

Violins over Violence: Mentoring At-Risk Youth with Music Education

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Introduction: Hidden Rhythm in the Streets

As the world adapts to the realm of computers and technological advancements, there is one aspect of our lives that has not faded out of style. Music has remained a part of society ever since man discovered the pleasure of sound. Although the instruments and genres of music have changed over the years, the impact of it has not. Everywhere in the world there are forms of music that can be heard every second of the day. From movie soundtracks to elevator tunes, music is truly everywhere. Today, various aspects of music provide entertainment and socialization, while other forms provide the freedom for self expression and individual taste.

Recent scientific evidence, however, has proven that music is not only pleasant to one's ears, but beneficial to the mind and spirit as well. It is this new discovery that may play an important role in aiding disadvantaged children across America. Troubled children have less and less to rely on in the fast-paced society we live in today. It is the purpose of this proposal to outline a solution that utilizes music education in the prevention of youth delinquency by simultaneously enhancing a child's learning ability and social skills with the help of mentors in a musical setting.

Problem: Children Out of Tune

Identifying At-Risk Youth

It is apparent to the public that kids today attempt to avoid their troubles and fit into society by turning to local gangs, drugs, and alcohol abuse. Most, but not all, of these children have been exposed to some form of family abuse or have grown up around violent neighborhoods. When children are traumatized by this type of physical or emotional abuse, the effects are detrimental to their development. Researchers feel that if the children's own personal needs have been completely denied for so long, it is not unreasonable to think that they do not care about the feelings of others (Nichols 9). Commonly, society refers to these kids as those who have fallen into the wrong crowd, or become the product of a broken home. School administrators and police officers label these kids as delinquents because of their lack of respect for authority and fellow peers. In the at-risk community, these children's lives eventually form a downward spiral, causing them to drop out of school and resort to a life of crime to support themselves. However, there is hope for children in these unfortunate situations. Psychological studies have concluded that childhood trauma can be reversed with the proper counseling and treatment. Thus, with the appropriate educators and programs, society as a whole may earn back the trust of these innocent victims.

Background and Data: Key Notes and Major Chords

Mentoring Benefits

Mentoring programs have been developing all over the nation. The cost of living is constantly rising, and more parents and guardians are forced to take new or second jobs to support their family. This is one of the main reasons why many cities have started to develop mentoring and tutoring programs. Everyone has heard of at least one local volunteer program in their community advocating child daycare or after school opportunities. Although these

programs are a safe haven for children who have nowhere else to go after the school day ends, most of these facilities simply provide child supervision for working parents. However, today many households also struggle with financial and marital issues that overflow into the lives of residing children. Stressful situations at home result in many negative consequences for children exposed to these adult problems. At-risk youth benefit more from a program that not only supervises, but provides helpful mentors. Programs with mentors provide a different atmosphere for education by advocating individualized lessons instead of treating the class as a whole. Mentoring also incorporates non-academic activities such as sports and art into the curriculum. Researchers suggest that "engagement in activities beyond academic pursuits has been shown to be positively associated with health-enhancing activities" (Harrison and Narayan 113). These activities can provide safe playtime for children who would otherwise be confined to offerings of a poor household or violent neighborhood.

Mentoring also provides the chance for children to find a friend and confidante outside their peers and families. Many troubled youth see teachers and other authority figures in a negative light resulting from past situations when they have been severely punished. For example, many children experience horrible beatings from gang affiliations and teasing from students in the classroom after a teacher calls him or her down. Studies have shown that mentors have "helped to mediate the cumulative potentially negative effects of contingent debilitating factors in at-risk students' lives" (Shields 280). Since mentors are neither part of the child's family or school, they may be seen as a neutral, even positive figure.

Musical Benefits

Music is one of the most underestimated tools in our society. It is obvious to the average person that music is beneficial to the auditory and motor systems of the body when listening to songs or playing an instrument. The effects of learning and playing music, however, provide the largest impact on children. Not only is music pleasing to the ear, but scientists have discovered remarkable connections "that show how music study can actively contribute to brain development" (Facts and Figures 2). Researchers at the Tokyo Metropolitan University of Health Sciences have concluded that because the left hemisphere of the brain deals with language, and the right hemisphere deals with music, they share a common neural network through speaking and singing (Society 3). In other words, language skills and music skills depend on and benefit one another through the sharing of neurological pathways in the human brain. Not only is music enjoyable and fun to partake in, but scientists now know it has educational and therapeutic properties as well.

Music also plays an important part in expanding memory. For example, learning mathematical formulas requires the brain to learn new material and then apply it to existing material. Many teachers call this the building block process. In essence, the brain is creating networks among neural cells which act as the building blocks. When learning a piece of music, the brain goes through the same process, therefore expanding one's memory by creating additional networks of neurons. Furthermore, certain elements of math, reading, writing, and science require one's brain to reconfigure basic material for higher learning. By reconstructing these neural pathways, practicing music also requires the brain to perform this same learning skill, such as reading multiple chords instead of one note at a time (Lu 1).

The bottom line to music education is that anyone can benefit from it, no matter what their socioeconomic status, age, health, or problem at stake. Listening or playing music is a

common form of stress relief and expression for people today. Music has been shown to decrease heart rate, blood pressure, and anxiety levels in the human body. Many students choose to listen to classical music as they study, while a majority of drivers tend to listen to relaxing songs when stuck in rush hour traffic. On the other hand, high school locker rooms are full of athletes pumping the team up with a high-energy rock or rap anthem. Sports fans of all races and cultures sing in unison to the National Anthem before the game begins. Society does not need to look any farther for such a unique and universal language.

Proposed Solutions: Moving to a Higher Octave

Mixing Music Education and Mentoring

Perhaps the best way to help at-risk children in a friendly, non-competitive environment is to develop a combination of mentors with music education. This kind of music program would be modeled to produce "a useful vehicle for interdisciplinary education, relating to its cultural, historical, and scientific context" (Sloboda 249). To ensure equal opportunity, the program will be a free and friendly environment open to all children within the at-risk community. Children would be able to engage themselves in healthy activities in a casual atmosphere. Students will be exposed to a range of musical styles, but may choose their favorite style for independent study. When children are engrossed in playing music they enjoy, they forget they are even learning (Sheftel 2). This way, the children are studying something that interests them, not something they are made to do. In addition to performances as a progress measurement, children may invite family members if legal circumstances permit. This may help the relationship between relatives grow and offer an opportunity for parents to see how their child is capable of producing such wonderful melodies.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The advantages to the proposed program are simple. The core belief in this program is that "musical instruction can supply intellectual, emotional, and physical components critical to children's development" (Persellin 2). In other words, the skills learned throughout the program reach far beyond the music curriculum to benefit many other developmental aspects such as social behavior. In classroom settings, problematic children are singled out by teachers for bad behavior, yet there is no individual attention given to the problem because the rest of the class must go on. If children were learning music from mentors rather than teachers, there would be less of an authoritative threat. Also, in a specific program developed for at-risk children, bad behavior can be addressed by their mentor and the child may be given the chance to explain what is wrong and how they feel. While providing the individual attention of mentors, the program will also create group activities through music ensembles. This will ensure that the children learn the skills of respecting others and working as a team. For example, performing in a group "helps students learn to work effectively in the school environment without resorting to violent or inappropriate behavior" (MENC 2). The end result will allow students to apply social and study techniques utilized in the program to their home and school lives.

The disadvantages to creating a mentoring music education program are strict employee standards and unavoidable financial needs. The qualifications of the mentors in the proposal need to meet high standards and cannot simply be volunteers. Research has shown that "non-directive mentoring programs delivered by volunteers cannot be recommended as an effective intervention for young people at risk of or already involved in antisocial or criminal behavior" (Roberts et al. 513). Therefore, employees must be qualified music educators that are psychologically prepared to handle problems faced by the at-risk community. Training the appropriate mentors will be

costly, as well as the purchasing of music workbooks, instruments, and other supplies. Like many community centers, "mentoring programs rely on volunteers and donations, and the cost of funding well-run research often exceeds a mentoring program's limited budget" (Keating et al. 718). Although many centers receive donated instruments and used supplies, there is hardly enough available to fulfill the needs of a full music education program. Furthermore, politicians and local governments have continued to cut funding that includes music education.

Unfortunately, many people do not believe in the importance of music in the lives of children today. There is a common and very misleading point of view in the education system that holds core academics, such as math and science, above music training. In theory, many people believe that an education in the arts is an important part in school. However, when faced with the choice of donating money to core subjects or music education, most parents and teachers are weary to fund music lessons in place of academic courses.

Conclusion and Recommendations: Success Requires Instrumental Harmony

In order to acquire the necessities for this special mentoring program, communities as a whole must work together. Parents need to recognize that their child might be in need of such an individualized program. Teachers need to overcome the common theory that music is less important than language, math, or science. Local citizens need to push their representatives to vote and pass bills granting the funding that will support music education. Politicians unsure about spending money on such programs need to review information that proves to them how an education in music can make their community a better and safer place.

The first and foremost recommendation for obtaining this type of program is for every person to recall a time in their life when music was all they could control or rely on. Think about

the difference between a gang on the street playing saxophones and trumpets rather than doing drugs and fighting. Try to imagine the emotional changes in a child's life when they realize they finally have someone that cares about them and is willing to listen to their problems. Picture a hard working single mother that finds relief in sending her kids to a place where they will be safe and enjoy learning about music when she is at work making ends meet. Finally, imagine a quiet stage with the curtains drawn. In the spotlight is an ensemble of bright, happy kids about to give a performance in front of their friends, families, and local citizens. Now, think of where those children would be if they were not given the chance to enter a program that guides them through the extraordinary realm of music and learning.

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