

Your Best Advocates: Sharing Personal Stories

By Karen Stafford, Lawrence KA

When music educators think about advocating for their discipline, they often use research-based data such as the benefits music has for learning, the cross-curricular connections involved, higher order thinking, and other scientific conclusions. Unfortunately, those who make decisions about music - including providing extra monies for training and equipment in such approaches such as the Schulwerk - do not take data into consideration as much as is claimed. At times advocacy broached by the teachers themselves seems to be self-serving. However, there is great power in personal stories from those we touch the most. Our best advocates are our students, and by extension, their parents/guardians.

In a blog about [Why Teachers Need to be Good Storytellers](#) (found on the [Edutopia](#) website), Suzie Boss outlines the beauty of the spoken, personal story. Boss cites a speech given at the New Tech Annual Conference in 2013 by Sam Chaltain, a veteran speaker and educator, who encouraged the audience to ask community leaders how they learned best. In his opinion, sharing stories is a much better way to get those decision makers to think about education from a personal viewpoint. Railing about test scores and the unfairness of consistent assessments, although true, suggests a sense of “I do not want to do this work.” To shift the narrative away from the standardized test, Chaltain invites community members to contribute stories from their own personal experiences. In the end, he encouraged the participants to utilize storytelling, followed by a call to action. When the focus is put on student and personal experiences as opposed to teacher experiences, the attitudes towards positive reform change radically.

As Orff-Schulwerk-based educators, how can we use stories to help promote the Schulwerk approach and validate its benefits? What better way than through the voices of our children? For example, I know of a young man on the autism spectrum whose OS trained teacher was on leave for a year. He missed her - and the OS activities she used - a great deal. He wrote the following letter to his principal:

Please bring (teacher's name) back...I can give up my lunches for a whole year if it helps...(teacher's name) plays a lot of instruments with us and even allows us to play the instruments. My music time with (teacher's name) helps my brain stop bad thoughts...

His mother reiterated his thoughts with her own:

Jeremy regressed into the world of autism just before the age of two years. At the diagnosis consultation Jeremy was considered so low functioning that institutionalization was recommended. By the time he entered kindergarten he had a vocabulary of less than 50 words and had extreme receptive and expressive language delays. The first time he met his music teacher he communicated with words and sign that he was HAPPY for music class and that he saw music in color. Each tone had a different color and it was beautiful to him. Fast forward a few years. Now Jeremy is exceptionally verbal but continues to have expressive and receptive language difficulties as well as sensory processing issues that can quickly trigger a meltdown. In his elementary music classes, his perceptive and creative teacher learned how to reach into his world of autism and bring him out to learn new things. The concept of breaking the class up into smaller groups, letting the children explore instruments to make their own music, taking off shoes to feel music through feet (a sensory slice of heaven for spectrum children), and singing questions and answers back and forth with students is pure genius and key to engaging spectrum children.

Another Orff teacher shared these examples of middle school student's experiences collected from their music journals:

- *I also believe that when we worked together to make the piece come alive we all grew closer to each other.*
- *I think it is good for me to learn dances from different cultures because the dance teaches me something about the culture.*
- *My favorite part of music class was the parts when the students were able to compose their own pieces. An example of that were the songs from The Pearl. I think that expands the horizons of us young musicians by making us think,*

cooperate and express our talents and ideas to the group. (About a project based on a book the class was reading in Language Arts.)

- *Composition is a marvelous thing, and being introduced to it at a young age is even better! Composition allows you to stretch your mind and allows you to think in a creative way. Composition also includes your opinion. You have to decide what sounds and melodies sound right to you. Composition can allow you to express your feelings.*
- *I think that Miles Davis means that when you are playing music you are coming from the heart and when you come the heart nothing can actually be wrong. In music there are notes and chords, but those mean nothing when you are playing from the heart and playing what you want. When you play what your heart desires nothing can be wrong. This doesn't apply for things like math, because that doesn't come from the heart and there can be mistakes. (In response Miles Davis' quote: "Do not be afraid of mistakes, there are none.")*
- *Once you overcome your ego and aren't afraid to show emotion, totally exposed, you will produce beautiful music. Personally, when I improvise I feel embarrassed, it would be better if someone were up there with me. But I need to learn to trust myself that the music I make will be good because it would come from me.*
- *Taiko drumming helped me grow the most as a musician because it made me realize that to play music everyone must work together and if one person does not work together the whole thing falls apart.*
- *I learned about oneness and the effect that happens if one person in the group is lost, or not up to beat. If you do not have oneness it makes it extremely difficult to play in a community with other musicians.*

Both the parent and the students note different aspects of the music class that are major objectives of the OS: working in small groups, using instruments, providing sensory opportunities (in taking off shoes for movement), creating, and using stories for a child-based approach. The teacher involved in the first example can use AOSA advocacy tools to educate the parents further on the philosophies of OS and the ideals of Orff and Keetman ...and have a ready, positive advocate on her side. The teacher of the students in the second segment can share these stories with parents and administrators. The teachers can also use AOSA advocacy information geared towards administrators to further reinforce the positive aspects of music and movement training to enhance the learning of all students. The AOSA Advocacy committee is currently working on these new tools...look for them on the [Advocacy](#) page of the website soon.

If the teachers in these examples had approached their administrators, they may have become just one more person on the list of "someone who wants something." However, when seen through the eyes of children, the administrators may decide to have another look at this "revolutionary" way of teaching music. Chances are, his/her experiences with music did not involve movement, creativity, and probably were not child-centered. I suspect any administrator who had an elementary teacher with an OS background would definitely have fond memories!

As the AOSA advocacy sub-committee develops more tools to help our members promote and advocate for the ideas and philosophies set forth by Orff and Keetman, we would appreciate your own personal stories. Do you have any examples in which your students relayed how much they loved movement in music? How they love to create their own works? How music is a "safe" haven for them? Please feel free to share any of these stories with members of the [Advocacy Committee](#) so we can pass them along to our membership. And, make sure you save stories and develop a relationship with the parents who share these stories. They will be your best allies and advocates.