises. During this exercise each student would have the opportunity to make up their own rhythm that the rest of the class would mimic. This gave power to the students and gave them a creative voice. Some had never experienced anything like this before and were timid, while others loved the opportunity and let their creative juices flow; making up new sounds and new rhythms. It was interesting to see how many had no idea what to play, but once myself or Dr. VanderLinde had played a few times and modeled some ideas, they flourished by latching on to those ideas and expanding upon them. This experience teaches me to always be ready to offer kids examples of how to be successful. We have to model to them what is expected before we can expect it of them.

Critical Discussion

What is the purpose of implementing a program like the one described in this report? Was there value in what was accomplished? Did this program have an effect on Alcott Elementary? Should more programs like this be implemented across the country? What should educators do with this information? These questions will be answered in this critical discussion section.

What is the purpose of implementing a program like the one described in this report?

The purpose of this program as evidenced by the goals outlined in the introduction, was to create a musical outlet for the 6th grade students at Alcott Elementary, help students achieve their musical goals, introduce students to African music, and experience the work necessary to implement such a program.

Since there had been no program at the school for many years, the chance to provide music to students without access to musical education appealed to me. I was intrigued by the opportunity to help students with no experience on instruments and provide for them what I take for granted. It seemed more important to me that I create this program in a school that had no access to music education, than a school that already had a budding music program.

For example, during this project I was also observing Long Meadow Elementary as a field placement for my college major as a music educator. That school has a great general music program and it seemed to me had a lower need for a program such as this. Students at Long Meadow are already able to achieve their musical goals, and are being introduced to varied musics including African music. The need for an African Drumming program was simply much higher at Alcott when compared to other schools like Long Meadow. It was my hope that students were able to discover that they enjoyed making music in a group and would be inspired to take it further in middle and high school if possible.

Was there value in what was accomplished?

The work done at Alcott was valuable in that it provided a musical experience for students who

have not had that experience at school. I believe that this is valuable because music as an integral part of expression. People ought to have the opportunity to express themselves musically and engage in music making with others.

The National Association for Musical Education, in their article entitled “Why Do Humans Value Music”, claims that there is a system of thought in Western culture that values the intellect over feelings and that they are entirely separate. They say, “So long as this belief system endures, it is highly unlikely that music will be regarded as playing much more than a minor role among far more important intellectual endeavors.” (Reimer, 5). The National Association for Musical Education believes that a shift in thinking is underway in Western Culture and that we are beginning to understand the relationship between mind, body, cognition, and intelligence.

“From a variety of scholarly disciplines, including psychology, physiology, philosophy, neuroscience, anthropology, sociology, and education, powerful, converging arguments are being made for a fundamental transformation in the ways we understand the nature of the human condition. Contrary to Descartes' conception of a disembodied, emotionless intellect, it is rapidly becoming clearer that human cognition, or intelligence, is (1) demonstrated in diverse forms, (2) intimately tied to the body and the ways it functions, and (3) pervaded throughout with feeling. Far more complex than Descartes and his followers could have imagined, the human capacity to know, think, feel, and act—what we call "mind"—requires the interaction of dimensions previously believed to have little to do with one another. The implications for our understanding of music, both as to its nature and its value, are profound.” (Reimer, 6)

If intelligence is demonstrated in diverse forms, is tied to the body, and is pervaded with feeling

as they claim, then it is clear to me that musical engagement is necessary for proper development of an intelligent student. Thinking musically is diverse in that it is a non-verbal method of communication, contrary to much of what students spend all their time in school learning. Playing music is intimately tied to the body at its core. In fact, much music is created entirely devoid of anything but the human body, just think about acapella groups, and body percussionists. Beyond that however, ask any musician and they will tell you how closely they are tied to their instrument on a physical level. The slightest adjustment of embouchure for a brass player can make lightyears of difference in the tone quality produced, and the slightest muscular adjustment for a percussionist can make the difference between superb four-mallet technique and carpal tunnel syndrome. Finally, hardly anyone will deny that music is in some way tied to emotion. If music encompasses each of these elements of a more fuller understanding of cognition, then it is important that students begin to engage one another and their world musically.

Beyond this, music is highly valued in our culture. It shows up at nearly every special event; whether marriages, funerals, parties, or religious ceremonies, and is played regularly at home or in the car to help change, or celebrate one's mood. Music is valuable in that it decorates and makes special the things we do every day. It is also valuable as a product when it is created well.

“Many values are attached to products—the results of human endeavors and nature's manifestations. A good loaf of bread, automobile, pair of shoes, job, political system, tomato, sunshiny day, forest, are each, of its kind, prized because of its contributions to human welfare. In music, successful results of creation, whether compositions, performances, or improvisations, are similarly prized because they contribute to our musical welfare, with all the resulting positive consequences for the quality of our lives. We treasure a good song, or symphony, or solo by a favorite jazz musician, or performance by a country fiddler or gamelan or Beijing opera troupe or African drum

ensemble, as a source of musical satisfaction and meaning. We honor those musicians, whether composers, performers, or improvisers, who provide us with their products—the outcomes of their musical efforts.” (Reimer, 9)

Because music holds such a revered place in our world it is necessary for students to develop a musical mind; the ability to think musical thoughts and process things musically. Each of the exercises that we did during course of the program challenged students to think musically. For example: in “Keep the Rhythm Going” students were challenged to hear how the music was a dialogue between high, mid, and low voices (each had interlocking and complimentary parts), and in “Add On” students were challenged to find an empty spot in the pattern, and interject a musical idea into it. These two examples are just a few of the ways in which students were challenged to engage and develop their musical minds.

Did this program have an effect on Alcott Elementary?

It is hard to determine from only one school year if there has been any impact on Alcott from this program. If I had the opportunity to continue this project for multiple years and gather data over time then we may begin to see some large scale impact. According to Hilary Anyaso and her reasearch, one year is simply not enough to bring about neural changes. “Two years of music lessons improved the precision with which the children’s brains distinguished similar speech sounds, a neural process that is linked to language and reading skills. One year of training, however, was insufficient to spark changes in the nervous system.” (Anyaso)

Regardless of whether or not the musical engagement at Alcott had any effect on student achievement in other school areas, I can attest to their growth musically. The difference between the first class and the performance was immense. Students entered the room the first day with low critical listening skills, and limited musical thought. By the time we performed they were bursting with creativity, adjusting quickly to one another, and communicating musically from one side of the room to

the other. If these students were given more opportunities to engage musically then I am sure that they would achieve even greater feats of musical thinking.

On top of that, according to Anyaso, more time studying music will bring about greater achievement in non musical areas. “Sustained music training is now an evidence-based method for closing the achievement gap between poor kids and their more advantaged peers,” said Margaret Martin, founder of Harmony Project. Martin approached Kraus several years ago, having observed the positive impact that music was having on Harmony kids’ lives. Since 2008, 93 percent of Harmony Project seniors have gone on to college despite dropout rates of 50 percent or more in their neighborhoods.” (Anyaso) According to this research, a program such as the one conducted in this project could have a very significant impact on a school like Alcott if it became a regular part of school proceedings and could provide sustained musical engagement.

Should more programs like this be implemented across the country?

Programs such as La Sistema and Kalikolehua have been successful at engaging students musically and developing more competent learners. A study by the Inter-American Development Bank demonstrates that the effects of La Sistema reach far enough as to effect conflict management skills, employability, and academic achievement, not to mention all the musical skills developed. With results such as these for similar programs, it should be imperative that schools should provide opportunities for students to engage with one another musically.

Students need a creative outlet to help organize and comment on the emotions and experiences that they have. “Music is able to add a unique dimension to the capacities of humans to feel. Music goes beyond— makes special, or transforms—the feelings in nonmusical life, adding another dimension to the human capacity to feel, a dimension not available except through music. Music is an essential way to expand, deepen, and vivify the feelings humans are able to experience. It is among the most powerful means humans possess to fulfill their need for an abundantly feelingful life.” (Reimer,

According to this article from the National Association for Musical Education, music provides a dimension to feeling that is not available anywhere else. With so much of our lives wrapped up in emotion, why would we deprive our children of this essential dimension?

The great thing about music education is that while each element builds on others to form ever increasing knowledge, none of these elements are prerequisites for being able to enjoy, or feel emotions through the music. “Though one must have recourse to technical terms, such as “melody”, “dominant seventh”, “sonata form”, and so on, in order to describe specific musical experiences and the musical experience in general, it is widely agreed that one need not possess these concepts explicitly, nor the correlative vocabulary, in order to listen with understanding.” (Kania)

This means that the benefits of thinking musically that give it its value can be experienced by all immediately upon musical engagement. Students do not need to learn note names before they can begin to think musically. Students do not need to be able to sing on pitch on their first day in choir class to be able to experience what it's like to relate to emotions through music. While note names and pitch accuracy are certainly valuable and help to deepen understanding, they do not inhibit one's full experience of that extra emotional dimension that music brings to the table of our lives.

What should educators do with this information?

From my own experience with this program and the results of the research conducted, I believe that every student should have an opportunity to engage and think musically. For school districts where the money is not available for music programs, it is imperative that local musicians and educators take it upon themselves to provide after school programs. Following this, it is imperative that the community support these programs in every way that they can. Anyaso's research showed that those in a music program had a much higher chance of heading to college compared to their peers in spite of the economic climate surrounding them (Anyaso). Musicians are creative meaning makers and diverse thinkers; able to organize and better understand the totality of their deeply connected body and mind.

“Every generative musical act is aimed toward an end—to create musical meaning. Without that end in view the act becomes musically meaningless. Every musical end—every result of creating music embodies the sum of the acts of making it. Without those acts there would be no result. Music is result (product) and act (process) interdependently; music is both noun and verb simultaneously. The values of music education for students of any age, but especially for young people, lie primarily in learning how to be more skilled when they are engaged in musical processes. (Reimer, 9)

Developing engaged musical thinkers will help develop the overall cognitive strength of all involved. Minds that are fully engaged in all dimensions, mathematical, linguistic, musical, and others will be stronger equipped to handle the rigors of a messy world that is deeply connected. Stronger minds make stronger students and stronger communities. Therefore, I believe musical engagement is essential to student development, and educators should do what they can to provide these opportunities to all students.

Conclusion

My experience at Alcott Elementary school has taught me much about educational practices, creating a drumming program, and the value of music in an education. By helping create a musical experience for students who have never had one before I was able to be a part of something valuable to the community and to the students. It warms my heart to read the responses that the students sent to us regarding their drumming experience and it reminds me of the value behind what we did. Students need an outlet for their ever-creating minds and a place where they can create something spectacular as part of a team of musicians. While the students learned about African drumming, I was busy learning about what it means to be a teacher and a musician simultaneously. Thanks to this experience I have grown in my confidence and ability to lead and create a valuable musical experience for others; the very thing I enjoy most.

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