

The Web of Life

Weaving connection, community & wellness into the music experience

By Rachel L. Dirks

Research in the field of mental health has revealed staggering rates of anxiety, stress, and depression in the youth of today—trends that were emerging prior to the pandemic.¹ Unfortunately, when students struggle with their mental or emotional health, teachers may also be impacted by those burdens.² Whether the stressors students experience stem from the pandemic, social media, or traumas from poverty, neglect, or abuse, the over-arching consequence is social disconnection. As humans, we are genetically wired to seek connection and to live in community—thus, the current societal disconnections could be seen as a “disease.”³ The silver lining? If disconnection is the disease, then connection is the cure—and the music classroom is all about connections.

This we know: All things are connected like the blood that unites us. We did not weave the web of life, we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.
—Chief Seattle

Weaving Teacher–Student Connections

Acknowledging that teachers and students can impact the mental and emotional wellness of each other, teachers have the opportunity to positively influence the emotional development of their students, especially when the teachers themselves are emotionally, mentally, and physically healthy.⁴ *How do we nurture this development?* One approach is to intentionally choose daily activities that focus on the wellbeing of all classroom stakeholders. Make time to play get-to-know-you games, even beyond the first week of school, share in deeper conversations about current events, participate in local activities as a group, or purposefully include stretching or deep breathing as a consistent element in your lesson plans. Each of these can make a significant difference in the healthy development of your students, and yourself.

Another way to encourage a more positive learning experience is to nurture a collaborative learning environment. In her book *Compassionate Music Teaching*, Karin Hendricks suggests the music education experience is one of sharing information and learning from one another. Working and learning alongside one’s students forges trust, student engagement, and ultimately, community. Hendricks also challenges us, however, to forge these connections in a healthy way:

Compassionate teachers keep professional and personal boundaries and maintain appropriate relationships with their students. Compassionate teachers are compassionate with themselves first and enjoy a healthful personal life outside of teaching so that they don’t place too much energy or emotion on their students either during or outside of teaching time (p. 8).

Regardless of how we choose to utilize these strategies, when we make time to develop healthy connections with our students, we enrich everyone’s music-making experience as well.

Weaving Student–Student Connections

The community atmosphere that students often experience in the music classroom is vital as we look to strengthen enriched connections within our programs. Research that highlights how the music classroom is a *home away from home*⁵ reinforces how many students see the music classroom as a space where they feel welcomed and safe and can express themselves authentically without fear of judgment.

One of the most powerful ways to cultivate authenticity and trust in a music program is by embracing student ownership and leadership as a foundational facet of your program. Do you have ways in which each student may contribute to the growth of your program? Incorporating a community-service project within your curriculum each semester can significantly shift how students

view their importance in your space. For example, students might have the opportunity to give back to the program directly by doing simple things like stuffing folders or setting up the stage after school. Or, perhaps a high school student could serve as a mentor for a budding young musician in need of extra help. Serving others can be a powerful tool toward boosting one's mental wellbeing—when we feel needed, we feel connected.

Another way to encourage student ownership and connection is by developing a leadership team for your program. Student leaders not only gain the rewards of service but also help shape the musical and social goals of the program, all while serving as active role models. Speaking with students about how to make their program stronger, identifying its core values, and developing strategic goals for strengthening those values can be incredible experiences for your students. In addition, empowering students to forge their own connections between each other and those who are affected by their efforts is a fantastic way to bolster their wellbeing long-term.

Chamber music is one of my favor-

ite activities that promotes connections while empowering student autonomy. Developing the skills needed to communicate in a collaborative and supportive way, while learning to become self-reliant as a musician, creates a multitude of opportunities for student growth and ownership. If you haven't attempted to incorporate chamber music into your program curriculum, I strongly encourage you to give it a try. The musical and personal rewards are invaluable, and the student-student connections that develop can last a lifetime.

Weaving Program—Stakeholder Connections

Within the field of adolescent mental health research, psychologist Dr. Jean Twenge has published numerous studies and books revealing a connection between historic societal norms and the impacts of these norms on the mental wellbeing of adolescents. While the cause for the current mental health crisis is uncertain, growing evidence suggests that newly introduced technological and social behaviors as well as environmental factors may play a role in these trends. By 2019, Twenge revealed a cohort generation (current adolescents and

young adults) whose anxiety and depression have been dramatically impacted by some of these factors.⁶ Following the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the data are even more alarming.⁷

How do we begin to counteract these effects our students are experiencing? *By weaving one connection at a time.* You might start by building partnerships with your colleagues in school, including your administrators. Do you know a physics teacher who loves music? Invite them to share their expertise about the physics of sound production with your students. Do you have a principal who seems uninterested in what you do? Invite them to serve as an emcee or narrator on your next concert.

Weave connections with your students' families as well. Parents and guardians want to be involved, even if they don't have the time or resources to do so. Get creative; ask them how they'd like to participate. While some parents have the time to haul the drumline trailer or serve at a cookout, others might want to contribute but don't know how. Ask for what you need, and you'll be surprised by the number of family stakeholders who find unique



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and meaningful ways to connect as they respond to those needs.

Ultimately, to change how our students engage with society we must weave connections that extend beyond our classroom walls. Forming chamber ensembles to perform for retirement communities, local events, and preschools is a first step in expanding your program's outreach into the community you serve. Ask your students how they might like to give back to their community. A few ideas include serving at the local soup kitchen, picking up trash at a nearby park, or collecting donations for the town food pantry (all while wearing their program T-shirts). These types of projects yield instant rewards and generate lasting impact. Many of these projects might become the traditions upon which your program is strengthened and eventually defined.

The ways in which you support your students and empower them to interact with others throughout the music experience weaves a web of connection between you, your students, student families, colleagues, administrators, and your community. This web is your program. The more connections you weave, the stronger the

program. And yes, each strand represents relationships between students and families and teachers, and sometimes these can be shaken or even torn. Nonetheless, the web can be rebuilt and made stronger with each connection.

I look forward to continuing deeper conversations with you at the TMEA Clinic/Convention about mental health and music teaching, and how we move forward. Until then, keep weaving—you are a powerful strand in the web of life! 🎵



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