"We Are" Building Empathy in Middle School through Musical Composition

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MUCE 595: Peace-Building Through Music Education

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June 30, 2021

Introduction and Background: Building Peace Through Empathy

Music has the potential to allow deep conversation and build connections if done with meaningful intent, allowing humans to communicate beyond the bounds of known language. The danger in the need for shared experience and similarity in order to foster empathy is that it can build walls between those who we perceive as "other" or "different." There is a need when empathizing and building empathic skill to both overcome perceived differences and accept them all at once. Reconciliation is the building block of peace making. Within any successful reconciliation, participants must gain an appreciation of the humanity of all participants, and a respect for their culture. There must be an opportunity to tell one's story and to listen to that of the others, as well as an acknowledgement of harms, telling of truths, and a mourning of losses (Urbain 31). Empathy, along with an acknowledgement and healing of injustices, and the important steps of apology, repentance, and forgiveness must take place. Finally, participants must resolve together systems for addressing future conflicts to the mutual benefit and satisfaction of all involved.

For any attempt at cultural crossover to be successful in peacebuilding, we must consider the cultural attributes of the music: materials, expression, construction, values, and spirituality, attempting to honor and incorporate these as authentically as possible. June Boyce-Tillman's work provides many unique models as to how incorporation of multiple musical cultures might be achieved, while the works of Gilad Atzmon and Yair Dalal offer two approaches for attempting to heal deep wounds through blending musical cultures, as in the tension and violence fraught struggle between Israelis and Palestinians. In fusing musical tastes, traditions and values, participants explore peace between cultures with diametrically opposite values and witness the beauty that is possible when incorporating multiple musical aesthetics.

The middle school music class students for which this project is intended are at a crossroads at this stage in development, where they are developing the ability to see the issues of the world, and yet their experiences and personal needs override and color their feelings. Empathy building at this stage of development is paramount in developing humans who will one day be capable of coming to the table to develop solutions to the benefit of many. This project is designed to foster collaboration, creativity, and empathy through a high-quality musical experience so that students can listen to and learn from other's perspectives, personalities, and musical cultures and tastes, in an environment that is safe, inclusive, and equitable.

Purpose:

In this project, Middle School Music students work to create an "I am" poem and compose music through a digital medium that best expresses their personality, tastes, culture, or traditions. Then, the students listen to the music created and try to match up pairs that sound the most opposite of one another. The creators of this music then collaborate in pairs to create a song that combines the styles and flavors of their individual songs and merge their poems into a new piece that combines "I am" and "We are" statements, derived from students' differences and similarities. Throughout this process, students will have an experience that emphasizes the five principles of the not-for-profit organization, Musicians Without Borders of safety, inclusion, equality, creativity, and quality. Students must have a basic working knowledge of the music composition technology to be utilized, such as Garage Band or Soundtrap, and have utilized the chosen composition previously. (**www.soundtrap.com)**

Project Overview: "We Are" Building Empathy in Middle School through Musical Composition

Estimated time	Activity	Detailed Steps	Why is this important?
Day 1 40 minutes	I Am	• Begin by having students share their favorite musical styles. Discuss the nuances of musical genre through the creation of a class word web. • Have students choose the most important statements after brainstorming their personal attributes and write or type them in an "I am" poem format. • Then, have students expand their poem with adjectives and poetic devices such as metaphor and simile.	Students begin to think more deeply about their self-identity and form pride in their individuality.
Day 2 and 3: 80 minutes	Create Your "I Am" Music	• Invite students to compose music using Soundtrap, Garage Band, or another digital medium that reflects their musical tastes and the spirit of their "I am" poem. • Students record their "I am" poem over their "I am" music.	Students are given the opportunity to dive deeper into self-reflection, finding ways to communicate their tastes and personalities non-verbally. Students find creative ways to express the words of their poems through music.
Day 4 40 minutes	Opposites Attract	• Students listen to their peer's poems and musical compositions and try to match up the pairs that seem the most unlike one another. • Students then begin to create a new "We Are" composition that incorporates elements of their individual creations or includes new collaborative elements.	To build empathy, students begin to see how music that is opposite of their creation can enhance or combine with what they deem beautiful and representative of themselves into something new and amazing. Through this process, students are required to actively collaborate, and also begin to gain appreciation for those who seem to be different from them on the surface.

Estimated time	Activity	Detailed Steps	Why is this important?
Day 5 and 6 80 minutes	Collaborate and Create: From "I Am" to "We Are"	• Students continue to create their shared music, representative of both participants. • Once finished composing their music, students examine one another's original "I am" poems to identify similarities and differences in what they each said. • Students create a new poem called "We are" that includes both "I am" and "We are" statements. Student then record this over the music they created collaboratively.	Taking the time to really know the similarities with a peer while also appreciating the differences is the core skill of empathetic engagement. Students create a shared musical composition inspired by their individual pieces, including elements of both as equally as possible, and then fuse their poems into a "We are" poem.
Day 7 40 minutes	Celebrate and Reflect	• Students view the work of the entire class or all student participants in the course. • Each student chooses two of these pieces that speak to them and fill out a feedback form to give to the composers. • Students review the feedback from their peers and teachers. • Finally, students reflect on ways they might have approached the project differently and celebrate the aspects of their work that make them feel proud.	All students are included in celebrating the success of their end products and have the opportunity to examine various approaches to the creative process involved.

Day 1: "I Am" (40-minute lesson)

Goals:

Students begin to think more deeply about their self-identity and form pride in their individuality. Students familiarize themselves with the "I am" poem format, and work on creating their own.

Process:
- Begin by having students share their favorite musical styles. Discuss the nuances of musical genre through the creation of a class word web.
- Have students brainstorm a list of things that would describe them to a stranger. If a person could only know five facts about them, what would they be? Have students choose the five most important statements and write or type them in an "I am _____" format, leaving 4 spaces between each one.
- Then, have students think of a metaphor, simile, or colorful adjectives to further describe this I am statement. An example of powerful "I am" poems would be a good idea.

Musicians Without Borders: On Day 1, students experience a safe, inclusive activity, as they are allowed to freely express and describe themselves without fear of judgement. In addition, students are given a level playing field with a template to follow, promoting equality and quality. They can be creative with their chosen text within the template.

Day 2 and Day 3: Create Your "I am" Music (40-minute lesson x2 = 80 minutes)

Goals:

Students are given the opportunity to dive deeper into self-reflection, finding ways to communicate their tastes and personalities non-verbally. Students find creative ways to express the words of their poems through music.

Process:
- Students compose music using Soundtrap, Garage Band, or another digital medium that reflects their musical tastes and the spirit of their "I am" poem. This could also incorporate their family traditions, values, or interests. They may use pre-made loops, create original melodies or rhythms, or record themselves playing an instrument of their choice. They may not utilize MP3's of other music found online, as their piece should be as original as possible.
- Students record their "I am" poem over their "I am" music.
- Then students add their teacher as a collaborator if using Soundtrap, or download the MP3 and email it to their teacher if using Garage Band.

Helpful Tips: Students may need more time for this process. If they finish early, have something musical for them to do while the other participants complete this task. For example, you could allow them to explore keyboards if you have them or give them another simple Soundtrap or Garage Band task. This might even be a time when you offer an opportunity to create a playlist of music that reflects the statements in their "I am" poems. In addition, be sure to monitor students while they are creating to help them trouble shoot creative roadblocks or encourage a rich composition that really reflects their poem.

Musicians Without Borders: This creative step of the process is paramount in fostering the principle of creativity, as students are allowed to communicate their poems non-verbally through their music. The opportunities to create original music digitally or with the recording allows for a rich, imaginative, quality musical experience, while the myriad of pre-made loops allow for students to explore and become inspired by a multitude of styles and musical possibilities. In this way, there is inclusion for all skill levels of young musicians, and an activity that is safe and equitable for all.

Day 4: Opposites Attract (40-minute lesson)

Goals:

To build empathy, students begin to see how music that is opposite of their creation can enhance or combine with what they deem beautiful and representative of themselves into something new and amazing. Through this process, students not only have to actively collaborate, but also begin to gain appreciation for those who seem to be different from them on the surface. Accepting differences while overcoming them through music will foster an ability in students to empathize with their peers.

Process:

- Students listen to their peer's poems and musical compositions and try to match up the pairs that seem the most unlike one another. This is done through group discussion and disagreements are settled by a class vote after students share their reasoning for their opinions.
- Students then use some of the same loops from their individual pieces in a new collaboration called "We are." Students determine how that will sound. Will there be simultaneous opposites that work together, or will there be contrast in the musical form?

Helpful Tips: In the class discussion of opposites, keep the conversation centered around the musical elements of the pieces, and get them to think about the rhythm, tone colors, melodies, style, avoiding opinion statements about the aesthetics of the musical creations. Remind students that sharing our musical creations is like sharing a piece of our hearts and souls, and in this case, our personal attributes. All are beautiful. Make the pairing of the musical opposites into a seemingly separate activity, and then share that these groups will partner for the next step of the process to avoid the trap of students expressing opinions that seem to have ulterior motives of being grouped with a best friend. Once in groups, students are allowed to choose to be inspired in their musical personality merging by comparing their poems and / or their music. A search for similarities and differences can foster discussion and strengthen new relationships.

Musicians Without Borders: Eliminating the hierarchy of teacher choice in grouping fosters a more equitable, inclusive environment, but this must be done with careful supervision. In this way, teachers promote a student-centered process that remains emotionally safe for all involved, and an experience that values the opinions and perspectives of all participants.

Day 5 and 6 - Collaborate and Create: From "I Am" to "We Are" (40-minute lesson x2 = 80 minutes)

Goals:

Taking the time to really know the similarities with a peer while also appreciating the differences is the core skill of empathetic engagement. Students create a shared musical composition inspired by their individual pieces, including elements of both as equally as possible, and fuse their poems into a "We are" poem.

Process:

- Students continue to create their shared music, representative of both participants. Students choose whether to layer the sounds from their individual compositions over one another or use them in contrasting form. Students are also given the choice to create and include new music that appeals to both participants.
- Once finished composing their music, students re-examine one another's original "I am" poems to identify similarities and differences in what they each said. Are there any statements that can be merged into a "We are" statement, incorporating some ideas from each poem? If not, they have a discussion with their partner to find at least two things they have in common (Ex: interests, personality styles, family dynamics)
- Create a new poem called "We are" that includes both "I am" and "We are" statements. Student then record this over the music they have created. Their completed project is shared with their teacher by adding them as a collaborator in Soundtrap or downloading the MP3 and emailing it to the teacher if using Garage Band.

Helpful Tips: Students may require a lot of monitoring and guidance throughout the collaborative process. Ensure that all students' voices are being honored and included in the products being created and provide students with helpful suggestions for resolving differences of opinion in how to execute the task. Council students on the art of compromise or make suggestions on how both ideas can be included, reminding them that this is the purpose of this activity, and that if they don't love the outcome, they can revise it after they try it. Students may need extra time to complete the task at this stage, and another day or two may need to be added to the project. Those who finish early may collaborate more freely in Soundtrap, in their groups from this activity or with other members of the class who are finished and satisfied with their products.

Musicians Without Borders: The principles of equality, safety, and inclusiveness are at the core of this collaboration. Teachers must be mindful to monitor students to ensure this process is being carried out in a manner that honors the perspectives and ideas of all involved. Students experience creativity and musical quality as they work to create their music and poetry, and must problem solve to collaborate effectively and produce music and poetry that is aesthetically pleasing to both group members.

Day 7: Celebrate and Reflect (40-minute lesson)

Goals:

All students are included in celebrating the success of their end products and are able to examine various approaches to the creative process involved.

Process:

- Students view the work of the entire class or all student participants in the course.
- Participants choose two of these pieces that speak to them and fill out a feedback form to give to the composers.
- Students review the feedback from their peers and teachers.
- Students reflect on ways they might have approached the project differently and celebrate the aspects of their work that make them feel proud.

Examples of Reflective Questions:

What were two things you enjoyed about this music? Did you learn anything about the composers of this music through their music or their poetry? Find at least one thing to notice that you didn't know about these people before this project.

After hearing the work of the other student composers, is there anything you would include or do differently if we started this project again?

Helpful Tips: Teachers will need to do a little work in advance to compile the student work for class sharing. This can be done in a power point that students watch individually or projected in the classroom and watched as a group. Including both options is ideal. In this way, the whole group can applaud their peers and react emotionally to the compositions together, adding to the peace building opportunities of this project. It also ensures that students view all the work of their classmates. Having the presentations in a format students can review at their own pace allows them to reexamine the pieces they are choosing for reflection to garner more meaningful feedback.

A Word About Insecurities in Middle School: Be mindful of students who experience anxiety at public performance and offer them alternatives. They are required to share their work with you to ensure a quality experience and for your assessment, but perhaps the entire class could give anonymous titles for their pieces that omit their names. Encourage students to take pride in their work and reassure them that they've created something of quality that others will enjoy, and they should share with the world.

Musicians Without Borders: Safety is at the forefront of this reflective process. Students must feel free to share their creative work and trust that the class is a place where students build each other up in support of growth in a non-competitive environment in which all perspectives are honored and all students' ideas are valued equitably.

Summary and Conclusion:

Engaging in meaningful collaboration derived from personal compositions that represent each student's culture, musical tastes, personalities, or interests allows students to build deeper relationships with one another. Through the creation of a shared musical composition that highlights each student's individuality and as well as their commonalities builds the empathetic skill of recognizing and differences in a positive manner, appreciating them and celebrating them all at once. Giving students a vehicle to express themselves and make positive connections with their peers alleviates the feelings of isolation that teens often experience, and certainly have had to cope with in the past year. Those who have experienced trauma or perhaps have difficulty connecting and forming friendships can see that they are not alone in this inclusive and safe music class experience.

All ideas are valued equally, and the classroom environment should be a carefully cultivated space where all children feel valued and accepted. Establishing a safe, inclusive, environment of equality sets the stage for the creative process to begin. Through the vehicle of musical creativity, students explore their potential and discover abilities and avenues for problem solving, expanding their self-awareness. This skill can transfer to a multitude of areas in life in which a person needs to summon their creativity to overcome a problem. Through working with a peer and sharing their work with teachers and their class, students are encouraged to create a high-quality product of which they can be proud.

Peace building is possible in the music classroom when done with the purposeful intent of building connection and community among students. These feelings of calm and peace can be transformative and lead to positive conflict resolution for students in their own struggles, in their school with teachers and peers, in their communities, and even give them the skills to interact with situations of conflict throughout life.

Works Cited

Urbain, O. (2008). *Music and Conflict Transformation: Harmonies and Dissonances in Geopolitics. London: I.B. Tauris.*

Appendix: Other Helpful Information and Examples:

An "I am" poem template example may be found at:

https://freeology.com/worksheet-creator/poetry/i-am-poem/

Other tips on writing an "I am" poem may be found at:

http://community-building.weebly.com/i-am-poems.html

A tutorial on using Soundtrap, as well as subscription and free trial information may be found at:

http://www.soundtrap.com

Helpful tips on creating music to coincide with poetry to share with students:

https://flypaper.soundfly.com/write/how-to-compose-music-set-to-a-poem-a-case-study/

How to use Garage Band and export music:

GarageBand Tutorial - Complete Course - [Everything You Need To Know For The SUPER Beginner]

Helpful Soundtrap tutorial:

[How To Make Music On Soundtrap | Intro Tutorial](#)