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Creating Harmony: Integrating Music and Restorative Practices in Education

Traditional approaches to conflict resolution and classroom management have long relied on punitive measures that prioritize punishments over understanding and healing. However, with recent ideas developing in education, schools are on the track towards new, more beneficial approaches. One of which is restorative practices, which centers relationships, community, and expression. Music, on the other hand, has long been an important part of children's development that in certain schools is left behind. When these two frameworks intersect, they create uniquely powerful spaces for transformation that address not only behavioral issues but also the underlying causes of harm and disconnection.

In this class, we have discussed the multiple different ways music can positively impact developing children. Not only does it help with fine motor skills, but music is an opportunity for students to engage and interact positively with one another. At their core, music-making and restorative practices share fundamental values that make them natural partners. Both prioritize collective participation over individual punishment, recognizing that healing and growth happen within community rather than in isolation. This theme of connection is a large part of restorative justice and is a theme that intertwines it with music specifically in the classroom. For example, a choir or ensemble requires every voice to create a harmony, while restorative circles depend on the contributions of all participants to reach understanding and resolution.

Understanding Restorative Practices

Traditional approaches to conflict resolution and classroom management have long relied on punitive measures that prioritize blame and consequences over understanding and healing. However, both music education and restorative justice offer a different paradigm—one that centers relationships, community, and authentic expression. When these two frameworks intersect, they create uniquely powerful spaces for transformation that address not only behavioral issues but also the underlying causes of harm and disconnection.

Used as a form of classroom management, restorative practices aim to build healthy connections between students and teachers that have been shown to help improve academic and social-emotional learning. They are used in conflict resolution, creating dialogue between various people, bridging gaps across divided groups, and building cultures where all members have a voice that is valued and listened to. In schools, restorative practices positively impact student behavior and school climate by creating a sense of belonging, minimizing harm while equipping students with the skills to self-regulate and overcome challenges with relationships.

The Role of Music in Child Development

Music, on the other hand, is often used in classrooms as break time or in specific music settings to engage and teach students. On top of that, music also provides “health benefits such as lower muscle tension, lower blood pressure, and a slower pulse rate” (Lawrence 3). While music can be very hands-on to implement and teach, there are multiple ways teachers can easily include music in their own classrooms without too much effort. For example, playing calming classical music for certain quiet and focus times in class, or a musical activity brain break.

Music provides students with what McDonald calls “emotional stability” alongside its social benefits, creating multiple pathways for participants to engage authentically

with their experiences and peers. The connection and combination between restorative practices and music is still a fairly new concept as many music educators haven't included it in their work; as "Scholars have primarily examined restorative and transformative justice in criminal justice contexts" (Cohen, Stuart Paul 555), meaning that the application of these frameworks to music education represents new territory. This gap between the potential of restorative music practices and their current implementation in educational settings points to both a challenge and an opportunity for the field.

Shared Values: Where Music and Restorative Justice Converge

This intersection of music and restorative justice also shifts the focus from punishment to healing and from control to authentic self-expression. Educators can apply restorative frameworks to develop classroom management strategies that prioritize healing relationships and authentic self-expression over punitive measures and blame. In this paradigm, a student who disrupts class is not simply disciplined but invited into a process of understanding impact, repairing harm, and developing skills for different choices in the future. Music becomes both the context for this work and a tool within it, offering structured yet creative spaces where students can explore conflict, build empathy, and practice collaboration in low-stakes but meaningful ways.

Just like music, "restorative approaches emphasize two or more parties working alongside one another—with rather than to, at, or for" (Cohen, Stuart Paul 562). In both contexts, there is no passive audience—everyone is an active participant whose contribution matters. A student who refuses to sing in choir doesn't simply miss out individually; they leave a gap in a collective sound. Similarly, a student who withdraws from a restorative circle diminishes the community's capacity to heal and grow together.

Furthermore, both frameworks honor non-verbal forms of expression and communication. Not every student can communicate their feelings in words, especially in moments of conflict or distress. Music provides an alternative language—one that can express anger through drumming, sadness through melody, or joy through cymbals. This multi-approach to expression is particularly crucial for students with language barriers, learning differences, or those who have experienced trauma that makes verbal processing difficult.

Practical Applications: Music Within Restorative Frameworks

The intersection of music and restorative justice shifts the focus from punishment to healing and from control to authentic self-expression. Educators can apply restorative frameworks to develop classroom management strategies that prioritize healing relationships. In this practice, a student who disrupts class is not simply disciplined and then left alone but invited into a process of understanding impact and empathy.

Often, educators who use restorative practices would consider using a restorative circle, which comes from Indigenous knowledge and culture (McDonald 7). Talking circles work to create a safe space for discussion in order to improve relationships and build community. Through talking circles, educators can teach and learn about new ideas, check for understanding, build musical vocabulary, share and respond to student compositions, discuss issues with practicing or rehearsal, and facilitate reflections. The physical arrangement of sitting in a circle—where everyone can see everyone else and no one sits at the head—creates a community dynamic where everyone feels empowered.

If two students have been in a conflict with verbal aggression escalating to physical, rather than immediate suspension, a restorative approach might bring the two students together

with a facilitator in a circle. After initial dialogue about what happened and who was affected, the facilitator might invite both students to participate in a collaborative music-making session. Each student could be asked to create a short rhythm or melody that represents how they felt during the conflict— the anger, frustration, or sadness. Then, working with a music teacher or facilitator, they explore how their two separate musical ideas might come together, finding common ground or creating a new musical song. This process mirrors the concepts behind restorative justice: acknowledging separate experiences, recognizing impact, and creating something new together. Something to keep in mind is that this is likely something more aimed at younger children but possible to use with other students.

Another application involves using music in restorative circles themselves. A circle might begin with a group song or rhythm experience that helps participants feel connected and present. Students practice waiting for their moment, hearing others' contributions, and understanding how their individual choices affect the whole.

The integration of music into restorative practices represents more than just an interesting innovation— it reflects a fundamental reimagining of what discipline can and should be in education. Music and restorative practices both insist that every voice matters, that healing happens in community, and that creativity and collaboration can transform conflict into connection. By bringing these frameworks together, educators create spaces where students don't just learn about empathy and accountability but practice these capacities in meaningful ways. The work ahead involves not just implementing programs, but cultivating cultures where repair is always possible, where every student has a voice that matters, and where the creation of harmony—both musical and social—is the shared responsibility of all.

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