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Daniel Bell

OP/ED Article: Special Education and Music

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EDTE 636: Psychology of Exceptional Children and Youth

L. Lawrence Riccio, EdD

COVER LETTER

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Daniel Bell and I am a Special Education teacher at the Chelsea School (www.chelseaschool.edu) in Silver Spring, MD. Chelsea School is a middle and high school for students with language-based learning disabilities. I teach Music and Media Productions. I am also a Graduate student at Trinity University in Washington DC, only two semesters away from earning my Masters Degree in Special Education. I have also had previous volunteer experience with special education and the disabled in educational and recreational settings, all of which included music programs.

I am very concerned about the current emphasis of academics over arts in our school system. I do not believe that one is more important than the other, but I do believe that they are of equal importance and have an equal affect on our lives.

I have written an opinion article for *The Washington Post* that discusses my concerns and how important music is, especially for special education students. Please consider publishing my article in *The Washington Post* so that I may share my concerns with a wider audience and hopefully garner support for the cause of keeping music and arts in our schools.

Thank you for your consideration. Please contact me if any further information is required at:

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REMOVE MUSIC, REMOVE SOUL

When I was in ninth grade, I took Guitar 1 (not to mention that I took Guitar 2 and 3 during my subsequent years in high school). I had fun. I made new friends. And above all, I got to play music for an hour and a half of my school day, which was otherwise, sad to say, often monotonous and sleep inducing. It was that experience that later inspired me to learn the drums, join a band, and have some of the best experiences of my life to date. I don't know if Jason (name changed) went on to have similar experiences, but one thing I do know is that Jason was happy and showed growth in that class as well.

Jason was the “inclusion” student in the classroom. He was moderately to severely autistic and, at that age and at the school I went to, was largely shunned by his peers. I can't deny that I was, at that time, frightened, annoyed, bewildered, what-have-you, by Jason's disability and manifestations of it in class. But despite it all, he was happy. Obviously so. He would strum that guitar with real fervor and excitement all through class, never letting up until the bell rang.

In this particular class, Jason wasn't stuck in the back of a room of 30+ students, largely ignored by a teacher who was desperately attempting to keep up with the wide range of learning styles of her “normal” students while balancing state and federally mandated standards. No, in guitar class, Jason was given an instrument, a piece of music, and was encouraged to do the best he could, whatever that may be. And I'm willing to bet that, more than in any other class, Jason showed true growth as a special education student. Not necessarily growth in terms of becoming an amazing guitar player or

learning every song to the note, but more importantly in terms of peer interaction and self-confidence.

Recitals in front of the class were required and, at first, Jason would not even look up when asked to perform. But we were all amazed, one day, when Jason sprung up to the chair in the front of the room and blasted out a series of strums and notes that appeared to have no consistency, structure, or purpose – but that made no difference. After that, more and more students, even the ones that teased him behind his back, would approach him in class, greet him, and offer to assist him with his guitar playing. Needless to say, he was ecstatic. It’s amazing how a piece of wood with some nylon strings can have that affect on people.

And yet, as Sandra Rief (2001) points out in an article on LDOnline.org, as education budgets tighten across the nation, music and the arts are always the first programs to go. Sure, all students will suffer from the loss, but perhaps none will suffer more than the special education students.

Kristina Chew (2006), in an article on AutismVox.com, discusses how inclusion, especially in core academic classes, can sometimes be the worst thing for a special education student, particularly in terms of social expectations and sensory overload. I have seen this myself. I was in another class with Jason and he was, unfortunately, so disruptive to the learning environment that the teacher didn’t know what to do with him and often had to have him removed from the room. But in music class, he was calm, more and more “acceptably” interactive, and often happy. AmericansForTheArts.org (2007) points out that students who participate in music and arts programs at least three hours a week are “4 times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement, 3 times more

likely to be elected to class office within their schools, and 4 times more likely to participate in a math and science fair.” Just imagine the impact on a special education student.

And yet, the arts-related classes that special education students most often thrive in are continuing to be cut. SupportMusic.com (2008) offers a laundry list of reasons that music and the arts are in danger of becoming extinct in public schools, including budget cuts, mandates for testing in a limited number of subjects, a lack of teachers, athletics overshadowing music, and insufficient support for students with disabilities. Sandra Rief (2001) from LDOnline.org discusses how music can actually help the academics of a special education student in that music teaches, for one, rhyming, which is essential to phonemic and phonological development. Rhythm supports counting, patterning, and many gross motor skills. Music can also affect mood and social interactions in that it is calming, uplifting, soothing, and comforting. Playing instruments builds strong auditory discrimination and listening skills, while also being a powerful motivator. I saw all of this first-hand with Jason.

I love Richard Dreyfuss’s quote from the film “Mr. Holland’s Opus” when Mr. Holland, a lifelong public school music teacher, finds that he is losing his job due to budget cuts, where reading and writing are chosen over the arts: “You can cut the arts as much as you want – sooner or later these kids aren’t going to have anything to read or write about.” Music is an expression of the soul. And though many special education students may not be able to express themselves as their “regular” education counterparts are expected to, they still possess a soul. When you take away music, you take away – for those who truly need it – a chance to connect with and express their soul.

References

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