Marginalized Youth Saying and Playing Who They Are

What is this research about?
This research aims to use musical improvisation as a pedagogical tool within the urban educational setting. Pedagogy is the science of teaching. The goal of using improvised music in a pedagogical manner is to support marginalized youth by beginning to dismantle teacher-student hierarchies, foster self-expression and personal growth, enhance cooperation and collaboration and encourage deep listening through call and response exercises. It also aims to contribute to the social equity of the group setting.

If improvisation is to be a widely available pedagogy it cannot rely on a small number of internationally respected artist teachers, but should be premised on respect, deep listening, equity and creative democratic collaboration that is locally developed.

Who can use this research?
Psychologists, Behaviour Analysts, Music Therapists, Urban Youth Teachers, Group Homes, Music Teachers / Instructors, Community Centres.

What did the researchers do?
Researchers conducted four sessions of a hands-on, percussion-based workshop created and facilitated by percussionist Rob Wallace. The workshop was conducted at Give Yourself Credit, an alternative high school aimed at providing educational opportunities to at-risk youth aged sixteen to twenty-one. Give Yourself Credit unites educational opportunities with social, emotional and medical support for students who have left the traditional school system for reasons including homelessness, addiction, bullying, abuse, expulsion from other schools and difficulty learning in a traditional classroom environment.

Ten students participated in the workshop, all of whom were Caucasian and nine of whom were female. Researchers also participated in the workshop which allowed trust to be built between the students and the researchers. The workshops followed four critical components of improvisation pedagogy: the importance of individual expression within a group setting, instrumental work as a process of personal growth, the importance of collective and cooperative work, and the importance of authority in the process of transmission. The workshops focused on both individual and collaborative expression, and emphasized support, respect and the breaking down of hierarchal structures between teacher and student. Each workshop built on the previous one and incorporated musical exercises like video clips of drumming and percussion sessions, and listening to fellow participants and the overall soundscape (the sounds which form an auditory environment).

What you need to know:
Improvisation as pedagogy speaks directly to risks that need to be taken in music education and in life in order to create opportunities for change, particularly within urban alternative high school settings where underfunding, lack of access to resources, and students’ mental and emotional issues can cause significant challenges for both educators and students.

Pedagogical improvisation can engage the ways that traditional school curricula have reproduced the values of dominant culture and alienated urban students as well as play a significant role in cultivating resources for hope.

When students become active participants in the production of knowledge rather than passive recipients of information, they model new kinds of relationships and become engaged as curious listeners beginning to hear and play the world in a different way. This can lead to achievements of personal insight, social cooperation and equity, as well as an openness of unexpected outcomes and encounters by saying and playing who they are.
What did the researchers find?

The research revealed that many students did not want to participate in “academic” approaches to music and wanted opportunities to express themselves through freer forms of musical practice. While feedback was not completely positive, a lot of the student participants were excited to attend school and looked forward to the workshops.

As one student said, there was the realization “that I can do it, [and] I never even tried it before.” Students were able to be self-expressive without words. Changes in students’ self-confidence and self-expression were also noticed, as well as an increase in individual and group cohesion, camaraderie, and growth. Many students in their interviews noted that the workshops brought them closer together, and that there was a stronger sense of community and new form of group acceptance. Students also reported an increased ability to focus and listen carefully to both the music and each other.

However, for some students suffering from anxiety disorders the workshops caused distress, worry and performance anxiety. The stress of participating in a new, on-the-spot, improvised situation was disorientating to some, but these students confirmed that their anxieties lessened as the workshops continued and they became more comfortable with the situations.

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