

Scholarly Reflection #5: Is Music Just All Fun and Games?

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“I would teach children music, physics, and philosophy; but most importantly music, for the patterns in music and all the arts are the keys to learning” (Plato)

The statement that music is “just for fun” has grown increasingly frustrating for me recently. I find it incredibly perplexing that music or the arts in general are sometimes seen as only useful for assisting in the development of other subjects, in particular the STEM subjects. Why, as a society, have we framed music in this light? Why did I have a guidance counsellor from my highschool tell several students in my grade that they should not take a music course because they can sing in the shower in their spare time? How outrageously bold is it to have a “professional” counsellor bluntly tell you that music is “useless”?

Philpott (2012) explains the difference between soft and hard disciplines. Soft disciplines, such as music, are therapeutic, emotional, and only good for other subjects, while hard disciplines are rational and intellectual, like the sciences. So if music is not being viewed as a hard subject, that is to say, a subject that is intellectually engaging, then why are we teaching it in the first place? More importantly, how can we switch our attitudes to reinstate music as a true hard discipline?

According to Philpott (2012), if we are to consider music a hard discipline then we need to understand the complex nature and meaning within its scope. The current context of music, as Philpott (2012) states, is that music is only good for the transferable application to other subjects. The philosophy behind this belief is that music is only useful to aid more important subjects: the STEM subjects. When we, as educators, carry this philosophy, we are saying that music for music’s sake is simply not enough and that there has to be some other external gain

from one's music education. Yet, is there a way to reshape our philosophies in order to combine both arts in the STEM subjects while keeping the integrity of arts for arts' sake?

In the eyes of Reimer (2002), having a philosophy of music education exists so that one can develop his or her own natural responsiveness to the power of art and music. Furthermore, Reimer (2002) claims that we need to be convinced of our philosophy's importance so that we can advocate for what our students need. Music has the potential to be a very unique, intimate and personal experience, as music and art are the fundamental ways that we know ourselves (Reimer, 2002). If it is not enough to teach music for this very reason and not for some other external "gain", then I am not sure I know what is enough. Subjects in the STEM stream are often viewed as "quantifiable" and therefore more easily graded and evaluated (Woodford, 2019). We are better able to see the progress students are making, as it is objective and not subjective. However, let me pose a couple questions: why do we need to be able to have quantifiable data to see the progress of our students, and why are qualitative personal experiences not enough?

I strongly believe that we need to shift towards having an aesthetic music education. Reimer (2002) was a strong advocate that creating art helps educate feeling and that this sentiment is persuasive in all cultures. Teaching "good" music makes us think critically and deeply and defends democracy in the classroom (Reimer, 2002). Again, if music has the power to reach every individual in an emotional and critical way that is relevant in every culture, then why do we see it as a supplement to other subjects? If you ask me, music teaches what all of these other subjects are lacking and needs to be considered enough within itself; music needs to be seen as a serious endeavour and vocation.

Yet, I also believe that there can be room for both the arts as a hard and intellectual subject as well as supplementary to many other subjects. By placing all subjects on an even playing field, we can better celebrate thinking and learning across the curriculum (Woodford, 2019). I suggest that it comes down to what we are prioritizing in education, what we think our students are actually going to use, and what they will genuinely remember after graduating highschool. Ultimately, if we are able to give the arts more exposure through other subjects, then why not incorporate the arts into STEM subjects? Yet, I contend that there still needs to be room for the arts, including music, to be viewed as an intellectually engaging and hard discipline within itself.

As Woodford (2019) points out, classroom music pedagogy is not about teaching children music but about teaching children to work together with a specific purpose in mind. After reading this statement, I can see how many might see the benefits of music and how they might transfer well to other disciplines. Yet, music also provides the deepest sense of developing critical awareness, and it is a much different type of critical thinking than in other subjects (Woodford, 2019). Unfortunately, as Woodford (2019) demonstrates, intellectual curiosity and critical thinking are not present in schools. I am still unsure how educators might shift their focus in the classroom curriculum towards an aesthetic music education, but I know that it is necessary.

References

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