

CLASSROOM MUSIC: WHERE EVERY CHILD'S A MUSICIAN

In 2005, when the NYSSMA® Classroom Music Committee celebrated its 15th anniversary, we decided we needed a motto to represent our goals and mission. After trying out several variations, we settled on “Classroom Music: Where Every Child’s A Musician.” This motto appears at the top of all of our meeting agendas as a reminder of the crucial role classroom music educators play in the overall musical development of our students.

Merriam-Webster defines “musician” as “a composer, conductor, or performer of music.” This sounds like a lofty title for our littlest students. We often think of musicians as professionals with years of study under their belts, or, at the very least, our high-performing band, orchestra and/or choir members. However, the definition does not specify the level of skill required to be called a “musician.” If our students are engaging in the activities of performing and composing, they are indeed being musicians! In my classroom, I have tried to develop the habit of greeting my students this way (“Good morning, kindergarten musicians!”) as they enter.

To the casual observer, an elementary music classroom may seem like a mysterious playground of cacophony. I’m sure we’ve all heard the gamut of comments from, “Being a music teacher must be so much fun!” to “How do you listen to that noise all day?” At any given moment our students may be moving with scarves, beanbags, parachutes and stretchy bands, exploring sounds on a multitude of instruments — some with strange names, like boomwhackers — singing with puppets, folk dancing or playing games.

Engagement is crucial

I believe that level of “fun” engagement is crucial to the learning process and skill development. The students playing with scarves may be responding to the expressive qualities in the

music, anticipating the resting tone, or learning the difference between staccato and legato. The group engaging in the stretchy band activity may be learning about binary form, practicing the steady beat, or demonstrating an understanding of high and low pitches. The boomwhacker players may be singing with a harmonic accompaniment, building ensemble skills, or developing musical independence. These children may be focused on the fun and exploration, but, in reality, they are being musicians.

At these early stages, we may forget how these incremental skills build a solid foundation for all future musical learning. Just as an AP calculus student had to start by learning that two plus two equals four, your Level 6 vocal sight-reader had to start by singing the resting tone independently (and, more often than not, to a puppet!). Your snare drummer may have first learned to keep a beat while moving to a song in Pre-K music class. Your tuba player may have played a simple ostinato to a folk song on the bass bars to develop crucial ensemble skills. Your jazz student’s first improvisations may have been a rhythmic conversation with a fellow student.

So many of us enter college with the goal of wanting to teach higher-level groups, and we often forget that it was those early musical experiences that hooked us in the first place. In many ways, the elementary classroom music teacher is like one of the behind-the-scenes figures involved in making a movie. We may remember the famous actors, and maybe even the director, but we don’t often know the names of the costume designer, make-up artists, cinematographer, or casting directors who play essential roles in the success of the film.

Several years ago, I volunteered to pick up our Summer Conference Classroom Music headliner clinician at

the airport. While chatting on the way back to the hotel, we inadvertently discovered that in the brief time she had worked in my hometown back in the ‘70s, she had been my kindergarten music teacher! As I participated in her sessions at the conference, I couldn’t help but wonder if I had engaged in some of those same activities as a five-year-old student.

It was an amazing, full-circle moment to realize that this person played a role in my own path to becoming a music teacher. The most wonderful part of this story is that I know my kindergarten music teacher did not adjust my learning experiences with the assumption that I might possibly follow in her footsteps. My classmates and I were all musicians from the time we stepped into the music room. We sang, danced, moved, played, created, and performed.

Setting the stage for success

I have been fortunate enough in my teaching career to work at all levels (Pre-K to 12th grade), and for several of those years I taught K-12. It has been amazing to watch a kindergartener go from marching around my room playing a hand drum to being part of my jazz band rhythm section, or see a student evolve from being too shy to sing out loud to nailing their NYSSMA® vocal solo.

All of these stages in a child’s musical development are equally important. If you are working with our littlest musicians, remember that you are setting the stage for their future musical success. If you are a middle school general music teacher, remember that you may be giving students who do not choose to participate in performing groups the opportunity to continue to be musicians. If you are a high school music teacher, remember that you are continuing to lay bricks on a solid foundation that began many years before. We are all an essential and connected part of the journey of a young musician! ||