Practices to Support Community-Engaged Music Education for Youth

This evidence brief summarizes practices to support inclusive, equitable, authentic, and respectful community-engaged music education for youth.

HOW DID WE COMPILE THIS EVIDENCE?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using combinations of the following key terms: "advocacy", "after-school music programming", "anti-racism", "arts-based programming", "arts education", "community development", "community engagement", "community renewal", "community-based art programs", "contexts of inequity", "culturally responsive pedagogy", "empowerment", "equity", "hip-hop pedagogy", "informal music learning", "learner-centered", "music education", "music pedagogy", "music teacher education", "parent participation", "resilience", "social capital", "social justice", "student-centered", and "transformative music engagement".

Youth exist within contexts, including the program space (whether physical or virtual), the family (defined by each young person), and the community. Parents, caregivers, and families can be intentionally and meaningfully engaged by programs, and they also exist within the context of the community, which serves as the context for the program itself.

The following summarizes **inclusive, equitable, authentic, and respectful engagement practices** for youth music education programs, focusing on:

A) **youth;**

B) **parents/caregivers and families;** and

C) **community.**

DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

Community engagement is a process of public participation and involvement that promotes relationship building through learning, action, and the expression of needs and values.[1]

Inclusive engagement means ensuring that all members of a community are included and heard. It requires programs to identify barriers to engagement and to allocate time and resources to ensuring accessibility – for example, by providing food and transportation, hosting sessions in an accessible physical space, offering community members different ways to participate, etc.

Equitable engagement is the process of recognizing and addressing power imbalances by intentionally providing community members experiencing marginalization with opportunities to participate and lead. To be equitable, engagement must be "an ongoing, two-way process" that focuses on relationship building, collaboration, and the sharing of power.[2]

Authentic engagement is "not just about listening to people", but about "hearing people and valuing what you hear."[3] The goal of authentic engagement is to work *with* community members, rather than *for* or *on behalf* of them.[4] Programs should focus on building strong relationships, fostering trust, and working toward long-term goals.

Respectful engagement is rooted in listening, a willingness to learn, and an appreciation for diversity. It is critical to understand that respect means different things to different people, and to be able to show respect for ideas, beliefs, and practices that may be different from our own.

KEY MESSAGE:
BE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE

Being **culturally responsive** requires practitioners to both be aware of cultural factors and to respond to those factors appropriately.[5] Culturally responsive youth programs consider how to include the diverse cultures of participants and their families in the design, development, and implementation of programming and interventions. In doing so, programs can "demonstrate respect, build on the strengths of the culture, and attend to clients in the contexts of their social environments, including culture."[5] Programs should prioritize cultural responsiveness in their engagement of youth, parents/caregivers/families, and community.

Culturally responsive pedagogy (or culturally relevant pedagogy) – critical to the success of music programs for youth experiencing marginalization[6] – is a student-centered approach to learning that draws on "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them."[7+8] In this case, culture refers to a broader set of values than those traditionally associated with race and ethnicity. To be culturally responsive, practitioners must get to know and understand their participants to make decisions about *what* and *how* to teach.[9]

A) SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: SEVEN PRACTICES TO ENGAGE YOUTH

01. UNDERSTAND YOUTH IN TERMS OF THEIR STRENGTHS, ASSETS, AND EXCELLENCE

Programs can better serve youth by adopting a strength-based approach and recognizing their assets. This differs significantly from the deficit-based approach that many programs adopt, especially in urban communities experiencing marginalization.[10] Rather than seeing young people as problems that need to be managed, this *positive youth development approach* "recognizes youth as resources that need further development."[11] Music educators can disrupt deficit narratives by recognizing young people's musical knowledge and skills (*see #3, below*), which may be overlooked in traditional band and choir music programming.

02. EXPAND THE MUSIC REPERTOIRE TO INCLUDE NON-WESTERN MUSIC

A culturally responsive repertoire can affirm participants' cultural identities and expand their musical horizons,[12] as well as foster long-term engagement with music.[13] Music educators should go beyond traditional Western repertoires to teach a wide range of genres, incorporating different notational practices and instruments. This can signal to youth that "differences are welcome (thus, they are welcome) and that this content is worthy of our time, energy, and effort to study."[9]

Provide a sociocultural and sociohistorical context for *all* music, including Western music, as presenting classical music without context naturalizes it.[14] Be sure to share "more than dates of composition and the name of the culture" but also "why music was created and for whom."[15] This teaches young people to think critically

about which stories have been prioritized and who is missing from the repertoire; it can help them to "develop skills to challenge systems, material, and media that exclude their lived experiences."[15] Putting music in context can also help youth to connect music to their own lived experience.

03. FOSTER AN ENVIRONMENT THAT VALUES YOUTH'S MUSICAL INTERESTS AND KNOWLEDGE

Programs that are responsive to young people's needs may encourage participation and promote youth wellbeing.[6] Effective programs focus on motivation and engagement rather than simple curriculum delivery;[13] they acknowledge young people's expertise and embrace their interests to create engaging and relevant pedagogy.

Practitioners should **recognize the cultural capital that grows out of young people's unique sociocultural landscapes** and incorporate genres that resonate with their lived experiences.[16] Recognize youth as 'students-teachers'[17] by valuing the musical knowledge, skills, and preferences that they bring to the classroom or program space.[10] This requires flexibility and openness to exploring different topics, such as improvisation, popular music history, and technology.[10]

Draw on the musical practices that youth engage in outside of formal settings, such as producing hip-hop tracks and playing in drum circles.[15] Consider using formal and informal learning strategies and both written notation and aural learning.[15] For example, some programs have effectively incorporated hip-hop into pedagogy to promote youth engagement, raise consciousness, and make learning more meaningful.[18,19]

04. MEET YOUTH 'WHERE THEY ARE AT', AND PROVIDE SUPPORTS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Practitioners should be familiar with young people's backgrounds, communities, home lives, and first languages/languages spoken at home, and use this information to develop programming that is responsive to each of their unique needs, challenges, and resources.[20] Consider barriers youth may face and offer support to address these challenges – for instance, by being mindful of transportation needs, financial barriers, time, and languages. Recognize that youth may have many competing demands on their time and commit to being flexible and open-minded.[21]

It may be helpful to develop 'progression pathways', which "help youth cross the divide between initial interest and long-term engagement."[22] A progression pathway allows young people to comfortably explore and deepen their engagement based on their skill and interest level; for example, activities may range from music 'taster' workshops to professional recording sessions.[22]

05. MAKE SPACE FOR CREATIVE SELF-EXPRESSION

Programs that allow youth to express themselves through music may be more effective in engaging youth in urban communities experiencing marginalization. Programs should consider incorporating music-making activities that allow young people to reflect on their experiences and create empowering narratives.[6,23,24] Providing opportunities for youth to create and record or perform their own music can foster a sense of dignity, self-worth, and empowerment that can lead to positive changes in young people's lives.[24]

06. BUILD TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

It is critical to recognize the value of relationships between practitioners and youth as a "prerequisite to engaged and meaningful learning" in urban communities experiencing marginalization.[10] Youth may access mentors and trusted adults to "negotiate their paths through systemic racism and racial discrimination, isolation, [and] lack of socio-economic opportunities."[11] Youth who participate in community programs experience protective factors that support their engagement and an increased aptitude for resilience.[11] Positive relationships with adult allies are critical to support youth with "their current needs, challenges, and barriers", as well as in identifying and building on their strengths.[11]

Programs should hire "flexible, creative, and musically eclectic music educators who are able to listen, honor, and incorporate students' voices."[10] Staff must be 'real' (authentic) and invested in building trusting relationships with youth. Programs can support this work with low staff turnover, which can be achieved by ensuring staff are satisfied with work conditions and are offered opportunities for professional development.[25,26,27]

07. HOLD HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR YOUTH

In urban communities experiencing marginalization, *the violence of low expectations* undermines young people's notions what is possible in their education and careers.[28] Practitioners should hold high expectations for youth and believe in their capacity to overcome barriers, and to draw on their unique lived experience to become better musicians – "ones who [push] the boundaries of music, [are] willing to move and groove, and mix diverse sounds and styles together; ones who [use] music to communicate, to tell stories of personal and community struggle, and offer ways forward."[10]

B) SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: FOUR PRACTICES TO ENGAGE PARENTS/ CAREGIVERS & FAMILIES

01. INCLUDE AND RECOGNIZE PARENTS/ CAREGIVERS AS VALUED PARTNERS AND CONTRIBUTORS

Practitioners often believe they know what will work best for families, but relying on assumptions or past experiences can sometimes reinforce stereotypes.[29] To build successful partnerships, ask parents/caregivers *how* they want to be engaged, listen to what they have to say, and recognize their expertise.[30,31] Programs can counter *the violence of low expectations* that affects youth and families in communities experiencing marginalization by providing "mechanisms for engagement that are more responsive to the contexts and benefits for these families."[30+31]

02. INTERROGATE YOUR BELIEFS AND ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT PARENTING/ CAREGIVING AND FAMILIES

Be mindful of the ways that culture impacts your perceptions of parenting/caregiving and families. Cultivating awareness about how our cultural lens influences our communication with families – and the assumptions we hold about how they should engage – can help us become more nonjudgmental and more effective collaborators.[29]

Unpack your assumptions, stereotypes, and biases around what meaningful engagement may look like in practice,[30,31] especially in urban communities affected by systemic inequities. Interrogate any assumptions you may hold about the impacts of family composition (e.g., two-parent vs. lone-parent families)

and material wealth on a child's potential for success.[29] Adopt culturally responsive approaches to family engagement,[30,31] and recognize that all families have different assets and challenges, and that parents/caregivers provide care to their children in many different ways.

03. RECOGNIZE AND MITIGATE BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

Parents/caregivers impacted by social and economic inequities may face barriers to traditional engagement activities, including:[29]

- having other children to care for;
- additional household responsibilities, such as preparing food;
- work shifts that conflict with afterschool programming; and
- lack of access to fast and reliable transportation.

Programs that ask parents/caregivers how they want to engage and what barriers exist – and then take steps to reduce these barriers – are more likely to get them involved.[31,32]

Programs should be mindful of the ways that spaces/environments may discourage engagement; for instance, if families do not feel comfortable in the physical space, or with program staff, they are unlikely to be engaged.[33] Be aware that families from different cultural and social backgrounds may have different expectations about what a welcoming space may look like.[34]

04. ACKNOWLEDGE THE CULTURAL WEALTH OF PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

Evidence suggests that parents/caregivers draw upon a *cultural wealth* that holds great importance for supporting their children. For example, Black parents/caregivers support their children

in a range of ways that are often overlooked by mainstream institutions.[30,35] Programs should recognize the ways that families use different forms of capital (e.g., cultural, social, racial, familial) to navigate, manage, and resist marginalization, and prepare young people to do the same.[1,30,31] Programs should also support families in using *navigational capital*: the ability to maneuver through and manipulate institutions and practices designed to exclude equity-deserving families.[30,31]

C) SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: SEVEN PRACTICES TO ENGAGE COMMUNITY

01. UNDERSTAND A COMMUNITY IN TERMS OF ITS ASSETS – ITS CAPABILITIES AND STRENGTHS

Focus on the capabilities and strengths of communities, rather than on challenges. Programs can then "leverage capabilities, strengths, and resources in order to plan with, and for, a community."[36] Understand the social and historical contexts of the community, and which "cultural forms are prioritized and who is drawn to those forms."[37]

Assets are considered the attributes and advantages of a community that are essential for the maintenance of its quality of life.[38] Community assets may be categorized[38] as:

- *natural* (pertaining to our natural environment)
- *built* (pertaining to physical structures)
- *social* (pertaining to the values and culture of the community)
- *economic* (pertaining to jobs and businesses)
- *public* (pertaining to government-funded services)
- *intangible* (pertaining to underutilized skills)

Understanding a community, in the language of the community, is one of the first steps towards meaningful community engagement.[39]

This approach is specifically important in communities experiencing marginalization, where deficit narratives perpetuate stereotypes, stigmatize community members, and put up barriers – visible and invisible – to youth development and wellbeing.[11]

02. DEMONSTRATE A COMMITMENT TO EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Equity cultivates an awareness of intersectional power dynamics and ensures the implementation of active strategies to create balance within them.[40] This awareness can be understood in relationships between practitioners/educators and youth, youth and parents/caregivers, practitioners/educators and parents/caregivers, and program staff and community members of varying roles and responsibilities.

Inclusion facilitates access to full and fair participation. To ensure that everyone can "contribute meaningfully and without stress,"[37] consider "different abilities, cultural backgrounds, income levels, education levels, genders, religions, and sexualities."[37] Programs should also consider *mitigating common barriers to participation* for those living in urban communities experiencing marginalization, including "child care, transportation problems, limited access to resources, and *improving accessibility* by adopting simple strategies such as choosing convenient times and locations for gatherings and programs."[41] Community music programs are "built on the premise that everybody has the right and inherent ability to create and participate in music."[42] Setting high standards for program participation may raise the level of the art produced, but may harm the process of empowering all participants.

In order to effectively engage communities, programs can strive towards '*radical inclusivity*', a concept that comes from within the Cree language:

> There is a way in Cree to say "all of us together". It doesn't just mean those of us in the room who are Native, or even those of us who are human. It's also animals, and objects that are in the room which, from within our animate worldview, have a soul.[37]

Everyone in the community could be envisioned as having a role to play in achieving the program's goals and/or in supporting its mission.

Consider engaging community members (including parents, caregivers, and other family members) as '*culture bearers*'[43] who can suggest music material, provide contextual knowledge, assist with teaching, and perform alongside students.[44] Community members can be actively engaged in the creation of art and music,[42,45] shifting the focus from the 'product' to the 'process'.[45] A bottom-up approach to the format, curriculum, and structure of community musicmaking would be steered by the interests and values of all participants.[42] This type of engagement can help foster an environment of cultural *appreciation* rather than cultural *appropriation*.[46] Some music educators work to disrupt whiteness in the classroom by centering music with marginalized roots and bringing in discussions of oppression and racism.[14] This approach enables "youth to understand themselves to be embedded in broader systems of power... [and] to respond to community issues through the arts."[47]

03. FACILITATE COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Stakeholders are more likely to assume responsibility for programming if they are engaged in its development, making collaborative partnerships central to community

engagement.[48] Effective community-based work is all about partnerships, often initiated from within the community; many of the most productive collaborations have been those with missions that are in sync with needs that are articulated by the community.[48] Successful practitioners cite relationships as their most valued resources;[48] they carefully balance the goals of the collective with concern for the needs of individuals.[49]

For youth music programs, partnerships could be specific to local schools, other music or arts-based programs and organizations, and/or existing community-based organizations. Programs that have been working with families for longer periods of time can highlight their strengths and assets, and in so doing, help new programs avoid deficit-based approaches to engagement.[33] Strong partnerships can also build networks and facilitate relationship-building across caregivers and across communities, and help programs to connect families with appropriate community resources and supports.[30] These "strong collaborative networks and effective partnerships with other agencies and service providers in the community can help to enhance access to funding and support, and improve service provision by linking the beneficiaries to needed services through making referrals."[41]

04. PROMOTE SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT, COHESION, AND BELONGING

Group learning opportunities, such as ensembles or group classes, promote natural mentorship, foster collaboration skills, and build community[50,51] across program participants. Evidence suggests that orchestral and community-focused music education can promote *positive youth development* outcomes when they involve peer mentoring, high levels of shared responsibility, and social cohesion among the orchestra.[52]

Programs should try to make space for informal peer mentoring in music programming. For example, the Buffalo String Works Practice Club functions as an informal space in which youth can come together to work on their musical skills in a collaborative setting.[51] Similarly, Ottawa-based OrKidstra schedules classes with some overlap in order to encourage students at different skill levels to play together and learn from each other.[51]

Social engagement is at the heart of most community activities, including music education, and effectively cultivates a sense of belonging. In turn, belonging creates a sense of wellbeing, and wellbeing is conducive to positive mental and physical health,[53] which can reverberate across spaces and contexts. In urban communities experiencing marginalization, "social ties and networks of varying kinds… [play] a quintessential role in creating cohesion… Social ties not only help maintain social cohesion but also provide support networks among inhabitants, and prevent isolation."[41]

Community-engaged programs for youth "act as spaces of knowledge transfer, skill sharing, teaching, and learning in novel ways," and they foster social cohesion, notably for youth experiencing marginalization.[47] Specifically, community youth arts programs "can enact transformative pedagogies through enabling critique, empowerment, and connection with others."[47]

05. PRIORITIZE BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social capital is a framework that allows for the exploration and understanding of "the personal and collective benefits derived from specific kinds of relationships."[54] This type of capital arises from "interdependence between individuals and between groups in a community."[54] Social capital can include *bonding* (relationships between people), *bridging* (relationships between groups/communities), and *linking* (relationship with

institutions).[55] Effective community engagement that prioritizes participation, trust, reciprocity, and collective action[56] may result in higher levels of social capital, which can offer youth (as well as parents/caregivers and other community members) access to projects, pathways, and networks that can support them in successfully navigating resources and accessing opportunities. Community arts programs, specifically, can facilitate "opportunities for youth to collaborate and expand their networks" beyond program spaces.[47]

Musician-teachers, for example, can support building social capital, drawing on their personal experiences as musicians to engage with young people's interests – by sharing their knowledge about what it takes to plan a concert, collaborate with other musicians, deal with the business side of music, or produce a home recording. When hiring and training musician-teachers, programs should ensure that these educators understand the community-building aspect of teaching music.[51]

06. CREATE AND PROMOTE A SAFE SPACE

To build positive relationships between program participants and their peers, and between participants and staff, programs need to create a safe space (both physically and emotionally) where young people have opportunities to grow.[25,57, 58, 59] A safe space is a "home away from home,"[60] where young people and staff should feel comfortable to fully express themselves without fear of being made fun of, excluded, or feeling unsafe.

A safe and welcoming space also allows practitioners and youth to draw on their lived experience to create collective stories, identify needs in the community, and build better music programs.[10] There is a lack of these spaces for youth in communities experiencing

marginalization;[61] inclusivity and safety, specifically, have been named by youth as characteristics of their ideal public spaces.[61] Keep in mind that rules and structure can help youth feel more comfortable, especially when other environments they inhabit may be unstable or unpredictable.[10] A safe space "would have codes of conduct that would be facilitative and conditional rather than forbidding... for fun, emphasizing interactive learning and sociability."[61]

Consider *who* in the community will have access to your program spaces, *when*, and *how* – whether that is only youth who are program participants or all youth, and whether that includes peers and adult allies or all members of the community.

07. CELEBRATE AND CHAMPION ARTS-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Arts-based community development "is founded on the belief that the arts can be a powerful agent of personal, institutional, and community change."[48] Although the arts play an important role in the lives of individuals and communities, they are often undervalued, underused, and underaccessed.[62] There is a growing need to work more "proactively and collaboratively with key community stakeholders to harness and integrate artistic skills and capabilities across a full spectrum of community interests."[62] Community development can be a larger goal of programs when practitioners engage stakeholders in meaningful and intentional ways, take their perspectives into account, acknowledge and celebrate their contributions, and make use of their skills.[48]

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