

Reading Recovery and Music Education

As millions of U.S. school children file into public school classrooms each day, decisions are being made by national education policy makers that will impact the structure of their curriculum and school day in the near future. Topics frequently debated by policy makers include block scheduling, standardized testing, inclusion, vouchers, home schooling, and charter schools. These debates center their arguments on curriculum, funding, scheduling, and educational standards and more often than not, base their decisions largely around conservative views on education rather than intensive research. One area, however, that has been garnering national educational attention as of late is reading recovery. National education policy makers have always valued reading as a fundamental cornerstone of education, but only in last decade has a real push been made to aid students who struggle with reading. This has created a hot debate among theorists and educators alike. Many feel that while reading skills are important to child development, reading recovery programs deprive reading-challenged students of other educational opportunities that may help and encourage their reading skills and educational and personal growth more than such programs.

“To learn to read is to light a fire; every syllable that is spelled out is a spark.”
-Victor Hugo

Victor Hugo, French dramatist, novelist, and poet spoke those words over a century ago, and still, after 100 years of technological innovation they remain true. Hugo relates reading to a fire. Fire keeps us warm, cooks food, gives us light, and Hugo felt that reading did the same for the mind. As children begin to read, they sound out each syllable of a word creating tiny “sparks” that will, with practice and reading instruction, erupt into a fire that can fuel a lifetime of learning. Reading is a fundamental foundation of learning and child development that influences the way

children learn for the rest of their lives and opens doorways to unique opportunities that use skills similar to those of reading. Hugo understood this just as we do today. Child psychologists, educators, and doctors all agree that reading fosters tremendous growth in not only the mind of a child, but also in their world perspective, social contexts, and interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships and understanding. Because of these findings there has been a tremendous push in the last decade for child literacy. Much of these efforts are generally accepted, but one literacy effort that has come under scrutiny as of late is reading recovery.

Reading recovery is a concept developed in 1984 by New Zealand educator Marie Clay designed to aid children who are struggling with reading and consequently falling behind their peers and below national standards. The program advocates private one-on-one in school instruction for students diagnosed with a reading disorder. The lessons, given by a specially trained reading recovery teacher, last for 30 minutes each school day for a duration of 12-20 weeks. Once the student begins reading at a predetermined average level the lessons are discontinued.

As reading recovery programs are growing in popularity among US schools, they are reaching out and affecting more than just the reading skills of those involved. In fact, they are positively and negatively impacting the lives and educational opportunities of all students and teachers. According to the Reading Recovery Council of North America, over 1 million children have been served through reading recovery's 17 year history, 67% of which (approximately 670,000) being served in the last 5 years. This illustrates the ongoing popularity trend of the reading recovery program. Since its inception in 1984 by Marie Clay of New Zealand, enrollment has grown 1384%, from 110 students in 1984 to 152,241 in 2001.¹ Proponents of reading recovery point not only to the enrollment numbers as a success, but also to a number of other

¹ Reading Recovery Council of North America <http://www.readingrecovery.org>

factors and studies conducted that validate reading recovery programs as a primary importance in education.

One such study, conducted at the Marie Clay reading recovery programme in New Zealand concludes that children who participated in the reading recovery program not only kept up with their fellow non-reading recovery students in ability over the course of a 6 year post-reading recovery period, but that these students actually surpassed their peers in both reading and writing abilities.² Other studies have also found similar results and have illustrated that reading recovery programs have positive short-term and long-term effects. These effects include an elevated level of reading, writing, and reading comprehension; a positive attitude toward school; and improved performance on standardized tests.³ Finally, the positive effects of these programs have implications for students and teachers not directly involved in the programs. Proponents argue that reading recovery programs enable instruction in other subjects to be delivered with greater ease, as the teacher does not need be concerned that students are confused because of literacy problems. Secondly, it is argued that since U.S. educational success is measured by how many students are not reaching the standards, reading recovery programs not only help children reach those standards, but actually push standards higher because “No Child (is) Left Behind.”

The “No Child Left Behind” Act passed by the U.S. Department of Education in 2002 is one of the flaws, among others, that opponents, including myself, of reading recovery programs point to. While the goals of the legislation, one of which is to raise the literacy level of children, are respectable and lofty, the bill seems to threaten schools that fail to meet these goals. Penalties for not reaching the standards range from loss of funds to loss of the entire school to government control. Thus, this bill forces programs such as reading recovery on school districts which are

² Moore, Maggie & Wade, Barrie *Reading Recovery: It's Effectiveness in the Long Term* Support for Learning Aug. 1998 Vol. 13 Issue 3 p123 - 128

³ Pinnell, G.S. *Success for Low Achievers Through Reading Recovery* Educational Leadership Sept. 1990 Vol. 48 Issue 1 p17 - 21

scrambling to keep pace with the rapidly changing educational policies of this country.⁴ Other arguments against reading recovery programs include the intense training reading recovery teachers must receive as well as the cost, time, and structure necessary for implementing such programs. One of the most compelling arguments, however, is not against the program, per say, but rather against *when* the program has chosen to operate.

Most reading recovery programs are set up to operate during the school day, often utilizing elective time slots in the student's schedule as the "reading recovery hour." Thus, the students involved in the program are being denied the opportunity to participate in elective classes such as music, art, and physical education. The effects on music education are thus astounding.

Reading recovery programs are pulling kids out of the band room and depriving them of "kinesthetic, aural, oral, visual, and emotional experiences that will ultimately bring the written texts to life."⁵ These programs are creating a homogenous atmosphere in the band room – i.e. students who are smart, at least enough to read well – and denying everyone the opportunity to learn in a diverse, inclusive classroom. The definition of inclusive education, in a broad sense, is education "in which differences related to social class, gender, ethnicity, and mental and physical ability between pupils are taken into consideration."⁶ Even though these students are different, inclusive education means that instruction is organized so that students can learn together in a heterogeneous classroom. This diverse classroom affords students equal opportunities both academically and socially. Proponents of inclusion believe that an inclusive education "contributes to pupils' opportunities and skills to function in...society, which is characterized by social cohesion," and that "educating pupils together must provide all pupils with a good chance

⁴ Shields, Charles J. *Breaking Down the New Education Bill* District Administration Aug. 2002 Vol. 38 Issue 8 p20-21

⁵ Bernstorf, Elaine & Hansen, Dee *Linking Music Learning to Reading Instruction* Music Educator's Journal March 2002 Vol. 88 Issue 5 p17 – 21, 52.

⁶ Leeman, Y. & Volman, M. *Inclusive Education: Recipe Book or Quest. On Diversity in the Classroom & Educational Research.* International Journal of Inclusive Education Oct. 2001 Vol. 5 Issue 4 p367-369

at success at school.”⁷ Reading recovery programs are thus denying students of the social and academic opportunities afforded by a diverse, inclusive classroom.

While reading-challenged students are in the reading recovery classroom, their peers are exploring creative, imaginative, evocative, and fun outlets for human expression in the band room. Much like the issue with diversity, the reading recovery students are once again being deprived; this time of the experiences music provides for the mind. “Art professor Elliot Eisner writes,

‘Children who have not learned how to see and mentally explore the various forms of arts and science will not be able to write, not because they cannot spell, but because they have nothing to say, nothing to reconstruct from sensory exploration of the environment.’”⁸

The thoughts of Elliot Eisner are a repeated sentiment among music educators. It is inherently unfair that some children are afforded the open doors that music and the arts create while others are deprived because of their problems in another subject. While music educators such as myself realize the importance of reading in child development, we also emphasize the effect music can have on all students and the strong links between reading instruction and music education.

Music educators must get children in reading recovery programs back into the music room. To do that, however, a plausible argument must be presented as to why music instruction would be more beneficial than reading recovery. Music educators also point to the strong ties between reading and music and use these links as support for their argument. One of the many arguments music educators present in support of music over reading recovery is the idea of the at-risk student. At-risk students are defined as “those who are in danger either of dropping out of school, or of graduating without mastering the knowledge and skills that are necessary to be effective citizens and contributors to the economy.”⁹ Illiteracy falls into the category of being an

⁷ Leeman, Y. & Volman, M. *Inclusive Education: Recipe Book or Quest. On Diversity in the Classroom & Educational Research.* International Journal of Inclusive Education Oct. 2001 Vol. 5 Issue 4 p367-369

⁸ Bernstorf, Elaine & Hansen, Dee *Linking Music Learning to Reading Instruction* Music Educator's Journal March 2002 Vol. 88 Issue 5 p17 – 21, 52.

⁹ Schuler, Scott C. *Music, At-Risk Students, and the Missing Piece* Music Educators Journal Nov. 1991 Vol. 78 Issue 3

at-risk student, and therefore, schools try to raise literacy rates with reading recovery programs in an attempt to prevent these students from dropping out. These programs however, force many children away from reading rather than engaging them in the subject. “The National Research Council’s publication ‘Starting Out Right’ warns that ‘after several days of too many hours of reading every day, the reading experience might well start to become distasteful for a child.’”¹⁰ And as drop out rates are rising (sometimes as high as 50% in urban areas) and the percentage of minorities who enroll in college is declining, it seems as though reading programs are doing just that¹¹.

Many music educators believe that music instruction is just the prescription these at-risk students need to stay in school and enhance motivation. Howard Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences becomes of particular importance to this argument. Gardner theorized that every individual possessed 7 separate intelligences (linguistic, intrapersonal, logical-mathematical, interpersonal, spatial, musical, & bodily-kinesthetic), each in different degrees, with an elevated aptitude in at least one of them.¹² Since music is one of these intelligences, it is vital that this intelligence be appealed to during the day, as all of the others are in one subject or another. Music may be a powerful way of learning for some of the reading-challenged students and it also serves as a motivating factor by making the school experience more appealing. “Music education can make a positive difference in the lives of at-risk students, so it is the responsibility of music educators to develop instruction that maximizes that difference.”⁸ Maximizing this difference acts as a catalyst for at-risk students, because it creates a motivating factor by enhancing their self-esteem and allowing them to have fun in school.

“Music is an integral part of the lives and experiences of at risk students (as well as non-at-risk students). It serves as a means for group participation and self expression. (Music)

¹⁰ Bernstorf, Elaine & Hansen, Dee *Linking Music Learning to Reading Instruction* Music Educator’s Journal March 2002 Vol. 88 Issue 5 p17 – 21, 52.

¹¹ Schuler, Scott C. *Music, At-Risk Students, and the Missing Piece* Music Educators Journal Nov. 1991 Vol. 78 Issue 3

¹² Labuta, Joseph A. & Smith, Deborah. Music Education: Historical Contexts and Perspectives. Prentice Hall Upper Saddle River, NJ. 1997 p139

provides opportunities for social, physical, emotional and cultural development...and encourages students to think positively about themselves and others.”¹³

Self-esteem levels are an important factor in a student’s educational experience. Many at-risk students fail because of the lack of desire to learn rather than the inability to learn. Raising self-esteem levels through music education is just one way of stimulating this desire to learn, which may encourage a student to read and try harder, and ultimately rescuing at-risk students before they fail.

Music educators also point to 2 other arguments advocating music education over reading recovery programs: 1) linking reading instruction and music education and 2) comparative skills of reading and music. The first issue, linking reading instruction and music education is an idea that many music teachers are beginning to embrace and use in their classrooms. Joanna Calogero believes that linking music and reading is a win-win combination. She writes, “Using (children’s) literature that explores the explicit and implicit values of music enhances music learning and appreciation, as well as reading skills and general knowledge.”¹⁴ Indeed, music and literature have always been linked. Opera follows a written story line that could be read separately from the music. Choral music includes lyrics, poetry, etc.. Many musical pieces are programmatic and often follow a particular story line (e.g. Tchaikovsky’s Romeo & Juliet). Many books for children are based on children’s songs and many music method books include songs that are influenced by literature. Therefore, no matter what level of study a music educator is teaching, literature and reading can easily be integrated into the curriculum. When literature is integrated, music educators agree that,

“the use of song in the classroom together with other forms of music can expand thematic units and make significant interdisciplinary connections while serving as direct teaching

¹³ Hadley, W.H. & Hadley, R.T. *Motivating Factors for At-risk Students*. Education. Summer 1991 Vol. 111 Issue 4 p573-575

¹⁴ Calogero, Joanna M. *Integrating Music and Children’s Literature* Music Educators Journal. March 2002 Vol. 88 Issue 5 p23-30

tools for across-the-curriculum knowledge and understanding. In addition, music makes learning more lasting and meaningful because integrated musical experiences provide excitement for learning and improve students' reading, writing, and thinking skills."¹⁵

And perhaps most important of all, music is fun!

Finally, music educators point to the comparative skills between reading and music. Basically, advocates of music education believe that music can help students do better in other subjects because skills acquired in music class extend across the curriculum to other subjects such as reading and math. Music educators point to the similar mental processes involved in both reading and music while stressing that the skills necessary for both processes are extremely similar as well. For example, reading text in a book is compared to both music-symbol reading and music-text reading. Educators point to 6 areas in which music and reading are very similar: phonological awareness (ability to aurally discriminate/sensitive between sounds), phonemic awareness (understand smallest units of oral/musical language), sight identification (recognition of words/notes), orthographic awareness (understand use of letters/symbols in a system), cueing system awareness (gather meaning from words/symbols/image in a system), and fluency (speed and accuracy). (See attached Table 1) Theorists believe that the mental processes involved in these tasks remain the same with any system. Therefore, just because music uses notes and reading uses letters doesn't mean that the mental processes differ. Thus, music is practice for the mind at the mental processes involved in reading and writing.¹⁶

While reading recovery programs are trying to aid children by helping them with reading skills, they may actually be pushing students away from school by depriving them of educational opportunities such as music and the arts. Music educators understand the power of music, but others may not, and it is our duty to present whatever argument necessary to keep our kids in our

¹⁵ Brown, Ron & Brown, Nancy. *Use Songs to Teach* Reading & Writing Quarterly. Oct.-Dec. 1997 Vol. 13 Issue 4

¹⁶ Bernstorff, Elaine & Hansen, Dee *Linking Music Learning to Reading Instruction* Music Educator's Journal March 2002 Vol. 88 Issue 5 p17 – 21, 52.

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classrooms. Integrating reading into musical activities should not be a goal aimed at pleasing critics of music education, but rather should be used as an enhancement tool for musical learning. It should however, be pointed out when rationalizing music education over programs such as reading recovery. To regain control of our music classrooms we must work in conjunction with national and local reading objectives to create a music curriculum that appeases music educators, students, and administration, all while bringing our at-risk and reading disabled students back to the music classroom.

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