

Music Activities or Musical Activities?

By Mary Ellen Pinzino

(Rhode Island Music Educators Association, RIMER, 2011)

You are a musician. You went through music school practicing for hours and performing in ensembles, recitals and before juries. Being musical inspired you to become a teacher of music. Do you find the magic of musicality with your students? Do you feel like a musician in a community of artists with each group of students?

The common notion in our field seems to be that artistry is in the realm of the select ensemble rather than the general music classroom. We readily accept that the collective imagination of most any group of children can become lost in a story, taken in by every detail. Yet, as a field, we seem to find it hard to believe that the collective musical imagination of most any group of children can become equally lost in music, taken in by every nuance. Our field further separates general music from choral music, yet children can and should sing beautifully in both settings.

Children love being musical. Every group of students can become a community of artists making exciting music, whatever the age or experience level. Why, then, do so many students tune out of general music activities? Perhaps it is because so many of our classroom music activities are not musical. Activities that speak to the thinking mind do not speak to the musical mind. Activities that are dominated by teacher talking are not musical—even if the musical content is worthy. Activities about musical instruments, composers, or music theory may be about music, but they are not, in themselves, musical. Songs the thinking mind judges as “cool” may be unmusical to the musical mind. Activities for vocal technique that engage the body and the thinking mind, without engaging the musical mind, are not musical. Going over lyrics for meaning or pronunciation is not musical. Scarves, hoops, and other props can be delightful vehicles for musicality, but if the props dominate the activity, musicality is limited.

“Everybody Out!”

Developing singers in the chorus or classroom requires full and constant immersion in every song’s meter, tonality, and movement. Typical rehearsal comments and well-meaning instructions interrupt the musical mind and derail children’s artistry. Let’s look at the process from another lens.

You are teaching your students to swim. You send them into the water. They swim three or four strokes and you blow the whistle. “Everybody out! You’ve got to take longer strokes. Stand here outside the pool and let’s practice those strokes” (which feel very different than they do in the water).

You send them back into the water. They swim another few strokes and you blow the whistle again. “Everybody out! Come up here alongside the pool and let’s work on breathing” (which feels very different than breathing while swimming).

You send them back into the water, only to bring them out again to practice the timing of their strokes, which feels very different in the water. Taking students out of the water for verbal instruction prevents them from engaging with the very medium they are trying to master. Immersion is essential for students to develop the skills to propel themselves through water—and music.

It is time for a new paradigm in classroom music—one in which every group of children becomes a community of artists, making exciting music. It is time that we transform music teaching and learning into exciting music making at every age and stage of development, with musicality as the driving force.

Children are born artists. They are compelled by meters, tonalities, movement, and quality song literature. All ages are moved by the energy of the line, by the expression of musicality, by the wonder of the art—the same power that drew us into this field.

Risk being utterly musical in song and movement and your students will do the same. Embody the excitement of the energy of the line. Talking about the line communicates with the thinking mind. Moving the energy of the line communicates with the musical mind. Line, momentum, articulation, expression, dynamics, rhythm, and melody can each be manifest in movement. What the body does, the voice follows.

Do a “musical reality check” in your classroom and increase the level of artistry in your music activities. Diminish verbal instructions. Communicate sheer musicality through movement. Choose song literature that is worthy of children’s artistry. Develop activities that engage the musical mind, body and soul in exciting music making. Rekindle what brought you into this field, and you will light the fire of your young community of artists.

© 2011, Mary Ellen Pinzino

[Contact
Mary Ellen Pinzino](#)

[More by
Mary Ellen Pinzino](#)