



Music: Music and Respect

What if music helped children to show respect?

Madelyn was doing some basic composition with her class and wanted them to listen with considerate attention to each other's work as a sign of respect. Often they got excited about performing their own pieces, and focused on that rather than on listening to others.

"Before we started, I asked students to listen for ten seconds to the sounds in the room in absolute silence. Afterward, I asked who heard the birds outside, the creak of furniture, the hum of the computer. I explained that in order to listen attentively to one another, we need that type of listening. When other people listen to us in that way, it can make us feel that what we have to contribute is valued. I asked students to think of times when they had felt that people were not fully listening to them, and to reflect silently on how this made them feel. I also asked them to suggest behaviors that gave them the impression someone else was not really listening. Listening carefully is one way of showing respect.

"I divided the students into groups, and gave them percussion instruments and three pictures in an envelope. I asked them to choose one picture and told them they couldn't show it to the other groups. I challenged them to produce a piece of music to express their chosen picture. When it came to performing, the children held up the three stimulus pictures; the others had to listen attentively in order to determine which picture inspired the music, and then say what connections to the picture they heard in the music.

"I chose the picture activity since it helped the students concentrate and listen carefully. I wanted them to succeed at the listening exercise so that they would feel encouraged. At the end, we talked about what it felt like to be listened to in this way."

What's going on here?

Madelyn saw her music lesson as a way of encouraging respect through attentive listening.

She engaged students in reflecting on their own learning behaviours and their effects on others, connecting listening with values, and practicing attentive listening to their surroundings and to others' work.

She reshaped her practice by choosing a question and concept to frame the lesson (respect) and using it in her language, by creating activities and resources that would influence ethos and allow students to experience the central focus, and by guiding student interaction (focus on each other's work).

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Respect is an aspect of love; it means honoring the worth of another person. The Bible describes people as God's masterpieces, and, as beings created by him, they deserve respect; they do not have to earn it. Respect is the default setting. This type of love is not emotional but rather is a decision to behave in a particular way toward others.

What difference do this make?

Most teachers suffer at least some of the time from students not paying attention to them or to fellow students. Madelyn began to address this with her music activity: she designed it in such a way that children got a taste of success and began to connect their listening behaviors with respect for others.

Where could we go from here?

Respectful listening activities can be built into work across the curriculum. But, as with the pictures in the music lesson, sometimes helping structures will be needed to aid the students' listening until this becomes a habit.

Digging deeper

The Bible locates human worth in being made by God and mattering to him. Respect should be our basic response, and all deserve to be treated with dignity as God's children (1 Peter 2:17). Jesus said that what we do to others he treats as done to himself (Matthew 25:40). "Respect" in biblical Hebrew means "to bow down." Respect and honor were shown in biblical culture by a physical position. We may not have the elaborate courtesies of some cultures, but we can still explore with students how we show respect today.

It is easy to go through life glancing at the world and seldom stopping to listen, giving superficial thought and attention to our surroundings and to other people. This casual glancing and listening can be the result of an overly stimulated environment, but self-absorption, superficiality, and a lack of respect also can lead to paying little attention to the world, its people, and what they create. We need to cultivate a deeper way of viewing the world so that we look away from self to the object or person seen. We need an attentive, loving gaze and a listening ear.

God can speak through his world (Psalms 19:1) and through the things people make, like music and poems. We need to listen in order to discern whether God's voice can be heard in what we learn.

The first duty of love is to listen. Paul Tillich

Next: Music and Creativity

What if music made children think ...



