

## Why Our Work Matters

Steve Giddings

Does music make us smarter? Perhaps – perhaps not. In this article, the author questions the ‘music makes you smarter’ mantra by instead suggesting that our work matters simply because it has the potential to change lives. Using a compelling story about a boy named Jonathan, the author shows us that this, in fact, may be true.

Music educators are the only teaching professionals that seem to have to justify why we do what we do. I was never a strong believer in the ‘music makes you smarter’ commentary. I don’t think music makes you any smarter than any other subject does. All learning makes you smarter. Demorest and Morrison (2000) argue that music does make you smarter but not in the way that the general public believes it does. Music and music education, they state, does in fact make you smarter - it makes you smarter in music. The implicit assumption is that ‘smarter’ means ‘smarter at something else’ (Demorest and Morrison, 2000, p. 33). Many of us are familiar with the works of Daniel J. Levitin from his book *This is Your Brain on Music* (2006) proving that music engages more of the brain at one time more than any other activity. Also, you may have come across a viral TED-Ed video that has made its way around music teacher circles advocating for playing music as “...the brain’s equivalent of a full body workout” (Collins, 2014) and makes some pretty convincing arguments about the benefits of learning music but always references how it helps in other subjects and applications that are not music related. As Peter Greene states in his recent article from the Huffington Post, “I really wish people would stop ‘defending’ music education like this” (Greene, 2015). The reason we teach music is not so our students will be better in other subjects. It is so they will find value in it, enjoy it, and find success with it when they are in school and throughout life. We never advocate for math in this manner, so why music? Math is *directly* helpful in other applications, and has an assumed importance that never needs advocating to the general public. Saying “music makes you smarter” or that learning music helps, indirectly, in other areas creates the assumption



that there is no inherent value in it. In my opinion, ‘music makes you smarter’ as an advocacy tool, only hinders our ability to strive as legitimate professionals.

To me, it seems so simple: Every student deserves a chance to be successful at something. For example, not everyone is good at math; not everyone is good at reading and not everyone is good at music, but *everyone* is good at something. Without music in the school system, as per Howard Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences, we would be denying that musically intelligent student their chance for success. Or even that student who feels a deep connection with music. The more programs we can offer, the more students in the school will feel that they are good at something. The same can be said about any individual music program. The more diverse your program is, the more students you will be able to reach because not everyone likes the same music or the same ways of making music.

At Montague Consolidated School, I coach two rock bands. These bands are just one of the ways that I am able to engage with students at the school through music. Students at our school also partake in extra-curricular music activities that include glee choir, Christmas choir, guitar club, and full-scale musicals. In class, they engage with music using Orff percussion, recorder, solfege, guitar, arranging, rearranging, and composing music. Students have had success with all of these and many students stood out as leaders in their respective groups over the years. However, the most blatant incidences of student success and engagement have been with the rock bands.

When I think about students whose lives were changed by music in the school, there are a few that come to mind but they do not jump out as much as a particular student named Jonathan. Jonathan’s musical journey is a student success story that I will never forget. He could easily be the poster child for music education in Canada, and here’s why:

When I began my time at Montague Consolidated School, Jonathan was in grade 5. He was completely unengaged in music class and in any other subject that was delivered at the

school. He rarely did what he was told and had a lot of behaviour issues in all of his classes. To top it off, he could be very disrespectful to me and other teachers at times. He would regularly be found in the principal's office or at the centre of a conflict that happened outside. In around April of that year, we were starting to plan for our spring concert. I remember grade 5 was preparing *Yellow Submarine* as a class and the band, at the time, was to accompany them in the concert. Jonathan was not doing any of the actions, nor was he singing the song. I took him aside later and asked, in a desperate plea, if he wanted to play "guitar or something" in the song. We scheduled a meeting time for recess the next day so I could show him a few things and he seemed really excited to come. When he came the next day for our meeting, I showed him G and D, the two chords that were in the chorus of *Yellow Submarine*. I was impressed by how quickly he was able to pick up the formations and get his fingers around them for someone who had never played before. Not thinking that he would be willing to work at learning the entire song I let him practice the two formations and switching between them before I sent him on his way saying "we'll work on those until we can put them into the song with the class." The next day, he came into the music room at recess time and wanted to practice his chords. I didn't have choir rehearsal that day so I told him that would be fine. It only being my third year teaching, at that time, I had never seen a student so focused on wanting to learn something new. He practiced those two chords for the entire 25 minutes of recess time. By the end of that recess he was sounding pretty good. His switches were much smoother and he seemed very happy with his progress. This didn't happen for just one day. He came in at every recess to practice those two chords for an entire week. Very quickly it became time for him to learn the verses which have a lot of chords and fast switches that, for a beginner, can be very challenging. We started with the two chords he knew already and kept adding new ones until he had been introduced to three more chords: C, Am, and Em. At first, he was having a bit of trouble as I was coaching him through the changes but he did begin to gain some facility with them. Again, he came every recess that he could to practice the song. Before long he was more than ready to play the guitar part in the concert. It also seemed that behaviour issues were slipping away and his office attendance seemed to dwindle as the end of the year drew closer. By the time of the concert, he had been only playing guitar for about a month and a half, knew five chords and could switch between them effortlessly. The concert went off without a hitch and Jonathan was so proud. He looked like a pro up there. After the concert, he began to talk about being in the band the following year. My bands are auditioned and, without making any promises, I told him that if he kept practicing over the summer that he could have a very good chance of making it in. He kept coming at recesses until the end of the year wanting to learn more, so I gave him a few more chord progressions to work on to keep him going over the summer.

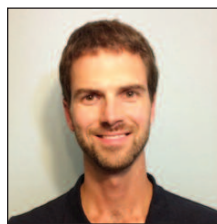
When he came back in September he wanted to know when the band auditions were starting. Again, he came at every recess

he was free to make sure he knew his stuff for his audition. When he inevitably made it into band his entire school attitude changed from unengaged, impolite, and poorly behaved to engaged, polite, and behaved. He was a completely different kid. When guitar club was starting, he became a leader by helping other students form chords and telling them what it was like when he started playing and how much practicing he had to do. He was so mature about it. I will never forget what the phys ed. teacher said after class one day. She said, "Jonathan told me that he was going to be on his best behaviour today so that he doesn't have to miss guitar club." The principal said he didn't see Jonathan anymore because he was in the music room playing guitar. If I was busy, he would sometimes politely and quietly pick away on his guitar in the hallway outside the music room. He rarely missed a day. His teachers noticed a difference in his attitude throughout the year because he didn't want to get in trouble and have to miss practicing guitar. He thanked me on several different occasions for teaching him how to play the guitar and for the band and continues to talk about it to this day. Music gave his life meaning and a reason to want to come to school. It was his chance to be successful.

The reason our work matters is not because it supposedly 'makes you smarter.' It's also not because playing music engages the brain more than any other single activity. As encouraging as these points may be for music education, the reason our work matters is because music has the potential to change lives and gives students that chance to be successful when they are not successful anywhere else. Jonathan's musical success is a compelling story that I will never forget. It always inspires me and gives me faith that music does make a difference in students' lives. Our work matters and is sustainable, meaningful, and legitimate on this reason alone.

#### References

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