

The Music Center: A Leader in Music Education for Los Angeles County

Denise Grande, Robert Rich, and Annette Simmons

The Music Center/ Performing Arts Center of Los Angeles County has been an influential force in arts education since 1979, providing quality arts experiences to young people throughout Los Angeles County. Each year more than 300 schools participate in Music Center programming, providing students opportunities to directly experience the arts through classroom workshops, assembly performances at their school, or fully staged productions and festivals at the Music Center. But part of the Music Center’s mission and commitment to education is to reach beyond introductory art experiences and to contribute to comprehensive, standards-based arts education for students - pre-K through 12 - throughout Los Angeles County. At the heart of the Music Center’s education programming is the conviction that quality arts education is at its best when it includes the regular participation of professional artists.

Morrison Elementary: A School with a Vision for Music Education

Julia B. Morrison Elementary School is a Title I school located in the Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District in Norwalk, California, just twenty minutes from downtown Los Angeles. The school has a total enrollment of more than 600 students, Grades K through 6. The demographics include a student population that is 88% Latino, and one out of three students are English Language Learners. Seven out of ten students live below the poverty line, and four out of ten students have parents who did not graduate from high school.

Some years ago, Morrison Elementary was confronting the same dilemma facing scores of schools nationally: a significant percentage of its students demonstrated low levels of achievement in reading, language arts, and mathematics. Faced with this compelling need, the school’s principal, Marsha Guerrero, set out to design a program that would motivate learning and improve student achievement. Ms. Guerrero studied the substantial brain research regarding connections between music and learning and decided to undertake development of a special project, in collaboration with the Music Center, that would integrate music into the core curriculum as a catalyst for improving student achievement.

To launch their music initiative, the school obtained a three-year *Creative Learning Communities* grant through the Disney Learning Partnership in 2000. This funding allowed students at Morrison to participate in 12-week residencies led by Music Center musicians representing traditions from throughout the world: taiko drumming, Senegalese drumming, music of Mexico, Nigerian dance and drumming, and American folk songs. Older students were also involved in music composition. In these early days of the Music Center/Morrison partnership, both the components of implementation and the relationships between collaborators were still being developed, and so were often difficult. Scheduling and logistics were sometimes clumsy; Music Center artists were challenged to tailor their teaching to meet specific requests at each grade level; teachers were being challenged to understand, apply, and be accountable for connecting music learning to other aspects of their curriculum; and the project as a whole was being asked to show demonstrable gains in student achievement within a very short timeframe. Tensions within the project were being fed from two angles: unrealistic pressures from the funder to show immediate gains in student test scores, and realistic pressures for the Music Center to shift from

its role as a pure “fee-for-service arts provider” to a true *partner*. This shift would take time and would require a different level of commitment in terms of resources and capacity (increased staff knowledge of educational - and specifically literacy - pedagogy, application, and best practices; increased readiness and capacity of teaching artists; increased flexibility in terms of structuring services; willingness to participate as a learner as well as an expert, etc.). Despite these growing pains, at the end of the three-year project, Morrison staff observed that the concentration, self-esteem, self-motivation, and focus skills developed during music lessons directly transferred to improved concentration, self-esteem, self-motivation, and focus in other subject areas, including language arts. Student journals confirmed these encouraging outcomes.

A Groundbreaking Partnership in Music

Two years following the conclusion of the Disney-funded music project, the Music Center and Morrison rejoined forces as true partners to build on what they felt they had only begun to uncover in their earlier work. Seeking outside guidance and expertise, the partnership became part of the Music-in-Education National Consortium’s *Learning Laboratory Schools Network* in 2005, and together they began learning about how research-based practices could improve their efforts. Led by Morrison’s PRINCIPAL Marsha Guerrero, the Music Center’s DIRECTOR OF STRATEGIC INITIATIVES Denise Grande, and MUSIC CENTER TEACHING ARTIST Andrew Grueschow, the Music Center/Morrison partnership has since moved toward more investigative pursuits, with an emphasis on determining strategies for leveraging student learning through music education.

And since the school began investing in music education, student achievement has improved significantly at Morrison. The school scored 802 in the 2007 API and is now rated a *High Performing Title I School*. Results of the project to date have reestablished Morrison’s belief that studying music is a potentially powerful tool for teaching literacy skills. Backed by the full endorsement of the Norwalk–La Mirada Unified School District’s superintendent and administration, Morrison is committed to serving as a *research and development laboratory*, with the objective of working with the Music Center to create, implement, and document model elements that can be shared to advance the field nationally. It is anticipated that project findings will be especially valuable and relevant to the many Los Angeles County-based schools with large numbers of English Learners among their students.

The Music Center and Morrison have worked together to articulate project goals, objectives, outcomes, and activities in three distinct areas: Standards-Based Music Instruction, Building Classroom Teachers’ Capacity to Teach Music, and Teaching for Transfer. Although new learning each year continues to shift specific investigation in each of these areas, the project has consistently provided monthly professional development in music for all 28 teachers (K-6), semester-long music instruction led by teaching artists from the Music Center (beginning with 12 classes in 2005 and expanding to include 23 classes in 2008), and monthly face-to-face meeting time for ongoing project design and planning by the leadership team (Guerrero, Grande, and Grueschow). Activities have been targeted to: (1) identify and test strategies for making authentic connections between music and literacy; (2) to develop a school-wide “scope and sequence” plan for music, based on California’s Key Content Standards; (3) to develop and distribute a school-wide music vocabulary to all the teachers at Morrison Elementary; (4) to create, test, and enhance new assessment tools that measure the growing abilities of teachers and

students in music education; and (5) to document all of the curriculum, lesson plans, and assessments developed as part of the initiative.

In addition to instruction in vocal music, percussion, and music composition provided by Music Center teaching artists, the school continues to invest in building its own internal resources for providing students with opportunities to learn and engage in music: a cross-campus/ high school–elementary school Steel Pan Ensemble (see report by district music specialist Karen Calhoun); 5th grade dulcimer instruction (see report by Morrison classroom teacher Lori Knight); 2nd grade recorder instruction (led by a local college undergraduate majoring in music education); before-school keyboard instruction (also led by a Morrison classroom teacher); and after-school violin instruction (led by a community music teacher). As a whole, this diverse, multi-dimensional body of music instruction both informs the investigative work of the initiative and offers students access to music experiences in a variety of settings and musical genres.

MUSIC LITERACY AND LANGUAGE LITERACY

Year One: Learning the Language of Integration

When the Music Center/Morrison Elementary School partnership first began their work under the guidance of the Music-in-Education National Consortium’s *Learning Laboratory Network*, the initial interest was to investigate connections between music and literacy. But an understanding of even the *semantics* of the inquiry would need to evolve. What began as an investigation of “music and literacy” shifted to “connections between music literacy and language literacy” and ultimately arrived at the more clearly expressed intention: *How can teaching be structured to reveal explicit connections between the two different disciplines of music and language arts, wherein literacy in one discipline leverages literacy in the other, and vice versa?*

The partners noted that the challenge and complexity of this work was addressed in *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning*, which asserted that “Interdisciplinary learning transfer effects are more complex and less linear than the usual ‘cause-and-effect’ models of education.” Building from earlier work that identified Fundamental Concepts and Processes Shared by Music and other subjects (Scripp, *JLTM*, vol.1, 2000, p. 28 and Davidson, Claar, & Stampf, *JLTM* vol. 1 2000, pp. 64 ff.), the partnership hypothesized that cognitive development would increase when *explicit* connections were made between shared fundamental concepts and processes. The project leaders correlated the different dimensions of Scripp’s Shared Fundamental Concepts and Processes with current educational theory, categorizing content areas such as math, language, and music as lying within the Formal Curriculum, areas of social-personal development as part of the Hidden Curriculum, and learning processes as components of the Meta-Curriculum. (*see Figure #1*).

Initial work with students was grounded in the Formal Curriculum. The partners set out to design a music-plus-music-integration project that would make explicit connections between Fundamental Concepts and Processes shared by Music and Language, focusing on elements such as character, setting, sequence, beginning/middle/end, theme, inference, decoding, writing, composition, and voice. The approach was to “score” a piece of core literature from each grade

level – or more accurately stated, to compose a musical interpretation of a story from grade level texts. Led by Music Center teaching artist Andrew Grueschow, instruction intentionally linked music and language arts concepts such as instrumentation and character, rhythmic patterns and word patterns, dynamics and beginning/middle/end, musical contrast and mood, and composition and story sequence (see Reflection piece by Grueschow later in this Report).

After studying basic musical concepts, children outlined their stories, created rhythms and patterns, and then developed original compositions – with particular attention to arrangement and instrumentation – to convey ideas of setting, character, mood, conflict, and theme through music. A performance at the end of the project featured the children playing their musical compositions to express the narrative, as pages of the book were visually projected for the audience.

Despite its success in two consecutive semester cycles, this strategy – taken as a sole approach – felt a bit constrictive and contrived, somewhat limited in its potential for developing students’ musical skills, and altogether too near the surface of what was becoming increasingly understood as *true integration*. Further, in our early efforts to identify “explicit connections between music literacy and language literacy,” we kept tripping over ourselves in conversation. *Procedures. Strategies. Processes. Content. Cognition. Meta-Cognition. Curriculum. Formal Curriculum. Meta-Curriculum. Hidden Curriculum. Cognitive Processes. Parallel Processes. Cognitive Procedures. Parallel Procedures . . .* The nuance of the vocabulary was sometimes very difficult to keep straight, especially since we were trying to foster clear communication among artists, classroom teachers, district personnel, arts organization staff, and school site leadership. We found that we were haphazardly using abstract vocabulary interchangeably to convey very disparate ideas about where to find these “explicit connections.” Meetings intended to clarify and plan project goals ultimately left teachers, artists, and leadership feeling confused, misunderstood, and frustrated.

We needed a map to help find our way, to clarify and chart the relationships among and between the different layers of teaching and learning that were being explored – discrete content areas, social-personal development, cognition and meta-cognition, and teaching practice—in short, to enable us to sort out the individual pieces involved in learning, and to help us see how they fit together. As a result, near the end of 2006 the partnership began to map the multiple processes they were encountering in their investigation of the role of music in student learning (see image #2, first printed as the Music-Integrated Teaching and Learning Framework in *JMIE 3*, 2007, p. 389). Once this conceptual map was formulated, it became a tool for clarity, providing a new perspective to leverage greater impact in student learning. In addition to allowing for targeted decision-making in regard to student instruction, student documentation, and teacher professional development, the conceptual map has become a common way of thinking and talking about the work.

Year Two: Increased Understanding of Student Documentation

In the first year of implementation as a LLSN site, the whole idea of assessment and documentation was in some ways one big tangled ball of yarn. We knew it was important to collect student work as evidence of growth over time, but we didn’t really have enough experience to know what we should be tracking (vocabulary, symbol recognition, understanding of the cultural origins of the music, skill acquisition, student self reflection, etc.), let alone the

best way to track it (audiotape, video, teacher observation, student written response, artist observation, etc.). We were also quite clear that we had no reference for evaluating which efforts might yield the greatest demonstration of learning. Essentially we threw everything against the wall to see what would stick. In retrospect we collected a lot of rich data, reflecting many different aspects of student learning, but we were not yet able to recognize the value of the effort. The data still sits in a drawer, neatly organized, awaiting eyes that might interpret it.

With the conceptual map in place, however, the focus of the project subsequently shifted from an emphasis in the Formal Curriculum to an exploration of the role of the Meta-Curriculum in improving student achievement. More specifically, we asked, *Would students’ learning about their learning improve their ability to make connections and apply processes across subject areas?* To this end, music lessons in Year Two were designed to draw students’ attention to how they were required to Listen, Question, Create, Perform, and Reflect (LQCPR) while participating in music. Following each week’s lesson, students were guided through a written reflection of their own music learning. While it was intended that students would also be led to discover parallels between their learning in music and their learning in other subject areas, the partners quickly became aware that the written reflections generated by these students contained a wealth of information regarding student learning – information that the project leaders and participating teachers had little reference for understanding. As we were still not entirely sure how to make sense of what we were seeing, the project never did overtly bridge students’ cognitive understanding in music with cognitive awareness of learning in other subjects. However, weekly LQCPR reflections continued to be collected throughout the project, and initial analysis of this data by the New England Conservatory has helped the partnership recognize the value of consistent, ongoing student documentation in terms of cognitive awareness, driving us toward the next level of inquiry:

How can student reflections be used as a “real-time” interactive strategy that informs instruction as well as documents student learning? and

With the growing awareness that the LQCPR data captures only part of student learning in comprehensive music instruction, how can this strategy be used in combination with other documentation strategies to capture a more complete portfolio of student work? What documentation tools piloted in Year One might contribute to this effort? Can we develop a thoughtful “system” for data collection? For data analysis? How might multiple-year data from selected students convey longitudinal information?

Year Three: Using Music to Foster Social-Personal Skills

As the initiative began its third year of implementation, the leadership team revisited their Music-Integrated Teaching and Learning Framework and were reminded that the Hidden Curriculum (Social-Personal Development) was placed horizontally below all other content areas in order to convey the belief that social-emotional skills provide the basic underpinnings for all learning. This gave cause for further refinement in the project’s focus: to design music instruction that would intentionally foster development of students’ social-personal skills: *self-discipline, self-awareness, risk-taking, perseverance, respect for others, collaboration, leadership*, etc. The hypothesis continues to be that these skills are basic and essential for

learning, and that improved social-emotional skills transfer to improved student learning in all subjects, reaching far beyond a one-to-one correlation of music and language.

Thus, in Year Three project leadership began to look within music learning itself, as well as within specific musical traditions, for opportunities to engage these skills. The resulting project, again led by teaching artist Andrew Grueschow, delved into the music and dance of Ghana and encouraged students to challenge themselves in building technical skills in both percussion and dance (see Reflection by Grueschow later in this Report). Students learned to play changing rhythms – as well as complex polyrhythms – with precision, relying on auditory cues to direct their drumming, dancing, chanting, and singing. But as Ghanaian musical traditions also encourage personal expression and the development of individual style, students not only became familiar with the cultural origins of the music they were learning—its aesthetic, its purpose, and its role in fostering interaction within the community—but were given real-world examples for understanding the components of teamwork: individual contribution, collaboration, leadership, and group support. Within the realm of personal skills, students were required to display self-discipline, self-assessment, self-confidence, tenacity, empathy, and respect for others. Learning skills included expanding students’ ability to focus on a task, memorization, self-motivation, independent practice, peer tutoring, problem solving, perseverance, and general love for learning.

In reflecting upon what they had learned from their experiences with Ghanaian music and dance and how it related to their work with dulcimers (see Reflection by Lori Knight later in this report), some of the 5th grade students in Spring, 2008 commented as follows:

Isaac: At the end of one class, I asked Andrew how to jump in, and he told me to look around to the people that were playing the same part I was playing. When I mess up in dulcimer class I look to the people around me . . .

Gaby: In Andrew’s class, when I messed up, he told me stop, listen, and find my way back in. When I messed up on a hard [dulcimer] song, I remembered what Andrew said, and I stopped, listened, and found my way back in . . .

Brandon: In both classes, I’ve learned that hard work pays off a lot . . .

Klarice: In both classes, I learned that it takes a lot of focus to do something . . .

Kassandra: What I noticed in both classes is we all have to play together as one . . .
So while the initial goals of the Music Center/ Morrison Elementary School partnership were to investigate *explicit connections between music and language literacy content and processes*, the evolving understanding is currently placing more emphasis on *social-personal development as a high-leverage strategy for improving student learning across all content areas*. At this point, the initiative is still in the very early stages of documenting students’ awareness of how music learning applies to their learning in general.

Figure #1

Our hypothesis is that cognitive development increases when *explicit* connections are made between Fundamental Concepts and Processes shared by Music and ...

Social/Emotional Development (hidden curriculum)	Math (formal curriculum)	Language (formal curriculum)	Learning Processes (meta curriculum)
self discipline, self esteem, tenacity, empathy, self assessment, peer and parent collaboration, motivation , focus, a love for learning	measurement, proportion, patterns, logical thinking, hierarchies, computation, etc.	character, theme, voice, decoding, inference, syntax, writing, composition, setting, sequence, begin/middle/end	memorization, problem finding, problem solving, divergent thinking, self reflection, systems thinking, analytical thinking, creative thinking, aesthetic awareness

Building on thinking published by The New England Conservatory, 2000