

Chapter 20

Engagement and Creativity in Music Education

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ABSTRACT

The wider benefits of active engagement with music throughout life have been well documented. There is evidence that playing a musical instrument and integrating music in the curriculum can have a range of positive effects on children's self-esteem, their social behavior and cognitive skills, such as creativity, spatial-temporal ability, reading, language and IQ score. Music is a vital part of children's everyday lives and schools have a major role to play in helping children develop a positive musical identity by encouraging active participation in musical activities. When children are actively involved in creative work in music, they are affectively, behaviorally and cognitively engaged with the creative task. This chapter concludes that there is a problem with lack of engagement in formal music education and that we need to do more to understand why many students are disengaged with music at school and put music to its proper place of being an integral part of students' lives.

MEANINGS OF ENGAGEMENT AND FLOW EXPERIENCES IN MUSIC EDUCATION

Pupil engagement with school has been conceptualised as a multifaceted construct that includes behavioral, emotional and cognitive dimensions (Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004). Compared to behavioral and cognitive engagement, the emotional dimension of engagement, which refers to students' motivation and affective reactions to school and learning (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012), has the highest positive association with instructional contexts (Lam, Wong, Yang & Liu, 2012; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Lumby, 2011). This led Lam et al. (2012) to conclude that affective engagement 'may be the engine that drives the other dimensions of student engagement' (p.415). The interplay of emotion and intellect can impact on classroom behavior in school (Newton, 2014) and can affect students' well-being in higher education (Beard, Clegg & Smith, 2007).

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A strand of research about engagement in music education has looked at the state of flow, “a self-perpetuating state of enjoyment that results in creative products, insightful thinking and personal growth” (Custodero & Stamou, 2006, p.1666). Creative behavior in music is correlated with levels of optimal experience, with a sense of satisfaction in individual and group work (MacDonald, Byrne & Carlton, 2006), which is the consequence of engagement in valued and challenging activities for which individuals are highly skilled. This kind of engagement generates an ideal learning situation as there is a constant need for skills to be improved to match the perceived challenge. As Custodero (2005) maintains, “across age groups, musical engagement is initiated and maintained through skilled awareness of and responsiveness to opportunities for increased complexity implicit in musical materials” (pp 185-186). Musical engagement, in this sense, has been linked to transcendent music making experiences (Bernard, 2009) by functioning at the height of one’s abilities and being a part of something larger than the self.

The connection between flow experience and learning assigns, on the one hand, children as agents who can actively shape their own learning and implies, on the other, that teachers who can both create and recognise instances of such experiences in their students can lead to improved learning and effectiveness (Bernard, 2009) while also reciprocally increasing their own engagement in the teaching and learning activity (Custodero, 2005). Young music-makers (4 and 5 year old children), for instance, use ‘scaffolding strategies’, such as interpersonal relations and the construction of meaning and value through collective music-making, to make “implicit metacognitive adjustments” to facilitate and sustain flow, a process which allows for emergent motivation (St John, 2006).

To experience flow and be wholly immersed in an activity, both affective and cognitive aspects of engagement need to operate. Behavioral involvement is reinforced through an active interplay between the emotional and mental facets of engagement, both of which contribute to the experience of the feeling of enjoyment which implies much more than fun. As Elliott (1995) interestingly stated,

Any form of intentional action to which there is a corresponding form of know-how provides the basis for ordering consciousness and experiencing enjoyment. Enjoyment is not something that just happens; enjoyment is something that people make happen as a result of their efforts to meet the demands of something that they themselves deem a challenge (p.115).

Along similar lines, Dillon (2007) argues that activity and reflection (behavioral and mental engagement) need to complement and support each other as the act of music making acquires purpose, context and relevance through cognitive understanding and structured reflection. Mental engagement in the music lesson and especially the quality of talk and pupil responses (Major, 2009) forms an essential part of an “enchanted” lesson (Finney, 2003). McPherson and McCormick’s (1999) research supports the view that those students who are more cognitively engaged while practising their instrument tend to do more practice, are more efficient with their learning and are also more intrinsically motivated. There is a relationship, therefore, between the mental strategies employed and the level of achievement in rehearsing and performing music.

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