

Research Reconsidered—Promoting Personal Connections
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Welcome to the second installment of “Research Reconsidered,” a review of the 2005 NCMEA Research Poster Session intended to bridge the gap between academic research and classroom application. Featured in this article are factors of a successful after-school music program as researched by Dr. Lisa Runner at Appalachia State University, and on humanism in music education that I researched at the University of North Carolina Wilmington.

The challenge of retaining music and promoting its influence in America’s schools is an ongoing concern for music educators in the twenty-first century. Beyond learning notation and presenting well-rehearsed performances, music educators may also promote personal connections between learning music and related educational benefits. To investigate these aspects in greater detail, Dr. Runner examined several factors for sustaining an after-school music program. In a related study, I explored the personal benefits of music education using the Orff approach in terms of humanism.

Dr. Runner found three important components in her case study of the Wise Village Pickers of Stanton, Kentucky. She reported that it is important to incorporate the music of the local community into the curriculum. In her study, this after-school music program took hold when the over-riding theme of preserving Appalachian music and culture was included in a curriculum already based on the national music education content standards. Programs of this nature bridge the gap between the musical world of the student’s classroom and that of their neighborhood. As music teachers identify and develop resources within their local community, parental and community involvement in the school increased. The second important step is to involve leaders who can effectively communicate a guiding vision. Leadership need not be limited to music teachers; the Wise Village was established and guided by the school principal. Grounding a program in theory may also increase the likelihood of sustainability. The Wise Village, for example, was founded on theories of social learning and Dewey’s principles of beginning with what the student already knows. Finally, she reported that it is important

to find committed individuals – teachers, staff, and community members – who offer collegial relationships and access to differing points of view. Such gatherings in support of a music program are too seldom seen; in reality, the very nature of a music teacher’s work is frequently isolating. Music teachers would do well to recognize the wisdom of practice exemplified in the Wise Village and to concentrate on socially constructed music programs by sustaining villages of musical innovators. One such innovator was Carl Orff, the subject of my research.

When considering the influences of composer and music educator Carl Orff, I was intrigued by something he said at the national American Orff-Schulwerk Association conference in 1962. He asserted that, “Anyone who has worked with children or young people in the spirit of Schulwerk will have discovered that it has a humanizing influence which transcends its musical function.” As an educator and a musician, I intuitively knew the value of his observation but, as a researcher, wanted more information and a deeper understanding of this view. Therefore, I investigated the branch of psychology known as humanism through the work of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow to find connections with Orff-Schulwerk.

In humanism, people freely choose the behaviors that are the most rewarding and personally satisfying and the goal of education is to help each person reach his or her own potential. Perhaps the most well known expression of humanism is Maslow’s Hierarchy of Human Needs. Usually displayed as a triangle, the lowest level of needs such as survival and safety precede higher-order needs such as understanding, belonging, and self-esteem. Similarly, in work of Carl Rogers, an emphasis is placed on the student’s self-evaluation, self-direction, and self-discovery. The overall humanistic philosophy is an innovative approach to psychology, emphasizing creative self-discovery, with revolutionary applications to education.

In music education, the Orff-Schulwerk approach uses a five step, child-centered educational process: observation, imitation, exploration, improvisation, and creation. The Schulwerk holistically

addresses the child's overall development through a process that emulates natural play and exploration. In addition, the Orff approach encourages active music-making in group settings and is intended for all students, not just the musically talented or inclined. All students learn in a progression that invites and honors their ideas and creativity. The students build not only their understanding of music but also their social and emotional development through their participation in classroom activities.

By combining both these perspectives, I found important connections between humanism and the Orff approach. The main purpose of Schulwerk is to help students find and form a musical expression of their own, facilitated by the characteristic sound of pentatonic improvisation. Providing a means to honor each student's self-expression is evidence of Orff's link to humanism. The emphasis of "sound before sight" in music highlights the importance of the musical experience in the Schulwerk. In the same way, Maslow advocated a return from conceptual to experiential learning, now widely practiced by progressive teachers. As in humanism, the philosophy of Orff-Schulwerk emphasizes the student's contribution to the process of education. Orff himself was a sort of "Musical Humanist." By altering students' view of themselves and teaching key musical skills, music educators can lead students in developing their own musical self-expression.

Music is a powerful force in children's lives and, as such, can have a transformative and humanizing effect on students. Whether in an after-school program, using the Orff approach, or by some other means, music educators can capitalize on the personal and community connections afforded by making music both in and out of the classroom. Social factors associated with music have a fundamental importance in making and finding meaning in musical experiences. By promoting these personal connections between music and related educational benefits, teachers may expand the possibilities for music and music education in the lives of their students.

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