




The Importance of Music Education in the Middle School Curriculum

Providing an environment of acceptance for all students through music—even for one hour per day—is a first step toward connecting with students from all backgrounds and helping them to develop healthy life skills.

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The bell rings. The 30 eighth-grade students who enter the music room represent a diverse population and a wide range of learning abilities. Carrie, who struggles with understanding the most basic of instructions and reads at a second-grade level, greets the teacher but shies away from the other students. Brigida, who speaks Spanish and a limited amount of English, delivers a greeting in slow and deliberate English. Rute, who speaks Portuguese and understands Spanish, and Numa, who speaks only Arabic, enter the room quietly and move directly to their seats. The other students enter, talking excitedly about various life experiences. The last student to enter the room, running in just before the bell rings is Jimmy, who announces his entrance to the class with loud and inappropriate comments.

This group of students, like middle school classes throughout America, challenges educators with developing curricula that meet a wide range of needs and abilities.

Middle school educators must offer experiences that will encourage students to become engaged with their school environment, develop a positive attitude, and make healthy choices. Music is one program that addresses multiple learning styles, meets individual needs, and engages students in meaningful activities. Lessons learned in music classes can help middle school students, who often feel awkward and confused, develop a sense of self-esteem, belonging, and purpose.

Self-esteem. During the adolescent years there is a strong relationship between self-esteem and performance in school. It is important to design lessons that address student ability and level of understanding and that incorporate a variety of brain functions. Playing music incorporates many systems of the brain—the motor system (using hands in playing music), the auditory system (listening to other students), the ocular system (watching other students playing the same part), the attention system (focusing on the activity), and the memory system (remembering the many components of the music). Playing music also engages the student in the musical, spatial, bodily kinesthetic, and personal intelligences described by Harvard University professor John Gardner in his theory of multiple intelligences. Students draw upon their strengths as they perform the music, developing at their own individual rate and experiencing success in the school environment.

Belonging. Playing music, an activity in which every student is a valuable member of the ensemble, encourages students to develop connections with the other members of the class. These connections can have a positive effect on perceptions, which in turn encourages students to become more fully engaged in class activities and to demonstrate healthy, pro-social behavior.

Purpose. Students who are not working toward future goals may lack a sense of purpose in their lives. Playing music allows them to work together toward a common goal and to develop a strong sense of purpose. This sense of purpose may foster a desire to engage in healthy behaviors and to develop goals in other areas of their lives.

Coping. All people experience and must cope with feelings of disappointment, rejection, fear, and anger at various points in life. Turning our attention back to the students in our sample class, we are reminded that as educators, we rarely have enough information about our students' home situations or the emotional problems with which they may be struggling. However, we do have a unique opportunity to influence our students during the time they

spend in our classrooms. Providing an environment of acceptance for all students through music—even for one hour per day—is a first step toward connecting with students and helping them to develop healthy coping skills.

In examining the characteristics of middle school students, we discover that music education in the middle school curriculum can:

- Encourage success for all students;
- Provide an environment of acceptance for all students;
- Allow for modifications that meet the individual needs of all students;
- Address multiple learning styles and levels of development;
- Incorporate many systems of the brain; and
- Engage musical, spatial, bodily kinesthetic, and personal intelligences.

The structure of music and the significance of the community in its performance can provide students with a sense of individual importance in relation to the ensemble as a whole. Music education can motivate students to become healthy, valuable, contributing members of society, a component of the middle school curriculum.

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