

# ***Social Emotional Learning in the Elementary Music Classroom [Conference presentation].***

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## **Abstract**

A natural connection exists between music learning and the realm of social emotional skills (Edgar, 2017; Hallam, 2015; Jacobi, 2012). It also provides opportunities for self-expression and building upon intelligence of a more intrapersonal nature through activities such as creating original musical patterns, singing and playing with appropriate expression, and becoming more aware of personal feelings and how those emotions connect to the music. This article presents a theoretical context and an invitation to explore lesson plans that focus on music learning and social emotional skills and is from a presentation at the Holistic Teaching and Learning Conference: Wholeness and Hope in Education, Virtual Conference. See attached Lesson Plan document.

**Keywords:** music education, social emotional learning

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## **Making the Case: Music and More**

A natural connection exists between music learning and the realm of social emotional skills (Edgar, 2017; Hallam, 2015; Jacobi, 2012). For example, the elementary music classroom involves multiple types of social interaction with peers, including taking turns in musical games, mimicking rhythmic and melodic patterns, and practicing for performances together. It also provides opportunities for self-expression and building upon intelligence of a more intrapersonal nature through activities such as creating original musical patterns, singing and playing with appropriate expression, and becoming more aware of personal feelings and how those emotions connect to the music. Music-making also challenges children to utilize their skills in self-management and impulse control, such as starting and stopping on specific cues.

The elementary classroom teacher who infuses his/her teaching with some kind of musical experience will most likely experience an improved sense of engagement among individual students as well as an overall enhancement to classroom management, and the elementary music teacher who integrates aspects of social emotional learning makes music education more relevant and meaningful to the child.

## **The Challenge**

How can opportunities for social emotional learning through music education be further realized? The first obstacle may be a societal belief around musical skill as “fixed.” In other words, the belief that one is born with or without musical ability. Connected to this belief is the opinion that music is meant to be a specialized subject for those who are wanting to become professional musicians. In fact, there are some who may say things like, “Teaching music in the schools is a waste of time and money, especially for those students who are struggling to keep up with their regular class work or seem to have no talent for music in the first place.” In fact, many music teachers come from a similar fixed mindset that supports these beliefs by being too focused on the end product or performance or by alienating themselves from other teaching colleagues through a feeling of specialness in their teaching role or subject. Music educators must teach in a way that addresses the whole child and supports the theory that all children can learn, while realizing that the subject is part of a larger field of educational experience.

Teaching along a growth trajectory as opposed to following a fixed mindset has been widely accepted in recent years by many educators and administrators. The idea of growth mindset parallels Jean Piaget’s constructivist theory around child development. This theory embraces the idea that intelligence is not a fixed trait, but rather something that can be greatly affected by interaction with one’s environment. Carol S. Dweck, growth mindset theory pioneer and Stanford

University professor, makes the case for the positive impact struggle and failure can have on a child's learning. In fact, research has shown that too much praise and telling children that they are smart can prove detrimental. For example, students who are praised for their intelligence may view their difficulty with challenging tasks as failures and therefore not take risks that could lead to greater success. (Dweck & Haimovitz, 2017).

The elementary music classroom provides a heightened opportunity for children to interact with their environment along a growth trajectory rich in exploration with self and others. For example, playing and singing music are activities that quickly show one's current musical ability, and this can trigger frustration and feelings of insecurity. Practicing music in spite of one's current skill level and confidence supports growth mindset and fosters a sense of resiliency and intrinsic motivation, allowing students to develop ability through their own efforts (Hendricks, Smith, & Stanuch, 2014).

In addition to the challenge of differing mindsets around the role of music education in children's school lives, music educators nationwide are faced with issues that make connecting with students and providing instruction challenging. These challenges include limited time with students, budget cuts, and working with children with a variety of conditions including emotional behavioral disorders, attention deficit disorder, and those along the autism spectrum. Often, these types of students take a longer time to develop trust with the adults in their lives and struggle more with such skills as emotional regulation and impulse control. The elementary music educator is in a unique and challenging position in that he/she often is responsible for working with all of the student population and within a short amount of time. This unique challenge also points to the importance of the teacher's tone with students and developing his/her own emotional intelligence skills. These types of challenges also make a case for music educators to develop closer working relationships with other staff who work with the students, including other specialists, administrators, and classroom teachers in order to best serve students by learning more about them as individuals.

### **Overview, Background, Context & Relevance**

The unique challenges that elementary music educators face further enhances the case for curriculum that teaches not only foundational musical skills, but skills for life. In fact, educators and administrators nation-wide are discovering more than ever before just how crucial it is to teach social emotional skills across disciplines and how these competencies are connected to cognitive and academic functioning (CASEL Competencies & NEA, 2017). Increasingly, topics on how to deal with disruptive learners and children who have experienced trauma are the focus of school district professional development. In reality, no

educator can afford to leave the teaching of these kinds of skills out of their curriculum.

The elementary years are a particularly crucial time for exploration and for discovering personal connection through all school subjects. Children also tend to be more open to learning and engagement in the elementary years. An elementary music curriculum that is infused with self-awareness skills such as naming emotions as well as developing social awareness through successful and cooperative practice with peers addresses school and parental concerns for developing these important life skills. By bringing more attention to the ways music and social emotional competencies are connected and designing and delivering curriculum around this foundational theory, we make the classroom more successful for students and at the same time build a case for the importance of music in the schools.

The five components of social emotional learning (SEL) have been categorized by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning as: self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision making, self-management, and relationship skills (CASEL, 2003). Though there is much agreement around some kind of a connection between music and SEL competencies, there is a need for more actualization of this theory within our nation's elementary music and teacher training programs. Author and music educator Scott N. Edgar makes a case for this need:

Often music teachers feel underprepared to effectively teach SEL or to engage students on a social and emotional level. Instructing students beyond the music can seem daunting, especially given the magnitude of what is already expected. However, I suggest SEL instruction makes many of the other elements in a music classroom easier, including classroom management, social interactions, self-motivation to practice, and peer leadership (Edgar, 2017, p. 18-19). In fact, educators of all kinds nation-wide are discovering that teaching some form of SEL is crucial to both the success of the teacher and the students.

### **Conclusion**

Since I have been exploring and practicing the connection of music to social emotional learning, I have found teaching more enjoyable, and I have observed an overall increase in student interest and engagement. Finding ways to experience music that use children's prior and growing knowledge of language as well as building on the reality of their feelings, helps the world of music become more meaningful and accessible to them. My hope is that you will be inspired by this and not only use these activities in your classroom but also create more to use with your students!

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Heather Hutton is a public school teacher in the Rogue Valley of Southern Oregon. She has a wide range of teaching experience from over 23 years, including elementary music, secondary choral, and middle/high school social emotional and wellness classes. She has also been a private voice teacher for adults through her Unified Voice-Work, a way of teaching singing holistically as a personal growth path.