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ETHNOGRAPHIC ESSAY

MUSIC IN EDUCATION

1. What is the discourse about? (What are the issues present in the discourse?)

My composition is a research paper about the relationship between music and education (academic learning). I discuss how and why music should be used as a tool within the classroom to help students learn academic concepts across all subject areas.

2. Why is the discourse needed? (What prompted the discourse and why is it an important time to deliver it?)

Well, I wrote the paper for class and chose this topic simply because it interested me. But I would definitely argue that we need to take a closer look at the education system in America and evaluate methods of learning and what could be improved to help our upcoming students compete internationally.

3. What should the discourse accomplish? (What are the goals? How is the audience supposed to react?)

My goal with the paper is to convince educators and students alike that music is an extremely effective tool within the classroom. I really wanted to address the misconceptions that are associated with music - that it's only appropriate for certain age groups, or for certain academic subjects - and prove that this is not the case (that music can and should be used to reach all age groups within all academic subjects). I would hope that the audience agrees!!

LIST OF STRENGTHS/WEAKNESSES

I think the paper is definitely too long (sorry!!). I was trying to meet a word count, so there may be sections which are unnecessarily lengthy or redundant. But I did do a lot of research, and interviewed several teachers and students, so I'd say a strength is that I knew what I was talking about.

TWO QUESTIONS FOR REVIEWER

- 1. Is my paper focused? Do you understand my argument and the support for my argument?**
- 2.**

INTRODUCTION

I chose to study the relationship between music and education (academic learning). I wanted to find out whether music could be used as a tool to help students learn an academic concept, and furthermore, for which student groups and for which concepts music might be most effective. I chose this topic because I am particularly fascinated by the way people learn. In school, I've always been the type of student to find what works best for me - many challenging classes have forced me to reevaluate my study strategies and to try new methods in order to better learn the material. Also, I'm a tutor. I've worked with an elementary student for the past five years to help improve her study skills and to assist her with homework. I'm always looking for ways to make learning more fun and engaging for her. Music can accomplish this. Music is something that binds humans together, a sort of universal language. Music has the ability to take a rather difficult concept and turn it into something that is more memorable and understandable for a variety of students. Through my research, I wanted to take a closer look at the relationship between music and memory, as well as the relationship between music and mood. In other words, I wanted to explore *how* and *why* music positively impacts academic learning.

METHODOLOGY

As my ideas slowly began to take form in my head, I realized there were many things I'd need to know before drawing any sort of conclusions. First, I'd need to reach out to people in the field, or people within the Tallahassee education system who could shine light on my particular topic (music in the academic classroom). This demographic would principally include teachers,

administrators, and students. Administrators and teachers, of course, have control over the ways in which information is presented to their students. I'd need to find out how often they use music in the classroom, what types of music (rhymes? songs? music videos?) and for what material, and in what ways the music may have aided comprehension. Specific examples and personal testimony from teachers would be especially helpful. As for the students, I wanted to be given an idea of what it's like to be on the receiving end, what it's like to learn a new concept with the help of a song or some other musical tune. I decided to conduct my fieldwork in a variety of ways, in order to reach a greater number of teachers and students and subsequently increase my sample size. I conducted several in-person and email interviews with both teachers and students. I interviewed Sealey Elementary teacher Rachel Cassidy, Trinity Catholic middle school teacher Kayleigh Lazar, Leon High School teachers Kayce Giglio and Amanda Geiger, and former Leon High School teacher Laura Ansola-Crowley. For each of these in-person interviews, I recorded the conversation on my iPhone and transcribed the interviews later to pull direct quotes. The online survey I created specifically for students allowed me to easily compare students' opinions regarding my topic - whether or not they find music helpful when learning an academic concept, the academic subjects for which they think music is best suited, and the age groups for which they believe music to be the most beneficial. The results of my survey have led to some interesting and surprising results, which I enjoyed analyzing. It was especially helpful because of the large sample size - more students than I could have hoped for (182!) took the time to answer my ten questions. This was due to the incredible cooperation of several middle and high school teachers who promoted the survey and encouraged their students to take it.

MUSIC IN THE CLASSROOM

Going into the project, I already had some ideas regarding the types of music one might find in an academic classroom. Due to my personal experience, there were a few examples I knew both students and teachers would be familiar with. For example, I have not yet encountered a single high school student who has not at least heard of the song "I'm Just a Bill" by Schoolhouse Rock. So when I spoke to students and teachers about the types of music which aid academic learning in the classroom, it was not surprising to hear this particular song mentioned again and again. My mom remembers this song from her elementary and middle school years, and that is definitely saying something about the song's ability to stand the test of time. It was a popular song then, and it is a popular song now.

As I continued to conduct my fieldwork, however, I was pleased to hear students give me a variety of other examples. These included music videos (the EconStories epic rap battle "Fight of the Century", Hannah Montana's "Bone Dance"), a Ted Talk (Akala - Hip-Hop & Shakespeare?), and simple rhythmic tunes (including well-known jingles or silly nursery rhymes!). Other Schoolhouse Rock songs made the list, including another social studies / government focused tune about the preamble to the Constitution. Sealey Elementary teacher Rachel Cassidy (who currently teaches math, science, and social studies) used Schoolhouse Rock in her classroom last year when she taught reading and grammar. Leon High School English teacher Kayce Giglio has her students listen to Billie Holiday's jazz music during the *To Kill a Mockingbird* unit, particularly to lyrics concerning lynchings. Giglio believes this music will help her students emotionally connect to the historical time period and therefore the story. These specific examples from both students and teachers gave me a clear picture of what's going on in the classroom and

a better idea of how music is used to aid the academic learning process. And now that I've introduced these various types of music used in the classroom, I'll dive a little deeper.

MUSIC AND MISCONCEPTIONS

I think it's important that I touch on some of the common misconceptions I've come across during my research. The first is that music is best suited to elementary classrooms. I wasn't sure, at first, if this was a wrong assumption to make. This is why I made a point to have students and teachers address this issue during my fieldwork. My survey asked students to select one of three listed age groups for which they thought "music is most beneficial." I was surprised to find that "all age groups" received the overwhelming majority of votes (68.37%). While music in the classroom is certainly beneficial for younger students (elementary, middle school), these younger grades do not take the cake. Music is similarly well-suited for high school and college classrooms, as well. So why is this a common misconception? Elementary teacher Rachel Cassidy put it this way, "I don't think it's less effective to use [music] in the upper grade levels, I just think teachers start shying away from it because it seems more 'elementary.'" And perhaps this has something to do with the types of material being taught in the upper grade levels, as well. Cassidy believes music is a useful tool for "basics," but not always for concepts which require "higher order thinking."

Which leads me to the second misconception, that music is better suited for academic subjects such as the social sciences or English, but less so for math. This is what I would have said originally, as I could not think of a time when music was used in any of my math classes (geometry, algebra, pre-calculus, calculus). According to my survey, math received the least

number of votes (40.82%) when students were asked "for what academic subjects do you think music is best suited? (select all that apply)". But surprisingly, when given an opportunity at the end of the survey to answer a free-response question asking for examples, a large number of students wrote about their math classes. Students frequently mentioned learning their multiplication tables, the quadratic formula, and PEMDAS (order of operations) via a catchy tune or by watching a funny music video. A female high school senior wrote, "When I took Algebra 1, our teacher taught us the 'quadratic formula song' and I've remembered it to this day and it still really helps."

Language was an academic subject on the opposite end of the scale that received a large number of student votes (61.22%). Students who'd taken Latin or Spanish or French classes wrote about memorizing noun or verb endings by putting them to music. A male high school junior wrote about learning "songs to the tunes of children's songs to help conjugate verbs in French." A female high school freshman wrote that "in Latin we use songs to learn the declension endings." In subjects like math and language, it's clear that music plays a large role in memorizing important concepts (this particular role will be further explored in the next section).

And the third misconception, which I have recently been convicted of, is that music serves the same purpose across all academic subjects. I no longer believe this is the case, and my reasoning comes from an interesting discussion with high school English teacher Kayce Giglio. We were talking about music and math, and she said, "They're using music to memorize formulas and facts, whereas in history or literature we're more often using music to relate the students to a time period." She continued, "I don't use music for memorization or facts at all." Former Latin teacher Laura Ansola-Crowley agreed, "For subjects like languages and history, music is a great memorization tool. For creative arts subjects, music encourages invention." At first, I wondered

if what Giglio was describing was in line with my other research - I wasn't sure her examples (having students listen to Billie Holiday music while studying the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*) qualified as music to aid a student's understanding of a specific academic concept. Giglio was the first to bring this type of example to my attention.

Luckily, I later had the opportunity to interview another English teacher. Trinity Catholic middle school teacher Kayleigh Lazar uses music in her 8th grade Holocaust unit, a "multisensory approach" which "allows for another level of engagement with the subject matter." In her email to me, Lazar wrote, "We listen to songs composed during WWII, from radio hits to those written in the concentration camps themselves and recorded after liberation. This brings the time period and the events to life in a whole new way for my students, as they are not only reading about the time period and seeing pictures from archives, they are also listening to what the people of that time period would have heard." What a powerful way for the students to connect to the material. I soon realized the error in my former thought process - why should this music be any less valid, if it was a method by which Giglio and Lazar taught their students about the historical periods in which the books were situated? Giglio described the music she uses and its purpose as more "emotion-based" and she concluded, "That just goes to show that music can be used across any curriculum and for many different reasons and purposes."

MUSIC AND MEMORY

While I believe it's true that music serves a variety of purposes in the academic classroom, perhaps the most common purpose it serves is the memorization of basic facts. Why is music used in the classroom? Not only for the students' enjoyment, but because it's a tool for the

successful memorization of an academic concept. Whether it's the multiplication tables, the quadratic formula, noun or verb endings, the process of a bill becoming a law, or the ideology of two well-known economists - music helps students commit it to memory. But how? Why is music any different from the other techniques teachers have used to help their students understand a particular concept? Why don't students find lecture notes nearly as effective when it comes to memorization? I interviewed Leon High School senior Maya Manciangli for her opinions regarding music in the classroom. She described several instances in which her teachers used music to teach a concept - in her Latin class, her AP US History class, her AP Government class, and her AP Economics class. In Latin, Manciangli memorized noun and verb endings by putting them to the tune of Jeopardy and "Jingle Bells". She said, "And since we already knew [the tunes], growing up, just applying them makes it really easy to memorize."

It seems as though, in many cases, the type of music or song choice isn't what's important. The music could be a well-known tune or jingle, as was the case with the Jeopardy theme music and "Jingle Bells", or even something silly and childish like "Pop Goes the Weasel" (as one survey respondent mentioned). Middle school English teacher Kayleigh Lazar pairs poetry with music, and she uses "everything from Top 40 hits to Christmas carols". Certainly interesting song choices, but Manciangli thought the tunes used in her Latin class were an effective memorization tool due to the repetition and the catchy rhythms. She touched on two key points. In his book "The Mozart Effect for Children - Awakening Your Child's Mind, Health, and Creativity with Music", author Don Campbell writes, "The material melds to the music, as it were, just as simpler information, such as your Social Security number, is easier to recall in a fixed rhythm" (173). An excerpt of Chris Boyd Brewer's book "Music and Learning" found on the Johns

Hopkins website is in agreement. Brewer writes, "When information is put to rhythm and rhyme, these musical elements will provide a hook for recall" (Brewer, 1995).

What is "recall"? One could argue that recall is the cornerstone for deep learning. It's the reason the students have not forgotten the information even years down the road. And this, of course, is what impresses students the most. It's powerful stuff, because typically it's a struggle to remember a concept even overnight for a quiz or exam. A survey respondent (male high school freshman) wrote, "The 'I'm Just a Bill' song helped me pass a test in 8th grade. I learned [the song] in 3rd grade, and have remembered it ever since." A college senior took my survey and wrote, "For one of my chemistry classes in high school, we watched/learned a YouTube song that helped us remember the electromagnetic spectrum. It really helped me to memorize everything in order and I can still remember it to this day because I remember the song!"

Campbell's book offers an explanation for why it's seemingly easier to commit music to long-term memory. He writes, "In general, a person's short-term memory has the ability to hold about seven bits of information. When related groups of information are bundled through rhythm, they may be remembered procedurally as one bit of information, and the volume of material that can be stored increases" (175).

MUSIC AND MOOD

"It's important to use rhythm, but it's just as important to have fun" (Campbell 173). Of the students who took my survey, 89.8% answered "yes" to the question of whether or not they enjoyed learning via music. Music is not the primary method by which academic concepts are taught, and so it is a rare and special occasion when it's used to supplement the material in the

classroom. This is one of many reasons students find it enjoyable. During my interview with high school student Maya Manciangli, the break from routine was probably what she stressed most. Describing the Schoolhouse Rock "I'm Just a Bill" music video, she said, "The visuals are really fun, so [the video] grabs your attention and you're more likely to remember it than a boring slideshow." She continued, "So many classes are just notes, and when teachers bring [music] in it really mixes things up."

She shared another example, a music video she'd watched in her AP Economics class - the EconStories "Fight of the Century", a music video that presents the ideologies of economists John Maynard Keynes and Friedrich Hayek as a musical showdown. Manciangli's AP Economics teacher, Amanda Geiger, relishes the "element of surprise" that's inherent with this particular video. Geiger said, "I don't tell them it's a rap... I introduce it very casually." Even she is "reenergized" about the material when she watches the students' reactions - when the music starts, and the kids look a little confused. Manciangli said, "[The video] was just really fun to watch, so people obviously paid attention, whereas sometimes you just zone out during a lecture and you're not as likely to absorb the information." Her honest opinion is perhaps representative of the high school student body as a whole. Lectures are often "boring," but anything outside-the-ordinary is welcome and refreshing and fun.

And not only is music enjoyable, but it's also accessible. It's something students instinctively understand. Students who struggle in school get a bad taste in their mouths when a particular concept seems overwhelmingly difficult. But music is the opposite of intimidating. Giglio, when speaking about the times she's used music in her classroom, described it like this, "It's really the one time when I don't have to be the expert, and [the students] can be the experts with me." She continued, "It's almost like I'm getting on their level - but music is on everybody's level." Giglio

believes students are more "open" to learning new concepts with music. To immediately capture her students' interest at the beginning of her Shakespeare unit (and to encourage them to give Shakespeare a chance!), Giglio shows her class a video - the Ted Talk (Akala - Hip-Hop & Shakespeare?) I mentioned earlier. The speaker, Akala, relates Shakespeare's iambic pentameter to the lyrics of early hip-hop music. For many students, it's an unexpected comparison, as Shakespeare is often stereotyped by younger generations as "stuffy" and "irrelevant." In the video, Akala gives his audience a chance to guess whether certain lines are from Shakespeare or hip-hop. The guessing, Giglio mentioned, is particularly fun for her students. If students "aren't really interested in learning" or "the door is closed," music might encourage them "to let that door creep open." She concluded, "And sometimes [the door] will just fall wide open and you've gained a lifelong learner." We could make the simple conclusion that "having fun" equates to being in a better mood. But there's more to it than that. It is true that music positively impacts the learning environment and is directly related to attitudes that are more conducive to learning. Campbell writes, "Listening to music has been shown to slow the listener's heart rate, activate the brain waves of higher-order thinking, and create a positive, relaxed, receptive state of mind that is ideal for learning" (173).

MUSIC AND MEANS

According to the collected results of my survey, 69.07% of the student respondents selected "not often (0-3 times)" as opposed to "occasionally (4-6 times)" (26.8%) or "very often (7-10 times)" (4.12%) in order to describe the frequency with which music is used as an academic tool. If music is so incredibly beneficial when it comes to teaching and learning an academic concept (as

I've analyzed in previous sections), why isn't it used as a tool more often? I'd like to propose a theory before I conclude my paper, and that is concerning the implementation or application of music within the classroom. Elementary teacher Rachel Cassidy was also able to shed some light on the topic. I asked her to describe her typical day-to-day style of teaching. She told me that she frequently has her students work in small groups and that "songs would need to be more whole-group." I thought this was an interesting point. While I'd given much thought to the types of music used in the classroom, and the types of material with which the music is associated, I hadn't given much thought to execution. It makes sense, now, to give classroom dynamics the attention it deserves. After all, teachers don't step into the classroom and "wing it." They have a plan, a blueprint, if you will, for each class. It's part of their job to find out how tools such as music best fit into the plan.

The teachers' level of control over what's taught in their classrooms also needs to be taken into consideration. Teachers actually have very little control over the curriculum, which is often school-wide or state-wide. Leon High School teacher Amanda Geiger said, "I don't have as much control over the content, but I have a lot of control over how I teach it." She's given a "course outline," and has "more control in how I approach the material." And this brings us to another interesting point - a tool is only as effective as the person wielding it. Cassidy said, "I think any teacher can take something and make it really effective." And speaking specifically of music within the classroom, she continued, "I think it depends on how it's executed." Her line of thinking also serves as an explanation for the subjectivity of my topic - music is implemented in different ways in different classrooms, and this will surely impact effectiveness and subsequently student response and receptivity. According to high school English teacher Kayce Giglio,

execution is successful if "the teacher ties [the music] to what they're doing in class and it's relevant throughout."

LIMITATIONS

Just as I mentioned in the section above, there were elements of my research that were somewhat subjective. I'd like to touch on a few of the limitations I encountered along the way. As far as statistics or "hard data" goes, it was difficult to acquire this from my small sample of the students/teachers in the Leon County school district. For example, I did not have access to students' test scores to compare grades or to provide evidence for my theory that music is beneficial for teaching/learning academic concepts in the classroom. I would have liked to cite an example in which a student saw an improvement in their grade after learning via music. But even then, it would be difficult for me to prove that the improved grade was due to music alone (there are many other factors which would need to be considered). For my intents and purposes, the survey asking for students' opinions was going to have to be enough. Unfortunately, though my survey received 182 responses, I only have the free "basic" Survey Monkey account, and therefore only have access to results of the first 100 survey respondents. I found this to be extremely disappointing.

Also, I didn't have the opportunity to interview students in elementary school, and these students are too young to access my online survey on their own (without the help of an adult). In some ways, I think this is a good thing, because I could focus solely on the upper grades and the interesting interactions with music these older students are experiencing. I think my research would have been too predictable had I given more time and attention to the elementary grade

levels, which are already known to use music frequently in the classroom. I recognize, however, that my research would have been more well-rounded had I spoken to elementary students.

CONCLUSION

My fieldwork and research has given me so many interesting things to think about. I definitely went into this project with preconceived notions and ideas about what I'd find - and while much of it was confirmed, I also gained new perspective regarding the ways in which music is used in the classroom and how it benefits students academically. Music is a tool for all age groups, for all academic subjects, and it serves a variety of purposes within the classroom. Music is particularly helpful with memorization and recall. Students find that a concept will stick with them for years if they've put it to music. And, of course, music is accessible and enjoyable. When music is used in the classroom, the break from routine is refreshing for students. It was such a pleasure discussing this topic with both students and teachers alike. It's given me new insight about the learning process and the inner workings of the academic classroom in Leon County schools. I hope I'll take my research and apply it in my own way, with the students I tutor but also as a study strategy for myself.

4059 words

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