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ABLE Assembly 2020
Song In Everything: Using Musical Improvisation to Empower Diverse Learners
Precis

About ten years ago, I set out to write a sequential, evidence-based music curriculum for adolescents with learning differences. At the time, I was teaching in two content areas. I was a high school English teacher working with students who struggle with learning differences such as Dyslexia, ADHD, Executive Function Disorder, Auditory Processing Delay, and other nonverbal learning disorders. At the same time, I was also teaching these same students Music. I knew my students both as academic learners and as creative musicians, and I knew that almost all of them were struggling with expressing themselves, either verbally or musically.

In order to create my curriculum, I went through the four-year Musicianship and Leadership training program offered by Music For People, and organization which trains musicians and educators to facilitate others in improvisation. I received MFP Certification in 2013. I also graduated from Goddard College with a Master's in Individualized Studies. My research was dedicated to the neurologic intersections between music and language. As I researched how best to teach Music to adolescents with learning differences, I discovered that the musician's brain has strengths in the many of the same aptitudes in which the LD brain has deficits. As a result, much of this research shows us that training in one domain, music, can have an impact in another, language processing. Therefore, I focused my curriculum on developing exercises that target two neurologic aptitudes where music and language intersect: beat synchronization, which is intimately linked to language processing, and melodic perception, which is related how we process prosody, or the melody of language, which gives meaning to so much of what we say.

Overwhelmingly, my research showed me that improvisation was the key to exercising these two neurologic aptitudes. Teaching my students to improvise is an incredibly powerful tool because it awakens them creatively, gives them ownership of their learning and progress, empowers them to lead each other in their learning, scales our classwork to be able to be differentiated at any level at any time, provides them with a rigorous but intuitive and fully embodied approach to learning about music, and also builds community and emotional as well as cognitive well-being.

After years of study, practice, trial and error, professional development, graduate study, and countless hours of improvising, I have created *Song in Everything: A Storybook Guide to Musical Improvisation*. This is the curriculum which I use in my own Music classes at Delaware Valley Friends School in Paoli, Pennsylvania. It is based on a sequence which uses storytelling to engage students in the elements of music, and connects these stories with simple, easy-to-follow improvisation exercises that are intended not only to target these neurologic aptitudes where music and language intersect, but also to teach the students about the essential elements of music. In this way, we can use music as a means to awaken our students creatively, empower them to find their voices, and target essential cognitive aptitudes through improvisation.

The purpose of this pre-recorded session will be to teach participants about the essential ways in which musical improvisation can address language learning needs, as well as other cognitive and

emotional well-being needs. In addition, I will demonstrate some of these simple-to-follow improvisation exercises, in the hopes of inspiring others to try out these games and forms in their own classes, especially when working with students who learn differently.

I have included in this packet the first unit of my curriculum. This unit is called “The Song of the Wolf: Melody” because the story that inspires the unit tells of a young girl named Serafine who learns about melody from a pack of wolves. In addition to all of the exercises around melody that the unit contains, the unit includes an introduction to help teachers connect the exercises to the story, questions for discussion to help students make these connections, and journal prompts for students and teachers to write together as they work through the unit.

I have also included a proposed sequence for teaching the exercises and reading the story with students and a chart detailing which neurologic aptitude each exercise in the unit is designed to target, as well as the ID numbers of musical elements identified in the 2014 National Standards for Music Education for which each exercise is aligned.

If you would like to read the story I wrote that accompanies this unit, head over to my website: www.songineverything.com. There you will find the story, entitled “Serafine Learns to Sing”, as well as a musical, audio version of the story to support students with Dyslexia. Feel free to explore the website for other information, including a deep dive into the neurobiology of improvisation and how it addresses the intersections between music and language and a detailed bibliography for further exploration and reading.