



Fun

This word is bandied about every day by teachers, parents, and students. I read it recently on the website of one the best music programs in the state because it is an essential component to beginning music studies. For fourth- and fifth-graders still intrigued by the world, making a sound on an instrument for the first time is “fun.” Indeed, “fun” may be the most important component to all music studies, provided we expand this word’s definition to include the experiences of more advanced music students mastering repertoire that is very difficult for them: there are no smiles or giggles in evidence here because the enjoyment – the “fun” – is happening on a deeper, more sophisticated level. The work is enjoyable because the activity is both interesting and challenging to that particular individual. The same can be said for young people engaged in a science experiment or a debate topic or a basketball practice.

It should be enough for all of us to say that because music is fun on these different levels, it should remain an integral part of our schools, along with the other parts of the curriculum, along with athletics, and along with clubs, because these increase the likelihood that young people will engage in activities that interest them – activities that are fun -- and because these activities help develop each individual’s unique mixtures of ability and skill.

However, we music teachers still seem to be searching for other reasons to promote and protect music studies and ensemble experiences. We fear that they appear inessential when budgets are discussed by administrators, so we try to create arguments about how music helps students in a more general way by somehow developing intellectual skills that are important in more traditional academic subjects.

Apparently, it is not enough for the administrators who control the budget process to witness the positive impact of these activities

firsthand, or to gather the opinions of the students who enjoy these experiences, or the opinions of their proud parents. They seem to need proof that these experiences are helpful to students in ways other than providing them with deep, meaningful fun. And, in trying to prove that music studies can help in other ways, we actually lend credibility to the argument that they are not essential by themselves.

Not long ago, music advocacy groups tried to establish a link between music studies and higher academic achievement¹ across the curriculum. According to these studies, music students showed superior scores in other academic domains compared to students who did not study music. Eventually, enough people realized that this link was coincidental and not causal, and this particular defense of music programs seems to have been withdrawn.

Recent brain research suggests that the brains of violin students develop real and useful skills in the domain of music but not necessarily develop skills in other areas.² These violin students could more quickly pick up other instruments because of the musical skills acquired while studying the violin, but their violin studies prepare them to do better on the mathematics or verbal reasoning components of the SAT.

Common sense and experience tells us that the same students who study music tend to be more curious and motivated about other things, too; we see them signing up for all sorts of “extra” activities. Data to support this hypothesis could be collected in any school. Music students are often capable in other intellectual domains, too, and intellectual ability in mathematics and language arts often seems to coincide with skill in other potentially complex domains like music, but neither of those anecdotal truths prove that music studies actually help these particular kids develop skills in these other areas.

To prove that musical studies could actually help across the curriculum, we would have to identify two large groups of demonstrably coequal students, test them in a variety of skill areas to provide a baseline, give them both exactly the

¹ <http://jrm.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/05/17/0022429413485601.abstract>

² <http://www.psmag.com/blogs/news-blog/music-students-have-higher-sat-scores-but-why-58468/>

same experience in school for a long enough period of time, but only provide one group with music instruction. We would then test all of the students again to determine whether the music students enjoyed some advantage over the non-music students.

Protecting the scientific integrity of this study might be difficult, but it would be the only way to establish a causal link between the intellectual work of music and the intellectual work in other subjects. But again, even if we could safely predict the outcome of this experiment, why do we need to prove the usefulness of music studies to other skill domains? Doesn't this actually undermine the belief that music studies have their own unique merit?

Our society has determined that reading, writing, and mathematics skills are essential to our children's future success in the work world, which I suppose is reasonable enough, but is that all we hope our schools will do for our children? Shouldn't we make certain that students feel engaged in what they do at school? That they feel good about their schools and about their lives as students? And won't this level of engagement and enthusiasm help them when they need the motivation to succeed in areas that don't come easily for them, or in areas that don't interest them as much?

I recently read a book by William J. Broad called *The Science of Yoga*. This book reviews and discusses virtually all the known scientific research about yoga's health benefits. From what I understand, practitioners of yoga have attempted for years to prove the health benefits of yoga. While researchers still have discovered no causal link between yoga practice and aerobic fitness, they have learned that yoga practitioners generally feel better about themselves and also attribute this positive emotional state to their yoga practice. In addition, researchers have discovered that the positive emotional state that yoga practitioners enjoy has also had a significantly positive effect on their physical health, their job performance, and their interpersonal relationships. Virtually everyone who has practiced yoga regularly would attest to some form of this statement. Evidence of yoga's health benefits is anecdotal but profound enough to account for yoga's explosion in popularity.

Music students who have become accomplished enough to participate in effective music

ensemble would also attest to music's positive impact on their lives – on their “selves.” There is something about music that really “floats their boat,” even when they are still aspiring to modest skill levels. Let's be satisfied with this point of view. Instead of trying to prove what music studies can do for performance in the academic areas, let's appreciate more fully what they can do for young people as they follow their interests, develop a broad array of skills, and have fun doing so.