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Music education as a tool to improve socio-emotional and intercultural health within adverse contexts in El Salvador

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Abstract

Educators must address emotional, affective, social and intercultural health, taking into account learners' specific cultural and economic context in their teaching. This article discusses the experience in la Comunidad Iberia in San Salvador (El Salvador), one of the most conflict-ridden areas in the country. Here, educators created a music education program as a tool to prevent violence and improve the students' socio-emotional health. This group's lives had been characterized by affective, economic, emotional and intercultural deprivation, which prompted feelings of disdain for their own culture. The process followed led them to consider music as an instrument to improve their social, affective and cultural relationships.

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1. Introduction

Music forges a path toward emotional understanding through activities such as auditory comprehension of the composer's emotions, or improvisation, which commits the learner to listening to the other. We can consider this music education process to be comprehensive since it implies the transmission of fundamental values that allow learners to view musical work as a cultural and emotional product.

Artistic cultural production (Bernabé, 2015) cannot be considered something individual, since it encompasses elements brought in from other time periods and other cultures. From this perspective, art can be understood as a tool

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for intercultural citizenship, allowing individuals to be in touch with their own emotions and at the same time with those of their peers. That said, when working in socially disadvantaged groups we have to ask ourselves what educational, social and emotional priorities should be set for learners: Do they need to first receive intercultural training? Will the exercise foster a positive cultural self-concept? This article argues that music education based on intercultural education principles will allow an improved self-concept and self-image and thus contribute to positive socio-emotional—and hence intercultural—health, given the principles emphasized during the project.

Thus, the main aim of this study is to use the experience gained in El Salvador to demonstrate that music education can improve the socio-emotional health of students and promote intercultural understanding in a classroom of young people at high risk of social exclusion. We perceived it to be very necessary to attain this intercultural situation given the loss of cultural identity apparent in Salvadoran society, so damaged by conflict and its economic and political situation.

2. The Republic of El Salvador, Central America

El Salvador has the highest rate of deaths and “disappearances” worldwide (Acevedo, 2008), which undoubtedly affects the world view of students and their families.

The country’s civil war brought with it massacres and torture of the civilian population, a strategy the Salvadoran military implemented to intimidate civilians and destabilize any external attempts at intervention (Zúñiga, 2010). The aftermath of the war is still visible in the overwhelming number of broken families; the high rate of migration, illiteracy and poverty; and the scarce attention paid to the importance of the educational process. Beyond these factors, the war’s consequences have also had an impact on how the student body understands life and death, its apprehension regarding education, and a detachment from family. Together, these circumstances drive many into the hands of gangs, or maras (Moratalla, 1990). Children raised in an environment characterized by an absence of parental figures, physical and psychological abuse, and both financial and nutritional scarcity—in short, children with negative socio-emotional health—can easily fall into delinquency, abuse and physical aggression in order to defend themselves from a society that has mistreated them. Juvenile violence is the sad reality that the country lives as a result of its recent history and the lack of positive and adequate socio-emotional health. Certainly, dealing with intercultural education is seemingly inaccessible for this particular demographic.

3. Music education as an educational tool to achieve health and interculturality

In this context, Salvadoran students from regions such as Comunidad Iberia of San Salvador need an educational model based on prevention. The pedagogy developed at the Instituto Técnico Obrero Empresarial Don Bosco (Don Bosco Technical Worker Business Institute) of the Polígono Industrial Don Bosco (Don Bosco Industrial Park, a center that develops musical education activities), was based on several principles, including: increased classroom time, consisting of service by educators to the student body within the same schedule and of artistic activities (among them, the activities included in this paper); plus diverse meetings and psychological attention to reduce and eliminate conduct that negatively impacts personal and social development.

As of 2010, thanks to the Polígono Industrial Don Bosco’s initiative, art classes were introduced to minors at risk of exclusion (Bernabé, 2014a). This initiative helped them to improve their self-image, and to understand that they had a right to artistic beauty; their socio-emotional health improved as they realized that the rest of the country valued them as they deserved. These were the individual objectives achieved with this experience. From there, the Polígono’s student body required systemization, structure, order and rigor in the educational process, in order to extrapolate the values transmitted through musical activities and apply them to their socio-affective development outside of the classroom. Thus, among the musical objectives, the project focused on achieving the following within this group of students:

- A reduction in violent behavior and conduct towards their peers, by means of respect toward peers’ turns to perform.
- An increased appreciation toward their peers for their contributions (intellectual, social, cultural, affective, etc.), by means of creating body percussion movements to accompany the songs.

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