Music and Society: New frontiers in Community Outreach

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Abstract

The project is a mixture of community engagement service, skill enrichment and music education. Art is and has to be part of our life. It brings humanity, spirit and value to us. As a member of the international community at the University of Denver, who has played piano for nineteen years, I have a passion for sharing my experience and interest with others. This qualitative study is attempting to provide music lessons to children of immigrant background or/and those who would not be able to afford music lessons otherwise. The actual gathering and implementation of the study took place in 2009 and 2010, and was, in part, intended to design and implement a model for a sustainable program of its type that might serve as a venue for graduate music education interns at the University of Denver. This thesis is a report and analysis of the data collected.

1. Introduction

Students from low-income families face two major obstacles to music education in private settings: lack of financial ability to afford tuition, and unawareness of the benefits of this education. Often such families are preoccupied with more than one job, are trying to face many challenges on a daily basis, and don't have the realization of the importance of music education, nor the financial means to seek it for their children. However, music and all the arts are essential parts of every human's development; the lack of it at an early age leaves a child without crucial means for attaining a life of completeness in human interactions and meaning.

Community partnerships have been shown to be effective in developing opportunities for music education that are accessible to low-income families. In a recent study involving a community-based arts project that was implemented in a native-American community in the state of Washington, Soto, Lum and Campbell [4] found that participants in the partnership benefited in musical and cultural ways. University personnel and community members, children and adults, professional teachers and preprofessional students found the exchanges gainful, such that the result was an understanding of music, education, and culture as they are enfolded and linked to one another.

For the purposes of this study, it was determined that providing a music education opportunity that would allow low-income families to discover the importance of music education in their children's lives would be a priority, and that it would be crucial to make this opportunity free of tuition expense. Since community partnerships have been found to be effective in implementing such programs, it was determined that such partnership would be sought.

This was a qualitative study to (1) design and implement a program of keyboard-centered music education for children of low-income families in an elementary school in Denver, Colorado, involving a community partnership between the elementary school, the University of Denver and its Lamont School of Music and its Center for Community Engagement and Service-Learning, and (2) gather qualitative data in the form of journal entries recording the reactions of the children and their parents that might reflect their changing values about the importance of music education in their lives.

2. Methodology and Data gathering

The project "Little Pioneers" is based on a partnership with Asbury Elementary School, located close to the University of Denver campus. This connection was made through the University's Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL) office, the supervising office for Little Pioneers. This project was selected to receive funding through the Morgridge Community Scholar Program. As a part of the MCS Program, I was required to attend weekly meetings and report about the development of the project. I spent several months trying to establish a connection with elementary schools around the University of Denver campus and it was discouraging going to weekly meetings only to report "no success with the partner". Finally, I contacted a Denver University professor and parent whose children attended Asbury Elementary. After exchanging e-mails, I attended a meeting with the principal of Asbury Elementary to discuss a collaborative partnership. In the process of developing this partnership we held meetings with the parents to familiarize them with the project and to establish a trusting relationship. In preparation for the first meeting with the parents, I created and distributed a flier to selected students from the school.

Hi everyone, my name is Gergana and I am from Bulgaria

- I am a piano performance student at the University of Denver
- Passed the Background Check and authorized to do DPS community work
- Offering FREE Enrichment Music Program
- Contact info: e-mail: gargirov@du.edu cell: 720-352-7488
- More info about the Program will be given on Monday, 13th at 2:30.
- Please feel free to join us!

Figure 1. Flier given to students

The director of the school music program helped me to introduce the project in front of the children and the parents. A couple of the families were enthusiastic about the project so we had the first meeting with them the following week. During this meeting I collected contact information and preferred times for lessons. After couple of meetings with them I started working with 4 wonderful children between The ages of 5 and 7. It took a long time to organize the lesson schedule and to purchase and receive the music literature that I was planning on using. Since I was going to work with all beginners, I had a wide variety of music literature to choose from. After researching and comparing the available methods on the market, I chose the collection Piano Adventures by Nancy and Randall Faber. This collection represents the fun and educational experience that I wanted my students to have while learning piano. For each student I purchased a set of four books: The main Lesson Book for general and basic knowledge, the Theory Book for homework and exercise, and the Performance Book and Gold Start Performance Book as a tool for them to not only learn and play famous songs, but also to transpose and work with them later on.

A very important part of creating and sustaining a community-based project like this one is the communication and connection between the participants. It was extremely important to create and establish an environment where the relationship between children, parents and teachers can grow and develop. With that in mind, I made a couple of requests prior to teaching lessons that helped me establish a friendly atmosphere without "babysitting" the children while parents were away for the lesson. One of them was creating an attendance slip in which I've included all of the policies and requirements for

both the children and the parents, in order for both to benefit from this project

Table 1. Attendance slip

<p>Little Pioneers Enrichment Program</p> <p>This is a music program which is taking place at the Newman Center for The Performing Arts (Lamont School of Music) on Evans and University.</p> <p>Instructor: Gergana Argirova gargirov@du.edu 720-352-7488</p> <p>Requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - attending lessons every week - notifying the instructor ahead of time if not able to attend the lesson - practicing every day according to the specific needs of the student - PARENTS/GUARDIANS ARE REQUIRED TO PRACTICE WITH THE CHILD IF NEEDED - accomplishing the goals set for the week - doing the homework when assigned - PARENTS/GUARDIANS PRESENCE IS REQUIRED DURING LESSONS - conducting a daily journal with the amount of practice time for the day + the title of the piece. <p>MISSING A LESSON AND/OR NOT NOTIFYING THE INSTRUCTOR AHEAD OF TIME IS EQUAL TO WITHDRAWING FROM THE PROGRAM</p> <p>Child's name:</p> <p>Parent's name:</p> <p>Parent's phone number:</p> <p>Sign and date:</p>
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Music lessons were held once a week on the 5th practice floor of the Lamont School of Music building, furnished with all Steinway pianos. The strategy behind was to expose the students to a true music experience and to incorporate and stimulate their imagination and curiosity about the other music and instruments in the building. Lessons were 30 minutes long. I usually started them with questions about the pieces and if the child enjoyed their practice time this week. It was very interesting to observe how they got more and more excited about practicing once they trusted their own abilities to learn and perform a piece. It was the easiest way for me to bond with them and get invited into their world. Next I checked the homework from the previous lesson together with the child. If there were any mistakes we were able to discuss them together and go over the material again. Moving on with the lessons, the next step was performing the assigned songs and working on them (if needed). Usually my teaching practice has showed me that children learn extremely fast when there is some kind of story involved in. I used the exact same method in making them memorize the songs. I was asking the children to think of a story related to the song they were playing. Almost always the pieces that they were playing have had a story line already going on and based on this, I made my decision about the books that I was going to use. The next part of the lesson was involved with presenting the new material in the most appropriated and linked

way to the previous material. Usually we didn't have a lot of time for games but I tried to include while presenting the new material. Presenting something new to the students through a game or an activity session is always more memorable and fun for them.

3. Discussion

This was a life-changing project for me. Studying piano for 19 years limits your social contacts as well as changes your world prospective. I had intended to be a soloist, traveling and playing with orchestras. One trip to New York City changed my point of view. Trying to decide what to do next, I applied for Morgridge Community Scholar (MCS) Program and proposed the project "Little Pioneers". The main idea for this project came not only from my international background, but also from my previous work experience. I have had a lot of experience working and helping children. Their first years are the time when children are forming their characters, as well as their dreams and perception about the world around. One of my biggest obstacles was finding a community partner. It surprised and saddened me how many schools were unwilling to participate in this project. Cox (2000) theorized that "each party to the partnership is an important source for stimulating questions, participating in information gathering, and selecting and applying the solutions" (p. 15). I found this observation very applicable to my project as well. When I started working on this project I expected that public schools would be eager to participate. It is very disappointing looking back at the troubles I had in finding a partner for my project. The reason for this hesitation has the same roots as the reason for the lack of music education in the public school curriculum; the importance of music education is being underestimated by the American school system.

Despite their closeness in age, the reactions and observations for each of them were totally different from one another. Things that I was very much looking forward were to observe the connection between parents and their children, and how is this connection reflecting on time and quality of practice. One of the clearest observations I made was that the more parental involvement there was in the child's practice and the lesson itself, the better the child was able to learn and communicate. This was less true for children who were overwhelmed with other activities in addition to music lessons. Some students were trying to juggle everything all together, but the outcome was inevitably a tired and distracted student, coming to every lesson unprepared. The kind of activities a child participates in during their formative years is extremely important because they shape a child's personality for life. Balancing activities and managing time is very difficult at a young age. It is true that children should be exposed

to as many activities as possible, so they can not only pick the ones that are most interested in, but also obtain a broad basic knowledge about some of the other activities. However, from an early age children should be expected to be responsible and disciplined. The role of the parent is extremely important in forming these essential qualities. Parent control and collaboration is vital not only for learning piano, but in any other sphere in children's life. After familiarizing myself with the Suzuki teaching methods, I strongly believe that the relationship between children and parents is the base of the student's learning success. This is one of the reasons I required parents to stay during the lessons and learn along with the students. The benefits I observed from parental involvement were: better practice time at home (since the parent is aware of the teacher's expectations, they can guide the student), learning faster (especially outside of the practice room when the parent will integrate some music reference into the children's games or activities), and a stronger parent- child relationship, which is the natural base of one child's success. The family environment is the example that children first learn from and follow. After getting to know the children I was working with, as well as their families, I made a very important observation- as long as the student was spending more time with the parent around the piano, playing music games and being involved with music, the child developed a better musical ear than the other students who were attending the piano lessons as a part of the their "daily schedule". Many times I observed from the students' own words how important this opportunity to study piano was in their life. One of the students made the confession once that they were interested in music and have had always wanted to seriously study music but never had the opportunity. Another student said after one semester of lessons that even if this project doesn't get funding next year that will not stop him of continuing with the music lessons. At the end, this is what I always wanted to hear and I was fighting for-inspired little people with a lot of interest and desire to learn. This should be the goal of every community- based project.

Students from low-income families face two major obstacles to private musical study: lack of financial opportunities or sources in the community for musical education, and unawareness of the benefits of this education. Often these families are preoccupied with more than one job, trying to face many challenges on a daily basis, and don't have the desire and the support to take the extra step and include music in their child's life. This is why community partnerships are necessary. Music and all the arts are essential part of every human's development and the lack of it in early age can cause a lot of future problems. In a recent study of community-based arts projects, the authors Soto,

Lum and Campbell [4] say that participants in the partnership benefited in musical and cultural ways. University personnel and community members, children and adults, professional teachers and pre-professional students found the exchanges gainful, such that the result was an understanding of music, education, and culture as they are enfolded and linked to one another.

Community projects like this one are a great opportunity for outreach and making a real and lasting impact. One of the goals for this project was to become a part of the M.M. degree in Music Education at the Lamont School of Music, serving as an internship for the Masters students. In this way, the children were going to receive their music education, the parents were going to be “financially free” and the graduate students were going to get real practice for their future career. The other benefit of this university-community based project is the collaboration between the two institutions of education, faculty and staff, students and parents. After reapplying for the MCS Program this year as well, I am extremely glad that the project was selected again and is going to continue for the Academic 2009-2010 year.

4. Recommendation for Further Studies

University—community collaborations are a fairly recent phenomenon, which has often been manifested through the establishment of university partnerships with schools [4]. Further research on university- community based music projects will be very helpful if they are talking from the “community side”. What is the benefit that they expect to gain from these projects? Why does the society let its own young members live with no music education? How is this music education reflecting on the children’s development at school and is there a way to make music education available to anyone?

Further studies involving research on choice of repertoire, especially involving international music. Does this help the participants to adapt faster to the new environment or it’s seen as a patronizing?

University-community collaborations reflect a renewed focus in higher education on institutions’ civic responsibility to address current needs in society [1]. This is in particularly true when the young generation is involved, as well as these in disadvantage.

5. Conclusion

Partnerships between universities and public schools are a new phenomenon but there is a lot more that can be done in this direction. In order to reach social equality in education in such a diverse society as the U.S. one, we need to start from the ground level of the problem, which is the curriculum

at the public schools. With the effort of teachers, scholars, educators, and parents we can create a better educational system that is a supporting body for the different cultures and nations living in the U.S.

6. References

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