

Bonding Through Music

All Teachers Can Use Music to Help Students Express Emotions and to Add Joy to the Classroom



By Patricia Shehan Campbell

Mr. Waugh is a powerhouse in his classroom. In his particular way of welcoming his 5th-grade students, he sets the tone for his genuine interest in their well-being through routines characterized by movement that is rhythmic to watch (and sometimes to listen to as well). Mr. Waugh can groove, and he does so daily with his students.

He scans the line of students that forms outside his classroom door..., awaiting their chance at a hand-clapping routine that each one has devised with him individually, an imprint of who they are and what their interactive relationship is with him. They feel the connection with their teacher, who looks them squarely in the eye as the student's own personal signature handshake takes off. Sometimes their movement is full-bodied, and head, shoulders, knees, toes, and torso are in rhythmic motion together, and the routine is a shared musical ritual.

Mr. Waugh describes the necessity of the greeting ritual for his students, noting that "the gestures we make are beyond a simple 'hello.' We've figured our 'welcome' out together, and this is a daily routine. There's an unspoken tribute to the groove of a hip-hop

maneuver that makes 'the connect' for us and ensures that we are in this learning venture together." With student investment in a lively ritual that is inherently musical, Mr. Waugh then can deliver students to the learning they will do in his classroom. He builds trust and gives joy to his students from the outset, and they radiate a kind of controlled energy that follows them into the classroom and into their focus on the academic work they will accomplish.¹

Music is an invaluable facet of everyday human life. Whether we are the music makers or someone else is "musicking" for us (in person or through our earbuds), we are drawn to it, touched by it, engaged in it, and often captivated by it. Adults and children alike spend a considerable chunk of their waking hours listening to music and responding in movement, gesture, and groove. We sing, chant, rap, hum, and whistle, and we play music on a grand variety of instruments—and on noninstrument objects with sound-making potential, like buckets, cans, and tabletops.

Teachers like Mr. Waugh employ these musical experiences in meaningful ways to build relationships, allow self-expression, and infuse joy into the school day. In this article, I offer several practical strategies and suggestions for all teachers—not just music specialists—to incorporate music into their daily routines.* From listening

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*A wide variety of songs and artists are suggested throughout this article, and some may not be appropriate for young children. Teachers are advised to review all lyrics before selecting songs for their classrooms.

Teachers of all subjects can educate children in and through music.

nooks, which may be all the more important as students recover from the pandemic, to transitions with a groove, all educators will see valuable ways to harness the power of music to enrich their classrooms.²

Music has always turned my head and tugged at my heartstrings. And I've been fortunate to enjoy it in many settings and circumstances: the Irish traditional fiddles in the village of Miltown Malbay, the Bulgarian *gaida* (bagpipe) players in Plovdiv, the mariachi music in Guadalajara, the percussion-heavy rumba in a crowded basement dance club in Havana, the *taarab* concerts of oud and violin in Zanzibar, and the mastery of Burmese slide guitarist U Tin in his home studio in Yangon.

Closer to home, I've been decidedly moved by the Cleveland Orchestra's rendering of Beethoven's "Symphony No. 9" (3rd movement) as a middle schooler, and by the heart-wrenching St. Louis blues of Henry Townsend during my early-career teaching. In graduate school, I was drawn to the high lonesome bluegrass sounds of Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys in Beanblossom, Indiana, and later to the *son jarocho* ("Veracruz sound") at the monthly fandango gatherings of Seattle's Mexican American community (one of many diverse communities in this West Coast multicultural metropolis where I'm now a university professor).

These rich global and hometown experiences have convinced me of one thing: music is at the heart of our humanity. Music is a vehicle for expressing ourselves, for knowing others, and for growing relationships. Music is very present for each of us regardless of race, gender, circumstance, or social status. Across the lifespan it ebbs and flows, nonthreatening and all-embracing, crossing cultures even as it empowers cultural identity. Music knows no bounds.

Music Is a Birthright

Music is a birthright, and many children are enthralled by music. From birth, they absorb and sustain the music they pick up from others,³ and they creatively express themselves in new and necessary ways through the music they make.⁴ Some children study an instrument in weekly lessons or participate in a school ensemble, while other children take solace or strength from music all on their own, without any formal training. Several years ago, I studied children's musical interests and inclinations and was enlightened by their insights.⁵

- Nathan, 7 years old, shared with me that "Every morning, when I wake up, I have songs in my head." I wondered: Was music so wholly integrated within his life that he could be asleep with, and awakening to, these songs?
- Carrie, at 6 years of age, told me that "Some music helps the stories along," and then offered a sophisticated analysis of music's functions in her favorite movies and how she, too, could imagine music for the storybooks she was learning to read. Was her imagination ready and waiting to be tapped for the songs she would summon?

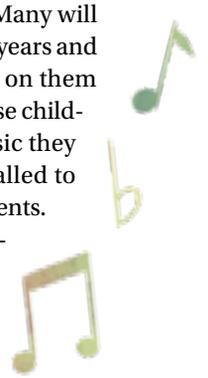
- Lateesha, 10 years old, announced that "Music gets me going and gives me strength." Did she find music's force, flow, and energy so full that it could give her stamina, stimulation, and support?
- Twelve-year-old Jonathan underscored music's energizing capacity, pointing out that "Nobody should have to sit still when there's music. It moves and it makes you move." Was this his personal complaint that the rules of appropriate classroom behavior were conflicting with his own natural compulsion to dance to the music?
- Darryl, age 5, remarked, "I love the feeling of music," and then went on to differentiate between the sounds of a flute's high, thin, and floating quality and a bass guitar's deep, thick, and throbbing effect. Did his acute attention to music's sonic features surpass a mere auditory sensation to become for him a thoroughgoing physical experience?
- Andrea, at 9 years of age, explained music as "something that is sometimes happy, sometimes sad, and probably in between, too." She added, "All the time, it's there, and I need it." Was her definition an expression of the delight that many children feel about music in their lives?

All Teachers as Music Ambassadors

As sure as music is humanly organized sound, so is there also a common musical humanity that we share. It then follows that all teachers have innate musical and artistic qualities, at times in full bloom and at other times hidden and untapped—but waiting to be revealed. All teachers can draw from the music in their lives, families, and communities and find ways to share music with their students. While their attitudes toward music and what it can do for children are more important than their music-making skills, all teachers are more musically skilled than they might believe themselves to be! They need no extraordinary performance skills to lead musical activities, to encourage children's musical involvement, or to incorporate music in significant ways in their classrooms.

Because they were once children, teachers may recall how music enveloped them in their early years and enticed them to engage as listeners, singers, players, and dancers. Many will remember music's meaningful role in their developing years and feel the hold of particular musical moments or songs on them even today. But even teachers who feel distant from these childhood musical experiences still have access to the music they once encountered. It lives within them and can be called to action and put to good use in the teaching of their students.

Teachers of all subjects—language arts, social studies, math, and the sciences—are vital for educating children in and through music. Further, they have advantages that music specialist teachers do not. They typically see their children daily, or at least more



Music helps children think creatively and transition between tasks.

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regularly than do music specialist teachers. They know the children well and are keenly aware of their needs, interests, and abilities. They are able to determine key times and places

for inserting music into the classroom to give children expressive opportunities, enhance their learning, and even “make their day.” They are acutely aware of energy shifts in the classroom when children could best benefit from a music break that will revive them, settle them, or give them focus. Moreover, teachers are capable of creating an environment in which children can share their own music, discover culturally unfamiliar music, and make music without criticism.



Music for Relieving Stress and Forming Bonds

Music allows children to release emotions that are not always easily expressed through the words they know. Listening, singing, playing, and dancing to music can lift or soothe the spirit, bring peace after moments of emotional turmoil, and reduce stress and anxiety—which can make children’s learning more efficient. Music also helps increase empathy; in making music together, children learn to regulate emotions and become more aware of other people’s feelings. And the sharing and exchange of songs and musical experiences that are meaningful to children and their families can help build classroom community.⁶

Listening Centers: In the busyness of a school day, a solitary retreat into music may be the answer for children who need time away from the overwhelming regimen of academic study. Imagine a listening nook in the corner of a classroom where a child might go to listen to recorded music and view music videos. Taking time for listening can be richly rewarding, as it helps reduce tensions and worries and offers relaxation and peace. A small space with nothing more than a table, a chair, a computer, and headphones can provide solace and a safe haven for children.⁷ Such a center might also feature activity sheets with questions to guide a search on the musical

life of Beethoven or Beyoncé, Mozart or Midori, Ravi Shankar or his daughter Norah Jones. For some children, a listening center can be perfect for the pursuit of independent listening, a necessary refuge from the hustle and bustle of the classroom.

Mood Regulation: When the days sometimes seem long and lacking color or energy, music can regulate moods, enlivening children who appear lethargic, distracted, or crabby.⁸ When rousing activities leave children overstimulated and overexcited, music can create calm to help them wind down. Listening selections such as Saint-Saëns’s “The Swan” (from *The Carnival of the Animals*), Dvořák’s “New World Symphony” (2nd movement), and Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” can help children relax from stressful academic challenges, release emotional energy in safe ways, and center their thinking.

Music for the Joy of It

Well-chosen music makes classroom experiences more vibrant, from the time children first gather for learning to the end of a class or a school day. Music helps children focus their attention, think creatively and expressively, retain information, and make transitions from one task, concept, or subject to the next. Music cues activities and behaviors as it enriches individual learning in classroom music centers, makes holiday celebrations more communal and genuine, and enhances schoolwide assemblies. It can add magic and motivation to transform a plain, dull, and uninspiring classroom to one in which children love learning with and from each other.

Openers: Music starts the day or class on a positive note and helps children feel that they are sharing in a gratifying experience as part of a group that works together to make something beautiful. Teachers have long used music to provide the grand opening to an experience to which all children can contribute. Songs to sing together with or without recordings include classics like “Lean on Me,” “Here Comes the Sun,” “Celebration,” and “Oye Cómo Va.” Children may instead want to create an opening routine of their own that can be sung, rhythmically chanted or rapped, and designed as a dance routine or a set of gestures. With a good sound system, teachers can stir up students to follow the leader (the teacher or another student) in showing the beat of a music selection through movement—clapping, snapping, stamping, hopping, blinking eyelids, nodding heads, lifting shoulders, or tapping heads, shoulders, knees, and toes.

Another type of opening might consist of students walking in place or around the room to the sound of a steady rhythm on a hand drum. The activity can start with rhythms at a moderate tempo played at a medium dynamic level and then shift to slower or faster tempos or softer or louder rhythms that are reflected in movement, all the way to a stillness or “freeze” when the music stops. Or teachers could feature recordings of gentle music to set a calm tone in the classroom (for example, “Plum Blossom Melodies”

All of Us Have Musical Gifts

And All of Us Deserve to Have Those Gifts Nurtured

There is a long-standing debate as to the distribution of musicality across the population. Some maintain that only a select few have been granted the musical gift, and the rest are passive consumers of music. But in fact, the notion of selective musical talent has been highly exaggerated, and neuroscientists have debunked it as a widespread myth with little basis in reality. Of course, some people are born with a physiology necessary for a pleasant-sounding voice, and there could be a natural propensity for the motor coordination that contributes to playing a guitar, a violin, or a flute—but deliberate practice is still important.¹ And while it's long been noted that perfect pitch tends to appear in families, which indicates the possibility of a genetic component—evidence is now growing that perfect pitch can be learned.² In all, music is not an inherited trait so much as a practiced behavior; there is little evidence that expert musicians are uniquely hardwired at birth. Rather, musicians and nonmusicians emerge from the womb with similar brain structures and learning potentials.³ Of course, this doesn't

mean that all children will want to become musicians—but it is heartening to know how much potential we all have.

Because of both that potential and the joys of music, all children deserve opportunities to become musically expressive singers and players and thoughtful, analytical listeners. Music merits a central place in education for improving cognitive development, school attendance, and motivation for all children—and particularly for students growing up in under-resourced neighborhoods.⁴ Music also plays a key role in providing a safe place for venting emotions, developing empathy, and stimulating the creative imagination.⁵

In far too many schools, students do not have access to either music classes or extracurriculars such as band or choir. But the study of music and opportunities for musical enrichment should not be an exclusive privilege for a select few.⁶ While children benefit from systematic musical education by music specialist teachers who know well their instruments, ensembles, and graded repertoire,⁷ music can also be



comfortably integrated all through the day by all teachers, for all students to enjoy deeply. The more children sing, dance, play, and listen to music, the closer they will come to living out their full musical capacity. Because music plays many roles for students, a school curriculum inclusive of music becomes more than another constituent of a liberal education. Music shapes identity and bridges cultures; the songs children sing, the pieces they play, and the dances to which they move in stylistic rhythms, positions, and formations engage them in holistic ways of understanding themselves and the world at large.⁸

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For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2022/campbell.

played on a Chinese guqin), then turn to more vigorous music (such as the Drummers of Burundi's energetic performances featuring an *Inkiranya* drum) to set an upbeat tone for an upcoming study plan. Just a few minutes of a musical opener can do wonders in bringing children together into the community of the classroom.

Closers: Just as music makes an excellent launch to the business of learning, it also functions well in closing a class session or school day. Farewell songs can neatly wrap up schoolwork, drawing children out of their academic focus, calling them together, and sending them on their way with good cheer and contentment. Notable closing songs sung to recordings, to a guitar's strumming of a few chords, or even a cappella (with voices only) include The Sound of Music's "So Long, Farewell," the cowboy signature song "Happy Trails," "Jamaica Farewell," Woody Guthrie's "So Long, It's Been Good to Know You," and the Swahili-language song "Kwaheri" ("Goodbye").

Soothing music can work well at the end of a test or particularly stressful time; children can be treated to a few minutes or more of a Mozart string quartet, a Javanese *gamelan* (percussion orchestra) work, a gentle Brazilian bossa nova, a traditional Irish *air* (open-ended melody), a South Asian Indian *thumri* or *dadra* (light-classical song forms), or a slow ballad from the likes of folk singers Iris DeMent, Odetta, Lydia Mendoza, or Elizabeth Cotten. While children listen, they can rest, talk quietly, finish an assignment, or start homework.

If the goal of a closing activity is to develop communal energy, a children's singing game can be effective; the wide assortment of musical choices includes "Bobo Ski Waten Taten," "Down Down

Baby," "Sarasponda," "Here We Go Zudio," and "Alley Alley-O." Another high-energy closing is a rhythmic follow-the-leader game: using body percussion, a few drums, or boxes and pencils, the teacher or a student leader can play four-beat or eight-beat rhythms that are echoed by the whole class.

Signals and Breaks: Music can call children's attention to an announcement or signal a transition from one task to another. Teachers have learned to save their voices from overuse by using music to come to attention or as a reminder to children to quiet down. One signal popular with teachers is to clap a short rhythmic pattern as a call to which children immediately respond in imitation. Some teachers use the single chime of a small brass bell to remind chattering children to listen or focus on an already assigned activity. Some teachers cleverly turn a rhythm into a mix of clapping, snapping, and chest-slapping in which children join as the group cycles through several revolutions of a body percussion routine. Still other teachers have access to instruments as signals for lunchtime (the sharp ring of a triangle) or the end of quiet working time (a repeating chord on keyboard or tone bars).

Breaks between subjects or assignments are a necessary relief to a period of intensive focus, and these breaks can be musical mood modulators. Teachers may give children 30 seconds to shift their books and seats, during which time a musical excerpt plays. At music's end, students need to be back at their seats or they may need to "freeze" in their positions, after which they are placed "at ease" as they start a new topic. Musical breaks can also consist



Sharing musical experiences can help build classroom community.

of singing, humming, or playing on available instruments folk songs like “Frère Jacques,” “Kookaburra,” “A La Rueda, Rueda,” or “Shake Sugaree.”

Music to Enliven Standard Subjects

Live and recorded music permeate life, and they also slide smoothly into the nooks and crannies of language arts, social studies, math, and science, potentially making learning more compelling and enduring. In my experience, music integration is beneficial in developing students’ logic and literacy,⁹ numeracy, and knowledge of history and culture. Musical experiences can make student learning in all subjects more colorful, lively, and fun, and they are easily fashioned and facilitated by teachers.



Music, Language Arts, and Social Studies: Speech and song are closely related, such that music shares communicative and expressive functions and features with language arts. They both concern rhythm, pitch, and accent; they both convey direct and implied meanings; and they both affect the emotions. Literature can come alive through the infusion of music into stories, and students can be encouraged to create their own soundscapes to accompany the reading aloud of stories such as Eric Carle’s *The Very Quiet Cricket*, Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*, and Marcus Pfister’s *The Rainbow Fish*. Storybooks based on folk songs can be sung and rhythmically chanted, such as Peter Spier’s *The Fox Went Out on a Chilly Night* and Jeanette Winter’s *Follow the Drinking Gourd*.

Sometimes, silent reading can be complemented by soft, tranquil music wafting through the room, such as Bach’s “Air on the G String” or “The Midnight Blues” by the Wynton Marsalis Quintet.

Music may also serve well to motivate creative, descriptive, and expository writing projects. There are endless possibilities for inspiration, from Mozart’s “Symphony No. 40 in G Minor” or Bach’s “Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor” to Duke Ellington’s “Take

the ‘A’ Train,” Mariachi Los Camperos’s “La Malagueña,” and Rahim Alhaj’s “Letter 7. Fly Home—Fatima.” Teachers may suggest scenarios or characterizations but then leave it to children to write descriptive words, sentences, or paragraphs against the backdrop of the music.

Poetry and music combine in songs, and as literary forms, songs convey inspiration, celebration, history, myth, and cultural comment—building a bridge to social studies. Songs like “It’s Raining, It’s Pouring” and “Frog Went A-Courtin’” help children discover rhyming words and engage their imaginations, while “Wade in the Water”^{*} and “John Henry” are poetic and integrate historical information. And the poetry of hip hop like Blackalicious’s “First in Flight” can empower and uplift students and help them explore issues impacting their communities.

Going deeper into social studies, children can develop meaningful insights into the study of history, culture, relationships, and social responsibilities through experiences that take them over time and across worlds in songs and instrumental music. Social and historical values come to life through music, as children learn the feelings that come through musical expression in ways that words alone cannot do. Teachers may introduce students to 14th-century England through a modern-English excerpt of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* combined with the popular Middle English song “Sumer is icumen in”—which is well within children’s capacity to sing (or even to play on improvised instruments). Songs such as “Yankee Doodle” and “Hail, Columbia” reveal some of the patriotic spirit of an emergent American identity near the time of Revolutionary War and are well worth singing or listening to. “America the Beautiful”[†] and “This Land Is Your Land”[‡] can be enlightening when analyzed from multiple perspectives—particularly the perspectives of Black and Indigenous peoples—to deepen students’ historical knowledge and cultural appreciation. In studying the struggles of enslaved African Americans and recognizing the complexities of equity, justice, and universal human rights, songs like “Oh Freedom” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” (both historic and contemporary recordings) are valuable to listen to and sing along with.

Two resources that are particularly useful for cultivating students’ respect and appreciation of other communities across the world, and that can be used as prospects for all-class or individual experiences, are the Smithsonian Folkways Record-

^{*}The meaning of “Wade in the Water” is not readily apparent from the lyrics. This website on the Underground Railroad is helpful for providing context for students: go.aft.org/360.

[†]For an illuminating analysis of this song, see “America the Beautiful a Call to Struggle” at go.aft.org/frg. And consider asking students to compare the original version of the song with this version by Ray Charles: go.aft.org/pyt.

[‡]For a discussion of this song that includes some Native Americans’ perspectives, see “The Blind Spot in the Great American Protest Song” at go.aft.org/i0z, which includes revised lyrics performed by Pete Seeger and an instrumental version by youth immigrant musicians. For an Ojibwe version recorded by Anishinaabe singer Keith Secola, see go.aft.org/f11.

Musical experiences can make learning more colorful, lively, and fun.

ings (folkways.si.edu/learn) and the “Star-Songs and Constellations” curriculum at the Global Jukebox (theglobaljukebox.org/?starsandconstellations). Here, teachers can find ready-made lessons, embedded audio and video recordings, and slide sets that can be used in the classroom or as listening assignments for students to learn about people, cultures, and music of American and global cultures. From Afghanistan to Zimbabwe and nearly everywhere in between, these rich resources help students develop cultural understanding of the common and distinctive features of the human condition across time and place.

Music, Math, and Science: Not so far removed as it may seem, there are overlaps between music and mathematics, and in knowing the science of musical sound. To begin with, there are the fundamental natural considerations of music’s acoustical properties: pitch as vibration frequency, timbre as wave complexity, dynamics as decibels and intensity levels. There are musical patterns to decipher, logical structures of music to discover, and experiments with the science of sound that can appeal to and support learning.

At the fundamental level of numeracy, there are counting songs in every language and culture, such as “Vamos a Contar” (Spanish), “Moja, Mbili, Tatu” (Swahili), “Yi Er San” (Mandarin), and “Un Éléphant Qui Se Balançait” (French). At a more sophisticated level, children can be drawn to mathematical cycles and sequences through participation in West African percussion patterns. They can experience the thoughtful arrangement of musical elements through body claps, pats, snaps, and stamps, and through the transfer of these patterns to drums, shakers, woodblocks, and bells. They can create, combine, and play eight-beat patterns of various long and short durations and become immersed in the mathematical complexities of rhythms and polyrhythms. An understanding of fractions can be illustrated as children discover the subdivisions of whole-note rhythms into halves, quarters, eighths, and so forth.

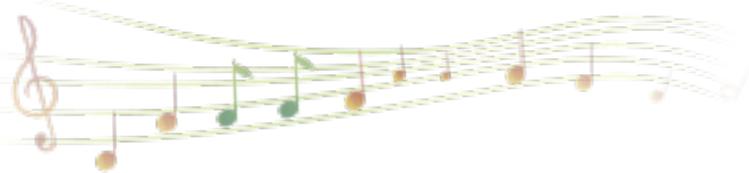
Scientists since the Greek philosopher Pythagoras have been fascinated with the challenge of measuring sound. Pythagoras developed a complex mathematical system for describing the relationship between the length of a vibrating object, such as a string, and its subdivision into various pitches. For instance, a string pressed at its midpoint, when plucked, vibrates twice as fast as the full-length string, creating a pitch one octave higher than the whole string’s frequency. Experiments to determine the physical properties of sound and explore resonance or pitch all build on Pythagoras’s work and are intriguing to children. Concrete materials such as string, comb-kazoos, and balloons that can be inflated and then slowly deflated with a squeaky squeeze can demonstrate sound properties. Children can further investigate resonance with rubber band box sounds or uncover the nature of pitch by creating a monochord using a two-by-four, eyebolts, and nylon string. Through experiential activity, teachers can share

Pythagoras’s drive to grasp relationships between music, math, and science for exploring the universe.¹⁰

Never let it be said that music belongs only to the prodigies. Music lives in all of us: in our voices, our bodies, and the various human inventions—musical instruments—that function as extensions of our artistic, social-emotional, personal, and communal expression. As we have the capacity to receive music, respond to music, perform music, and create music, we share music as a characteristic of our humanity. Music brings smiles and tears, energy and stillness, agitation and peace, joy and wonder. It need not be compartmentalized in schools, nor should it be perceived as inaccessible and unattainable, relegated only to the artist-musician.

Undeniably, music in the hands of music-specialist teachers should be continued in schools; they who are musically educated in the pedagogy of vocal-choral music and the instruments of bands and orchestras can contribute to the musical skills and knowledge of their students in specialized ways. There is evidence, too, that music curricula led by music-specialist teachers are becoming more diversified, increasingly featuring courses in guitar, keyboard, and songwriting, and ensembles like mariachi, steel band, and West African drumming. Bravo for them! Although the struggle continues to ensure that music can operate as its own subject for study in every school and has a strong and continuing presence in the curriculum, the reality is that music is owned by everyone, and everyone has license to use it in varied ways. Teachers of all subjects will continue to prove themselves thoroughly capable of weaving music into the daily doings of their classrooms, using music to animate their students’ lives, lighten and brighten their learning, and acknowledge the myriad ways music makes life worth living. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2022/campbell.



Online Special: Music to Our Ears

For links to all but the most readily available musical suggestions in this article, see the online version at aft.org/ae/fall2022/campbell. Links to free videos are embedded throughout the text.