

Music for Youth Works: The Music Makers Program

By Casey Van Wensem

Abstract: This article describes a program run by the non-profit organization Music for Youth Works Society in Victoria, BC. The program, which partners with local elementary schools, matches six and seven-year-old learners with high school and university age teacher/mentors for free weekly music lessons.

Colin has just finished playing *Yankee Doodle Went To Town* on the piano, and he is beaming. He is playing on an old out-of-tune piano in a church hall, but he doesn't seem to mind. Looking at his smile, he couldn't be happier. He is eight years old, and this is his first musical performance. His mom applauds enthusiastically, and so does the rest of the room full of teachers, students and supporters. Then Maia gets up to perform. She has already played her songs, but her dad has just arrived and she wants to play them again. She rushes up to the piano and plays "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" even better than she had the first time. Her dad is overjoyed.

These may seem like typical moments from any child's first recital. But Colin and Maia's performances are different. They are two out of eight elementary school students who are part of a program called Music Makers. They are playing at a year-end concert to celebrate the first year of the program. Music Makers is a program designed to provide free music lessons to children whose families otherwise wouldn't be able to afford them. It is run by Music for Youth Works, a Victoria-based non-profit society. These eight first and second-graders have been taking lessons since September and are now ready to showcase their stuff. The difference is that without this program these kids might never have had the chance to participate in the experience that many of us know so well.

Not just lessons

The benefits of music education are well known. Research has shown that children who have access to music education, especially at a young age, are more likely to perform well in other parts

of the curriculum such as language and mathematics (Smithrim and Upitus, 2005; Demorest and Morrison, 2000; Gardiner et al, 1996). Music can also provide an important creative outlet, especially for children who are experiencing difficulties in their life. So the Music Makers program operates on two basic principles: first, that music education should be available to all children, and second, that lessons should be focused firstly on personal growth and secondly on musical skill.

Instead of music teachers, the Music Makers program has Music Mentors. Mentoring has a simple and direct focus: to assist a person's abilities in working through life's challenges. So rather than just being a music teacher, a Music Mentor is first a foremost a friend. Their job is to encourage the emotional as well as musical development of their students.

A Music Mentor comes to the child's school once a week for a free half-hour lesson where the student has the opportunity to learn an instrument and develop a positive relationship with their mentor. Music Mentors volunteer to work with one or two children. Lessons work on a one-on-one basis in order to build a direct relationship between each child and mentor, and also involve a third-party supervisor to ensure the safety of each participant.

The mentor's role is also unique in that they can work at the child's pace. Because Music Makers emphasizes emotional and creative growth, the mentor is able to accommodate the child's needs rather than forcing an outcome. Music Mentors are assured and encouraged to take it slow and follow the child's interest (even if that means simply being a friend).

Music as a tool for empowerment

Music Makers is a program focused on using music as a tool for empowerment. By involving several groups, the program is able to create empowerment on many different levels: with the students, their families, their mentors, their school, and their community.

recurring motifs

emerging voices



Music Makers empowers its students by identifying the children who are most likely to benefit from the program and providing them with new tools for success. Children are identified through their schools by three factors: financial need, social need, and musical interest. This means that lessons are being offered on an “at-need” basis. The program is also a benefit to the families of these children, as it allows them to ensure that their child can develop creatively without being burdened financially.

Music Makers employs a strategy of youth helping youth in order to empower both the student and their mentor. Because the mentors are all in university and high school, this program presents major learning opportunities for them as well. Many of the mentors are accomplished musicians who are looking for a way to gain teaching experience. Others are more experienced music teachers who are looking for a meaningful way to give back to their community. Either way it is a new experience for them that can empower both them and their student to make a difference in their community.

Music Makers also targets schools and areas that are financially in-need in order to create school and community-level empowerment. The program is only offered to schools that can demonstrate a need for music mentorship. By offering these music lessons for free, Music for Youth Works is able to foster creativity in community locations that would not otherwise have access to musical education.

Most importantly, Music Makers is a program that partners with and empowers an at-risk demographic. Children who are unable to access music lessons are often the ones who need the benefits of music and mentorship the most. And whether those benefits are emotional growth, personal connection with a mentor, developing a coping mechanism, or cultivating musical skill, Music Makers ensures that each child comes out of the program feeling empowered.

Where do we go from here?

After the children have performed, a special guest stands up to

speak. The guest is the Principal of George Jay Elementary School, the school that Music Makers is currently working with. She admits that the school’s resources are limited, especially when it comes to music, but she says that Music Makers has really helped to fill some of those gaps. And word is spreading about the program at school. She now has a list of parents asking if their child can be a part of the program.

Fortunately, the program is growing. Starting in September of next year, there will be ten children at George Jay in the program. In January of 2012 Music Makers will take on ten new students from another Victoria school, Quadra Elementary. Alongside this will be another new program run by Music for Youth Works Society called Music Explorers, which will operate out of a local community center and give even more kids the chance to access free music lessons.

There is plenty of momentum behind these programs. Along with continued interest from parents, volunteers and community members, Music for Youth Works Society is now partnering with the University of Victoria to help with the expansion of the Music Makers program. That partnership will be a major stepping-stone on the way to providing every deserving child in Victoria with free music lessons. Now what the program really needs in order to keep growing is more financial support as well as more mentors and volunteers.

What has the program taught us so far?

If there’s one thing we can take away from the first year of Music Makers, it is that the program is as meaningful for the kids and their parents as it is for the people who run it (if not more). In fact, everyone who has been involved in any way—mentors, school staff, volunteers—has had such a positive reaction to the program that we know that all we can do now is to let the program keep growing. And if there’s any doubt that music is an essential part of a child’s life, all you need to do is see the smile on Colin’s face when he’s playing the piano in front of an audience for the first time. CME

References

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