

## **Drumming up a Passion**

### **Murugesu s/o Samarasan, East View Primary School**

A champion of music education, Mr Murugesu aspires for his students to march to their own beat, hold their own tune and find their forte in life.

I believe in the power of music. It engages the Mind, moves the Body and touches the Soul, in short M.B.S. This is my signature music programme in school. I believe that the best way to make music come alive for my students is through immersion and involvement in music improvisation and creation. This has always been a cornerstone of my teaching philosophy. Why M.B.S?

#### **Engaging the Mind**

For me, the best way to engage young minds in music is to adopt the Orff approach. This involves both speaking and listening skills in a learning environment that engages all five senses. In using the rhythms of familiar poems and rhymes, I help children to express themselves and improve their understanding of English and how it relates to the language of music. By teaching students how to use the body as a drum kit and the basic techniques of body percussion, students learn how to improvise rhythms. For example, getting the lower primary students to stamp their feet, pat their thighs and clap their hands while singing “London Bridge is falling down”, helps them to think of innovative ways to keep the beat or rhythm, even as they learn about intonation and pronunciation. Through guiding questions (e.g. How can you change your actions but keep the same beat?), students will be guided to develop a mental framework with which they could work with when improvising and creating music.

To inspire students in music making, I always look for ways to align the music curriculum with that of other subjects. In this way, students are able to see how music complements the other subjects they study. Using buckets, barrels, boxes, plastic bottles and cans, students also explore sounds with recycled objects. This is in line with the environmental science programme in my school which teaches students the importance of reducing, reusing and recycling waste. Exploring the different timbre of sounds (such as making as many sounds as possible with a tin can or a pen) allows students to follow their music-making instincts and ultimately fuels their creativity and critical thinking skills.

I stretch my students’ potential for creative expression by making sure they have lots of chances to compose music using technology during my lessons. The possibilities of what students can do when they harness the power of music software and apps are limitless. Although I support traditional music literacy and the teaching and

learning of classroom instruments, I strongly believe that we need to reach out to the masses through a curriculum that teaches students both acoustic and digital instruments. Using various apps such as Garageband, the practice time for instruments is much reduced. Students can now use the iPad to perform, compose, arrange, improvise and record music without having to master the techniques of instrumental playing. When students work together in an informal environment, take ownership of their learning, and determine their own pace of learning, their creativity blossoms.

I also challenge students to use the song-writing and digital music skills on the Garageband App picked up in the school's Mind, Body and Soul (MBS) music programme to write and compose music for the Eco-Music Challenge and the Melody of Hope (Singapore Kindness Movement) song-writing competitions. The students rose to the challenge and went on to win awards from the competitions.

### **Moving the Body**

Body movements are responses to the rhythmic feel to a piece of music. Through the bucket drumming module in the Programme for Active Learning (PAL) for the Primary 2 cohort, the students not only acquire drumming techniques and various drumming grooves, they also move to the rhythms of the drum. Students are given ample opportunities to explore with the different sounds of the buckets to create grooves of their own. Working in groups, students learn to accommodate and manage each other. They learn to understand each other's strengths and limitations and respect the learning abilities of their friends. Hence, I use music as a powerful tool to facilitate them in acquiring Social Emotional Learning (SEL) skills such as awareness for others and collaboration.

In another project involving music and movement, we asked our Primary 5 students to compose music for aerobic exercise. Students had to first listen out for important characteristics of music used with the different parts of exercise routines such as warm-ups and cooling down before manipulating the musical elements to suit the various segments of exercise they were composing for. Through this activity, students worked with sound loops of various genres and cultures and were exposed to a wide repertoire of world music samples and instruments, making them more aware of musical genres and styles from around the world.

### **Touching the Soul**

I have always believed that music education shapes a student's character. Drawing on the school's 'C<sup>2</sup>RISP' values, (Commitment, Compassion, Respect, Integrity, Self-discipline and Perseverance), I use music to imbue these into my students. Through learning performance and audience etiquette, students learn self-discipline. I get

students to watch video snippets of concerts and we discuss how the performers engage the audience with their discipline in performing and how the audience in turn respects their performance and applauds. In addition, after each group or individual performance, I facilitate a 'press conference style' discussion where students mention what they liked about their friends' performances, and how they can improve the performances. It is through these dialogue sessions that my students learn from one another.

I strongly encourage students to persevere in practicing and preparing for a performance. I share with them stories of past students who have been dedicated in musical practice and succeeded as a result. I also set up mentorship opportunities for students to coach their peers who might have difficulties playing an instrument. During the ukulele module for the Primary 5 and 6 pupils, student mentors used their recess slots to coach their friends. It was heartwarming to see students who were initially not able to play the ukulele being inspired by the commitment shown by their mentors and persisting with their practice.

### **Making a difference**

Working closely with teachers on the music programmes, I am able to track students' character development and social emotional skills through teacher observations and written reflections at the end of each session. I remember Afiq\*, a student who had a natural flair for music and loved bucket drumming. He used to be disruptive during lessons, often disregarding teachers' instructions and getting into arguments with his friends. Besides not observing the rules of the drum circle and playing the drum when it was not his turn, Afiq would write inappropriate comments about the lessons during reflection sessions. I counselled him and got him to reflect on his actions whenever he misbehaved. I also encouraged him to use his talent to lead his friends well and to be understanding towards them. Gradually, I noticed the effort he put in to respect the rules of the drum circle and his friends' opinions. Afiq also learnt how to solve disputes more amicably with his friends. I affirmed his efforts by praising him each time he showed a willingness to change his behaviour and gave him opportunities to lead his class in drumming. I often reiterated to him that it was important as a musician to practice 'Active Listening' which involved listening carefully to when he had to play or come in with a drum groove. In the end, there was a marked improvement in his behaviour towards his friends and teachers and in his written lesson reflections.

I provide opportunities for at-risk students in the Music Interest Club (MIC) to increase their self-esteem. I worked with a group of Primary 6 boys and used drumming to inspire them towards greater heights. In preparing for our performance for World Water Day 2015, students had to lead different sections of the performance. With each performance, I noticed that they show more commitment

both musically and academically. Student leaders organised sectional training for their juniors and students loaned drum sticks from the school to practise at home, drumming on pillows and on cushions! There was also a positive change in the students' behaviour when they became more well-known in the school. Several of these students involved in drumming for community projects and outreach programmes have gone on to win the Arts in Community (ACA) award. To add on, a considerable number of students from my MIC Co-Curricular Activity group have gone on to pursue their musical interests in their secondary schools. Some students have joined instrumental ensembles such as the Gamelan orchestra, brass band, guitar club and digital music clubs. There is a group of alumni students who come back regularly to help out in the school's musical endeavours, reflecting their passion for the performing arts which was cultivated through my music programmes.

As a music educator, my aim has always been to inspire students to be the best that they can be. I hope my students will be fuelled with a passion for music and the performing arts throughout their lives.



2015 World Water Day Performance

*\*Actual name has been changed.*