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**Unity Through Transformation: Community Building With
At-Risk Students Through Participation in a Ghanaian
Music Ensemble**

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Unity Through Transformation: Community Building with At-Risk Students Through Participation in a Ghanaian Music Ensemble

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There have been many conversations surrounding the term *at-risk* in educational settings and how to address the growing concern over these students (Cuban, 1989; Wan, 2008; Ward-Steinman, 2006). The term *at-risk* was originally intended to describe poor and minority youth who were “at risk of emerging from school underprepared for further education or the kinds of jobs available” (Barr & Parrett, 2001, p. 14). However, due to recent economic and social changes this targeted group has been expanded from *at-risk* to *deprived*, and later *disadvantaged*, which describes students “as the *disengaged* or *disconnected* youth of the United States” (Barr & Parrett, 2001, p. 2). Other similar labels have included *marginalized*, *low-achievers*, *culturally deprived* or *impoverished* (Baptiste, 1992), and *inferior* (Dance, 2002). Any label has its limitations, and may be accused of stigmatizing students (Benedict, 2006; Cuban, 1989; Emmanuel, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Waxman, 1992).

Evidence exists that arts programs were beneficial to at-risk learners, but, according to Taylor et al. (1997), “At this time the majority of intervention programs for at-risk students have

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been conducted in other disciplines” (p. 13). The authors also advocate that further research be done in this area in effort to prove these benefits. The lack of literature specific to African-American learners’ needs may be due to the failure to recognize them as a distinct cultural group, not simply a different race (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Music educators have designed experiences for students considered to be at-risk and have recorded success with their participants (Andreassen, 2013; Byrt, 2011; Neill, 2004; Schmid, 1998; Serba, 2010; Taylor, J., Barry, N., & Walls, K., 1997). However, these case studies mainly focused on individuals who were older students, and experiences were often conveyed from a teacher’s perspective. Results reported quantitative data without any qualitative analysis to support their findings. Other research into the effects of music on the self-esteem of disadvantaged students includes the work of Darrow (1991, 2005); Hietolahti & Kalliopuska (1990); Kennedy (1998); Kivlan (1986); Legette (1993); and Schuler (1991, 1992). My learner-centered approach in the current study honors learners’ perspectives and prior experience, for I firmly believe this approach engages learners to their maximum potential. Through a qualitative lens, this study attempts to illuminate the need for music educators to take an active role in advocating for youth, deemed at-risk of educational failure.

My Approach as Music Educator

The role music plays in my life has shaped and molded the curricular choices I make in my general music classroom. As a professional music teacher I use my personal musical experiences to guide lessons and am reminded of my students’ human need to express themselves through body, mind, and feelings as each of these elements work “together to create meanings” (Reimer, 2003, p. 238) as only music can accomplish. I am mindful of the way I teach and how my students perceive my curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

My students relate to music on an emotional level fairly easily, but they need to experience music for themselves. In other words, they become the doers, or what Dillon (2007) calls *student as maker*. Campbell (1998) suggests, “Children learn by doing music as much as by thinking it, by entering the musical arena as active players rather than sitters in silence at the periphery” (p. 187). Music requires an act of doing, whether a person is listening to, performing, or creating the music. When children *do* music, they remember it because of the mind-body connection (p. 187). According to musicologist Small (1998), one must take part in some capacity in the actual musical performance or engaged listening experience in order to *do* music.

As a music teacher in a school district that served underserved, economically challenged students, I decided to invite some of my students who were experiencing the most difficulty in school to join a lunchtime drumming ensemble in hopes that the experience might help them find more success in school. I decided to engage in a qualitative study of the nature of these children’s experiences in hopes of learning more about them as learners.

I selected and invited thirteen fifth graders to participate in a hand drum ensemble, focusing on music styles from northern and southern Ghana, in hopes of improving their school attendance, academic grades, and behavioral conduct. The study produced insight into the development and influences of community-building (Rogoff, 2003; Wenger, 2002) on the attitudes and behaviors of these at-risk elementary school students. Additionally, because the music we learned and performed in this ensemble was authentic Ghanaian music, a secondary focus of the study was the nature of the children’s learning of this particular music in the context of an American elementary school setting.

My story began with a desire to get to know these “difficult” (misbehaved and negative attention-seeking) students in a more intimate setting in hopes of gaining rapport and mutual

respect that would lead to a calmer time in our general music classroom. The bonds we created throughout this process exceeded my expectations.

Theoretical Frame

I wanted to understand more about the learning needs of my own students who were considered to be “at-risk” in hopes of becoming a more effective teacher in reaching this particular population of learners. As an elementary school general music teacher working in an impoverished community, I not only met with every student in the school on a weekly basis, but I witnessed firsthand the effects of poverty on my students’ learning. My school district was relatively small, with all students considered to live at or below the state poverty level.

The study was informed by literature on social constructivist learning theory and practice. This approach hinges on recent brain research about how the human brain works and how people learn best through constructing their own understanding, or taking new information and connecting it to what they already know, their prior knowledge (Kincheloe, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; van Manen, 1991; Wiggins, 2015). I combined the information found in these resources with my personal experiences in the classroom and encounters learning music in Ghana.

I also familiarized myself with literature related to teaching African-American learners and populations affected by poverty. Parrett & Budge (2012) reported that childhood poverty rates were on the rise, with African-American children three times more likely than Caucasians to be in poverty. As populations have increased, more African-American students were making their way through our nation’s public school system (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Peltier, 1998; Waxman, 1992). In order to address this growing concern, we must better identify the needs of the African-American learners in our classrooms (Dawson, 1968) even though schools have

traditionally ignored them (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Robert Stephens (2002) suggested that there was strong evidence:

. . . that many African-American students feel that their school environment is alien and hostile toward them or does not affirm and value who they are. As a consequence, they are not motivated to concentrate or attend to academic tasks with any dedication. (p. 98)

To counteract the negative effects of poverty, teachers have tried to empower their students (Gnezda, 2005; Kafele, 2009, 2013) by offering guidance through opportunities for choice and responsibility. To accomplish these tasks, educators have allowed students to take control of their learning and taught them how to be self-directed (Gnezda, 2005; Michie, 2009). As students develop these skills, their sense of agency has increased. Greene (2005) also testified to the need for at-risk youth to develop personal agency in order to be successful, suggesting participation in the arts provides “a model not only for engaged experience but for constructivism as a mode of liberation and expansion” (p. 129).

I created my theoretical framework by examining existing literature addressing the impacts of poverty, African-American learners, and development of musical agency to develop a curriculum aimed at enriching the lives of my students through interaction in a drumming ensemble. Guided by my previous knowledge, I set out to challenge my pre-assumptions about at-risk learners in hopes of collecting new data to further the research on the positive effects of musical involvement.

Methodology

Thirteen students were selected for participation in the drumming ensemble, all of whom, according to their teachers, had varying aspects of their lives that made them more at-risk than their classmates. The thirteen students were chosen by sending an email to the fifth grade teachers asking them to list any student they felt might benefit from inclusion in this group. The

teachers understood what my objective was, but I left the criteria for choosing up to them. Every student listed was invited to join. All, except one, continued participation through to the end.

While each student presented themselves with his or her own unique strengths and weaknesses, I found it difficult to view them all under the same at-risk umbrella. The realization that the term at-risk did not necessarily define these students provided my launching point for this study. I wanted to get to know them as individuals and how participation in this ensemble and my commitment to them might make a difference (or not) for each of them as individuals. As Kafele (2013) suggested, “it is still incumbent upon you to take the initiative to learn about your students’ lives outside school, as it has direct implications for what they do inside school” (p. 61).

The ensemble met for a total of 27 regular rehearsals not including auditorium practices, group interview sessions, and performances. Our meeting time took place during the students’ half hour lunch period on Fridays throughout the school year. Students would bring their lunch to the music room, eat and socialize quickly and then begin practice. My method for transmitting the material during these 27 meetings was based largely on how I was taught the material in Ghana, but incorporating some simplifications as needed. For example, I began our sessions with instructing proper drumming technique and an overview of the significance of drumming in Ghanaian culture. I often introduced and practiced patterns using American terms like Tone or Bass sung in higher and lower pitch imitating the sounds of the drum hoping to reinforce hand placement patterns, both physically (where the tone and bass are played) and melodically (how the pitches sound in relationship to each other). The ensemble concluded after a final concert performance and school assembly where they performed alongside world percussionist and educator, Mark Stone.

Using qualitative research methodology (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), I entered the setting as a teacher-researcher (Kincheloe, 2003) and collected data through participant observation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 1987). Audio and video recorders captured students' participation and interactions during our weekly class meetings. I also kept a teaching journal and had access to students' academic records. Recordings were used to establish persistent observation. Informal conversational interviews (Patton, 1987) with teaching staff, administration, and student participants were documented throughout the process, allowing for more in-depth, and individualized questioning. I transcribed the audio recordings verbatim following each session, with additional memos to aid in remembering thoughts and nuances that were observed. I analyzed the transcripts and recordings, coding the data for themes as they emerged (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), and interpreted the themes for their interrelationships (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

When the ensemble meetings ended, I set the data aside for three years, except for an occasional update on students' lives as our paths crossed. Analyzing and interpreting the data three years after they were collected enabled me to view the students and myself in a distinctly less-biased light. I felt most of my emotion and attachment to the study give way to critical views of myself as teacher and my students as learners.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

During the coding process I chose to code the transcripts two ways. Utilizing highlighters of various colors I began looking for emergent themes. The first set of transcripts highlighted a total of sixteen emergent thematic codes. Upon studying these themes for continuity and developing storylines, I realized that embedded within the transcripts were the individual stories of my students as they lived their experience in the ensemble. The discovery led me to highlight

a second set of transcripts giving each student's voice its own color code. The coding allowed for an easier way to follow the progression of each student through the course of the study.

All video was analyzed for additional non-verbal, non-musical elements present in student interactions with each other, with myself, and with their instruments. Teacher reflection has been an important pedagogical practice (van Manen, 1991) and was documented following each session as well, specifically recording my feelings, observations, thoughts, lesson analyses, possible themes or connections, and ideas for future sessions. The audio and video files were saved for repeated observations of the data contained therein, providing a "benchmark against which later data analyses and interpretations (the critiques) could be tested for adequacy" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 313). Recordings became my main source for data collection and "therefore, the quality of what is recorded becomes the measure of usable observational data (because it can be monitored and replicated) rather than the quality of the observation itself" (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000, p. 676).

Results

The main themes that emerged from this study reflected my initial hopes that building a rapport would increase achievement and attitude in my music classes. For the students in this study, participating in the drumming ensemble fostered increased personal and musical agency, which resulted in their making progress in school attendance, academic grades, and their capacity for cooperative, positive classroom participation and social interactions within the school community.

Increased Student Achievement

All thirteen students in the ensemble showed growth in their academic achievement and social skills over the course of that school year, evident in their report card grades and teachers'

evaluations. What follows are examples of classroom situations where it is evident that the children's participation in drum ensemble had been a positive influence on their willingness to attend school and keep up with their classwork, followed by my reflections as taken from my journal.

Scenario 1. While reviewing our ensemble rules I mentioned that some members had almost missed rehearsal because their teacher wanted to keep them in for lunch detention to make up missing classwork. She had allowed them to come to rehearsal with the understanding they would have to make up the time with her on another day.

Kevin: I got off of indoor recess (detention) so, I turned in all my work today so I could come.

Teacher: So, you turned in everything you were supposed to do? Good, that is exactly what you need to do. Good job, Kevin. We are glad you are here.

Reflections. I finally hit a milestone with Kevin today. He turned in all of his homework and was beaming with pride when he told me why he did it. I hope he will continue his efforts.

Scenario 2. I had spoken with Ms. S. regarding Tori this morning and she said that as long as she turned in last night's homework she was all caught up and could come today. When I saw Tori in the hallway she was all smiles and said she had her work ready to turn in and would see me at practice.

Reflections. Academically, Tori is capable of producing quality grade level work, but has a history of poor attendance. Her biggest challenge is not turning in her homework. Her teacher recommended her for inclusion in my program to aid in building her self-esteem, promote turning in homework and class assignments, and curbing her distracting

behaviors. She is now regularly turning in her homework which has raised her grades significantly.

Scenario 3. Yesterday in music class Aaliyah was very conscientious about her behavior and participation. Several times throughout class she asked me how she was doing and had a big smile on her face every time I looked her way. Today at drum ensemble practice she hugged me and asked if she could stay with me for the rest of the afternoon.

Reflections. Aaliyah has come a long way from the child who, at the beginning of the year, sat in music class refusing to do anything, bothering others, laughing uncontrollably, teasing relentlessly, and giving me a BIG attitude! Last week she was not allowed to participate in the ensemble to serve a detention I had issued for refusing to participate in music class. Using the drums as incentive to participate and follow directions in music class was one of the reasons I formed this group. These results were even more than I was hoping for.

Increased Student Agency

During the time between the forming the group in the fall of 2010 to its conclusion in June, 2011, I witnessed numerous examples of student growth, in particular the emergence of leadership and musicianship in my students, stemming from a boosted level of personal agency. Themes emerging in this category included how the students began viewing themselves as musicians and leaders. I also expected to find examples of heightened cultural identity, especially in our students of African-American heritage, and was surprised to find no themes relating to this concept. What I found instead were students suddenly able to express pride in themselves as in the following examples:

Scenario 1. Drum ensemble practice was well under way on a snowy lunch period in January when DeAngelo is heard above the tapping of drum rhythms and clanging of the bell as he shouts out “I’m the King around here! I’m the Big Daddy! I am the Grand Poobah!”

Reflections. Normally this type of interruption to our group’s practice would result in a disapproving look and verbal admonishment, but this was not the case today. I neither stopped the group nor addressed his outbursts. Instead I simply smiled at him and kept on drumming with the group. My smile came from the deep sense of pride I developed after watching this young man become the best musician in the fifth grade class that year. DeAngelo was recommended for this group due to his at-risk status in math, reading, behavior, and low self-esteem as identified by his classroom teacher and principal since Kindergarten.

My intent for this ensemble was to help my students develop a sense of musical agency. At the outset of this project, with the exception of Atina, the participants would not have described themselves as musicians. Providing opportunities for them to showcase their talents and encouraging them in any way I could became my goal at each rehearsal. The following “snapshot” taken from a rehearsal transcript shows musical identity and agency in the making.

Scenario 2. In the middle of a frustrating rehearsal of *Adowa* where we had to stop and restart multiple times, Joey became resigned. Joey usually struggled with the rhythms in the ensemble. He was last to figure out a pattern and continued to have difficulty coordinating his hands and knowing how his part fit with the whole. He was passed over for independent parts like the bell or lead drumming even though he often wanted to play those parts. He recognized his difficulties and usually accepted that he was not as

proficient as others in the group, especially DeAngelo. While reviewing the recording of a particular rehearsal, I discovered Joey's comment: "Man, I'm in this drumming mood and we just keep stopping and stopping. I'm going to do my own solo and make you proud."

Reflections. In this example Joey was clearly expressing his frustration at having to keep stopping during the rehearsal, but the second statement reveals something much deeper than I had ever given him credit for. In the six years I had taught Joey he never once indicated a desire to make anyone proud of him. He wore his lack of personal agency on his sleeve and used it to his advantage to get out of higher-level thinking in the classroom. I wish I heard his comment during the rehearsal so I could have offered him that opportunity.

Developing Leadership

One of the goals I had for the ensemble was to provide them with opportunities to take ownership of the class and of the music (Hall, 2008; O'Neill, 2012; Wiggins, 2015). I wanted to see them establish their own functional learning community in this setting and be able to transfer those skills to the general music classroom and beyond. From as early as our second rehearsal the students rose to the challenge, taking on the roles of community leaders and teachers. They established their own rules of conduct and took turns enforcing those rules. That several participants developed leadership skills was an added benefit to their development as musicians. Leaders rose in various situations where students acted as peer coaches, teachers, and group motivators, as illustrated in the following scenarios:

Scenario 1. In this scenario, which occurred early on in our rehearsals, I had divided the group in half and sent each half to a separate part of the classroom to practice an

assigned rhythm. I intentionally had not assigned leaders. I was curious to observe their group dynamics as they worked together to solve the problem. I did not interact with the group during this time, leaving them to work on their own.

DeAngelo: Wait, shhhh, wait, I've got an idea. Okay, one of us, or we'll all start with

Bass Tone Bass Bass Tone [speaking the words as he plays it on his drum].

Another student: No, it's Tone Tone Tone Tone Bass Tone Tone Tone Bass [correctly

articulating the pattern I had asked them to practice].

DeAngelo: I know, but then I'll...

He stopped to ask Bobby to stop drumming so he could talk then provided indistinguishable instructions to the group. They all begin drumming the second pattern while DeAngelo said the pattern aloud. When someone yelled out "Freestyle!" and began adding beat boxing, DeAngelo returned their focus to the assignment. "Okay, stop. Let's try it one at a time. We'll start here and go this way. Imani will go first." He continued asking everyone to take a turn and corrected them as needed. "Come on, let's do it all together. She'll start. 1, 2, ready, go."

Reflections. Only a few rehearsals into the project and DeAngelo stepped up and took control of the practice. I was impressed by his ability to take charge of making sure everyone could play the rhythm, but his patience and compassion toward everyone was something I had not witnessed in him before. Instead of arguing or shouting out in frustration, DeAngelo handled his classmates with all the care of a teaching professional. No one made attempts to suppress his authority and the students showed him great respect. They listened and followed his lead, a welcomed trend that would continue through the rest of our rehearsals.

Scenario 2. DeAngelo had proven to be the leader of our ensemble community. He secured his role when he became the *atumpan* soloist for *Adowa*. During rehearsals for the piece he not only led the group as a solo musician, but also as a conductor. Following the performance we no longer had a need to practice *his* piece and some students teased him about not being the leader anymore. He took great offense to this proclamation and looked for every opportunity after that to place himself back at the center of attention.

DeAngelo: Why does she [Tori] get to sit there [at the *gyil*]? I want to sit there!

Tori: 'Cause I'm on the xylophone [part].

DeAngelo: Well, I should be. I'm more important than anyone!

Reflections. Everyone ignored DeAngelo's whining comment so he went right back to playing his drum. The group had learned to ignore DeAngelo's outbursts by this point. They had become accustomed to his desire to be the musician in the spotlight and most of them just laughed it off. DeAngelo's comment, although earnest, was not said in a harsh or confrontational tone and he just smiled as he put his best efforts back into his drumming.

Scenario 3. Here DeAngelo and Kevin had been paired up to practice combining the two *Kpanlogo* rhythms. Once again DeAngelo took control of the situation and Kevin and he were the first pair to begin practicing.

DeAngelo: Wait, who's going to go first? You wanna do Bass Tone while I do [plays second rhythm]?

Kevin: You pick.

DeAngelo assigned Kevin the first rhythm, which was the simpler of the two, and they played both patterns together successfully.

DeAngelo: Switch! [more drumming is heard without a break]

DeAngelo (when stopped, laughing): Oh, you're messing me up now.

Kevin: Yeah, you're like...

DeAngelo: Okay, let's stop for a minute. I'm gonna do [played the second pattern faster]...

Kevin: You're going too fast.

DeAngelo: Wait, look [played second rhythm slower].

Kevin: I know.

The boys continued to drum together for a while, switching back and forth between parts. At this point DeAngelo approached me and said they both "had it perfect" and asked, could they do the same parts together? I mentioned that this might be a good time to work on the third rhythm I had showed him last time and figure out how it fits with the first rhythm. He leapt back to his seat and explained this idea to Kevin. I could see that he was struggling to remember the rhythm so I offered to come and help them. They both watched and attempted the third rhythm, and then I asked Kevin to play the first while DeAngelo and I played the third to show how it fit into the first pattern. By the time we finished, they had a few moments to practice alone together and then it was time to move back to the large group. Upon returning DeAngelo followed Kevin to his seat and was still helping him with the third rhythm while the other students were setting up.

DeAngelo affirmed Kevin's playing before returning to his own seat.

Reflections. In this example DeAngelo took over the leadership role by dictating the proceedings of the practice session, dictating who played which part and when they would switch. He also assumed the role of teacher as he adjusted his tempo to

accommodate his partner's ability and took it upon himself to teach the new rhythm to Kevin and follow through with him until Kevin could play it accurately.

As time went on more students became empowered enough to take on the role of teacher during our rehearsals. Often I would pair them up and give them time to work together on new rhythmic patterns. As I reviewed the audio recorder nearest Atina and Michael I was pleasantly surprised at the new leadership role Atina instantly stepped into:

“Try it, go. [playing] Nope, too fast. Bass, tone, bass, bass, tone [she says while Michael plays on the drum]. Michael! Eyes on your drum. Okay, you go [she plays the second rhythm pattern for him and then they play together as she sings the rhythm on da]. Here, I got an idea. Look, you'll start me off. Watch my hand, okay? And when I go back like this [bass] you put yours up front [tone]. So, try it [playing again]. Here, I'll drum it for you, okay? I'll do it with you, okay? [playing and saying the words]. No, you're going too fast. Watch my hand. When I go like this you do tone and bass, okay?”

When the group reconvened Atina told me that Michael did not really know how to play the first rhythm. As I monitored the whole group practice I noticed that Michael was playing the part perfectly. Perhaps Atina's attempts were confusing to Michael at first, but in the end, thanks to Atina's unrelenting attention, Michael was able to learn the rhythm and performed it accurately during every rehearsal thereafter.

Findings and Implications

The study participants were provided with a holistic and unique experience of coming together as an ensemble community. Students had opportunities for large and small group instruction, peer scaffolding, introduction to a new historical context with connections to their

prior experience, multiple performances, a workshop with a cultural expert, and a creative composition component.

I engaged the ensemble in community-building techniques designed to foster a strong sense of personal agency in the community members. I sought to empower students, who many had already given up on, through the use of Ghanaian music. Through this empowerment I witnessed improvements in my students' academic, behavioral, and attendance records and documented their success at gaining self-confidence and self-worth, as both musicians and as valued individuals.

Are Teachers Standing in the Way?

Throughout this process, I came to understand that teachers have more to do with student agency and achievement than they probably realize. These students had been labeled from an early age as potential dropouts based on their academic abilities, behavior concerns, or family challenges. I found that these students continued to fall short of their teachers' expectations. I witnessed firsthand the disappointment of rejection and failure on their young faces as teachers and other staff refused to see the good in these individuals.

For example, I had known Kevin since Kindergarten. His older brothers and sisters were equally as notorious for constant classroom disruptions and misbehaviors over the years. Kevin was the youngest of the family and my colleagues were eager to see him move on to middle school at the end of the year. Kevin's behaviors in music class bordered on appalling: laughing, taunting, refusing to cooperate, disrespectful to teachers and students, unrelenting silliness, and stubbornness in all classroom situations. If trouble was brewing somewhere, Kevin was likely in the middle of it.

Kevin was one of the first names brought to my attention for inclusion in the ensemble, with hopes that the opportunity would provide an outlet for him to express himself and offer incentive for him to complete classwork and stay out of trouble. Needless to say, I was skeptical. Since Kindergarten, Kevin and I had not seen eye to eye on most issues. If this ensemble could enhance our relationship even to the point of being able to tolerate each other during music classes for the remainder of the year, then it was worth a try. The following quotes were taken from an email sent by Kevin's classroom teacher in early October.

"The classroom 'bad boy.'" "At the BOTTOM of the behavior line." "Whenever there's a problem, Kevin is in the middle of it." "He's ALWAYS turned around and making faces and laughing about something, and draws even the best kids into it!" "I don't think much of anything will help fix Kevin. He loves the bad boy image, and thrives from the attention he gets from it. He shows NO desire to change and come to the good side. Typically, he'll shrug his shoulders in apathy, when given 'the speech' about being good, getting good grades, etc. I don't bother anymore."

Even though I understood his teacher's perspective, I could not help feeling heartbroken when I read her last line. One month into the school year and his teacher had already given up. After reading this I decided then and there that if his regular classroom teacher was not up for the challenge, then it would have to be up to me to reach this child.

Teacher Becomes Advocate

I never thought I would find myself advocating for these children—not the students I had previously sent to the office, for whom I had written a myriad of discipline referrals, and whom I had occasionally refused to allow into my classroom over the years. My attitude had been slowly changing over the course of our time together, although I did not recognize this epiphany until

the following situation occurred. My biggest “Aha!” moment came only minutes before a lunch rehearsal in late May when Ms. S, one of the fifth grade teachers, popped her head into my room and informed me that her class had been running in the hallway to get their lunches so they could get to my room and she was going to “let them have it” after lunch. This upset several of my students, especially Atina who came in crying. I learned the whole class would be serving lunch detention the next day, but we had scheduled our big rehearsal for our concert during that time. As a class we discussed the incident briefly and the students begged me for help. I promised to do what I could, but indicated that they were still responsible for the consequences of their behavior.

Feeling a bit panicked over potentially losing half my ensemble for our last practice, I made the decision to bypass discussing this with Ms. S and went straight to the office to speak with the principal. She had always been supportive of our rehearsing needs and I knew she did not always agree with Ms. S’s unbending detention policies. I explained the situation and asked her what I could do. She said she had already spoken with Ms. S and my students would have to make up the lunch detention on Monday. I thanked her for her preemptive help and turned to walk out of the office when our secretary poked her head into the conversation and said, “That’s the problem with your group. The kids know no one can touch your rehearsals and they can get out of trouble. I thought your group was supposed to help with the behavior problems, but all these kids are still bad kids.”

At this point my principal interjected and reminded her of the purpose of my study, why the students needed to be there, and that they always had to make up their punishments; they were not getting away with anything. I was very thankful that she had jumped to my defense, as I was a bit speechless at the attack. “Well I got news for you,” the secretary responded, “Your

project failed. It didn't work." At this point I waved my hands at her in disgust and walked away fearing I would say something I would later regret. I fumed all the way back to my classroom, but it wasn't until later that afternoon that I had my epiphany. *Why had I felt the way I felt when she attacked my kids?*

Initially I attempted to dismiss what the secretary had said and move on. I rationalized that she only saw these children in the office when they were in trouble. A year ago I would have agreed with her about how truly horrible and unreachable they were. As I reflected further I realized how her statements fueled a fire in me. My project had not failed; it had passed with flying colors. Our learning community was everything I had hoped for and more. These youth were misunderstood and demoralized by many of our staff. I knew they were not perfect and most likely would never be exemplary students, but I had watched them grow. I witnessed and felt their kindness, listened to their emotions, enjoyed getting to know who they were—their hopes, their dreams, their fears, their anxieties. I loved those kids.

From my data analysis, it became clear that all the study participants did in fact meet the goals I had set. School records indicated increased daily attendance, higher academic grades, greater consistency in completing and turning in class assignments, and higher scores in behavioral conduct across their educational experiences. Analysis of classroom transcripts and interviews with students and staff revealed an increased sense of personal agency, teamwork skills, and leadership capabilities in all participants. These findings gave further credence to the idea that the experiences of music educators have value in the broader teaching profession and our voices should be recognized and brought into conversations regarding music in urban schools (Frierson-Campbell, 2006).

The study illuminated the benefits of musical participation and community-building opportunities in the lives of students labeled *at-risk*, including heightened sense of student responsibility, increased musical and personal agency, and growing leadership skills. The students built and regulated their own learning community, which enabled them to expand and share their knowledge and boosted their overall self-worth as musicians and lifelong learners.

Throughout our work together the students engaged in a community composition project aimed at creating their own piece for a drum and xylophone ensemble. The students worked hard and were very proud when they debuted their piece for the entire school. When asked to title their work these fifth graders openly discussed several ideas, eventually settling on “Unity Through Transformation,” because they had become united as an ensemble and each of them had transformed in some way that year. A fitting title to say the least.

Three years after concluding this study I was given the opportunity to reconnect with the study participants. As they were about to complete middle school, I kept trying to imagine how they might look three years older, but in my mind they would always be my baby-faced fifth graders. Of our thirteen original fifth grade ensemble members, only six remained in our school district. I was able to visit with five of them over lunch. We informally chatted about their middle school experiences, activities, hobbies, behavior, and grades. We reminisced about our time together in the drumming ensemble, bringing moments of laughter and thoughtful reflection from the students. DeAngelo enthusiastically spoke of his involvement in the middle school band as a percussionist and how much he was looking forward to joining the high school marching band drum line. DeAngelo, on my recommendation to our middle school band director, joined sixth grade band as a percussionist because he wanted to continue drumming after his experience in my ensemble. I basked in the glow emanating from his excitement as he spoke of his success

and enjoyment in the band program and his plans to continue playing in drum line through college. The other students were enjoying various activities as well, including sports, guitar, piano, writing, and dance.

As we wrapped up our time together I asked if I could take a photo.

DeAngelo: Sure!

Bobby: Yeah!

I said: It's not going to go in the dissertation, it would just be for me.

Bobby: You have to put it at least in the back of the book... "Here are my children now."

"Here are my children now." No truer words were spoken during our half hour reunion. I was warmed that he referred to all of them as MY children, because that was exactly how I felt. They will always be my kids. There was a deep-rooted love toward these individuals that must have compared, in some degree, to a mother's love. Since I do not have children of my own, it is difficult for me to say if this comparison is accurate, but looking at them that day, sitting there talking with them again, admiring how much they had grown and matured, I can only explain the feeling as one of a proud mom. I fought back the tears as we parted and still felt them stinging the corners of my eyes as I reflected on this time together. I was proud of them—proud as can be. I wanted the best for these kids.

After the photo was taken they went out the door looking for a place to throw away their lunch trays and head back to class, reminiscent of the many lunch hours we had spent together three years ago. I let out a big sigh and turned back to pack up my things. Moments later DeAngelo returned for a hug. Some things never change...thank goodness. Imani returned next for a hug, followed by Kenneth and Bobby. I thanked them all and told them once again how

proud I was of each of them, and what handsome and beautiful young men and women they were becoming. I hope I will get a chance to see them again.

Upon arriving back at school I was downright giddy—an extra spring in my step, a refreshed level of energy to take on my afternoon classes. Spending a moment with those kids made me remember what it means to be a teacher and how blessed I am to make a difference in children’s lives. My school year had been a rough one, but this single event was just what I needed to renew the joy in my heart and remind myself of the importance of giving my all to my students. I can make a difference. I did make a difference. I will continue to make a difference.

Today, music educators are faced with numerous challenges affecting the way we teach and interact with our students. From budget cuts and course eliminations to state mandates and emphasis on test scores, we recognize the need to rise above and promote our programs now more than ever. With so many students now qualifying as *at-risk* in one way or another, more has to be done to involve these particular students in our musical communities. A constructivist perspective on learning can help ameliorate the damaging influence of poverty and change our attitudes about what students are capable of producing.

As educators we must seek out all students, despite our pre-conceptions, and provide access to musical ensembles for all students. As less and less people attend orchestral concerts and theatre productions, the future of live music-making is in peril (Aucoin, 2012; Cohan, 2013). We must find new ways to keep these valuable traditions alive for our future generations. My thirteen students’ lives were impacted by their participation in our ensemble. Follow up research and interviews in 2018 found that all of these students graduated from high school, with several having found ways to continue their creativity and leadership in service to their community.

DeAngelo was accepted into a creative arts college. He revealed to me that because of his drum ensemble experience he had joined his high school marching band. Leading the drumline his senior year gave him the desire to seek a career in music. His story has empowered me. He is one reason I wake up every day and face the challenging students I see in my general music classroom because now I can see the value and potential on each of their faces. Since this study I have made a personal commitment to engage all of my students in community-building musical activities in hopes of fostering similar desires to be lifelong musicians.

The purest essence of communal drumming lies in its ability to bring communities together through shared expression of lived experience. In Ghana, entire societies are characterized by their social behavior. Most social situations revolve around drum and dance as a way of preserving their culture and forming a strong group identity. Drums are “the blood and bone of sub-Saharan African cultural heritage and identity. Without it, the collective, the emotional, and the cognitive life of the community will be incomplete” (Bokor, 2014, p. 192). For our ensemble, the drums became the blood that united us. Through our experience together we each evolved as individuals, but equally as important, we became a community with lasting bonds that have continued to shape our identities as we have forged ahead on our individual paths. As a result of our time together we grew as musicians, leaders, teachers, and truly became *transformed*.

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