

The Benefits of West African Drumming in the Classroom

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Teaching a musical instrument in the classroom can be a challenging and daunting task for any teacher, particularly when you realize that more than just a few of the students are faking their participation by not blowing any air through their recorder (and personally, I have done this during recorder lessons myself.) In other instances I have witnessed students in a lesson strumming their guitars so softly so as not to make any noise. It is frustrating as a learner to realize that you are not catching on as quickly as your peers and that in spite of your best efforts you are unable to produce a pleasant sound with your instrument, nor to join in with the 'orchestra' to play what appears to be simple nursery-rhyme based songs that you've known your whole life. At the same time it is disheartening as a teacher to know that despite your best efforts and planning, you are not able to engage all your students in a learning activity that can be fulfilling and valuable. Essentially, it is virtually impossible to help students feel successful at an activity that they feel is beyond their capabilities and as a result do not fully participate in.

Enter the West African Drum, an instrument that has been in existence for over since ancient times. Here is an activity that everyone can do, regardless of age, past experience or confidence level. Tapping on a drum can be enormously fulfilling for all students, all the while supporting their development on various cognitive, physical, social and emotional levels. This instrument is as easy to play as it is to implement in the classroom and ultimately there are numerous flexible approaches that can be used by teachers to introduce this instrument into the curriculum to make it a rich and satisfying experience for everyone.

In ancient times the drum has been an integral part of healing rituals in many cultures. In recent years drumming has grown in popularity as a tool to use in many different branches of therapy. However, there are very limited amounts of scientific evidence to back up the many biological benefits that are believed to be linked to drumming and drumming circles. Nonetheless, studies have been done that link the use of drumming to stress reduction with Vietnam Veterans as well as others suffering various forms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.(Dorian) It is believed that drumming alters brain wave patterns and it a vehicle for reintroducing “a correct rhythm to realign our physical and emotional state.” (Friedman) Further studies performed at The Mind-Body Wellness Center in Meadville, Pa. determined that drumming has the potential to alter stress related hormones in the body, to help beat depression and to even boost one’s immune system.(Bittman) Drumming therapy done with stroke patients and people with Parkinson’s disease showed that patients had increased motor coordination. (Dorian) Overall, drumming has come to be recognized as both a positive and important tool in the field of therapy, in spite of the lack of sound scientific evidence. It is agreed that drumming fights stress and helps bring relaxation and a sense of calmness to its participants.

On a social level, drumming circles are a great way to promote community spirit and a sense of belonging within a group. Everyone participating becomes an important part of the dynamic and adds their drum beats in such a way as to enhance the overall rhythms and sound of the songs. In this collective rhythm, each member becomes connected until essentially there is the sense that all are one. In this case, it becomes obvious that the whole is greater than all the parts, or in this case all the individual

drummers and as a result each drummer can experience the joy of working together with others to create a powerful and entrancing sound experience that fills the room and the soul.

When it comes to using the West African drum with groups of children, the benefits to those who play are numerous and varied. On a cognitive level, the drum can be used as an excellent source of non-verbal communication. While playing there is active integration of both the left and right side of the brain. At the same time, creative thinking and creative problem solving are stimulated. Drumming also helps develop a child's ability to focus and concentrate. On a physical level, dexterity is improved along with motor, visual and auditory coordination. While playing the drum a healthy, positive physical release is experienced within the body. Emotionally, stress levels are reduced and moods become altered towards relaxation and calm. Drumming promotes individuality as well as the individual's awareness of their own uniqueness and contribution to the group. And perhaps most importantly, drumming builds self-esteem and confidence within a cooperative rather than competitive environment.

Subsequently, there are many different ways to incorporate the drum into any classroom. In Social Studies one can examine the cultural context of the drum on either a traditional or contemporary level. The history and varied uses of this instrument over time are substantial and can be implemented into classrooms from Kindergarten to Grade Twelve. At the same time, the drum can be approached as an integral part of a rich blend of art forms that include music, song, dance and theatre. For such a production, the drum is like an anchor that holds all the pieces together and again, can be used in a Fine Arts program at any age. Another approach would be to include a literary component with

your drum study which could feature a look at traditional myths, songs and their meanings as well as storytelling, which once again has been assisted by drumming in many different cultures over the last centuries. Finally, in the field of music, the drum is a powerful tool that can be used to teach the elements of rhythm, beat, tempo, base and tone in a very simple yet effective manner. Lesson plans can be adapted in such a way as to meet the unique and varied needs of any classroom.

Consequently, the West African drum is a rich and valuable asset in the world of Education. Drumming groups can be implemented at any age level and provide an activity that requires no previous knowledge or skill. Beyond being a fun and enjoyable activity for children, the drum provides multiple benefits in the areas of cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development. While there is little scientific evidence to back the positive effects of drumming, particularly in the therapeutic community, human beings have used the drum for centuries as an instrument of healing, celebrating and well-being. Beating the drum is innate to all of us, for “we all possess rhythm in our hearts.” (Ferrais)

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