



this i dream... for Education

by Virginia Euwer Wolff

**“This dream is of millions of children,
stretching across continents,
every one of them with an instrument.
Music is our best peacemaker.”**

Over here: Listen to this child blow this horn.
Over there: See that one's fingers run up and
down the clarinet. Watch how the kid to your left
puts her whole upper body into bowing her violin.
And drums? Never saw so many children snapping
sticks in unison.

Band. Orchestra. In schools everywhere.

Kids are natural music makers. Listen to
their active games, vitalized by chants
and songs.

This dream is of millions of children, stretching
across continents, every one of them with an
instrument, every one of them now frowning with
effort, now grinning with glee. These children meet
musical instruments before they learn to read, and
they pick up one, then another, then another. They
have group lessons and make group songs. They
trade around, they try ones that blow, ones that
bow, ones that bang, ones that tinkle or tweet.
What feels best in their hands? What kinds of
sounds make their hearts jostle a bit? Which ones
do they think about at night?

By age 7 or so, each child has selected a favorite.
Some select two, some three. They have daily
instruction, daily they play together in groups. They
learn quickly what the conductor's beat means,
they discover the exhilaration of accelerandos, the
intricately timed repose of a fermata.

Their math teachers are delighted. (Almost any
8yearold can learn to play 3/16 of a whole note,
6/9 of a dotted half.) Their reading teachers are
thrilled. (The attention span of these kids! Even
though some of them can't stop tapping their feet
or humming during silent reading.) Their science
teachers find that they're genuinely motivated to
learn about sound waves and frog larynxes and
that they keep asking questions about how the
universe works. Their physical education teachers
have stopped being astonished at how naturally
these children take to team work.

In these schools, the number of discipline referrals
has shrunk so that the staff in charge of punishing
offenses have enough free time to visit rehearsals
and try learning an instrument, too. See that
grownup over there, awkwardly holding a flute,
listening to a fourthgrader explain what an Fsharp
looks like?

Of course it's audacious to give music lessons
to every child. Not long ago the USA had the
unprecedented, audacious idea that every child
deserved the opportunity to go to school. Now we
can carry it farther.

Listen to the children in wheelchairs playing in the
percussion section, using digitalized amplification.
See the deaf drummers, perfectly in rhythm with
the conductor. Hear the kid who would have joined
a gang, now playing his trumpet long and loud and

high and proud. Watch the orchestra beginning to rehearse the piece composed by the autistic teenager. See the perishable moments of childhood blaring out brightly, feel the energy of held chords pulsing into the air.

How do we pay for this dream? We use some of the money that used to be allotted for the juvenile justice system. Juvenile detention centers still exist, but they're not filling up as fast anymore.

Students do not bring guns to school. What is there to be so virulently angry about?

Music is our best peacemaker. Imagine: Turkish children learning Armenian folksongs. Israeli & Palestinian children playing trombones together. African and Indian violists. Caucasian children playing the Korean Ajaenga with its seven silk strings and bow made of forsythia wood, or the 200year old Chinese pipa with its nearly four octave range. Children whose last names are Schmidt, O'Malley, and BergstromNabori trying to coordinate their rhythms on the Zimbabwean Mbira.

Dialogue, not diatribe.

Kids who play music become less afraid to try new things. Once a shy girl who has yet to figure out vowels and consonants has reached for a low Bflat on the cello and found it and played it out loud, she finds her world isn't quite so scary after all. She needs to keep finding it out, day after day. In a few weeks she'll need to play a sequence of halfnotes on the C string when her orchestra accompanies the enormous school choir, singing songs in three languages.

And the jokes? Children find fun everywhere. Before and after rehearsals, they laugh and laugh and laugh. A line of quarternotes can be funny, a repeat sign can become an in joke. And what happens when you cross a bassoon with a....

Just a few of the statistics:

The College Entrance Examination Board reports, Students of the arts continue to outperform their nonarts peers on the SAT®. In 2001, SAT takers with coursework/experience in music performance scored 57 points higher on the verbal portion of the test and 41 points higher on the math portion than students with no coursework/experience in the arts. Longer arts study resulted in even higher test scores.¹

Music is the best stimulator, the finest invigorator, the great healer, infusing unique nutrients into the body and mind and heart. In spite of everything, kids immersed in unspeakable tragedy can feel relief for whole moments at a time if they can share in the glorious cacophony of group musicmaking.

And mostly, people who make music together do not kill one another.

It's worth dreaming about.

¹Profile of SAT and Achievement Test Takers, The College Board, compiled by Music Educators National Conference, 2001, 1996.



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Illustration by Elsa Warnick

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