

Music is vital part of child development

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Children's love for music often begins with bedtime lullabies and nursery rhymes.

And as they grow, music continues to play an integral role in every part of a child's educational experience.

"The arts can completely change and energize the learning process for students," said Kerri Quinlan-Zhou, director of fine arts for the New Bedford Public Schools. "It's a powerful tool when you're able to make connections between music and the arts and other core subjects."

The power of music can be seen in school districts across SouthCoast, with each school system integrating music into students' classroom experiences in different and unique ways.

"In the K through five grades, our teachers make a lot of connections between history and music," said Dartmouth High School music director William F. Kingsland Jr.

"By integrating costumes and music, teachers can make the lessons more interactive for the students, and the concepts stick," Mr. Kingsland said.

For example, students at the Quinn Elementary School in Dartmouth recently used music to learn about the different presidents.

"We try to cross over different subjects and disciplines as much as we possibly can," Mr. Kingsland said.

Stan Ellis, who directs band programs at the Old Hammondtown School in Mattapoisett as well as at Old Rochester Regional High School, also points out the important role of music from the very beginnings of formal education.

"Younger children tend to learn quite a bit through repetition, and there is no greater example of the power of repetition than music," said Mr. Ellis.

"Playing a musical instrument requires a lot of practice. It also helps them improve their hand/eye coordination and motor skills."

Mr. Ellis also explained how music encourages language development, as well as scientific exploration.

"Working an instrument is very much a science — knowing what's going on inside and how it works," Mr. Ellis said.

And while music enriches students' understanding of core academic subjects, its effects permeate other aspects of development, as well.

"The positive impact it has on a student's self-esteem and level of social interaction is crucial," Mr.

Kingsland said. "When students are involved in music programs, they form a bond with other students who have similar interests. It helps build character."

For Dartmouth High School senior Amy Medeiros, her involvement in all things musical has been invaluable, she said.

"Participating in band, indoor percussion and color guard has helped me academically, because it has taught me time-management," Amy said. "Being involved in two activities in the winter (percussion and color guard), I had rehearsals every day except for Friday. With the intense practice schedule, I had to learn how to manage my time, and be responsible for completing all of my school assignments on time."

She acknowledged there were sacrifices to be made.

"I had to give up watching TV and going online, so I could keep up with my school work. The time I would spend hanging out, doing nothing, I spent at practice. Being involved in various activities helped me to keep up my grades, because if I failed any course, I wouldn't be able to perform, and could possibly get kicked out of the group."

Amy said being part of Dartmouth's music program has spawned other benefits, as well: "It has taught me team work, and self-discipline ... and to succeed in anything I do. (It) helped me learn that if you put in the work, anything is possible. You will get rewarded for working hard."

She has the payoff to prove it. On April 19, DHS's indoor percussion group captured the gold in the Winter Guard International Percussion World Championships in Dayton, Ohio.

While she works with younger children, Hannah Moore, instrumental music teacher/band director at Marion's Sippican School, said they are already learning the lessons Amy described.

"Producing music together is the ultimate team experience — your band sounds only as good as the musician next to you is playing. Kids support each other more than in almost any other venue," Mrs. Moore said.

Beyond that, study after study has shown students involved in the arts do better academically than those who aren't.

A decade ago, Dr. Anna Madison of the College of Public and Community Service at the University of Massachusetts produced an independent report on the Massachusetts Cultural Council's YouthReach Initiative, which funded arts-based youth development programs for some of the state's most at-risk pupils.

According to a report on the Cultural Council's Web site, included in the research were extensive pre-program and post-program measures of student attitude, life skills and personal self-esteem. The quantitative data was supplemented with qualitative findings from focus groups of parents and young people themselves.

Reconnecting with the students five years later, the Cultural Council found, in part, that students in the arts program developed "crucial life skills that prepare (them) for college, the workforce and the world beyond."

Participants also "experienced an increase in life skills, self-esteem, and personal self-efficacy." In addition, they had more positive attitudes toward school, "a major indicator of academic success," and many of the students subsequently went on to college.

For her part, Sippican's Mrs. Moore sees "many different levels of answers" as to why students in the arts perform better in the classroom.

"Simplistically, kids learn that through regular practice (study), you achieve," she said. "The results are obvious and tangible for a young player — it often motivates them to apply more efforts in other aspects of their lives."

Mrs. Moore said that on a developmental level, "music reinforces intellectual growth through a wide range of psycho-motor channels. There is a cycle in playing an instrument: You see the music on the page, you physically feel your hands and/or face manipulating the instrument, your ears hear what you are producing and how it relates to the entire combined sound, and the cycle repeats itself as the music grows.

"As the cycle goes around and around, different parts of the brain are working. The child who is a poor reader suddenly begins to hear what is on the page. The child who struggles with numbers often relies on muscle memory. Because it is an event (music happens in time), there is a unique sense of ownership for students."

Said Mrs. Moore, "I am still impressed with how different every student is, and it is still enormous fun for me to watch and learn from each of them as they learn to 'play their ax.' "

Carol Nicholeris, assistant professor of elementary music education at the Burnell Elementary Laboratory School at Bridgewater State College, is equally strong in her feelings regarding the role music plays in education.

"I would even go as far to say that it's more important than other academic subjects," said Dr. Nicholeris. "It is an absolutely vital part of child development."

Dr. Nicholeris, who has conducted extensive research regarding brain development and music, asserts that there is a biological component to music. Unlike other functions, such as speech, which are centered in certain parts of the brain, music crosses all areas of brain function.

"When you look at a person, we're all essentially created like a piece of music," Dr. Nicholeris said, noting that music predates language. "Rhythm, beat, sound, timing. They're all in us and very much a part of everything we do."

And a lasting part.

"Music, along with the other arts, are an integral part of every child's education, from the earliest years right on up through high school and into college," said Ms. Quinlan-Zhou.

"Parents should never underestimate the powerful role the arts play in their child's education."

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