

Music Mends Minds  
by Katherine Fraser

Once upon a time Isaac Moore and I worked together at an Arts camp...in New Milford, Connecticut. The camp's location was questionable though irrelevant but our mutual respect and understanding, on the other hand, was certain and permanent. This respect is why I made sure to attend Ike's talk on Mental Health and Music at the fall OMEA conference. He spoke from the heart about his high school's need for students' mental health awareness and support. Ike learned from a psychologist about 11 ways teachers can support students' mental health and then directly linked them to what we do each day in music class. These 11 strategies are: Sense of Belonging, Experiencing Friendships, Comfortable Environment, A Sense of Humour, Being Creative, Controlling Impulses, Progress not perfection, Passion for learning, Perseverance, Being Spiritual, and Positive Attitude.

Mental Health in Elementary Music Education

Inspired, I took these 11 strategies and tried to make them relevant to my elementary school community. I began by creating a hallway bulletin board with my Kindergarten to Grade 6 students' help. We sat together in the hall, discussed their ideas about music learning connected to mental well-being, and I scribed and posted their thoughts. This bulletin board, full of student voice, was a great way to communicate the mental health benefits of music education with fellow teachers and parents (who just happened to be passing my room on their way to the school book fair that week). My music room door is often closed because we're noisy, which is a shame because so many people in the school and community don't really understand what the students and I explore and achieve. They don't see our process, even though I try to share it as often as possible.

Mental Health Awareness in Concert Performances

Our bulletin board led me to my Winter Concert theme and title: Music Mends Minds. During the show my MCs spoke about how in the music room, they learn that respectful behaviour allows for more time to create, we have a lot of fun together as a team, and that practise makes better, not perfect. We posted the 11 ways that music supports mental health on the gym wall. Honestly, I'm not sure anyone was really listening. It felt a little forced.

In the New Year I started to prep for my spring concert and hoped to tie in mental health in a more meaningful way. I'm a classically trained violinist but I get excited about creative teaching so I thought it would be fun to prepare a show with all original, student-composed pieces. It was fun but, goodness, it was exhausting. The grades 1-4 each wrote a class song with me: One was based on a 4 beat improvisation loop. A second was based on the "The One and Only Ivan" book which the class was reading. Another on paintings from three different calendars. The hit song originated from the fact that one day I found a child-sized purple guitar outside my room, and still have no idea where it came from.

My grade 5 and 6s began by individually composing and notating melodies on mallet instruments. They then formed bands and based an original song on one of their pieces. In the fall I had taught musical form through a unit on Garageband composition and insisted that while in their bands, they think about their piece's different sections, introductions,

endings, etc. I encouraged jamming and writing down any ideas that worked. They revised constantly.

#### Techniques for calming your nervous system

Meanwhile each week I was teaching the students a new way to “calm your nerves” and posting these at the front of the room. These included: warming your hands and covering your eyes, pushing on the front and back of your skull, breathing in for 4 counts and out for 5, pushing your hands together/feet down, shaking out your limbs, and yawning and stretching, among others. This list developed thanks to conversations with my staff, my students, and my osteopath who was intrigued by my teaching. In April, a month before the show that would feature student composition and highlight ways to calm nervous systems and minds, I came up with our concert title and was far more excited than my students about it: Self-composed!

#### Mental health struggles and sadness leading to growth

A month before the show the grades 1-4 pieces were polishing up beautifully but the older students were experiencing drama amongst their members and over the quality of their pieces. I worried a little about all of our mental health but together we worked through some difficult situations. I realized that when these little ensembles of 3-6 students were going to be on stage, with a spotlight shining on them, I was not going to be able to help them. Nor was I able to circulate to each group each class to guide their musical decisions. The music room was open and full most recess and lunches for band practises and the students benefited from two workshop songwriting days with both Joe Lapinski and Royal Wood, yet still, I'd never given the students so much independence nor had less control of ....the success of a show. And that worried me because usually I rehearse my students very well pre-concert so to increase the chances of positive performance experiences.

Of course they were amazing and I was reminded that there are always benefits when I let go of control. But life isn't fair. The day before our Self-Composed concert our school lost a grade 4 student. She was healthy and then she was in SickKids and then she was gone. She was a great guitarist and creative artist, and then she was gone. My principal and I discussed if we should go ahead with the concert. A fellow music teacher texted me: “the students of your school need their music teacher more than ever.” The show must go on.

Talk about music mending minds. We sang through our tears and needed our self-composing techniques more than ever. Each junior student ensemble leader led a group deep breath before counting in. It was magical. Lyrics took on new meaning. The one that floored me was the Grade 3 song we had written using quotations from “The One and Only Ivan;” four little singers sang, “It was, for awhile, a perfect life” and I nearly melted. The song we wrote with Royal Wood had another powerful line, “In this world of greed, forget what we don't need. Kids need happiness, family, love, and friends.”

#### Performance Goal Setting and Reflections leading to self-awareness

Her death weighed heavily on all of us for days following the concert. When asked what his strengths were as a performer, a grade 3 wrote, “I tried not to get distracted and it worked. I played as best as I could. I dedicated my part to her and it made me play my best.” It's now

a month after her death and I'm still suffering. A mother myself, I can't stop thinking about her parents. Her poor parents. I hope they can find comfort in the videos I have of her making music in my classroom and the many other memories they must now cherish.

I'm beginning to truly believe in the value of reflection in music class; Practising mindfulness, really. Before the concert I had grade 6 students write "twitter performance goals" which I then tweeted on my account (@msfrasermusic) and linked to my website ([www.katherinelenafrazer.com](http://www.katherinelenafrazer.com)). Some of my favourites were: "my show goal is to make sure that I stay with my band. Also make sure I am calm and confident in what I am gonna perform before I go on!" and "my goal is practising and maybe getting my group to work better together as a group and to try to get less mentally frustrated and worry less." I asked my grade 4s what "self-composed" meant to them: "being self-composed on stage means to me that you are respectful and nice and have an imagination and faith for destiny" and "what self-composed means to me is that I feel scared but I try to feel calm because I know if I try my best I can do it." These students will hopefully be more self-aware the next time they perform and I believe in empowering them with this opportunity for self growth.

After the concert I held a debate in my junior classes with the questions being: Be it resolved that the process of composing is better for students' mental health than the product of performance. The sides were divided and passionate. Without knowing it, my students talked a lot about Ike's 11 strategies. On the composition side they argued for process over product, the opportunity to be creative, and giving students who experience performance nerves the chance to demonstrate a passion for music learning. On the performance side they felt strongly that performing teaches perseverance and self-control and that performers experience a sense of belonging and new friendships within ensembles.

### Mentally Strong in their Musical Conviction

One final thought. Last week was "sharing music from home" in my music class. Students look forward to this lesson, which occurs three times a year, where they can share music they prepare at home. Some play polished pieces which their private teachers have taught them or compose original songs and accompany themselves singing. Some are important audience members. Still others side-step my rule that this lesson is not the time for improvisation and stand confidently beside the piano, announce the title of their piece (my favourite to date is "Three. Black. Ants"), and proceed to mess around on the piano and then bow deeply. Everyone claps.

Everyone claps even though these kindergarten (understandable) to grade 4 (really?!) students seem indifferent to the fact that they are performing before or after students who have practised diligently. This phenomenon has amused and frustrated me for years but this spring, I'm seeing it in a new light. My students are comfortable to take risks in music class. Encouraged to, in fact. They amaze me, during all my classes with them, with their willingness to take huge musical leaps of faith. They feel secure and free to create. They are mentally sound.

