

Belonging as the Backbone of the Music Classroom

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I recently did a tour of my son's soon-to-be new school. When I walked into the music room, I could feel something noticeably different from the rest of the school - the music of the past and that which was yet to be made. I felt the positive energy from previous musicals and rehearsals, students hanging out, and performing. It was incredible. Here was this high school music room, COVID-spaced, no people around, after hours and dark - and yet it still had a buzz, an indescribable feeling to it. Maybe I'm perhaps projecting my own feelings a bit here, but my music room in high school was my second home in those years. The place where I could be found in any and all of my spare time outside of my classes. As I looked at this room, I couldn't help but hope and wish that my son has that same feeling someday and feels that he has the second home in which he belongs.

Belonging is the backbone of my classroom. On my door when you enter you will see a sign that says "*You Belong Here*" created in rainbow colours and surrounded in many shades of skin tone hearts. As a teacher, I believe my job is to create an environment where all of my students feel welcomed, valued and reflected. I want my students to be comfortable enough in their class to create, take risks and make mistakes - and that is not easily done, especially in today's online society. Jacqueline Kelly-McHale discusses the difficulties of living in the online society in her section of one of my favourite books, *Music Education and Social Emotional Learning*. In her chapter, she states that "We also need to acknowledge that belonging does not always occur and that the process of building a community in the music classroom is complex and diverse. When belonging is achieved it is a big part of why we are on the path that we are on." (Kelly-McHale, 2017).

Despite community building in my classroom being one of my main goals in my fourteen years of teaching, I can distinctly remember one cohort that really "got it". It was our last full year of teaching, before teacher strikes and COVID. I was finally at a satisfying moment that I had been working for all my career. The students were willing to put themselves out there wholeheartedly. They trusted each other and most importantly, they felt like they belonged. So where is the "How-To Guide to Success?" I wish I had the easy answer, but developing a community isn't easy. I grew as an educator during my lead up to that "magical year". There was a lot of work I had to do on myself and my practice. I don't think it's

a coincidence that I was completing my Master's degree in Community Music at this point in my career. It forced me to reflect and take the time to put the work in - which we so often as educators put off for another time. I will share a few ideas which will hopefully "point you in the right direction".

Listen

This is by far the most important piece of advice I can give. Listen to your students, their parents, your colleagues, your admin and your own inner voice. The community around you is speaking volumes if you take the time to actually hear it. Your students will tell you what they want from you, but they might not in words tell you what they need from you. We have to open our eyes and ears wide and create open and caring relationships so that students feel supported when they enter the music room. Sometimes that may even mean venturing outside of the music world to connect with what is important to your students. This year my students asked for an Anime Club. Do I know the first thing about anime? No. Well, maybe I watched *Sailor Moon* as a kid, but that was a long time ago! This was important to a large majority of my students (including some I have struggled to connect with), so when I am allowed to have mixed cohorts again, that one is at the top of my list, even though it isn't a musical activity. I know that sounds a little unusual, that I, the music teacher, am planning on starting a non-musical activity before band and choir?! Hear me out... I connect with these students, I learn about their interests, they teach me what they know about anime, then when choir and band sign ups come up, more students will be interested. I can include song selections they have shared with me and they will be more interested in learning what I have to share because I listened to them and valued them.

Open up your room as much as possible

With COVID this can be difficult, but as much time as you're able to have students in your room in an informal atmosphere do it. I realize that is a lot to ask a fatigued teacher but it is genuinely worth it! One of my favourite things to do (outside of COVID times) is to offer Music Cafe where students bring their snacks and it is free music time. Students end up grouping together to participate in informal musical activities. Inevitably I get students singing *Hamilton* and *Dear Evan Hansen* songs, a group on guitars and a group listening to music on Chromebooks. They share with each other (and me) their own musical identities and make new

friends and new connections based on their shared musical interests. I also run traditional ensembles, but by creating these moments, students find like-minded people, new friends and hopefully once again that sense of belonging. I also find that certain people step up to provide musical leadership. Students spontaneously start teaching each other how to play a song on guitar, or someone arranges a group in a drum circle, or someone steps up and takes the flutes to the hall (because by this point they couldn't hear themselves!). Students who you may not have pegged as leaders come out of the woodwork and assert themselves.

Reflect

Reflection is a struggle for me. No one really wants to admit where they failed, but for me, writing it down on paper just seemed to make it that much worse. When I reflect, I really have to be intentional at sandwiching the bad with the good and recognizing all the things that I'm doing right as well as where I can improve. I'm not a perfect teacher by any means, but I have also come a long way and what I used to believe to be important in music class has changed greatly over the years. It wasn't until I started journaling that I realized just how much I was still teaching from the front of the room, "Sage on the Stage" style. How narrow my idea of diversity in music was or how I was greatly limiting my student's creative opportunities in lieu of making something sound "perfect". Change

doesn't happen overnight but takes some time to reflect in a way that is meaningful to you on how you do things in your classes. What is truly important to you? Is that actually reflected in how you teach? Are you being your authentic self? Are you reflecting every student in your teaching or falling back on your own comfortable background?

Learn

Take time to learn some general community music practices. For example, there is a free symposium coming up Feb 17/18 put on by *The Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts* at York University. Online or in person. This is featuring Dr. Phil Mullen who is one of the world's leading researchers in Community Music. This will be an excellent experience for any educator.

We as Music Educators are capable of making some great change and influence in the lives of our students. We have the power to instill belonging, creativity and respect. The energy that we put into making relationships and community building not only help to create great musicians - but ultimately great people.

References

Kelly McHale, J. (2017). Socialization in Music Education In E. Edgar (Ed.), *Music Education and Social Emotional Learning The Heart of Teaching Music* [Kindle DX version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

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