

Improvisation as Pedagogy for Youth on the Margins

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Abstract

Creative musical improvisation as a mode of pedagogy is explored in this collaboratively-authored article through a comparative analysis of two case studies: one with special needs children, the other with an alternative high school for at-risk youth. We discuss strategies for developing improvisation *as* pedagogy, and identify new areas of community-based research. Musical improvisation *as* pedagogy yields positive results by fostering vibrant, cohesive communities within these urban youth populations, while increasing self-esteem, self-confidence, leadership, and social skills. An improvisational approach to pedagogy has the potential to engage youth and educators in a learning process that values both individual growth and group cooperation.

Keywords: improvisation, pedagogy, special needs youth, at-risk urban youth, collaboration, institutional/community partnerships, arts festivals.

Introduction

The research presented in this collaboratively-authored paper emerges from a set of community-based outreach activities associated with a large-scale, interdisciplinary project. The project focuses on the social and pedagogical implications of improvised musical practices. Working from the premise that musical improvisation needs to be understood as a crucial model for political, cultural, and ethical dialogue and action, our project seeks to define a new field of interdisciplinary inquiry. It aims to have a significant impact on how research is done and how its results are implemented and

disseminated, both within and beyond the academy. Drawing on creative partnerships with music festivals and community organizations, we developed a series of outreach initiatives to put improvising musicians in direct and meaningful contact with aggrieved urban youth. Experience and theory alike tell us that there is a great deal of potential creative energy among this population; unfortunately, as many of the participants we interviewed have made all-too-clear, marginalized young people often have difficulty realizing this potential due to a lack of access to appropriate resources. It is also clear that young people see value in creative artistic expression as a way of fostering personal and community growth and cohesion.

To what extent, then, might the opportunity to “say who you are,” both as an individual and as a member of a community, and to have this message listened to sympathetically, and responded to both creatively and respectfully, help to advance personal autonomy and group solidarity? To what extent might the opportunity to “play who you are,” through improvised music, give marginalized youth a creative outlet in a supportive and collaborative environment? In addressing these questions, we seek to advance arguments about the kinds of new theoretical and organizational models and practices that might be developed: to create and nurture itinerant-institutional partnerships for teaching improvisation, to codify and share techniques for teaching improvisation, and to articulate theories of education that embed improvisation itself as methodology and pedagogy.

Our article examines the extent to which participation in musical improvisation can bring connectivity, self-awareness, creative thinking, and group cohesion to such populations in need. We discuss two case studies of improvisation workshops—one with a group of special needs children and one with a group of at-risk youth from an alternative high school—in order to examine the impact of improvisation-based music education on urban youth, particularly youth who are considered to be on the margins of the traditional education system due to a variety of physical, developmental, socio-emotional, and learning disabilities and challenges.

Method

RESEARCH METHOD

In keeping with our wider research goals, we want to emphasize the integral role of collaboration in this study: from the beginning, researchers worked hand-in-hand with artist facilitators, youth, teachers, parents, and organizers to design and implement the workshops. We have continued our collaborative and improvisational approach in writing this article by using a wiki interface for contributions by two professors, two PhD students, and one undergraduate student, with backgrounds in Music, English, and Environmental Philosophy. Our writing, like our research, brings into dialogue the diverse voices of the authors and project participants to illuminate unexpected themes and exciting new areas of inquiry. Using a qualitative comparative case study approach (Stake 445), we explored each case using several sources of data collection. Like the expressive lines of a group improvisation, the findings of these two case studies converge and diverge in theme and content. We have worked to articulate these intersecting strands of meaning by recognizing that improvisation emphasizes dialogue and the negotiation of difference. Our goal is to promote understanding about the theory and practice of improvisation-based music education for this youth population.

INTRODUCTION TO THE CASES AND PARTICIPANTS

KidsAbility

KidsAbility is a community-based program that provides children and young adults (birth to 18 years of age) with developmental, physical, and communication disabilities, with appropriate educational, physical, and socio-emotional support. It is a local branch of a larger provincial unit, serving a medium-sized urban centre (and surrounding rural areas) in south-central Ontario, Canada. KidsAbility' services range from occupational therapy and physiotherapy, to social work and therapeutic recreation, as well as assessment, consultation, parental support/education, equipment recommendations, and regular monitoring. Empowering children and youth with

special needs to recognize their full potential by working together with families, schools, and community groups is KidsAbility' main focus.

Give Yourself Credit

Based in the downtown core of the same city, Give Yourself Credit is an alternative high school aimed at providing educational opportunities to at-risk youth aged 16 to 21 years old. The school was established in February 2006, and was created through the collaboration of the local school board and a number of community-service organizations. Give Yourself Credit unites educational opportunities with social, emotional, and medical support for students who have left the traditional school system for various reasons, such as homelessness, abuse (substance, physical, mental, emotional, and sexual), bullying, medical and psychological challenges, expulsion from other local schools, severe family situations, and/or difficulty learning in traditional classroom environments.ⁱ The classroom runs from 9am until 2pm, is staffed by one teacher, one child and youth care worker, an educational assistant, and community volunteers, and is overseen by a principal located off-site.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In both instrumental case studies (Stake 445), research was gathered in four ways: participant observation; open-ended semi-structured interviews with the staff, young people, and artist facilitators; exit surveys; and video-recordings. In the case of KidsAbility, we also interviewed the parents of the young participants, and we recorded the participants' final performance at an international jazz festival.ⁱⁱ Given the significant differences in the case studies, it is important to note that the voices and data gathered varied greatly in type and length; yet, just as in improvisational practice, these differences interact, harmonize, and clash to create a stimulating and revealing dialogue.

KidsAbility

"Play Who You Are" was a series of five workshops and a concert that brought together youth, staff, and parents from KidsAbility, three improvising musicians, an international jazz festival, and a team of six researchers. A preliminary workshop was

held early in July 2008 in order to introduce the KidsAbility clients to the idea of improvisation and to assess their interest. Subsequent workshops were held on two weekends in late August and early September culminating in a performance at the jazz festival. The first three workshops were led by a local musician and educator, Rich Marsella. In the final two workshops and concert, Rich Marsella was joined by New York saxophonist Matana Roberts and improvisation researcher and percussionist Rob Wallace.

Following the preliminary session, three researchers attended each of the workshops: one to observe, one to video-record, and one generally to assist the artists and participants. Ten KidsAbility clients, aged 10 to 16, signed up for the program, with five attending every session, four more attending at least two sessions, and one client participating in one workshop. We conducted in-depth interviews with three students and four parents. All interviews were conducted in September 2008, either in the participants' homes or at KidsAbility. The artists were interviewed both as a group immediately following the performance, and individually.

The interviews included five open-ended questions for the participants and seven for the parents, staff, and artists. These questions addressed the evaluative features (Golstaub 5) of the workshop and concert settings, such as strengths and weaknesses, benefits, and client reactions, as well as analytical factors, such as pedagogical goals, modes of preparation, and tools for teaching improvisation. Both types of questions were developed as lenses through which we could engage with the multidimensional nature of the project and see possible revisions and improvements for future inclusive programming and creative opportunities for special needs youth. While the interviews generally involved standard sets of questions, the group interview with the artist facilitators, held in a restaurant, was less structured. All of the interviews, however, were flexible and often conversational (Kvale; Kim and Taylor), involving the call and response, intense listening, and flow that are characteristic of improvisation (Alterhaug; Bunt).

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, and ranged from 10 to 45 minutes. Keywords were used in the initial research analysis; these keywords

varied among participant groups, and were used to cross-reference within-case and across-case.ⁱⁱⁱ All results were shared with the larger research team for the purpose of identifying similar and divergent themes and executing cross-analysis between the case studies.

Give Yourself Credit

The research for this case study took place during May 2009 at the Give Yourself Credit school, and studied the impact of four, one-hour long in-class improvisation workshops. These hands-on, multi-media workshops were created and facilitated by Rob Wallace, the same improvisation researcher and percussionist who worked with KidsAbility, and emphasized drumming techniques and rhythms (with students having opportunities to use various percussion instruments), musical skill development, group collaboration, and the history and significance of drumming from different cultural and historical perspectives. In preparation for developing the workshops, Rob Wallace and one of the researchers visited the school to get a sense of the classroom space and set-up, the daily activities and routines, and to meet the students and staff. The workshop structure and contents were pre-approved by the Give Yourself Credit teacher whose suggestions were incorporated into the final plan, as well as throughout the workshops.

The research team consisted of three individuals: two observational researchers and one videographer. At the time of the study, there were 12 students who were still regularly attending Give Yourself Credit.^{iv} Ten of these students participated in one or more of the workshops, with five students participating in all four, and three participating in three. Eight of the ten students agreed to be interviewed for this study (including the five students who attended all four workshops), as well as the teacher, the child and youth care worker, and the facilitator, Rob Wallace.

Interviews were conducted in June 2009, with all eight students and two staff members interviewed on-site in the classroom, and Rob Wallace, who was interviewed via email. As with the KidsAbility workshops, “by interviewing persons in various positions of power, we gained multiple perspectives about the school

programme” (Kim and Taylor 210), in order to ensure that the data gathered represented a range of perspectives. The interview schedule consisted of 21 open-ended questions for the students, 12 for the staff, and 13 for the workshop facilitator, with all questions formulated based on the study objectives, the larger project mandates, and pertinent literature. Interviews covered aspects of the workshops such as strengths and weaknesses, benefits, and client reactions, as well as pedagogical goals, tools and techniques for teaching improvisation, and the political and social implications of improvisation-based workshops. The interviews were flexible and often became conversational (Kvale; Kim & Taylor), and were structured around deep listening and call and response practices (Alterhaug; Bunt), increasing participant comfort and allowing for a variance in voices to emerge.

The interviews, ranging from 12 to 33 minutes, were digitally recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed by two members of the research team using keywords identified from the KidsAbility research completed previously. Since the research contexts differed, new keywords were also created and assigned. As the analysis continued, the larger themes and topics emergent from the research were drawn out and used as organizing categories. These themes were shared among the larger research team, and collaboratively collapsed, synthesized, and distilled where appropriate, until all members were satisfied with the analysis categories.

FINDINGS

KidsAbility

Pedagogical approach and workshop structure

KidsAbility routinely links to other community groups and resources in its search to provide positive, inclusive experiences where children and young people of all abilities are able to participate, have fun, learn, and have the kind of opportunities to shine that rarely come to them in school or society. Before beginning the workshops, we asked the managing director of KidsAbility which group of young people she thought could most benefit from improvisation workshops. She told us that when it came to musical opportunities, teenagers are the most neglected group of children

with physical disabilities and developmental delays. They often lack the ability to hold and manipulate an instrument or read a score, skills that are essential in school band classes.^v However, she also wanted to make the opportunity available to a wide range of children. Accordingly, we designed our “Play Who You Are” workshops to accommodate youth from 10 to 18 years of age.

Choosing caring and experienced artists to facilitate the workshops was a high priority. Rich Marsella has a master’s degree in music education, and much experience improvising with large groups of grade four students. We were also able to bring New York based saxophonist Matana Roberts to our community, where she worked with KidsAbility. Given her work using the traditions of jazz and creative improvised music as a medium for storytelling, we felt that she would be an ideal person to draw out the expressive voices of young people.

The workshop participants from KidsAbility live with a variety of physical and developmental challenges such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, and mild to severe autism. As a group, they presented a new challenge to both artists. In the first workshop, Rich Marsella attempted some musical games with the children and invited them to try out the wide variety of home-made instruments he had brought with him. Even a simple sound game involving passing a balloon, however, presented problems, since some of the children were sensitive to latex. Rich Marsella stated frankly that during the first workshop, “all my ideas were flushed down the toilet,” causing him to rethink his strategy. While Rich Marsella had experience working with children with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Tourettes and Asperger Syndrome, he had “never worked with kids who had [extreme] physical disabilities.” He recalls that in the first session “...one of the kids came in and just immediately fell asleep. He was on the wrong medication”, and he also said he “...found it very [difficult]. You don’t know if you’re getting through—you’re speaking but you don’t know if a lot of what you are saying is actually reaching them.”

Adapting to the KidsAbility clients’ needs, for the second workshop Rich Marsella brought in an instrument he calls “the junkyard gamelan.” It consists of long, low frames made out of PVC pipe from which all kinds of sound-making items

may be suspended, such as chimes, pipes, and squeaky toys. The participants sat or lay down on mats and had only to reach out with a stick to hit the items. Three racks allowed all the players to participate at once. In addition, he added percussion instruments, including a brake drum and a kitchen sink (which proved to be a great favorite). Rich Marsella also brought in a large pad of paper and asked everyone for sound-making ideas out of which they would construct a piece. These included “play your shoes,” “scraping,” and a specific rhythmic idea from one boy, “rack note stick stick”—hitting the rack twice, hitting a chime once, then hitting one stick against another twice. Rich Marsella’s inclusive and collaborative strategy was successful in engaging the group since everyone was able to participate.

In order further to alleviate concerns about accessibility and participation, immediately after each workshop, the staff and volunteers sat down with Rich Marsella and gave suggestions for specific adaptation techniques for each participant. This helpful collaboration changed the musical practice of each workshop. For example, Rich Marsella began using pictures rather than words on the score (thereby creating a graphic score), and spent more time on each activity to allow participants the opportunity to focus and to achieve the specific physical gestures needed. He also introduced a bell to sound the change from one musical element to another. In addition, the KidsAbility staff also provided some innovative tools, such as a large stop/go sign and individual laminated cards with the score icons on them. Such adaptations went a long way towards enabling particular children to participate, and greatly enhanced the musical experience and opportunities for musical communication for all involved.

For the last two workshops and the performance, Matana Roberts joined the workshop, along with percussionist Rob Wallace. Although Matana Roberts has extensive experience teaching young people, she had not worked with children with physical disabilities, and confessed that she initially felt some concerns about being able to create a positive experience for this group: “These children have challenges, but I want to make sure that I’m speaking to them as I speak to any of the children that I’ve worked with and that I’m not talking down to them in any way.” Yet, given the adaptations already made through Rich Marsella’s experience with the children

and the suggestions of the KidsAbility staff, Matana Roberts and Rob Wallace were able to adopt these methods and integrate seamlessly into the workshops, while adding their own elements and pedagogical approaches. For students, the key to integrating new artist facilitators was the consistency of Rich Marsella's continued participation in the workshops, as well as the continued use of the graphic score and the junkyard gamelan. Comfortable in this familiar environment, the young people accepted Rob Wallace's playful participation as "one of the band" on the drum kit. Matana Roberts contributed new interactive elements by introducing call and response, dance, and a melodic through-line to the piece: all elements that encouraged individual expression.

Impacts of the workshops

The impacts of the workshops and concert for the KidsAbility clients were numerous, including increased self-esteem, self-expression, and self-confidence, increased ability to listen and focus, and a sense of group cohesion. As one mother stated, "I think the hugest thing might even just be building anyone's self-esteem...I think that's important." One boy who had no previous experience with music, and who was extremely shy and withdrawn, fell in love with the clamorous sound of the kitchen sink (in fact, he could hardly refrain from beating it repeatedly!), and emerged from his shyness to become more engaged with the group. As his father noted, through playing the kitchen sink, his son had the opportunity to increase his self-confidence, and even began looking up during the workshops (a real achievement for him). Recognizing this transformation, the workshop facilitators celebrated the noise and the student's new level of engagement. A young volunteer creatively employed sign language to help the boy know when to stop and go, thus managing what could have seemed a disruptive noise level.

The participants' self-confidence was also demonstrated through their conducting the rest of the group. Every child had the opportunity to conduct (though some chose not to). One boy, who conducted at the final concert, told us that being able to lead was his favourite part of the workshop experience: "I like how I can actually be the boss and go like, 'Do this, do that, this, that. Do this, do that.' I'm tired

of people always ordering me around all the time.” We also learned that one of the older girls who conducted had never before chosen to get up in front of a group in any activity. As one volunteer noted, people with special needs “don’t have a lot of opportunities to be a leader... So having a chance to be up there and stand in front of everyone, and find that people are following them and listening to them... [boosted the participants’] self-confidence.” Finally, as another girl’s mother shared with us, she was surprised that her daughter had such confidence to get up and conduct the group: “I wasn’t sure how she was going to be with that... I thought she was just going to stand, being totally lost. But she absorbed, even though at some point it didn’t seem that she was listening and watching, she absorbed what the instructions were.” The opportunity to conduct proved to be an important component of the workshop by providing a leadership role (an uncommon occurrence for youth with special needs), as well as the opportunity to practice what they had learned during the workshops and to add individual variations and style.

Throughout the workshops, in short, all of the participants shared the impressive ability to focus and rehearse—often for a continuous hour and a half, which according to the staff and parents, was a rare occurrence for these youth—while simultaneously listening to the artists and to each other. Despite the fact that the room contained several researchers and many parents and staff, the players stayed very intent on and engaged with their musical activities, a concentration that extended to the final public performance. We were initially concerned about the public performance. Not wishing to force this component on the children, we had emphasized the workshops as a fun chance to participate in improvisational music, an end in itself, with the concert as an optional extra, should the participants be interested.^{vi} Yet, surprising to our team, all of the kids and their parents were completely excited about being part of the concert, were motivated to prepare for it, and did not seem fazed by the unfamiliar situation of being on stage, amid equipment, technicians, and a sizable audience. As one parent explained, he thought that the relaxed and unpressured atmosphere created by the artist facilitators allowed the young people not only to gain the confidence to perform in public, but also to focus intently on their music-making: “[During the performance] they were really more themselves, and you know, they were able to focus.” In the end, the final performance

went extremely well and was very positively received. The youthful performers not only showed tremendous confidence, but they also displayed great listening and focus skills throughout the performance.

Finally, the workshops also fostered a sense of group camaraderie and cohesion. According to the staff organizer, feelings of collectivity are not always apparent in other educational and extra-curricular programs involving special needs kids: “Because of the communication difficulties and because of social difficulties, they may be in inclusive environments at school or with other programs, but they’re not always really part of the group. They don’t experience that sense of group cohesiveness as often, and sometimes rarely, compared to what kids without disabilities do, and so I felt like [during the workshops and performance] we were a group, and I really think that they did too.” One parent noted that the sense of group cohesion among the youth also extended to the KidsAbility staff and parents, the university researchers, and the jazz festival. Such collaborative partnerships go a long way towards counteracting negative stereotypes and increasing acceptance of special needs children and teens: “As a society we need to come back to not doing those judgments . . . I think when you do start with the connections—University, KidsAbility, and the Jazz Festival—and people see that more often, I think that people will appreciate the value that these people have to offer to the community.” The Play Who You Are workshops set the stage for the youth to be able to express themselves and form a group identity that carried forward into the performance, allowing them truly to become an ensemble.

Give Yourself Credit

Pedagogical approach and workshop structure

Following Paul Haack’s understanding that music “is a multifaceted human behaviour which can fulfill many vital needs” (139), and building on the success of our previous workshops with KidsAbility, we endeavoured to extend our mandates of outreach and community-based research to work with other aggrieved youth groups in the city. When we approached the Give Yourself Credit program about a possible collaboration to bring improvisational workshops to at-risk youth in an alternative

high school setting, the teacher and staff were very supportive, and they worked with our project members to embed these workshops within the group-curriculum piece offered to the students.^{vii} After meeting with the Give Yourself Credit teacher, and hearing about the social, emotional, educational, and musical backgrounds of the student cohort, we agreed that a percussion-based workshop format would be most appropriate, as the majority of the students did not have a musical background, and they had responded positively in the past to a hand-drum-based activity in the school.

Working with the Give Yourself Credit staff and Rob Wallace, the artist facilitator, and given the learning and socio-emotional challenges of the student group, we jointly decided that for this first iteration it would be best to start with four offerings, one per week, and to keep the workshops to one hour in length. The main focus of the workshops was to provide musical enrichment for the students within a format that celebrated individual self-expression through improvisation. The Give Yourself Credit staff provided valuable input throughout the process, offering suggestions to ensure that the structure and content of the workshop were appropriate for the students and resonated with school and provincial goals and mandates. Rob Wallace's overall goal "was to get the students playing music in some form, whether through drumming, singing, etc., with a high priority on group participation and listening." Similarly, the staff valued the opportunity for students to have hands-on drumming experience.

For each workshop, Rob Wallace brought a full drum kit for demonstration, as well as enough percussion instruments and hand drums for all the students to try multiple instruments throughout the sessions and to practice various techniques. At the beginning of each workshop, Rob Wallace started off with a name game. Participants had to go around the room, and come up with a nickname for themselves (such as "Radical Rob"), but before they stated their nickname, they had to repeat the nicknames of all other participants, while Rob Wallace riffed on the drum kit. This exercise was hugely popular, and invoked a great deal of laughter as everyone struggled to remember the names and come up with a nickname.

During each of the four workshops, Rob Wallace drew on many activities

from Rich Marsella Stevens' book *Search and Reflect*, such as clapping and counting exercises, as he found that they were a good starting point for people with or without musical background, but were complex enough to continue to use over the course of four sessions. Rob Wallace explained, "The key to getting these [activities] to work...is that everyone could do them in some form almost immediately. They contain the essential elements of all good music-making—pulse/rhythm, listening, etc—but they are simple enough that you don't even need an instrument to do them. All you have to be able to do is count to two and clap!" Each workshop built on the previous one in complexity of the musical exercise, the rhythmic requirements, and the skills and techniques on the various percussion instruments, particularly hand drums. In addition, Rob Wallace also included multi-media aspects, showing video clips of various drumming and percussion sessions, as well as facilitating exercises that emphasized listening to fellow class participants and to the larger soundscape (both inside and out of the classroom).

The students responded very positively to the structure and content of the workshops, sharing that they were "really, really fun to do. A neat experience," and that the workshops made them feel excited about attending school: "[The workshops were] relaxing and kinda fun so it was like, 'Oh yeah, we have drum circle today. Let's go to school!'" An active desire to attend school is a very positive response for students who have often felt alienated from educational environments and one that fostered great excitement within the group. The staff also shared many of the students' responses to the workshops, stating that "it was fantastic. The students were very engaged...there was some excellent feedback...All the students were involved."

Impacts of the workshops

Students and staff at Give Yourself Credit both identified positive benefits of the workshops that ranged from increased self-confidence and self-expression, to increased group cohesion and the development of various social skills, to breaking down social and emotional barriers in the classroom. According to the students, the workshops increased their self-confidence because there is no "right" or "wrong" way to play improvised music. As one student stated, one of the best parts of the

workshop was “being able to make my own part of something instead of just going with whatever.” For another student, one of the more positive results of the workshop was the realization “that I can do it, [and] I never even tried it before.”

Through the musical opportunities and the non-judgmental and fun environment created by Rob Wallace, the workshops allowed students to express themselves without having to use words. For several students, this was something of a revelation: it allowed them to witness changes not only in themselves, but also, significantly, in their classmates. As one student explained, watching her friend participate for the first time in a group activity and enjoy herself was a big event: “She’s totally like really hard on herself and down on the dumps a lot, and while we were doing those workshops, I actually saw her smile a couple times and she was happy, and it was like wow!” From the staff’s perspective, there were significant changes in the ways in which students were interacting, particularly when it came to drawing out the students’ self-expression through musical participation: “I mean sure when they first got the drums, some of them didn’t want to touch it and they weren’t very open with expressing themselves. In the end, I don’t think any of them were being shy about expressing themselves with it.” As one student explained, “I thought it was really fun to be able to express how I feel and be able to play the music and not have anyone judge me.”

In part because of the changes in student self-confidence and self-expression, staff and students also noticed an increase in group cohesion and camaraderie. These changes reportedly continued after the workshops were completed: “I think that during the workshop we seemed to...I don’t want to use the word bond, but it was like a bonding experience. We all got along and there was no fighting or anything like that.” In fact, many students noted that during the workshops, “everyone got along really well and there wasn’t much bickering or anything. Usually in things there’s always bickering,” and “everyone was smiling and laughing”—a change, which according to the students, brought them a little bit closer. For the staff, this increase in group cohesion was an incredibly positive addition to the classroom environment, because it gave the students a strong sense of community, and a new form of group acceptance.

Additionally, staff and students pointed to several social skills developed through the workshops. For example, one staff member stated that “I think they learned a lot of group work and social skills and behaving and team work.” For the staff at Give Yourself Credit, one of the most important skills fostered by the workshops was “working as a team...and not doing it in isolation.” Students also noted an increased ability to focus and listen more deeply, not only to the music, but to each other. As one student shared, during the workshops, she listened more attentively than she normally did: “I would listen where before I’d just kinda think this isn’t interesting, I’m not listening. But I listened to everything, everything [Rob Wallace] said. And I do that now more so with [my teacher].” Another student in the class spoke about the impact of the deep listening techniques on her own practice of problem-solving as a mother: “[The listening exercises] have helped my own parenting. I’m actually able to sit and listen to my children and they’ll say, ‘Okay, this is what is happening,’ and I’ll be like, ‘Okay, this is what I can do to help.’ It made me a better listener.” According to the teacher, these social skills are vital lessons for the students, and are helpful and important not only within an educational setting, but also within future life situations, such as employment and family and social settings.

For both staff and students, social and emotional barriers within the classroom broke down during the workshops. As one student suggested to us, making music together as a group changed the regular social dynamics of the class: “I suppose everybody just had to go at like the same time, like [with the] rhythm of whatever it was, [it was] kind of funny I guess, because everybody had to go on like the same wave length.” The opportunity to participate in workshops which placed everyone as equal partners in the process created an environment in which students felt comfortable, confident, and relaxed. After our Give Yourself Credit workshops, we found students and teachers alike commenting that the open, friendly, and non-judgmental attitude of the workshops led to new levels of involvement and participation not normally experienced by these young people in school.

Both the KidsAbility and Give Yourself Credit workshops demonstrate that improvisation-based music education workshops have great potential benefits for young people. Furthermore, these workshops and the research emergent from this

work have provided a framework to examine the ways in which a “play who you are” improvisation *as* pedagogy approach can engage aggrieved urban youth. It is to this theme that we now turn.

Discussion: Improvisation *as* Pedagogy

In creating positive musical opportunities for urban youth who exist on the margins of the educational system for a variety of social, emotional, psychological, and physical reasons, it is important to consider both the social context and the particular cohort of participants, and understand that music is not only embedded within these contexts, but is itself a social praxis (Regelski, “Curriculum Reform”). Indeed, according to David Lines, there

appears to be growing awareness among people involved in music study, theory, performance and research in the idea that music is intrinsically entwined with human affairs, with the aims and desires of cultural expression, and with instances of human power, freedom, dominance, control, and resistance. These potentially democratic concerns about music include interest in the musical activity of marginalised communities. (1)

Thus, within this understanding, the value of any form of music education must also be measured by its ability to make a difference in the lives of individual participants, as well as to add value to the larger social and political contexts in which those individuals operate (Regelski, “Music and Music Education”).

It is clear from our research with aggrieved urban youth that musical improvisation *as* pedagogy does yield positive results by fostering vibrant, cohesive communities within these youth populations, while increasing self-esteem, self-confidence, leadership, and social skills. An improvisational approach to pedagogy has the potential to engage youth and educators in a learning process that values both individual growth and group cooperation.

Further, we want to emphasize that the workshops were learning experiences in cooperation, adaptation, and listening for artist facilitators, teachers, volunteers, and researchers as well as for the student participants. Successful improvisation is predicated on democratic exchange and mutual trust (Lewis) so that improvisation *as* pedagogy represents a significant shift away from traditional hierarchical modes of

pedagogy. For our experienced artist facilitators, conducting these workshops and working with a new population of students helped them to articulate their values, refine their methods, and meet their own limitations, while simultaneously demonstrating innovative strategies for classroom teaching and music curricula.

Many of the community organizations working with aggrieved youth face very limited budgets and resources, and the opportunities for arts-based education, including hands-on musical experience, are virtually impossible without community support and partnership with other organizations. Because improvisation as pedagogy is by definition collaborative, it models co-operation at all levels from individual interaction to institutional partnerships.

LESSONS LEARNED

One of our research goals is to codify the particular benefits of improvisation as pedagogy, and eventually to make specific strategies available to other artists, teachers and therapists. Responding to workshops with French street youth led by William Parker and Cooper-Moore, Carsalade, Tesler, and Pierrepont have identified four crucial aspects of successful improvisation pedagogy:

- a. *The importance of individual expression within a group setting;*
- b. *Instrumental work as a process of personal growth;*
- c. *The importance of collective and cooperative work;* and
- d. *The importance of authority in the process of transmission*

While we agree in the main with these findings, our own research suggests that “authority in the process of transmission” may be less important than fostering a model of democratic exchange. To be sure, improvisational artist teachers such as Parker and Cooper-Moore are legendary for their knowledge and charisma— what Carsalade et al term “eccentric authority.” However, if improvisation is to be a widely available pedagogy, it cannot rely on a small number of internationally respected artist teachers. Our research suggests that the key to improvisation as pedagogy is creative collaboration among artist facilitators and community organizations, staff,

volunteers, parents and students. Accordingly, our workshops with KidsAbility and Give Yourself Credit suggest that there are many additional lessons to be learned from improvisation as pedagogy:

- e. *The importance of context*: given the diverse participants and needs of both research sites, we could not use the same format and techniques between the workshop series or from workshop to workshop within each case study. Knowledge of both the context and the participants was crucial. Collaboration with the staff, students, and parents helped us to create appropriate, accessible, and meaningful musical and educational opportunities;
- f. *The importance of clear goals and expectations*: from both case studies, feedback indicated that, while everyone enjoyed the freshness and flexibility of an improvisational approach, the staff and youth participants would at times have benefitted from clearer goals and expectations for the workshops. Give Yourself Credit teachers had obligations to report to their board, and to meet provincial curricular mandates. High flexibility within a clear structure creates a workable environment for improvisation as pedagogy;
- g. *The importance of play and compassion*: playfulness is an excellent strategy of identification with young people that invites an open response to new sounds, especially when combined with humour and a compassionate and non-judgmental approach. Many respondents cited the friendly and approachable attitudes of the facilitators and the researchers as a key to the success of the workshops.
- h. *The importance of listening and responding*: while improvisation as a form of musical practice and pedagogy is implicitly interactive, it is important to emphasize that for the facilitators of such workshops, listening and responding to each individual in the group is of the utmost importance. Given that these workshops were working with young people who experience a variety of physical, developmental, and emotional difficulties, it is important that the facilitators be mindful that occasionally the changeable and noisy atmosphere of the workshops can cause stress and distress in some students. For example, Matana Roberts's saxophone proved to be very loud for two young girls in the KidsAbility workshop, and she immediately responded by stuffing her neck scarf in the bell as

a mute. Thereafter, it became a kind of joke between the teacher and students, the girls covering their ears but giggling too. Facilitators need to respond quickly to these situations, and find alternative ways to engage these students and alleviate particular anxieties;

- i. *The importance of hands-on opportunities throughout the entirety of the workshops:* for both case studies, the staff, students, and parents all emphasized the power of providing youth the opportunity to play various sorts of instruments that were appropriate and adapted to their specific context, skills, abilities, and needs. Our hands-on approach also provided the opportunity for the participants to discover alternative ways to deal with the myriad social, emotional, and physical issues with which they are faced on a daily basis;
- j. *The importance of consistency:* features such as the workshop length, artist-facilitator presence, call and response activities, regular hands-on experience with familiar instruments, and a record of musical instructions are invaluable to establishing comfortable relations and clear expectations among all participants: youth, staff, artists, and parents (where they are involved). Such consistent elements allow participants to feel more confident about their contributions to the project while not barring the possibility of adaptations and additions;
- k. *The importance of effective, accommodating, and continuous communication:* on-going communication was one of the keys to running successful workshops, as it not only allowed our facilitators to adapt to the needs of each group, but it also allowed the staff, parents and students the opportunity to have their voices heard and to impact the workshops in a dynamic, creative, and on-going manner;
- l. *The importance of leadership opportunities for the participants:* in both workshops, the participants, staff, and parents all cited that the opportunity to take leadership roles throughout the workshops was an incredibly powerful and enjoyable opportunity for these youth. The opportunity to move away from an exclusionary model of music-making, towards a more inclusionary process where each participant could lead the group, challenged the students to value themselves as able participants while equally respecting the abilities of those around them;
- m. *The importance of adaptation and flexibility:* we need to learn continuously from

youth, parents, and teachers in order to adapt our pedagogical strategies to suit the specific needs of individuals or groups, particularly when working with aggrieved and marginalized youth. In particular, we found that a multi-media approach, uniting visual, aural, oral, and tactile methods for all activities was especially important and effective;

- n. *The importance of understanding improvisation-based music education as embedded within larger social and political contexts:* music-making does not take place in isolation and carries diverse meanings for participants. The respectful negotiation of difference is one of the crucial lessons of improvisation, as well as an understanding of the socio-political impacts, meanings, and new avenues of inquiry inherent within an improvisation as pedagogy approach.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IMPACTS OF IMPROVISATION AS PEDAGOGY

Through our research with both KidsAbility and Give Yourself Credit, we have identified three exciting areas of further inquiry: wider social and political impacts, ongoing resonance in young peoples' lives, and a deeper analysis of improvisation across a variety of vectors.

Even though the majority of participants had no previous improvisation experience before the workshops, during their interviews many expressed strong ideas about the broader impact of improvisation. As one Give Yourself Credit student explained, improvisation was “a chance to try something new” and was “like a random spontaneous spur of moment type thing...like I dunno, starting with something random and just continually growing with it.” Other Give Yourself Credit students felt that an understanding of improvisation may be translated into political and social situations, because “it’s all about being courteous and waiting your turn kinda thing. Maybe it should be put in political [situations]” and is something that can connect with “everyday life.” Building on this understanding of listening and waiting your turn, another student respondent commented that “if people talked the way they had drummed in improvisation, then I think the world would be...a lot nicer in life.” Obviously, improvisation is not an educational cure-all, but rather one potential

avenue among many to begin to engage aggrieved youth and their educators and support staff in dialogue around larger political and social issues such as access and democracy. We need to think more carefully about strategies for drawing more explicit links between musical improvisation and social relations.

From the perspective of one of our facilitators, “improvisation is a universal, life practice that allows humans to survive in a world of constantly changing situations. So of course teaching improvisation would naturally help students in a variety of situations...everyone improvises.” Building on this, one of the KidsAbility parents explained that through improvisation as pedagogy, “kids have the freedom to be independent and to do that on their own, to just know that whatever they’re doing is not wrong. That’s what I think improvisation is, and I think it’s giving kids a valuable outlet to just be who they want to be when they’re playing this. ...[I]t is a form of music that these kids can fully inclusively partake in.” Finally, as the Give Yourself Credit facilitator commented, “by having students actually practice improvising—be it musically, orally, etc.—you can get them to confront issues of interpersonal relationships, listening, collaboration and decision making, etc.—because...improvisation always implies more than one person.” Such comments suggest that we need to track the ongoing resonance of the workshops in order to see whether they have sustained benefits in participants’ lives. How can we make the link between musical improvisation and learning specific social skills more explicit?

What happens when improvisation as pedagogy fails? This may be as frustratingly simple as sticks that were too short for a KidsAbility participant to easily manipulate the junkyard gamelan (a detail that the student wasn’t able to communicate and that went unnoticed until a parent mentioned it after the fact), or as emotionally complex as a female Give Yourself Credit student who felt inhibited in the face of improvising and thus inadequate compared to fellow students. We need both to codify and to make available successful techniques for teaching improvisation, and we need to understand how best to embed improvisation in a variety of educational contexts. For this reason, one of our long-term goals is to create a free online “improvisation tool kit” for educators, but additionally, we need to better understand the particular needs and constraints faced by educational

institutions and community groups. We also need to create tools for analysing the impacts of vectors such as race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, ability, and gender on the effectiveness of improvisation as pedagogy. Although we collected gender and ethnicity data in our study, we have not yet developed an analysis of these factors and thus did not include them here.

Panagiotis Kanellopoulos has argued that in order “for improvisation to become a flourishing practice and an edifying experience within music education settings, teachers need to...be prepared to follow messy pathways of present-tense exploration...They need as well to become comfortable functioning as co-musicians rather than as instructors, learning how to follow the students’ intentions and preserving openness, both in musical actions and discussions” (100). Breaking down such received hierarchies, as any educator will attest, is no easy task, but if we remain committed to the notion that students should play an active role in the educational process, and that teachers and students are both simultaneously learners and knowledge-producers, then improvisation, as the data from our research suggests, may offer us a resonant and vibrant pedagogical model.

Conclusion

It is our hope that the research presented here will help to spark a growing recognition among music educators about the extent to which community-based outreach initiatives in urban contexts might be understood as powerful sites of pedagogical intervention. Max Wyman suggests that

engagement with artistic creativity develops the ability to think creatively in ways that significantly enlarge the educational experience. It encourages the flexible, nuanced thinking that will be an essential requirement of any innovative response to the challenges we face. It makes us see our world in fresh ways, encourages suppleness of mind. Doubt is cast on our most comfortable perceptions. We learn the art of adaptability. (7)

While Wyman does not speak specifically about music or about improvisation here, many of his assertions about art’s ability to foster an openness to different points of view, its insistence on educating us for uncertainty, and its capacity “to change attitudes, to foster the mutual respect that will help ensure a more peaceful world” (82), are akin to claims that have been made about improvisational musical practice.

Both encourage social mobility for members of subordinated social groups and offer innovative ways to trouble the assumptions (and the expectations of fixity) fostered by institutionalized systems of representation (Heble 94-95).

Improvisation as pedagogy, in short, speaks directly to the risks we need to take in music education and in life in order to create opportunities for change. It can, moreover, play an important role in cultivating resources for hope. “One of the tasks of the progressive educator,” writes Paulo Freire, “is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be” (9). We find hope in the willingness of some (and, indeed, a growing number of) music educators to develop innovative participatory pedagogies to enhance student engagement. After all, when students become active participants in the production of knowledge—as is possible through improvisation-based music education experiences—rather than passive recipients of information, they model new kinds of relationships, and they become engaged and curious listeners; they begin, in effect, to hear and to play the world anew. These new levels of attentiveness, as the case studies discussed here make clear, lead to achievements of insight, social cooperation, and understanding, as well as to an openness to unexpected outcomes and encounters by *saying* and *playing* who they are.

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- ⁱ The students registered in Give Yourself Credit have numerous documented issues such as learning disabilities, ADD/ADHD, Bi-Polar Disorder, depression, Schizophrenia, phobias, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, Oppositional Defiance Disorder, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, dyslexia, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Conduct Disorder, self-harming disorders, Eating Disorders, and social-emotional problems.
- ⁱⁱ Previous to being interviewed, all participants were informed of the purpose of the study. The interviews were voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time. All research adhered to an internal university ethics approval, as well as to the review processes for both organizations.
- ⁱⁱⁱ In the KidsAbility research, keywords varied somewhat among the interviewed groups, depending on the abilities and/or preoccupations of each group. For example, the limited verbal communication skills of the KidsAbility youth meant that the interviews were shorter and coded for a few keywords. The parent interviews were considerably more detailed and were analyzed for seven terms, while the staff member and volunteer interviews involved fourteen keywords.
- ^{iv} At the beginning of the school year, there were 17 students registered—and a waiting list of similar size—but for a variety of reasons, six of those students left the program throughout the year.
- ^v In earlier years, when music is introduced orally through simple songs, rhythms, and body movements, differently-abled children have more opportunities to participate, but as the music education progresses, and moves to the teaching of band instruments (usually by 13 or 14 years old in Canada and the United States), these children are excluded.
- ^{vi} We were prepared in case the children did not want to perform, and would have proceeded with a concert featuring the three artists in the scheduled timeslots.
- ^{vii} Students at Give Yourself Credit do much of their work on a one-to-one basis with the teacher in order to allow them to follow their own pace and curricular needs.

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