

Composition and creativity in the elementary music class

by

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Abstract

After my kindergarten learned how to read and count stick notation, students got to create their own rhythms on the whiteboard. We used these rhythms as an ostinato while we sang a scale and built up to using them while singing a song. To help us keep a steady beat, we played a game to the tune Acka Backa. Once they learned Acka Backa, we used glockenspiels to keep a beat.

This year I have had a major shift in my career from 5-12 to Elementary music. Even though my Masters' work has been in instrumental music, I feel so much more organized. I can plan my lessons more effectively and utilize a lot of play-based learning now. My communication to parents has improved as well. I started using Happy Notes to give to students in class. These notes can be for anything good I see that I want to encourage and reinforce. For example, some of the notes I have given out have been for good posture while singing or playing the recorder, for being an active listener, raising their hand quietly, taking good care of instruments, and being a positive example. In addition to these notes, I take a picture of the student holding the note and send it to the family on SeeSaw. I also post videos from class occasionally and have even shared articles during Music In Our Schools Month.

We read Leadership Lessons by Bill Snyder (Shoop & Scott, 1999) that gave me a lot of enthusiasm to do a much better job at goal setting. Through this, I have been focusing more on the steps to achieve the goals rather than the goal itself. I try to help the students see and identify their progress. One of my first grade classes is especially difficult due to unregulated emotions and lack of physical self-control. When we have a class period without major issues, I make sure to convey several praises to all students, and especially those who may struggle at other times, to reinforce those behaviors.

Prior to beginning my Masters', I was heading towards burnout. Lack of administrative support, other staff members that would talk poorly on our program and try to pit students against music, a counselor actively recruiting students out of music into study hall, and poor scheduling were some of the reasons I was heading down this dark spiral. Through these classes and the switch in my career, I am happier than ever. I began to see the reason why I became a teacher and how big of an impact I can leave on these students' lives. These classes have helped me learn how to be much more organized and truly enjoy my time teaching the students.

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Chapter 1 - Teaching Philosophy

I believe that education is important to prepare the future citizens of the country with the skills to be able to reason, use logic, and understand how to make their own decision. This will be able to push our society forward as a whole. What would happen to society without education? How would our Nation be run? What would politics look like? How could we take care of the ill and find a cure to cancer? Through education, we can create a basic general knowledge to allow students to further their understanding as graduates. We can prepare them for the workplace of the current and future society. I know that college isn't for everyone. However, a proper education of some sort is crucial in order to provide the skills necessary for the workplace. Trade schools are a great option for some students. Towns and cities still need plumbers and electricians. Are those careers going to need the same type of school that a teacher would need? Doctor? Accountant? We should be looking at what these students want to be when they grow up to plan their schedules accordingly. Do they plan to go to college or go straight into the workforce? Is calculus needed for a senior boy planning to farm right out of high school? So many classes that students are either recommended or required to take need to be re-evaluated. Why should we make these kids take classes that aren't going to prepare them for their future? That doesn't mean they don't get an education. We just need to re-evaluate what course load is required for students and their future plan. Something that society seems to be lacking is the ability to understand and discuss ideals with someone of differing views. "My way is the right way, or the only way" seems to be the prevailing way of thinking. Respect for others is something not taught anymore; or at least not learned. We should be teaching these students how to respect others, and also realize that failure is a part of life. I am personally tired of the "everyone gets a ribbon" phase. Everyone's a winner. This has actually negatively impacted my

classroom setting on more than one occasion. A student plays their test for me, but doesn't pass to get their karate belt. They then proceed to cry and throw a tantrum because they were raised to get everything they want. Always being a winner. This generation needs to understand that failure is normal. You can learn from failure. We as parents and teachers should be teaching them how to cope, learn, and deal with the non-successes of life.

Music is a multidimensional concept that develops the student as a whole. It provides opportunities for brain and emotional development. Music is an activity that utilizes both sides of the brain. This helps a student develop coordination. Not all students are going to be "sports kids" or actively participate in extracurricular activities. Music not only provides students with the socializing, but can provide a sense of accomplishment like many sports can. If a student has something that they love to participate in, they may be more engaged in school. I have students of my own like this. One wanted to drop out of school completely, but because of band, he wanted to stay. Participation in music is rewarding. Students are taught to think, imagine, and feel. Many other core classes teach students that there is only one way to get the answer, or there is only one answer. In music, students can think and imagine the answer. They can come up with their own answer. The ensemble can come up with a different answer than the teacher. That is the beauty and power that music can provide. Through teamwork, they can provide an aesthetic experience for all.

Something I feel teachers are sometimes guilty of is teaching to the test. Music educators are just as guilty. Music teachers often feel like they are fighting time, and just teach the music to the performance. I think educators as a whole need to stop teaching to the test, and providing real life opportunities and learning experiences for the children. Relate the music to their lives, history...give it meaning so they remember it for years to come after graduation.

When it comes to giving students an education beyond teaching to the performance, students should learn how to listen and develop cognitive emotions, as well as be creative. In David Elliott's Praxial approach, we need to be focusing on more than just the performance tradition, but developing their listening and musicianship through performing, improvising, composing, arranging and conducting (Elliott, n.d.). Elliott says "We are professionally obligated, as musician-educators, to strike and maintain an appropriate balance between performing and listening (two different kinds of musical performance), the productive and the receptive, activity and critical reflection, and to resist strenuously the kind of thinking that suggests highly desirable instructional options must mutually exclude each other. . . . a central and fundamental part of what we do as music educators and students of music is make music together" (Elliott, n.d.). As an educator, if we are teaching with the focus on getting ready for a performance, there may be listening, but the students are not having the opportunities to develop cognitively and be creative. I do not think that music education needs to move away from the tradition of performance, but educators should focus on meeting each of the National Standards and meeting the multidimensional concepts of music. As I mentioned earlier, music allows students to be creative and come up with answers on their own. This is a concept that Elliot Eisner supports. In his book, *The Arts and the Creation Of Mind*, he gives us five principles of art education. His fourth principle is that art education should help recognize what is personal, distinctive and unique about themselves and their work. The arts allow the creation of their personal vision (Eisner, 2002). Composers, arrangers, and publishers give us dynamics, phrase shaping suggestions, tempo markings, but all of that is suggestive. We as musicians can form our own understanding of the piece and be creative in how we respond to it.

I think that anyone should have the opportunity to participate in music, and I agree with Eisner that by not providing that opportunity, we are stripping these children of finding out who they might have otherwise become. Music is multidimensional and will develop us cognitively, and emotionally. It allows students to be more engaged in school, by giving them a safe place where they can enjoy where they are, and what they are doing. If they do not engage in their other classes, that opportunity may be stripped away from them. Participating in music ensembles can be rewarding. That moment when the ensemble ends together, the concert hall still has the final chord lingering, and the audience sits there in awe. It is a rewarding outcome for all involved. Students are allowed to be creative and come up with their own answers, where they may not have the opportunity to do so in some of their other core classes. Music education is truly like no other core class. I believe that my philosophy is a combination of both Elliot Eisner and David Elliot for these reasons.

How My Philosophy Informs My Teaching

In this unit, students got to be creative, playful, and engaged. While learning to keep a steady beat, the students got to play games to help them be engaged with the process. Once we learned how to keep the beat, we added glockenspiels so they can be creative with keeping the beat. With me moving to elementary music this year, I was able to get away from “teaching to the test.” I was not worried about all the performances we had coming up, and we can just create and perform in class. Playing the games to the steady beat was rewarding for the class. They had fun and became to realize when students wouldn’t stick to the beat. They also got to develop coordination with passing a ball.

Chapter 2 - Lesson Plans

1. Lesson Plan

Objectives:

Students will be able to recognize ta and tiri in stick notation by clapping and speaking.

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to sing Acka Backa while keeping a steady beat with rhythm sticks.

Standards Being Addressed: (NAfME, 2014)

Pr.6.1K.a: with guidance, perform music with expression

Cr1.1.Ka: with guidance, demonstrate how a specific music concept (such as beat or melodic direction) is used in music.

Materials of Instruction:

White board/dry erase marker, rhythm sticks, ball

Lesson Sequence:

Entry Activity/Transition: Clapping, patting, snapping, etc. echoes; speak rhythms while clapping.

Activity #1: Stick Notation

1. Write stick notation on the board from some we did in echoes
2. Show how the sticks line up with what we were speaking
3. Practice speaking and clapping the stick notation

Assessment: While practicing different rhythms, students are able to clap and speak the notation.

Transition: Clap a rhythm ostinato (ta ta tiri tiri) on repeat. Sing a scale with numbers 1-8. Put the ostinato together with singing.

Activity #2: Acka Backa

1. Learn how to sing Acka Backa by rote
2. Keep beat by patting legs while singing: ask what we are keeping while patting legs (beat)
3. Standing in circle, pass the ball around while singing. On “you”, the student that has the ball sits in the middle to play rhythm sticks to the beat of the song.

Assessment: Students can sing and keep a steady beat while playing the game to Acka Backa.

Closure/Summative Assessment:

All students playing the rhythm sticks to the beat of Acka Backa.

2. Lesson Plan

Objectives:

Students can keep a simple ostinato while singing a scale.

Students will be able to keep a steady beat with rhythm sticks.

Standards Being Addressed:

Cr1.1.Ka: with guidance, explore and experience music concepts (such as beat and melodic contour).

Pr.6.1K.a: with guidance, perform music with expression

Re7.2.Ka: with guidance, demonstrate how a specific music concept (such as beat or melodic direction) is used in music.

Materials of Instruction:

Whiteboard/markers, ball, rhythm sticks

Lesson Sequence:

Entry Activity/Transition:

Clapping echoes, learning to speak ta and tiri rhythms. Add stick notation on the board.

Activity #1:

1. Sing a scale with numbers 1-8
2. Clap an ostinato written on the board.
3. Clap the ostinato while singing 1-8

Assessment: Students are singing and clapping an ostinato at the same time.

Activity #2: Acka Backa

1. Review Acka Backa

2. Keep a steady beat while pretending to pass a ball.
3. While singing, students pass the ball around the circle to the beat. At the end of the song, the student with the ball will go to the center and keep the beat with rhythm sticks.

Closure/Summative Assessment:

Students can keep a steady beat while singing and playing the game.

3. Lesson Plan

Objectives:

Students will create a pattern on C/G to keep a steady beat.

Students will be able to keep a steady beat with a ball and rhythm sticks while playing Acka Backa

Standards Being Addressed:

Cr1.1.Ka: with guidance, explore and experience music concepts (such as beat and melodic contour).

Pr.6.1K.a: with guidance, perform music with expression

Re7.2.Ka: with guidance, demonstrate how a specific music concept (such as beat or melodic direction) is used in music.

Materials of Instruction:

Glockenspiels, rhythm sticks, ball

Lesson Sequence:

Entry Activity/Transition: Clapping, patting, snapping, etc. echoes; speak rhythms while clapping. Sing Acka Backa while patting the beat.

Activity #1: Learn to Play Glockenspiels

1. Teach students how to play and care for the instruments.
2. Give pairs of students a glockenspiel with notes C and G from both octaves, all others removed.
3. Using C and G, students can create their own pattern to the beat.
4. Students keep the beat using their glockenspiel while singing Acka Backa.

Assessment: Watching the students play the beat while performing the song.

Transition: Glockenspiels get put on the table and we set up to end with the game.

Activity #2: Acka Backa

1. Students stand in a circle and pass the ball to the beat. On “you” at the end of the song, that student holding the ball plays the rhythm stick from the middle of the circle, keeping the beat for the class.

Assessment: Students can sing and keep a steady beat while playing the game to Acka Backa.

Closure/Summative Assessment:

All students are playing the rhythm sticks to the beat of Acka Backa.

4. Lesson Plan

Objectives:

Students will be able to play an ostinato while singing.

Standards Being Addressed:

Cr1.1.Ka - With guidance, explore and experience music concepts

Cr2.1.Ka - with guidance, organize personal musical ideas using iconic notation and/or recording technology

Pr5.1.Ka - with guidance, apply personal, teacher, and peer feedback to refine performances

Cr3.2.Ka - with guidance, demonstrate a final version of personal musical ideas to peers

Materials of Instruction: Whiteboard/markers, shape drums/mallets

Lesson Sequence:

Entry Activity/Transition: Review Skipping rope song

Activity #1: Skipping rope song with shape drums

1. Students can quietly practice the drum while handing out the supplies
2. Students keep a beat while singing the song.
3. "One letter, two letters, three letters, four" - one student stands to jump to the beat

Assessment: Students are keeping the beat on the shape drums.

Transition: I draw an ostinato in boxes on the board for us to sing and play. Sing a scale with the ostinato.

Activity #2: Sing with ostinato

1. With the same ostinato from the transition, play while singing acka backa.
2. Students come to the board and draw an ostinato. We clap and practice the rhythm on drums.

3. Practice ostinato with singing a scale 1-8.
4. Sing Acka Backa with student ostinato.

Assessment: Students are playing the student ostinato together.

Closure/Summative Assessment: Review and go over earning our class stars.

Lesson Unit Reflection

My goals for this unit was for students to learn how to keep a beat, read stick notation, learn what an ostinato is and perform them, and have fun. The students learned a new song, Acka Backa, and how to keep a beat while playing a game with it. We learned how to use a glockenspiel and keep a beat with it while creating our own pattern on C/G. Ostinato was a new term we learned, and we tried to keep an ostinato while singing a scale. Play-based learning was my focus in this unit. When I assessed my students, I watched their performances to see if they were keeping the beat. I did smaller groups on the drums and glockenspiels so that I could really watch and listen to more students. I think that this lesson is better geared for first or second grade. I chose my Kindergarten class for this lesson just because they had been my most focused class. Now that I am teaching elementary, I tend to think of ways to use play-based thinking more in the classroom. This was something I never used in this way teaching an ensemble prior. I am excited to continue expanding the way I teach.

Chapter 3 - Reflections

This year, my entire career shifted. I had taught 5-12 band for 5 years. This year I made the switch to K-5. I thought this would be a one-year position, but I grew to love it. I love the excitement of the students as they come to class. I love the disappointment when they realize that “today isn’t a music class day”. This age has so much fire and passion that we can instill into them. From burnout to a burning desire to teach, I have come a long way with many thanks to this program. Had I known that I would be switching to elementary, I probably would have taken some of those courses! As an educator, I gained confidence, organization skills, leadership and goal setting, self-assessment, and parent involvement are all areas that I have grown that I can utilize in my new path as an educator.

In the years prior to this switch, I was facing burnout. I did not want to go to school. I was in a very negative environment that led me to believe that I was not worthy of a teacher. Upon talking to one of my Undergrad professors, I began working towards my Masters. This brought back my passion for teaching. I started looking for the positives in my day. I tried to grow the leadership in my band program. My organization as a teacher started to develop more. I was very disorganized and had poor planning skills. Throughout these classes, I have better learned to manage my time, plan for classes, and keep my work life and home life separate.

I really loved learning how to write drill. Marching band was not something I grew up with. When I began my career, I had very minimal experience. Marching quickly became my favorite part of the year. I paid to have someone write my drill, because I had no clue what I was doing. The marching band techniques course gave me the confidence to write drill. If I were to still be teaching band, I would have asked my district to get my Pyware so that I could write my own drill in the future.

When we were reading *Leadership Lessons by Bill Snyder*, I gained a lot of knowledge. Goal setting, helping students see their progress, and honest self-assessment are all things I have really started to implement. I try to help the students see and identify their progress. When I was teaching band, I would set a goal that I wanted for the band. I also allowed the band to set their goals for the year. I would come up with our plan to get there. A wrench got thrown in with COVID, but my goals started to look different. I wanted us to become more of a family. With the senior class I had during the pandemic, reaching our goals was not going as planned. Teaching elementary this year, I will be setting different goals for each grade level. I hope to have a well thought out plan that is attainable in smaller chunks so that I can see our progress. Helping students see their progress looked different for me this year. One of my first grade classes is especially difficult due to unregulated emotions and lack of physical self-control. When we have a class period without major issues, I make sure to convey several praises to all students, and especially those who may struggle at other times, to reinforce those behaviors. I started handing out Happy Notes in each class period to students that I was seeing something I wanted more of. This could have been for anything. Good posture, raising their hand, being an active listener, etc.

Self-assessment is going to be a big goal of mine to accomplish during this school year. When I taught band, I did not do near enough self-assessment. I was lacking confidence from evaluations and poor administration, but that all changed this year with my shift to elementary music. I assessed myself prior to making the next weeks' lesson plans. I would ask myself "what went well? What do I need to be more clear on?" I believe this really helped me navigate this new age level.

One thing I would like to try and increase this year is communication to my students' homes, getting families more involved in their child's music life. When I read *Habits of a*

successful band director: Pitfalls and Solutions (Rush & Lautzenheiser, 2006), I realized how important it is for me to develop a mission statement that will work for me that year, and communicate it with families. Especially since I will be starting at a new school, writing a letter to parents is something I want to start incorporating in the summer. Letting a family know how excited I am about the year and of their involvement can go a long way as a first impression. I can let them know why I think music is important and necessary in their child's life and also give teasers about the upcoming year (Rush & Lautzenheiser, 2006, p 5).

"The day that we stop growing and learning (hopefully) is the day that we die" (Rush & Lautzenheiser, 2006, p 109). I plan to continue learning and adding to my elementary arsenal now. Especially when it comes to classroom management, rules, and procedures. This year was particularly difficult with that first grade class I had. I never stopped working hard at it, but I still feel that I need to hone in on that prior to the new school year. Throughout the last three summers, I have gained much more confidence as a teacher. Even going into elementary music this year, I felt that I had the resources to help me do well. I can utilize the information gained from reading *Habits of a successful band director: Pitfalls and Solutions* by Scott Rush and *Leadership: Lessons by Bill Snyder* written by Robert Shoop. For future school years, I will plan to send a summer letter home to help families look forward to the new year. In addition to these things, I plan on doing some reading each summer on elementary music assessment and classroom management to further my self-assessment skills. I want to be honest with myself daily, and self-assess how my lessons went. I want students to hear from me on their progress more often while also giving out happy notes for good behavior choices, etc. Setting attainable goals for each year and developing a strong plan to get there will be another priority. In the past, all my goals were high, and my plan to get there always left me disappointed. And lastly, even

though I am no longer teaching band at this time, I gained so much confidence with writing drill for marching bands. This is something that I would consider continuing in the future for smaller bands. I was very passionate about it and would be pleased to see my work on a field!

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