Mental Health and the Music Classroom

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Abstract

A 2011 study conducted by Wendy M. Reinke, Melissa Stormint, Keith C. Herman, Rohini Puri, and Nidhi Goel, found that 89% of teachers believed that schools should be involved in addressing the mental health needs of their students, making it overly clear that the majority of educators feel at least some responsibility for the health and wellbeing of their students. Mental health is easily put at risk in the music classroom, and, because of this, it is crucial for music educators to cultivate an awareness of how mental health affects students in the classroom. This paper aims to explore the risk to mental health in the music classroom, the reasons why mental health is at risk in the music classroom, and to provide some options, strategies, and considerations to educators that aim to further their ability to be aware of and sensitive to the mental health needs of their students.

Keywords: mental health, musician culture, product-oriented vs. process oriented teaching, person-centered teaching, performance anxiety

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Content Warning: suicide, anxiety

Vignette: Stressminster Choir College

More often than some people realize, students at Westminster Choir College are dealing with extreme amounts of stress that are potentially destructive. Resident Advisors often mention that a majority of their on-duty calls are due to students in emotional distress. “I made it a week into the semester without crying!” is posted on Twitter with a sense of pride. The school’s nickname is “Stressminster.” “Let’s go jump off the George Washington Bridge,” and “Please run me over with your car,” are typical responses to the question “How are you?”

The mental health concerns on campus are brushed off as jokes, probably because it is seemingly easier to “laugh through the pain” than to deal with the severity of the issues at hand.

The problem is that laughing through the severity a problem doesn’t do anything for those who really need help. A few weeks ago, a student posted a suicide note to Facebook. Other students and faculty were quick to alert emergency services in order to get this student the help they needed. Professors stopped teaching. Some students got into their cars to see if they could locate the student in crisis while others sat in classrooms, held hands, and prayed.

When the student body, faculty, and staff got confirmation that this student was safe, many music education majors, as well as some other students, and two members of the music education faculty sat together in a classroom to discuss the issues of mental health on the Westminster Campus. The mental health crisis on campus was no longer hidden behind sarcastic comments and nicknames.

These students and faculty members recognized that, due to a lack of awareness, students’ needs were not being met, students were not learning as well as they could, and the environment of the campus was growing to be potentially destructive to its’ students. Talking

about a lack of resources, about stigmas, about students feeling like professors are aware of the stress students are enduring, but not taking action to help, and about many other campus-wide issues, this group of students and faculty decided it was time that something changed.

Introduction

> *"Schools are more competitive and stressful, children are more overscheduled, parents are worried about finances and safety, and society is based on a win-lose model..." –Lawrence J. Cohen, "The Drama of the Anxious Child"*

It is not just on the Westminster Choir College campus that mental health is an issue and change is necessary – mental health is a widespread issue in music classrooms around the country and around the world, and change is needed to ensure that the needs of every student are met.

A 2011 study conducted by Wendy M. Reinke, Melissa Stormint, Keith C. Herman, Rohini Puri, and Nidhi Goel, found that 89% of teachers believed that schools should be involved in addressing the mental health needs of their students. This study involved 292 teachers from five school districts. Through this study, it becomes overwhelmingly clear that teachers believe they are, to some extent, responsible for the health and wellbeing of their students.

On their website, the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) has published a position statement on health in music education. This position details NAfME's concerns, idea of the role of a music educator, and some practices for music educators to adopt. There are three statements in this position that are important to remember when thinking about mental health in the music classroom. In no particular order, they are:

- "Like other focused educational activities or pastimes, learning, performing and listening to music can produce possible negative health consequences when undertaken incorrectly

or excessively."

- "The performance of music, especially the public performance of music, involves a host of social and emotional factors that are key to the importance we place on music and a potential source of stress in the student."
- The role of the music educator is to "Provide good musical preparation for students and encourage appropriate attitudes toward music so that students' stress is kept to manageable levels."

For the purpose of this paper, and as defined in the constitution of the World Health Organization, "health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (p. 1). This paper aims to explore the role of mental health specifically in the music classroom, and to provide some options to educators on how to be aware of and sensitive to the mental health needs of students. All of this being said, it is crucial for music educators to cultivate an awareness of how mental health affects students in the classroom.

The Risk to Mental Health in the Music Classroom

> *"Musicians, as a group, are so profoundly committed to music that they find it difficult to separate their own personal identities from their musical ability…"*
> *–Anthony Kemp,* The Musical Temperament: Psychology and Personality of Musicians*, p. 83-84*

The risk to students' mental health in the music classroom is present. This risk is not isolated to any one age group, demographic, or learning environment. According to Deborah Pierce (2012), a large number of musicians experience physical or mental health issues or injuries significant enough to jeopardize their careers. In a 2006 study conducted by Jenny K. Hyun, Brian C. Quinn, and Temina Madon, it was found that there exists a positive correlation

between competition in academic fields and self-reported need for mental health care by students. Music is a highly competitive field, with a large number of applicants competing for a limited number of spots. It is important to remember the inherent nature of competition present in music when considering students' mental health.

Music students, by nature, are less able to detach themselves from their field of study than their non-music peers. This is evidence of stronger emotional connection with the field of study, and, therefore, a higher risk to the mental health and wellbeing of the student. In fact, music students are commonly found to have higher ratings on anxiety and depression scales than their non-music peers (Spahn, Stukley, & Lehmann, 2004).

Acknowledging Student Accomplishments

It is imperative that teachers not approach their classrooms with a bias favoring performance-based accomplishments over non-performance based accomplishments. Music education students are often frustrated that their accomplishments aren't as acknowledged or visible as those of performance majors (Wristen, 2013). This serves as a reminder that music is more than performance, and that music educators must acknowledge and showcase the non-performance-based musical accomplishments of their students equally as much as they acknowledge the performance-based accomplishments of students. One might encounter a classroom in which one student is constantly acknowledged for their singing, drumming, or ability to otherwise perform music. Another student, however, may be a gifted composer or a skilled music theorist, but these accomplishments are not often as readily acknowledged as performance accomplishments. Failure to acknowledge non-performance-based accomplishments of students marginalizes a large student population and will undoubtedly cause harm to the mental health of those students.

Performance Anxiety

A real-world, often easily visible, example of the risk to student mental health in the music classroom is seen in performance anxiety. Performance anxiety is experienced by many people of varying ages, levels of experience and expertise, and in various different learning environments. Performance anxiety is considered a state anxiety condition. A state anxiety condition refers to anxiety that is experienced for a short amount of time by most, or all, individuals in response to a specific stressor or situation (Wristen, 2013). According to Brenda Wristen (2013), an abnormally high amount of state anxiety, as experienced with performance anxiety, can be damaging or pathological to an individual. People with performance anxiety also tend to have higher levels of trait anxiety conditions, which are longer-term forms of anxiety in specific situations, and can also be pathological. With something as common, but potentially damaging, to an individual as performance anxiety, it is clear to see that students' mental health can easily be put in jeopardy in the music classroom, even when there are no ill-intentions.

The Necessary Changes Are Cultural

> *"Change must happen with active involvement of music educators from all levels, from classroom to private lessons and from early childhood to college educators – change is cultural." –Deborah Pierce*, Rising to a New Paradigm: Infusing Health and Wellness into the Music Curriculum*, p. 162*

Value Conflicts

A value conflict occurs when the value or belief systems of two people or groups of people are incompatible. Western society is product-oriented and focused on intellectualism. This mindset causes Western society to often devalue aspects of the musical experience that aren't explicitly cognitive (Tillman, 2004). This causes an immediate value conflict between the majority of Western civilization and musicians. Music students experience these value conflicts in the dynamics of the school as a whole, as well as in society at-large.

Musicians tend to be more oriented toward intuition and feeling, which predisposes them to experiencing stress when living or working in a culture whose beliefs oppose their own values. According to Pierce, natural value conflicts lead to anxiety and poor mental health states.

Musician Culture

There are some characteristics that many musicians share, as well as what could be looked at as a culture within the music community. It is difficult for many musicians to separate their own personal identity from their musical ability. Musicians tend to be more vulnerable to psychological injuries, and musicians often have an internal focus that may keep them from seeking assistance with various physical or psychological problems. The culture of musicians includes a strong "no pain, no gain" mentality in which sacrifice is seen as a prerequisite for success and pain is required for virtuosity (Daykin, 2005). There is also a large "survival of the fittest" culture in which there is a disproportionately large focus on competition and challenge.

Musicians and Perfectionism

In 1989, Dews & Williams stated that music demands a high level of perfection. In 2010, Hunt & Eisenberg took this a step further and said that perfectionism may play a role in how much stress music students perceive. In 2013, Wristen said that preoccupation with perfection may be mentally disruptive to music students.

What Can Educators Do About It?

> *"The choices and actions of every music educator affect these value systems in their institutions and by extension the profession as a whole." –Deborah Pierce*, "*Rising to a New Paradigm: Infusing Health and Wellness into the Music Curriculum," p. 162*

Teacher Preparation Programs

Teacher preparation programs are in an ideal position to jump-start the changes necessary

in order to make educators aware of and sensitive to students' mental health needs in the classroom. It is not enough for these programs to simply talk about mental health awareness and strategies for a healthy classroom; these programs must offer opportunities within their departments that can serve as models of strategies for their students to implement in their future classrooms.

Many teachers state that they feel undereducated and underprepared to meet the mental health needs of their students (Reinke et al, 2011). Teacher preparation programs are in a position to educate future educators on topics such as mental health in the classroom and prepare future educators for the situations they will almost certainly encounter in the classroom, no matter how seemingly trivial or extreme, so no educator goes into a classroom unprepared to meet their students needs. It is of the utmost importance that teacher preparation programs incorporate mental health awareness into their curriculum, so that future educators are prepared to support students' needs in their classrooms.

The Music Classroom

Good music teaching does not look or feel like what many students might think a typical classroom environment would be like. Because of this, music class can seem disorganized or chaotic, and this can immediately provoke anxious feelings in a student when they walk into a music classroom. Because of this, it is important to have individualized strategies for each student, in the case that they feel anxious or overwhelmed due to the nature of the class.

For example, many music teachers use games to help teach concepts. Bryan S. Price, Jr. (2012) points out that:

> Although games may seem a fun activity from the teacher's perspective, many students are afraid of making a mistake and being the center of attention when this occurs. When teaching games and game songs, one can reduce anxiety for many

students by letting them sit out for a few turns to get a feel for the game (71).

Teaching Methods and Approaches

The teaching methods, curriculum, and teaching approaches chosen must serve in combination to empower the students and meet their individual needs. Product-oriented teaching methods, when used in isolation, are destructive to student empowerment. It is crucial to balance product-oriented teaching with process-oriented teaching, as the two in balance creates an environment conducive to fostering student empowerment.

It is also imperative to teach from a person-centered approach. Each student is unique, coming into the classroom with their own set of tastes, values, life experiences, and knowledge. It is crucial to know each student as an individual, to recognize the ways in which they express themselves, and to cater to their learning style and needs.

Music is emotional and personal, and each student will react differently to the music they encounter in the classroom. Teachers should use trigger warnings if the content of a lesson may be upsetting to students. Teachers should also give students strategies to allow their students to feel safe. For example, a student who may be easily upset by the content of a lesson should be given permission to quietly exit the classroom, if they need to, and to return when they are no longer upset or when they no longer feel unsafe. This privilege can be easily abused, however, and it is important for teachers to hold their students to a high level of responsibility when given this permission.

Teachers also must make careful choices when it comes to curriculum content. The only way to create a healthy, holistic music curriculum is to include all types of music, exploring the full spectrum of its influence, meaning, and components.

Discussion

Where Is The Line?

Teachers are not responsible for diagnosing students. Teachers should be aware of warning signs for different conditions, as they interact with students frequently. If they see these warning signs, notice a difference in a students' behavior, or witness a student acting out, they should report this information to the school counselor or psychologist. Counselors and psychologists have more training and resources to deal with students who need help.

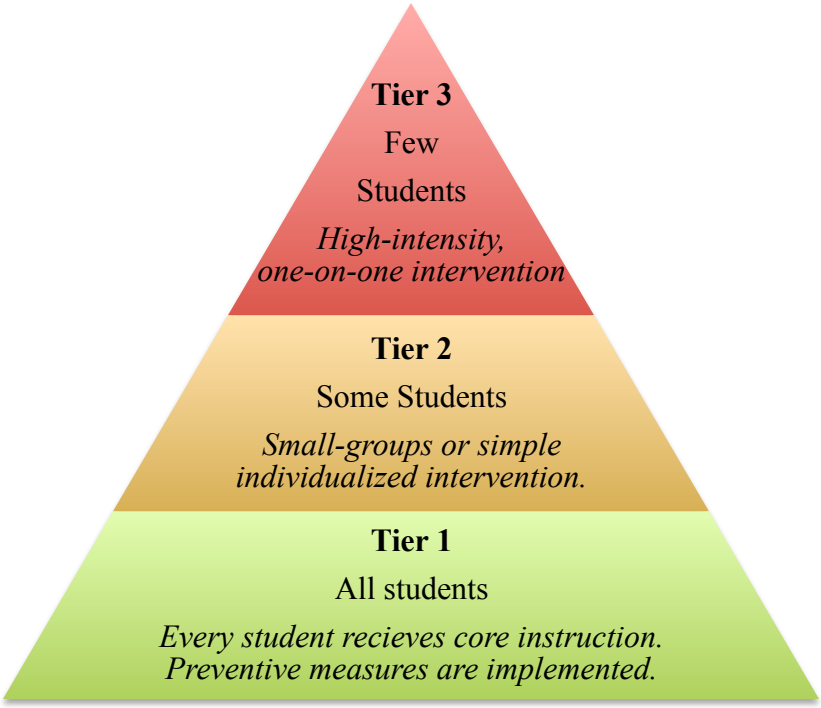

Figure 1. Diagram of a multi-tiered support system program. A MTSS has three tiers of intervention for students.

Many schools are implementing multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) as an effective way to address students' behavioral, academic, and emotional needs (Sulkowski, Wingfield, Jones, & Coulter, 2011). Multi-tiered systems of support allow for both prevention and intervention efforts to occur in schools (Moran 2015). Three tiers exist to classify student needs in a MTSS program (*see Figure 1*). The first tier in a MTSS program is the strong, well-taught instruction that every student is entitled to receive. Tier two includes students who receive extra support, but who has acute needs. The third tier is for students who require more intense, one-on-one intervention.

Why Music Teachers?

After parents, teachers are often the most important adults in a student's life. Music teachers have the potential to form stronger bonds with students than many other teachers. This

is first due in part to the fact that music teachers often see students over the course of multiple years. This involves interaction during the school day as well as outside the school day during extracurricular activities. Music teachers also strive to foster an environment of trust and vulnerability in their classrooms and ensembles, because music is personal. This environment lends itself to students feeling more comfortable to express themselves and form strong bonds with the other students in the class as well as with the teacher.

Why Is This Important?

Music educators strive to meet higher-level needs according to Maslow's Hierarchy. Maslow's Hierarchy was developed by Abraham Maslow, a humanistic psychologist, who believed that humans strive for upper-level capabilities, such as creativity and self-actualization. Maslow has set up five distinct levels of basic needs: physiological, safety, love and belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization (Simons, Irwin & Drinnien, 1987).

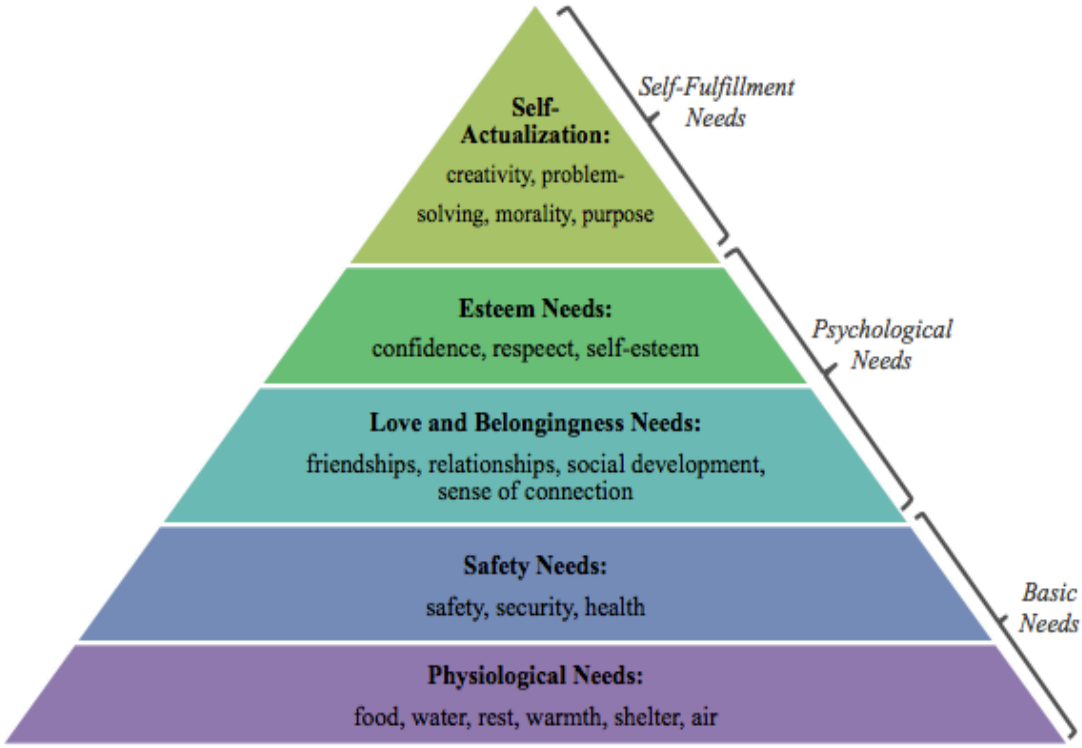

Figure 2. Pyramid diagram of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. This figure visually demonstrates the five levels of basic needs established by Maslow.

Maslow's hierarchic theory of needs is often represented as a pyramid (*see Figure 2*). In the pyramid depiction of the five levels of needs, no tier of needs can be met until the demands of the one below are met. For example, the person does not feel the needs of belongingness and love until the needs of safety are met.

Music educators strive to meet the needs of the upper-three levels, such as creativity, feeling of accomplishment, and achieving one's full potential. Music educators, and all educators, must keep the principles of this hierarchy in mind in their classrooms, for no student will be able to meet those needs unless the lower-level need of safety and security are met. When creating these safe, secure environments in the classroom, which enable higher-level needs to then be met, music educators must be aware of their students' mental health needs.

Conclusion

> *"Music educators have argued that music's benefits extend beyond entertainment, but many of the unhealthy issues that musicians face in their education and work limit how the field can continue to expand and evolve." – Deborah Pierce*, "*Rising to a New Paradigm: Infusing Health and Wellness into the Music Curriculum," p. 158*

Music educators believe that the field of music is critical in education. However, a field that does not benefit students' learning cannot be considered a critical field. Therefore, if music education should be deemed a critical field, music educators must cultivate an awareness of mental health that addresses students as individuals and meets their needs. If these student needs are not met, students will not learn and will not grow.

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