

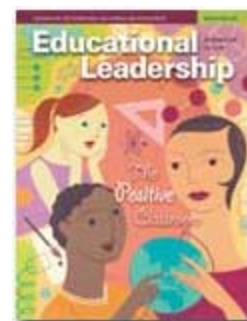


The Music Connection

Music deepens students' engagement with academic content—and enriches the learning community.

Andrea H. Antepenko

As we listened together to the song "We Look like Men of War,"¹ my 5th grade students entered into the mind-set of black soldiers from the 54th regiment trudging back from a U.S. Civil War battle. I sensed students empathizing with the soldiers' emotions. And I witnessed, as I have often, the power of music to enhance the classroom environment and the working of students' minds. As we shared this music in our unit on the Civil War, my students were no longer a class requiring "management," but rather a group engaged in meaningful learning.



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As a first-year teacher at Centennial Arts Academy in Gainesville, Georgia, I face the challenge of meeting the needs of a diverse group of 5th graders. My students come from varied backgrounds and socioeconomic levels: the majority coming from white or Latino backgrounds, and over half of them qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. Like all 5th graders, each of my students learns differently. With the intense pressure on 5th grade teachers to prepare students to meet and even exceed standards, it's easy to forget that my most important goal is to create an environment in which every student is involved in meaningful learning. Music helps me accomplish that goal.

Both music and words are essential ingredients for creating a positive learning environment, and music is particularly powerful in creating a relaxing, yet stimulating, atmosphere. When I play music that is related to the content we're learning, it also makes students' learning more relevant.

Integrating Music Into Classroom Life

My students hear music as they come into my room each morning, and we listen to music periodically throughout the day. I play instrumental music during class work, on special days when students join me in the classroom for lunch, and sometimes while they take tests. I don't always play music, of course, because silence is important for learning too. For example, I don't use music during direct, whole-group instruction unless it's part of the lesson. Because lyrics can be distracting, I reserve music with lyrics for times when we can focus on the words.

I choose music to create the kind of atmosphere I want in the classroom. For example, in the morning I want students to feel good about being at school and motivated to get to work on their starter assignment, so I'll play soft jazz without lyrics, such as anything by Chuck Mangione.

Our classroom soundtrack usually corresponds to the period in history that we're exploring. We listen to tunes sung by soldiers during World War II, folk songs about the Dust Bowl, or songs

associated with the struggle for civil rights in the United States, such as "Ruby's Shoes," written and recorded by Lori McKenna, which describes the experience of 6-year-old Ruby Bridges, the first black child to attend an integrated Arkansas public school. I never would have imagined that 11-year-old kids would request music by Billie Holiday and other jazz musicians that we heard when we studied the Harlem Renaissance—but they do!

I have found that students respond well to writing in response to a piece of music. We also use music to introduce and reinforce math, science, social studies, and grammar concepts, and even intangible concepts important to students' developing characters, such as respect for diversity.

Music sets the tone for an environment that is mutually respectful and advantageous to learning. For example, when we are doing small-group work, my students know how to complete the sentence, "If you can't hear the music playing ..." (then it means you're too loud).

Why Music Enhances Instruction

During my first year of teaching, I learned two key things about why music enhances a learning environment and makes instruction more effective.

Music Empowers Student Writers

One of my initial struggles as a teacher was convincing students that becoming great writers would benefit them, bringing both success in school and more intangible rewards such as a heightened imagination and broader vision for their futures. Originally, I prefaced writing lessons with reasons why students should become strong writers. I told stories about my work as a project manager in large corporations and how my communication skills brought me lucrative opportunities.

But it was impossible to *convince* students that writing is a ticket to many destinations. Students would need to experience joy and success as writers to believe me. Integrating music into instruction—in language arts and other areas—does a lot to help students develop their own voice and a desire to write.

When students listened to music as they wrote, words moved more directly out of their hearts and minds and onto the page. I also found music enhanced our class experience of *reading* good writing: It moved words straight off the page and into the heart. I accomplished my goal of replacing students' "have-to" feeling about writing with a "want-to" feeling.

Words and Music Together Equals Meaning

Teaching uses words, whether our words, students', or an authors'. Joining music and words to reinforce a concept or material heightens the meaning of the content. Our experience listening to "We Look Like Men of War" in the Civil War unit is one example. A large collection of primary source documents, trade books, and picture books helped my students explore their interests and gain deeper insights than a textbook alone would provide. I played songs from my collection of Civil War and African American music as students read, talked, explored, and listened.

But "We Look Like Men of War" led to deeper comprehension and more reflection on personal values than any of the other resources. We had read accounts by black soldiers who were barred from fighting alongside white soldiers, assigned menial tasks, or paid less than their white counterparts. But this song—whose lyrics emphasize courage and passion in fighting for a cause—deepened the students' understanding of the situation.

The kids requested the song many times in subsequent weeks. When asked to write about something they had learned as part of the Civil War unit, almost all the students wrote about "We Look Like Men of War." Students talked about how the song spurred them to feel what it was like to be someone else and to have someone else's perspective. I later witnessed students taking on a different perspective when we needed to address a situation on our own battlefields on the playground or the school bus.

My students' scores on our state social studies assessment showed that they learned required content about the Civil War; 96 percent of them met or exceeded state standards. But the more personal learning engendered by listening to music changed how my students think about life and themselves. Music paid dividends beyond improved classroom management; it made an immense, positive contribution to students' learning lives. I encourage anyone who wants to add depth to student learning to search out the music connection.

Practical Tips to Get Started Using Music

- Talk to the music teacher at your school. Music teachers receive publications that include content integration suggestions, and these are a great source of potential songs.
- As you listen to music, keep in mind the question, How could I use this music in my classroom? For example, when I watch a movie, I almost always hear a song appropriate for the classroom—either for the atmosphere the song induces or for its powerful lyrics.
- Vary the music you showcase for students. I listen to country, Christian, rhythm and blues, classical, jazz, hip-hop, and rap. If you respond to a piece of music, someone in your class will too.
- Keep alert to possibilities wherever you go. I found a compact disc of songs about trains at a garage sale and a collection of World War II songs at a discount store. Keep your eyes open for any book that comes with a compact disc.
- Use the Internet to research music that connects to specific content and characters you are teaching about. One good Web site is the Sounds of America audio programs available through the National Museum of American History, which highlights music of different locations and eras (<http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/music.cfm?key=1228>).
- To find the lyrics to songs, enter the name of the song and the artist into an Internet search engine.
- Ask your students where they get their music and learn from them. At least one kid in the class can show you how to download music from free sources right onto your computer.

Endnote

¹ This song can be found on *The Long Road to Freedom: An Anthology of Black Music*, CD set, produced by Harry Belafonte, 2001, Buddha Records.

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