

Grace Nelson

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Intro to Music Education

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Teaching Philosophy

On Creating a Positive Learning Environment

According to a favorite former music teacher, one of the best ways to keep a learning environment positive is to ensure that students feel like they are an active participant in the classroom. Not only will students have more fun this way, but they are likely to work harder if they feel like they are in control of their learning. Increasing student choice doesn't have to be overly complicated – it can be as simple as letting students vote on what song they want to play at the next orchestra concert. While that orchestral arrangement of “Party in the U.S.A.” might not be to your taste, your students are likely to enjoy it much more because they chose to learn it.

Another important aspect of maintaining a positive learning environment is eliminating unhealthy competition. Something music teachers tend to forget is that not all their students are as involved in music as they were in high school. While these students may not seem as passionate about choir, band, or orchestra as the “star students,” it should still be fun for them. If these students feel as if they are not as important as others, they will not have much fun. While school music ensembles are incredibly important, at the end of the day they are high school level ensembles, not the New York Philharmonic. A good music teacher does not foster an environment where more experienced students feel entitled to act as if they are better than other

people – if this means establishing rotating seating charts in band and orchestra or turning that solo in choir into a small group, then so be it.

On Building Positive Relationships

My first K-12 Field experience placement was with Mrs. Lisa Cheshier, who is the orchestra director at Berea-Midpark high school. From my first day observing her, I was struck how close Mrs. Cheshier was with all her students. During transition times between class periods, I frequently saw Mrs. Cheshier making her way around the room conversing with her students about goings-on in their lives, most of which had nothing to do with music. Her students will tease her and joke with her, but it is also evident from their behavior how much they respect her. She is by no means afraid to reprimand her students when they are out of line – she will often curb immature freshman behavior by saying “that’s what a little kid would do” – but her doing so in no way inhibits her students’ positive regard for her.

In my experience, kids tend to be drawn to the adults in their lives who make them feel seen. These kids are putting themselves in an incredibly vulnerable position by sharing their talents with us. They want to feel as if their talent has value. It is the job of a good educator to make sure these kids feel as if they are skilled at what they do, and that even the students who struggle can improve. However, it is also important to consider that students have lives outside of music. They want to feel valued as whole people: people who play varsity softball and love anime and suck at algebra II, not just people who can sing that high C when the time comes.

On Contributing to my Community

Art is much more far-reaching than many people give it credit for. A school ensemble can have a positive impact on far more than just those who play in it: after all, what good is music

without an audience to hear it? As my applied lessons professor Dr. Julian Ross puts it, “When you are playing for an audience, you are the least important person in the room.” It is our duty as musicians to use our talent to positively impact others, and this duty by no means excludes school ensembles. A lot of music teachers may be hesitant about getting their ensembles out into the community because they feel they are not quite proficient enough to be impactful yet. There are ways around this – having a string quartet or students in the school voice lesson program give a concert locally, for example. However, keep in mind that a performance does not have to be perfect in order to be meaningful. There may be people in the audience of your concert at a local nursing home who are moved simply because “Jupiter” is their favorite piece, or because they too were in band in grade school.

On Fostering Inclusivity

The fact of the matter is that the study of classical music, especially strings, is largely built on institutionalized racism. Systems of power in America are designed in a way that allows white, American-born citizens to succeed and generates undue economic burden for minority groups. To become a “successful” musician, students must generally begin taking lessons at a very early age, meaning 1) they were exposed to classical music early on and 2) their families can afford to pay for private music lessons and, when they get more advanced, membership in select youth ensembles. They must also have access to adequate materials and be afforded the time and space to practice enough, which becomes difficult for students who may be working to support their families, helping raise younger siblings, or spending long hours studying or playing sports in attempts to win a scholarship that will afford them a college education.

It would be naïve to say that one public school music teacher could eliminate all these barriers for their students. However, there are steps educators can take to make sure students

have every possible chance to succeed within our classroom. Setting up free or low-cost in-school music lessons for students who could not otherwise take them is a great start. If state teaching standards (and individual timetables) allow, some school music directors give students lessons outside of class themselves. Some schools provide their arts programs with enough funding to make hiring private lesson instructors a possibility; many do not. Even so, there are grant programs which can fill in the gaps. Having music education students at a local college come in and teach lessons for field experience is another great option.

In order to want to succeed in music, it is important that students can see themselves in the repertoire their school ensembles perform. Finding music that provides this for all students can be a difficult feat when most known classical composers are able-bodied white men. However, this task is by no means impossible; rather, it simply must be made a priority. There are plenty of western classical works created by underrepresented demographics, such as Clara Schumann or Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. An even better option is finding repertoire outside of Western classical music – there are numerous orchestral arrangements of pieces written or popularized by females and people of color, from hip-hop to vaudeville (which was created by black people in the late 1800s before being co-opted by white people and becoming a staple of minstrel shows) to rock-n-roll. Most of these styles will provide an opportunity to teach new skills to students. Barbershop music, for example, is generally taught by rote. Middle eastern music is not only taught by rote, but uses a system of tonality entirely outside of Western pitch classifications (read: use of semitones).

The Music Teacher “Types”

In all honestly, I consider sorting teachers into specific “types (more specific than good and bad) to be rather unnecessary. There is no one specific way to be a good teacher. Your

actions as a teacher will, and should, vary in accordance with the situation at hand. You may be a “chill” teacher when your students are exceeding expectations, or when you know they are under a lot of stress and in need of a bit of sympathy. You may be a “tough love” teacher when your students are making bad choices and need an adult to set them on the right path (or when they have adjudicated events to prepare for).

Some teachers may find it helpful to have specific traits they adhere to as a teacher. While there is absolutely nothing wrong with this, my concern is that adhering to this mindset will lead me to become more concerned with my own view of what kind of teacher I am than how I can best serve my students. There is no one thing you can do to be a good teacher, other than try. However, there is, in my opinion, one important goal: do everything you can to make your students’ lives a little bit more meaningful.