

## Enhancing the Social-Emotional Needs of Students with Special Needs through Music Making and Repertoire

**Brian J. Wagner**

PS 370K (NYC Department of Education)  
3000 West 1<sup>st</sup> St., Brooklyn, NY, 11224, USA

### Abstract

*Musical repertoire is one of the most important aspects of a well-developed music education program. High-quality musical repertoire is what will drive academic instruction in the music classroom. Moreover, musical repertoire can also be used as a tool to develop social-emotional skills for students. Social-emotional needs are important in the development of all children, and how they will eventually function in society. Examples of these needs include: social skills, developing friendships, building self-esteem, and dealing with depression. Nevertheless, for students with special needs, social-emotional skills do not automatically come natural. Musical repertoire can be used as a vehicle to help students with special needs build these important lifelong skills. Music educators can choose repertoire, and develop activities in which students can practice these important skills and apply it to real-life situations. Repertoire can be used for academic and social music-making, while helping to benefit students' personal lives.*

**Keywords:** Music education, special needs, repertoire, social-emotional needs, social skills, self-esteem, depression

### 1. Introduction

Repertoire is one of the basic foundations of a music education classroom. Repertoire includes: songs, listening examples, instrumental accompaniments, multicultural music, in addition to music from a variety of genres. A well-rounded music education program will include various types of repertoire for students to be exposed to. From high-quality repertoire, music educators can then focus on academic skills, such as: rhythm, form, articulation, tempo and dynamics, melodic contour, and articulation.

**1.1** The repertoire music educators incorporate can also be used to further develop students' social-emotional needs. Many students enter the classroom with either low or developing social-emotional skills. Such developmentally important skills include: social skills, maintaining and keeping friendships, self-esteem, and dealing with sadness or depression. "Music has been in the hearts of mankind since the beginning of time with the power to soothe, heal, and communicate profound emotions. It is the rhythm of life, with the power to uplift whole nations." (Harris, 2009).

**1.2** While these are skills that are important in the development of *all* students, they are crucially more important for students with special needs. Examples of students with special needs include: cognitive delays, communication delays, developmental delays, physical disabilities, and behavioral or emotional disabilities. Many students with special needs lack the independent skills needed to: build and maintain friendships, express emotions and feelings in an appropriate way, or know how to influence their own self-esteem. "Students with disabilities often face numerous challenges as they progress through their school years. In addition to disability-related challenges, they may encounter additional difficulties such as bullying in school and lack of social acceptance by their peers. These difficulties have the potential to affect their self-esteem and, consequently, their willingness to take social risks in school and to apply for jobs in their adult lives." (Darrow, 2014).

**1.3** The repertoire educators choose to incorporate can have a second agenda besides academic purposes. Repertoire can be used as a tool to help students deepen their social-emotional needs, and apply it into real-world settings. Moreover, the repertoire can be seen as a foundational tool that can impact further social-emotional growth for all students. "Music activities can help students improve their self-esteem. Music experiences should take place in a safe environment with a trained music teacher who has a rapport with the students and integrates their interests." (Culp, 2016).

Deep and important connections can be made through using high-quality musical repertoire. Moreover, through carefully planned activities, students can have the chance to go deeper into the music, and apply these connections to their individual social-emotional needs. Such examples of musical activities include: lyrical and theme analysis, composition, and the opportunity to take ownership of a musical production. “Music educators can profoundly affect the mental health and welfare of their students by teaching about peace, harmony, beauty, calm, silence, love, and laughter...This repertoire will serve as a key to their success for a better quality of student’s inner life.” (Sobol, 2004).

## **2. *Developing Social Skills and Friendships***

Many students do not have the independent ability to develop and maintain friendships. Social skills come more naturally to some students, such as: saying hello to a friend, shaking a hand when meeting someone new, or making eye contact when speaking to someone. Nevertheless, for many special learners, these are skills that are not immediately natural.

In addition, some students might even display negative behaviors when in social situations. Such behaviors can be considered inappropriate in certain settings. For example: hitting or pushing to get attention, using inappropriate language or vocabulary to communicate feelings, or not being open to other ideas and suggestions (egocentrism).

- 2.1 Being part of a musical setting can be a catalyst to influence appropriate social behaviors and norms. “Music educators can assist in the social-emotional development of students with disabilities by providing opportunities for interpersonal interactions and encouraging and by monitoring such interactions.” (Darrow, 2014). Through different musical activities, students can learn new social skills, and eventually apply them into real-life settings. Such musical activities can include: being part of an ensemble to develop teamwork, call-and-response activities to develop communication, and composition to express emotions and feelings.
- 2.2 One musical example that can be incorporated is singing the theme to the musical, “Hello Dolly.” The words can be changed and rewritten to include student names throughout the song (Fig. 1). Moreover, this can be incorporated as a greeting song for younger grades. Throughout the song, students can have the opportunity to greet each other in appropriate ways, such as: shaking hands, giving a high five, patting a friend on the back, or waving. Through this structured activity, students are learning appropriate ways to engage in social interactions. A further step would be to apply these skills into a real-life scenario.
- 2.3 A second musical example that can be incorporated is “You’ve Got a Friend,” by Carole King. Through text and lyrical analysis, students can discuss and explore the meaning to the song. To build a deeper connection, students can connect the friendship theme to other musical examples, such as “You’ve Got a Friend in Me,” by Randy Newman.

Afterwards, students can compose an alternate version to the original song about someone in the class, or someone within the school community. Students can compose a new refrain to the song about what they like to do with their friends, or what they would like to do. For example, students can write how they would: like to play a game together, eat lunch together, read a book together. For emergent readers or writers, they can use premade visuals to choose from (Fig. 2). Afterwards, students can share and sing their personal rewritten version of the song. In addition, real opportunities for these social interactions can be made possible, to add a deeper connection into the music, while enhancing their social skills.

## **3. *Developing Self-Esteem through Musical Theatre***

Many students entering the music classroom have low self-esteem, including special learners. There are many factors that influence self-esteem, such as: age, sex, ethnicity, academic level, social-economic status, and physical appearance. “Self-esteem ranks among the most important aspects of self-development because evaluations of our own competencies affect emotional experiences, future behavior, and long-term psychological adjustment.” (Berk, 2009).

When discussing self-esteem, it is also important to include self-concept. Both self-concept and self-esteem go hand-in-hand. Self concept refers to, “our perceptions about ourselves.” Self-esteem refers to, “the value each of us places on our own characteristics, abilities, and behaviors.” (Woolfolk, 2004).

- 3.1 Similar to social skills, educators can carefully plan musical activities to boost students’ self-esteem and further increase a students’ individual value.

Moreover, by allowing all students to have an entry point into the musical material and environment, they are having the opportunity to take ownership of the musical classroom. When students are aware that their choices and voices matter in the music-making decisions, students' self-esteem will increase. "No matter what end of the spectrum your students are, activities in the music program can enhance their self-esteem. Feelings of self-worth are increased by the recognition of the valuable contributions in class that they can make." (Sobol, 2008).

3.2 One such activity that can be incorporated is the use of musical theatre. Musical theatre repertoire can boost students' self-esteem through various ways, such as: providing opportunities to work on social skills, being part of an ensemble, and taking on leadership roles which will make them feel proud. Moreover, there are many skills that can be enhanced through participating in musical theatre (Fig. 3).

3.3 One musical theatre production is "Pirates! The Musical" by John Jacobson and Roger Emerson. The overall theme to the musical is that everyone has a talent and a place within the community. This theme can be used as a bridge to connect all students to finding their individual talents, and making it a part of the musical community.

Students can use this musical to take on leadership roles. First, students can explore: the plot, script, characters, and songs to the show. Next, they can analyze a scene/song, and choreograph different pirate movements to go along with the song using visuals. In addition, students can add different emotions to the various movements (Fig. 4). This will also further enhance appropriate social skills, and ways to show them in certain settings. Afterwards, students can put their scene and song together, and perform for their peers. Later, they can reflect on what the experience was like. The overall project is student-directed, based on: student choices, communication, and teamwork. The final performance will leave them feeling proud.

3.3 A second musical theatre option is "Summer Camp" by John Jacobson and Mac Huff. The overall theme to this musical is about finding a place to belong, which also can be beneficial for students to explore and connect. Similar to the first musical, students can: take on leadership roles, self-direct a performance, and have a final product to be proud of. Moreover, students can easily connect with the theme and apply it to their own lives.

#### **4. Developing Self-Esteem through Traditional Repertoire**

Traditional repertoire can be used to further enhance students' self-esteem as well. Traditional repertoire includes: folk songs, songs from a variety of cultures, orchestral and instrumental classics, and popular music. Themes can be pulled out of traditional music's lyrics or content, allowing students to explore and input their own personal ideas into the music. "Music interventions such as lyric analysis can help young adults identify and express current feelings about their self-worth and their environment." (Darrow, 2014).

4.1 The storyline to *The Firebird Suite*, by Igor Stravinsky, can be used to talk about self-esteem. This musical example is based on a Russian folktale. One of the overall themes from the story, for the main character Prince Ivan, is having to overcome and accomplish something that is hard. The separate musical sections (movements) from the suite can turn into an entire unit plan, where each section (movement) can connect with folk or popular music. Students can then explore the themes from the story, and connect it to the folk and popular examples (Fig. 5). Moreover, throughout the unit plan, students can create their own composition or suite, about something hard they will have to accomplish.

Music educators should first introduce the storyline to *The Firebird*. Russian folklore, and visual art can be utilized to build deeper connections with the story. Next, students can listen to each section from the suite, and connect it to the folk or popular song. Students can then have the opportunity to discuss the connections. Lastly, students can create their own composition. Students can write a short paragraph for each movement detailing their own individual story of overcoming something challenging. For students who are emergent writers, they can use visuals or draw pictures to represent their story. Lastly, students can create a musical theme or motif for each section using instruments.

#### **5. Challenging Depression through The Blues**

Many students enter the classroom battling depression or sadness. This is even more common for students with special needs. "Research suggests that students who are challenged with special needs are more likely to suffer from social isolation, depression, and mental illness." (Hammel and Hourigan, 2011).

- 5.1 The Blues can be utilized to teach students how to deal with depression, and offer them a tool they can incorporate when they are feeling upset. Students will have a musical outlet to vent out their frustration, while finding coping mechanisms they can incorporate into real-life settings. Moreover, students will be able to connect how they feel to others, and find friendships and support systems, while seeing other individuals might have the same feelings.
- 5.2 When teaching The Blues, it is important for educators to teach the historical and musical importance of the genre. In addition, educators can introduce and allow students to explore Blues lyrical form (AAB). In Blues lyrical form, one line is stated twice (A), in which a contrasting line follows (B). Two recommended Blues songs that can be used for introduction and analysis to Blues lyrical form are “One Shoe Blues” by B. B. King and “Hound Dog” by Elvis Presley. Students can locate where the different AAB sections are in both of these songs.
- 5.3 Afterwards, students can compose their own Blues lyrics in AAB form. For example: students can compose about something that upsets them (A), and something that makes them feel better (B). A second example: students can compose about something that angers them (A), and something that will calm them down (B). Students can then perform their song, and apply real-life coping mechanisms that will transition into real-life scenarios (Fig. 6)

## 6. Conclusion

Social-emotional needs are one of the most important aspects of childhood development. These needs apply to all students that enter the classroom. Some examples include: social skills, friendships, self-esteem, and depression. If these needs are not addressed in school or at home, this can influence their future lives and their abilities to function in society.

Students with special needs have a harder time developing social-emotional needs. Students with special needs often feel isolated and alone in the world. Nevertheless, many of the feelings that they have, are shared with other individuals, both with and without special needs.

Musical activities and repertoire can be utilized to allow students to find outputs to develop their social-emotional needs. Text from lyrics can be used to allow students to connect their own personal feelings to a song. Composition can be used to allow students to write about: goals, feelings, and friendships. Musical literature, including musical theatre, can allow opportunities for students to build their self-esteem.

Students can use the skills they learned through music making, and apply it in real-world settings. Using musical repertoire and carefully planned activities, students can have the chance to practice important life-skills, and incorporate them into their day-to-day living. Music educators can provide students with opportunities to develop social-emotional needs to prepare them to live a happy and healthy lives.

## Resources

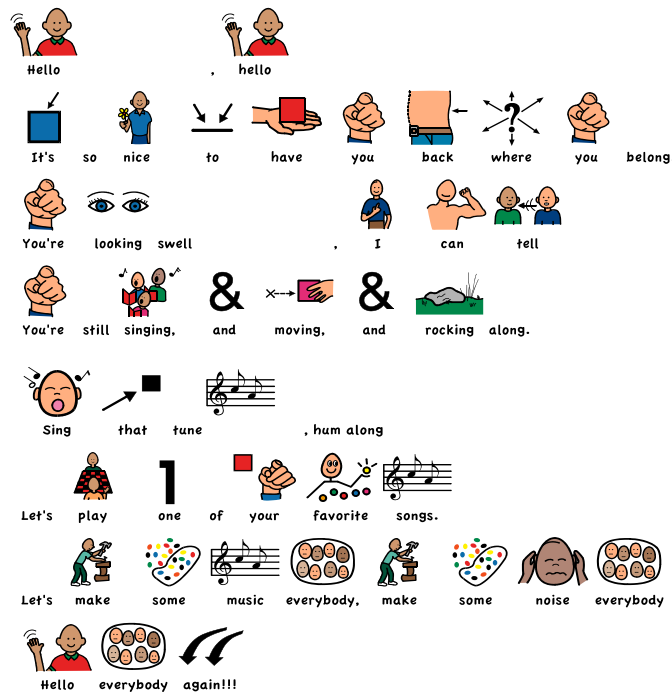
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Repertoire Resources

- J. Herman (1994). Hello Dolly (Recorded by Barbara Streisand and Michael Crawford). On *Hello Dolly! (Soundtrack from the Motion Picture)* (CD).
- C. King (1971). You've Got a Friend (Recorded by Carole King). On *Tapestry* (CD).
- R. Newman (1996). You've Got a Friend in Me (Recorded by Randy Newman). On *Toy Story (An Original Walt Disney Records Soundtrack)* (CD).
- I. Stravinsky (2001). The Firebird (Recorded by London Symphony Orchestra, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra & Sir Colin Davis). On *Stravinsky: Petrushka, The Firebird, The Rite of Spring, Orpheus* (CD).
- B. B. King (2007). One Shoe Blues (Recorded by B. B. King). On *Sandra Boynton's Blue Moo* (CD).
- E. Presley (2006). Hound Dog (Recorded by Elvis Presley). On *The Essential Elvis Presley (Remastered)* (CD).

Appendix

(Fig. 1)











(Fig. 2)



(Fig. 3)

Musical and Academic Benefits	Social/Emotional Benefits
Singing skills	Language and speech development
Music Literacy	Connections to ELA skills (ex: reading, writing, analyzing, form)
Movement and dances	Connections to OT and PT skills, gross motor skills, and cross-hemispheric development
Ensemble experience	Development of social skills, teamwork, and peer relationships
Analysis and directing opportunities	Development of student choice, ideas, and input
Performance experience	Final product for students to be proud of and reflect upon



(Fig. 4)



Column A	Column B
 Walk the Plank!  Steer the Ship!  Climb the Rigging!  Row the Boat!	 Happy!  Sad!  Scared!  Angry!
<b>Key</b> -Column A represents different movements a pirate can do -Column B represents different emotions we feel. Students can apply these emotions to the movements in Column A (ex: angry walking the plank, scared rowing the boat)	


(Fig. 5)

Firebird Suite	Connecting Repertoire	Theme and Focus
Introduction	"Turn, Turn, Turn" (The Byrds)	Dealing with change
Dance of the Firebird	"La Bamba" (Ritchie Valens)	Incorporating individual culture into movement/dance.
Round Dance of the Princesses	"Stand By Me" (Ben E. King)	Emotions between two people
Infernal Dance	"Blowin' in the Wind" (Bob Dylan)	Asking questions
Lullaby of the Firebird	"I Believe I Can Fly" (R. Kelly)	Confidence in accomplishing something

(Fig. 6)

  When I feel \_\_\_\_\_, I \_\_\_\_\_

  When I feel \_\_\_\_\_, I \_\_\_\_\_

 I \_\_\_\_\_ this feeling, it makes me \_\_\_\_\_