

Scholarly Reflection #6: Is Music Just All Fun and Games? (Part 2)

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What if we changed the public school curriculum so that music was at the centre of it? So that the essence of curriculum was not defined by the sciences or mathematics, but by the arts? What if we shifted our focus towards an art-centric education? I've often wondered if this would help us implement a more democratic-focused education in our schools.

As I stated in my last reflection, a quote from Plato explains that teaching music (or all of the arts for that matter) provides students with the keys to learning. Plato's philosophy is placing the arts at the centre of a student's education. If Plato believed in this kind of an educational approach, then I think it is worth it for us to explore the possibility.

Woodford (2019) contends that education needs to prepare students to be democratic citizens and that the curriculum should not just be concerned about getting students jobs. What Woodford (2019) is claiming is that education and vocational training are not one in the same. I often wonder if, because math and science are regarded as better options than the arts for job prospects, that the arts are then viewed as a 'soft discipline' (Philpott, 2019). With that being said, we need to understand the complexity of the arts and music and not just view them as recreational or entertainment (Woodford, 2019). Music needs to be viewed as a hard discipline if it is to ever be placed at the core of curriculum (Philpott, 2019). Music is not just about fun and games, although it does have the capacity to be such. What we need to understand is that it is not just simply that. Music has the ability to promote "complex modes of thought and action" (Woodford, 2019, p. 13). That is what we need to communicate to our students.

During my time at El Sistema Aeolian, I have observed how these after school music lessons are about more than making "good" music. Quite honestly, that is not the focus at all. El Sistema Aeolian (ESA) aims to promote community building and citizenship, which are two of

the points that Woodford (2019) suggests we ought to have in one's music education. We have a Festival Choir which consists of both the junior and senior choir. For one hour every week, all of the singers come together as one ensemble and share their music. It has also provided the senior choir members with the chance to mentor junior choir members and has given them an opportunity to exercise their group leadership abilities. We have divided them up into small groups with senior choir members designated as each group's respective leaders. The senior choir members truly look forward to this leadership opportunity every week. Festival choir encourages all of the students come together as a community, and it provides senior members with the chance to build their leadership capacities.

As Woodford (2019) contends, the arts seem to serve a secondary role in the STEAM curriculum. The arts are seen as a supplement to the more "serious" subjects, such as science and math. Yet, the arts ought to give meaning and purpose to our students' lives (Woodford, 2019). Have music programs, such as ESA, not given meaning and purpose to its students' lives by celebrating the community they have built? Has ESA not demonstrated that students can be engaged and excited about coming together to make music? If all of this is true, then why are we not placing the arts at the centre of education?

On the contrary, Philpott (2012) states that all subjects should be viewed as important and validated as such. By placing all subjects on an even playing field, we can better celebrate thinking and learning across the curriculum (Woodford, 2019). No one subject is better or worse than the next, and we need to remain impartial and level-headed. We will have students of all interests and abilities, and it is our job to help them find what they are passionate about and to inspire greatness.

Many of the skills that students acquire from a music education are transferable to many aspects of their lives. Music educators need to prepare students to live as democratic citizens (Woodford, 2019). Building democracy and citizenship through music education allows students to think critically and deeply about social and political contexts around them. Having a teaching philosophy that advocates for a democratic education focus helps students engage with critical thinking as both Philpott (2012) and Woodford (2019) state. Reimer (2002) would go as far to claim that we need to have an aesthetic music education, because teaching “good” music makes us think critically and defend democracy. Yet, for me, “good” music is not simply Western art music as Reimer (2002) states. In the music classroom, I believe that “good” music is any style or genre of music that suits the students’ needs and abilities.

How can we promote a democratic purpose in music education? One way is simply by encouraging composition and improvisation in the classroom (Woodford, 2019). Asking students to reflect upon their performance experiences, questioning what went well, what could have gone better, and how we can accomplish this as an ensemble.

After engaging in my own pedagogical beliefs and reflecting upon this myself, I believe there needs to be a universal transfer of learning across all subjects; music is not the only special case here. All subjects have important life lessons and transferable real world knowledge to expose our students to. My job is to expose my students to the arts in as many ways as I can, and to also encourage them to absorb all the knowledge around them in every way possible. Students ought to be sponges exposed to a variety of different waters; not simply just music.

References

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