

Musical Freedom: Using A Centers-Based Approach in the Elementary General Music
Classroom

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Introduction

The use of learning centers in education is not a new concept. Teachers in various subjects use learning centers within their classroom, but centers are more frequently used in early childhood and elementary education settings. Learning centers provide educational freedom to the learner as well as a means for extending and differentiating instruction (Reyes, 2010). Most students are drawn to music and find it a source of expression, creativity, and inspiration. Music centers provide students the opportunity to engage with music by asking questions, discovering answers, building musical independence, and nurturing the creative processes that build musical skills to last a lifetime (Burton, 2004). Students have been reaping the rewards of student independence through learning centers. Since one of the goals of music education is to nurture minds that will be able to function musically outside of the classroom learning centers seem to be an appropriate approach for music instruction. The purpose of this paper is to review articles on the topic of music learning centers within the setting of the general music classroom and to provide a summary of current thought on this topic.

Gilbert, 1995

Gilbert discussed the pros and cons of small group activities within a music setting. Various studies have been conducted in order to decide whether direct instruction or small group instruction is more valuable for student achievement. Based on the results of these studies, research shows that neither is necessarily better and, in fact, it ultimately depends on previous direct instruction and how small group instruction is presented to the students. The value of small group activities is evaluated according to three criteria: atmosphere, group cooperative and

academic learning. Small group instruction allows teachers to spend less time attracting students' attention and reprimanding inappropriate behavior contributing to the first criteria, atmosphere. Also, small group activities seem to improve student self-esteem and self-motivation. The second criterion, group cooperative skills, is easier to measure in small group activities. During small group instruction intergroup relations and acceptance of all students can be developed more effectively in direct instruction. The final area used to measure the value of small group instruction is academic learning. It is truly unclear whether small group activities will work for all classrooms and for all students, as the research is very inconclusive. However, it does appear that small group activities are most useful for problem solving in music and composition.

Even though the above criteria provides positive support for the use of small group instruction, Glibert stated that even though some teachers make use of small group instruction, the majority of music educators do not implement this form of instruction. After watching five groups of two student teachers trained in small group instruction it was concluded that most of the frustration with this instruction is due to the noise and chaos that these centers create. Gilbert stated that "noise" is very subjective and that, to some persons, noise may be considered music. In fact, after comparing assessments it was discovered that the least effective learning center was the center without any musical instruments or singing. One thing is clear - once the teacher employs small group work the role of the teacher has changed. The students do not have to be quiet in order for the teacher to be heard, the students are now assuming the role as the "teacher" and the teacher is more of a guide.

With the teacher not assuming the usual "role" within the classroom during this time the students are expected to exhibit a sense of accountability during the activity. It is not enough for

a teacher to ask students to cooperate during a small group activity. Three concepts must be discussed and built upon throughout the year in order to guarantee such success. These concepts are team rewards, where the team competes for rewards as a team, individual accountability, where the team's success depends on the individual learning of all members, and equal opportunity for success, meaning that students contribute to team's success by improving on their individual past performance. These concepts not only enforce accountability, but also allow the students to know where they stand in achieving a certain musical concept and allow the teacher to still properly assess each student, even though they are working in small groups.

Even though the teacher does not direct the lesson, the small group instruction should still proceed with the same flow as any lesson would. Gilbert stated that there must be an orientation to the musical experience followed by diversifying the experience with operational and then integrating supervision. The last two allow the teacher to be readily available for assistance, but then also allows the teacher the chance to assess each student's success after giving time for each student to become acquainted with the activity. Then at the end there is a period of presentation of what was learned followed by a summary of what was learned to round off the activity and bring closure to this particular lesson.

Gilbert stated that no small group instructional session is free from problem. Each activity will have its own problems that the teacher must creatively solve. However, in order to avoid these problems always remember to allow for success by making sure the musical groundwork has been laid before the small group activity. Be sure there is a warm up or lesson preceding this activity that somehow introduced the concept in some regard. Small group lessons that are efficient and organized will lead to greater student success and students should always be interacting with music. Gilbert emphasized that small group instruction may not work

for everyone and may in fact not be desirable for most classrooms; however, small group instruction allows for more satisfaction by both students and teacher and allows for students to more fully explore the creative areas of music.

Burton, 2004

Burton created a seamless guide on the 'ins and outs' of learning centers in the music classroom. Burton focuses on the use of learning centers in a middle school general music classroom; however, most of the techniques mentioned can be adapted for any elementary classroom. The flexibility of learning centers to cross into any subject or grade level is due to the idea that there is not set approach. By definition a center is an area in a room created to help students fulfill curricular goals through hands on activities.

Setting up centers in a classroom is heavily defined on what resources are available in your classroom. For instance, if you have access to several Orff instruments, perhaps creating an Orff arrangement is a possible option for your students. Likewise, if you have access to keyboards, it might be more desirable to have students learn chords or a melody on the keyboard to perform either as a solo or in an ensemble. Burton stated that centers have the power to be independent, small group, or large group activities and can rely on assessing students on previously taught material or a way to introduce new material. Centers can include listening and analyzing music as well as creating music.

Burton has discussed a series of variables that teachers should be aware of when beginning to teach middle school students that can be applicable to elementary students as well. First off she stated that most middle school students are coming from various backgrounds and have achieved varying musical skills and knowledge. In order to ameliorate this situation Burton suggested two options: informal assessments and a musical experience inventory. By informally

assessing students the teacher will be able to see what prior knowledge the students have or have not been exposed to in their elementary music setting. The inventory will help the teacher find out what students find musically important and what they really think about music in their lives. Since Burton has this directed towards Middle School it can not all be adapted for all elementary ages; however, with increasing elementary schools including sixth grade and the amount of new students that can move into a district in third, fourth, and fifth grade, some of these options may transfer over rather effectively. It is very important to establish an equal amount of time for each center and to ensure that the activities at each center can be accomplished successfully in the time frame. Another huge variable that is brought up is class size. A multi-station music center may be more difficult for large groups of students and it seems appropriate to keep the center sizes down to five or six students. Burton has suggested that for larger classes it might be more enhancing to a curriculum to have one center that five students can rotate through in order to work on independent musical projects.

When choosing to implement a music center in a classroom it is easy to become distracted by the actual center than the learning goal. Burton suggested that it is best to work backwards when designing the stations of your center and will help ensure that learning is student focused and authentic. It is best to start by identifying what the learning goals are and then what the actual performance task or activity will be and then finally creating the rubric for assessment. Since the students are working more individually it is very important that the performance task or activity is as musically engaging as possible so that students are as musical as possible. Also, the rubrics that are created should be shared with the students so that they have a full understanding of what is expected of them during their time in the center.

Burton used the learning centers as an opportunity for her students to really learn one

piece of music and eventually create an ensemble within the general music class where they could perform the piece of music they were studying and also arrangements and improvisations centered on this piece of music. She called this the *Big Jam Performance Task* and was able to create various stations where students learned parts to the song they were studying as well as analyze and compose music. After she created stations based on the song assessments fell into place and the overall experience was extremely successful for not only her, but for the students as well.

The role of the teacher in a music center is different depending on your students' needs and musical skill levels. The teacher will become more of a guide and be able to observe much more than before. As an observer, you will be able to identify ways to extend your students learning, thinking about differentiation within stations, deciding which stations lose appeal over time, and a score of other things. All of these will help your students' work independently being an overseer of their own learning.

Volk, 1997

Volk looked at several dissertations on the inclusion and teaching of world music within the music classroom in order to gather information on the attitudes, materials, methodology, and performance of world music. Even though it seems that more and more teachers are moving away from just teaching music from the Western art tradition and exploring music from other cultures, still so many of these teachers are not taking the steps to actually become trained in some of these cultural areas.

In regards to centers, it appears that those teachers that were able to utilize learning centers within their lesson were able to capture more authenticity for the students than other lessons. For instance, the use of small group learning centers when discovering American-Indian

instrument it seemed that a deeper cultural understanding and perception was created in this learning center. However, in another learning center where students used “make-do” American Indian instruments the authenticity was lost and so was the cultural understanding and perception of students. Learning about a musical culture can be done within learning centers rather effectively if the teacher takes time to properly learn about the culture in order to present it in the most effective manner.

The ability to learn about a culture is very appealing thought use of learning centers, but just like teaching music from a culture in a more direct teaching manner, it is desirable to be as authentic as possible within limits. With the goal to gain cultural understanding as well as musical understanding it is important to weigh both of these options when designing centers.

Niland, 2009

Niland is supporting the idea that child centered musical play can be a powerful medium for young children’s exploration of many musical elements and concepts. Young children learn best through play; this has been exposed through research for many years and it is time that music for younger children is viewed in the same playful manner. Niland stated that there are many different definitions for play, but most theorists agree that play involves free choice, enjoyment, self-motivation, and a focus on process rather than on product.

Music is a regular part of a young children’s play. For instance spontaneous singing, movement, and spontaneous sound exploration are very evident. Young children engage in various types of musical play. The first type of musical play is “cooperative musical play” in which children are involved in sociable, interactive musical exploration. The second type is “functional music play,” in which children are exploring the sound-making potential of a range of materials and are experimenting with techniques. There is also “constructive musical play,” in

which functional exploration is extended into creative improvisation and composition.

“dramatic music play,” in which children integrate music making with dramatic or pretend play; “kinesthetic music play,” in which children focus on movement or dance as a playful response to music. Finally there is “games with rules,” in which children engage in group-oriented, structured musical games such as singing games or clapping games.

Young children educators argue that music integrated part both of life and of the educational curriculum. When beginning to develop a play based child-centered music curriculum there are many different ways to do so. If using a music center it would be best to have students involved in the process of creating such a center. By having younger students involved in such decision-making processes such as deciding about materials, placement, noise, safety, and aesthetics you are giving children the chance to not only think about their musical interests, but also logistical and social aspects. Niland stated beautifully that by empowering children in planning processes can have implications for many aspects of children’s development.

By developing this play based approach through centers students will still be developing awareness in areas of singing, instrument exploration, and movement. Coursework will be different based on interactions with the class and also on each individual students needs. Niland stated at the end of the article that, “A playbased, child-centered early childhood music curriculum can nurture the innate musicality of young children so that they become and remain music makers throughout their lives.

Summary

After reading these several articles highlighting learning centers in the music classroom it is clear to me that learning centers are a great way for students to develop individual musicality

and really begin exploring aesthetic response to music, while still practicing singing and rhythm skills that are necessary in order to be an independent musician. Although there is no concrete evidence or real research that states that learning centers will help students achieve more musically (Gilbert, 1995) I still think that it is clear that the students are not only able to become better independent musicians, but they will begin to experience music through real time exploration, especially when experiencing music from other cultures or include sonic elements that students are not used to (Volk, 1997).

Learning centers allows a sense of musical freedom, especially for older elementary students and middle school students. Students are given options, within parameters of course, where they can decide what they want to create or listen to and learn to make informed decisions about music. Ultimately as a music educator we are trying to create a society of musicians that do not need to rely on their teacher. It seems to me that through learning centers this can be made possible because of the transition of the music teacher from teacher to guide (Burton, 2004). By facilitating the class rather than “running” it the students are able to problem solve better than if the teacher was directing the students as a whole.

Even though the stress of scheduling, class size, and time can seem to put strains on learning centers in a classroom they seem like a viable tool to change up the pacing of a class. Only after stepping aside and letting students make informed decisions on their own can we see a progression in musicality. Learning centers help foster an exploration and creativity that is evident in music and helps to channel the innate musicality in each of us.

Conclusion

After reviewing the four articles and reading several others my general impression of learning centers in the music classroom is that they are worth trying and using in the general

music classroom. I want to include these centers in my future teaching as much as possible because I really believe that in order to have children learn any subject, especially music, the teacher needs to occasionally get out of the way. Children learn best when they are exploring on their own in a controlled environment and this is what learning centers do. Learning centers provide parameters for students, but also the chance to view, learn, make mistakes and find their way out of them.

Learning centers are great, but you need to be careful when setting up a center. There are prerequisites to using certain learning centers. Even if it is a way for the students to embark on learning new material there need to be certain skills established. For example, I do not think giving a notated music to students in a center if they have never seen any notation before. The students need to be set up for success before using certain centers.

Learning centers are a way for teachers to guide their students and allow them to discover music organically and tap into a realm of creativity. The social and logistical skills that are passed through each activity are just as important as the musical skills and knowledge that can be obtained. Learning centers open up the world of music for each student to investigate and get a “hands on” approach. Every human has an innate ability to be musical and learning centers allow them to tap into their musical self.

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