

Musical and Personal Agency

An Experimental Study of the Role of Musical Agency in the Growth of Personal Agency
in an Academic Environment

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Among the most important goals of any modern educational system are the empowerment of personal agency of young learners and the development of cognitive abilities and knowledge-based consciousness. Components of personal agency include a sense of personal empowerment, self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989), and socio-cultural identity (Hargreaves, 2012). This paper will show that musical agency can be an effective tool in the formation and development of personal agency.

Building upon a recent study called “Constructive Interrelationship Between Structural Components in Early Music and Language Learning” (Zelli, 2015), the study contained in this paper explores how and to what degree musical agency could impact the personal growth, creativity, self-efficacy, and socio-cultural identity of students in seventh and eighth grades in the San Ysidro Unified School District, located in San Diego, California, which serves a significant number of Hispanic immigrants. This research examines the effects of music productions, interpretations, and performances in a Mariachi class (stage 1), in which students have the opportunity to modify and reproduce their Mexican musical heritage in the form of vocal and instrumental music (stage 2) and to perform for a variety of audiences (stage 3) during the 2017-18 school year.

The instruments offered during this project were the trumpet, vihuela, guitarrón, and violin. A vocal component was also included because it is a natural part of a Mariachi ensemble. After three months of basic training in instrumental and vocal techniques, students reviewed basic Mariachi songs to evaluate and experience their technical readiness through contextual material rather than through exercises or scales. The basic songs proved to be an effective tool for confirming culture and paving the road for upcoming stages of the project.

As the research confirms, children are true initiators of musical activities (Burnard, 2013), ideas (Wiggins, 2007), and innovations (Marsh, 2008). After a successful experience during the initial stages, wherein they became familiar with Mariachi instruments and vocals and established a musical platform, students were offered the chance to rebuild and modify the traditional songs in order to unleash their musical creativity and their fantasies. The results were phenomenal. The “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978) as an enabler of learner agency proved to be reliable, even in music. The modifications stretched from content (lyrics), temporality (meter, rhythm), dynamics (loudness, change of loudness with time), diastematics (melodic intervals), and spatialization (placement of the instrumentalists and the singer

while performing). The weak links in this process of modification were tonality, which students were not able to modify, and tone color, which they were not allowed to modify.

The third stage of the project was “musical knowing-in-action” (Elliott, 1995), which was the performance of musical products for an audience, including students, staff, and parents. The music program was designed by the students themselves, and it included a mixture of modified and non-modified songs from the Mariachi repertoire. Although the adult audience seemed reluctant to embrace the modification of traditional songs, the younger audience members had an easier time accepting the modifications due to a weaker bond with tradition.

In sum, musical agency proved to be an effective tool for empowering and strengthening the personal agency of a group of immigrant students. Many students felt ownership of the final performance because it was unique and personal. Engagement in learning, participation, organization, and advertisement was noticeably higher and more agentive than, for example, the band members of the same school. In the following school year, the rate of requests for learning Mariachi music was also higher than the rate of requests for the band or for guitar class. Increased self-efficacy of participating students led to increases in courage, assertiveness, genuine creativity, and the ability to create authentic musical sound during the final concert.

References

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