

The Classroom Drum Circle Project: Creating Innovative Differentiation in Music Education

By Valerie Vinnard

Since fall of 2017, the Classroom Drum Circle Project has benefitted and furthered education by providing K-5 and special needs students a creative learning modality that offers differentiated music instruction opportunities for enhanced student growth. The program currently takes place at four elementary schools in the Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD): Los Cerritos, McKinley, Prisk, and Webster.

Theory

Music educators try to find unique ways by which to differentiate general music instruction for their scholars, who come from diverse backgrounds and learning levels. Some scholars may be second-language learners, struggle with literacy, exhibit attentional issues, or encounter anger problems. Some students may be more auditory learners, whereas others may benefit from more visual or bodily-kinesthetic music instruction. Drumming offers students a hands-on approach to music education that is fun and helps to meet scholars at their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962) through careful teacher monitoring of students and through ongoing pupil assessments.

Not only does drumming offer many educational benefits, but it also offers healing benefits in the avenue of music therapy. Recent research has indicated that drumming accelerates physical healing, boosts the immune system, and has calming and focusing effects (Schwarcz, 2018). Drumming also proves beneficial to special needs students “in the areas of motor strength and control, speech and communication, social skills, emotional expression, and cognition” (Moore, 2011, p.).

Goals

The program offers students a drum circle unit in which each student learns basic hand-drumming techniques such as bass tone, open tone, and muted tone. Students in upper grades are shown additional tones such as slap and flam. World drumming provides enhanced communication, listening skills, teamwork, discipline, and respect for others. Goals of the unit are to explore and reinforce the elements of music, such as steady beat, tempo, dynamics, timbre, improvisation, tone, note reading/writing, and musical texture through drumming, singing, and dancing. These elements of music directly correlate with the California Visual and Performing Arts/Music Standards for each grade level. The standards touch on all aspects drumming imparts, such as Artistic Perception, Creative Expression, Historical and Cultural Context, Aesthetic Valuing, and Connections, Relationships, and Applications (California Music Standards).

Implementation

Each general education and each special education class may participate in its own classroom drum circle, or, as needed and appropriate, general education students can pair up with mainstreamed special needs students to share a drum, working cooperatively with one another. In the sharing of a drum (for example, due to a lack of materials if mainstreamed with a class of up to 35 students), scholars sit side by side in the drum circle and take turns playing the drum. While one drums, the other student utilizes body percussion or small classroom instruments already in music cabinets, such as rhythm sticks, maracas, tambourines, and so forth. Other differentiating techniques include students being dancers—i.e., putting the beat in their feet by “walking to quarter notes, tip-toeing to eighth notes, and gliding to half notes” (Vinnard, 2014)—while the other students play or improvise rhythms on the drum.

Materials

Through music grants acquired through the Rumba Foundation of Long Beach, under the direction of James Petri, LBUSD music department head, schools were awarded 37 world drums: 17 small Djembes, 11 medium Djembes, and 9 Tubano drums. This array provides one drum for each student in a class of 35, one drum for the music teacher, and one for the classroom teacher. The music teacher may use the small Djembe with strap to walk around the room during instruction.

If budget is not an issue, additional drum circle materials such as Ngoma (leader drum) and Frame drums with mallets are recommended. The Ngoma drum offers students a chance to experience the stature and power that the leader provides. The Frame drums are beneficial for smaller students or for students who demonstrate a lack of coordination in the challenging alternating hand patterns that hand drumming requires. Having such a larger array of materials provides teachers with more options for differentiating even as it broadens mainstreaming opportunities.



Author Vinnard demonstrates on a Ngoma leader drum.

Conversely, if schools cannot afford drums, music grant opportunities are available for teachers through “Donors Choose,” “The National Music Education Foundation,” and “Music for Everyone.” If schools are unable to acquire grants, the method, theory, and song materials (“The Classroom [Percussion] Project: Creating Innovative Differentiation in Music Education”) may still be utilized through the use of body percussion such as patting, clapping, snapping, stamping, and through the use of small classroom instruments as well as dancing.

Song materials utilized vary from American

folk songs to world music found in the district’s music textbook series, *The Music Connection* by Silver Burdett/Ginn (Beethoven, 1995). World drumming principles adapted from *World Music Drumming: A Cross-Cultural Curriculum* (Schmid, 1998) and sequencing/methodology applied in the *Kodaly Concept of Music Education* (Zemke, 1977) as well as movement elements exercised in Dalcroze’s *Eurhythmics* (Dalcroze, 1915) are also incorporated in the program.

Activities

Throughout the program, students are invited to come up and become drum circle leaders. The children improvise rhythm patterns that their classmates must accurately echo. Students also participate in a rain dance in which drummers tap eighth notes lightly on their fingertips for the rain, lay their palm flat on the drum as they make a circular motion for the wind, and tap quarter notes for the thunder. This activity also requires dancers who stand in the center of the drum circle and tip-toe to the eighth notes (rain), stamp their feet on the quarter notes (thunder), and free dance with their arms gliding in the air on the half notes (wind), The music

teacher or a student leader calls out which of the three parts to play/dance to. At the end of the activity, dancers are asked to freeze as they create their own visual arts sculptures. Students gain a sense of musical and social confidence throughout the activities and establish a deeper level of music appreciation.



Assessments

Assessments vary from working in small groups to music reading and writing. Collaborating with other teachers and integrating other subjects are also facets of the program. One school participated in an interdisciplinary

Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) project and another in a multicultural assembly with Samoan dancers from the local high school.

Students participate in a final assessment exhibition in which all perform a multicultural song for one another and sing a combined selection at the end. These drum circles expand from the classroom, to grade level (12 students per class), to a school-wide drum circle (6 students per grade level, K-5).

Outcomes

Students become attuned to one another through the program, and the camaraderie, mutual respect, and teamwork acquired during the lessons have aided pupils in all areas of the school, including in their regular classrooms, on the playground, and in the cafeteria. Teachers and administrators have noticed a positive shift in some key students. One particular student, De-Morris, has had tremendous gains in his behavior and self-confidence since participating in the program. According to his teacher, “He is a happier student and gets along with others in a better way.” Since participating in the drum circle unit, De-Morris has asked if he could spend part of his lunch time

improvising on the piano and has joined the school chorus. De-Morris even participated in singing *America the Beautiful* in a small group at his Grade 5 promotion.

Other outcomes of the program are that students are meeting and/or exceeding music assessments and expectations. Hector, a special education scholar, volunteered and was called up from the audience during a field trip to the city's symphony. The conductor handed him the baton, and Hector directed *William Tell Overture* by Rossini in front of an audience of 3,000 people with confidence, accuracy, and poise. The experience made "him feel happy and independent." His teacher, a National Board Certified moderate/severe special education teacher, said she was "proud of him especially because he was a shy student and music/playing the drums captured him where he felt good to step out of his shyness. It also helped him feel more confident with peers" (personal communication, 2018).

A documented increase in student achievement scores has also been noted at several of the sites in which the program has been implemented. According to the Student Accountability Report Card (SARC; California Department of Education), three of the elementary schools in the project increased the percentage of students meeting or exceeding the state standards in English Language Arts (ELA) and/or Mathematics. One of these schools also earned the title of *California Distinguished School* and has closed the gap for African-American students in math and English: "The school's effort to promote learning through collaboration has earned a 10% increase in math and a 6% growth increase in English for the African-American subgroup" (Mendick, 2018).

Conclusion

The Classroom Drum Circle Project provides healing benefits, boosts self-confidence, and gives students an enhanced role in their own music education. In the fall of 2018, the program expanded to an additional site that was awarded the 37 drums as well as 16 Frame drums with mallet and a Ngoma leader drum. This larger array of materials will provide greater differentiating technique possibilities and broaden mainstreaming opportunities for students. Music teacher colleagues in the district and in other states (through social media)



have recognized the value of the program and have asked me to aid them in writing grants for their schools and students. This program has inspired and encouraged music teacher colleagues in attaining drum circle materials and experiences for their own scholars. Now, many more children will participate in the benefits drumming has to offer!

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