

Music and Community in Jamaica: The Impact of Music Education in a Developing Nation

Matthew Gaal, Undergraduate, The Ohio State University School of Music
Advisor: Daryl Kinney, Associate Professor, The Ohio State University School of Music

INTRODUCTION

During spring semester 2014, I traveled to Mandeville, Jamaica to volunteer-teach music in the public school system. My purpose was two-fold: to study both Jamaican music education and culture and to assess how the two inform each other and influence the overall community in a case study format.

Ever since Jamaica gained independence from the British in 1962, the struggle to create a unified national identity separate from the colonial system has been plagued by violent crime, drug trafficking, poverty, and an unstable government (CIA World Fact Book). Music, as is with any culture, has been an invaluable entity in helping to define the people of the once colonized nation. However, scholars point to a disconnect between the cultural music of Jamaica (e.g., ska, reggae, dance hall, et al.) and the music that is taught in the schools. "Music in the primary schools is largely performance-based and often involves the entire class singing folk songs and religious music or playing the recorder" (Mundle, 2008). Secondary school music programs are less structured than that of the primary system and most lack instruments, properly trained teachers, and in some cases a music room (Mundle, 2008). Although educational reform documents have been assembled for music education in Jamaica, the curriculum still remains incomplete and has a lack of institutional support (Tucker & Bowen 2001).

As such, my research focuses on the following questions:

- What type of music education are the students getting?
- Does educating students in the subject of music influence the community?
- To what degree does the community influence music education programs?

OBJECTIVES

- Observe teachers and students in primary and secondary music education classrooms.
- Participate in music classrooms as a volunteer music teacher and be fully immersed in Jamaican culture to gain a better understanding of Jamaican music education.
- Reassess the current state of music education in Jamaica and determine the type of music education the students are getting by analyzing curriculum guides, teaching methodologies, and genres of music studied by students.
- Assess the interaction of and relationship between music education and the community (school community, local community, national community)

METHODS

Data were collected via direct participation and observation in music classrooms and through interviews with stakeholders who fit the following demographics:

- Community Members with no direct affiliation with music education
- Students enrolled in music classes
- Students not enrolled in music classes
- Music Educators

Direct participation involved living in Mandeville, Jamaica for 12 weeks and volunteer-teaching music in the public school system at both the primary and secondary levels.



Observations took place in public school settings where teachers and students were involved in normal classroom activities. Participants' words and actions were recorded via researcher field notes.



Interviews were conducted with participants of varying backgrounds over the course of the project. Snowball sampling procedures were employed to identify key stakeholders considered to be data-rich sources. In total, 9 people chose to participate in the study: 3 community members with no direct affiliation with music education, 2 students enrolled in a music class, 1 student not enrolled in a music class, and 3 music educators. Efforts were made to interview school administrators but there were no responses. Data centering on stakeholders' opinions and beliefs about the intersections of music culture in Jamaica and music education were collected. Topics of discussion included the goal of music education, curriculum, the importance of music in the schools, and community dynamics and support for music programs.

RESULTS

Observations

Observations were conducted at three schools during the course of this study: two primary schools and one high school. All schools were located in suburban areas. Enrollment was largely based on standardized testing and all students were tracked starting in grade 1. Both of the primary schools had many instruments due to their involvement with the "Music – Perfect Pitch For a Sound Education" Initiative sponsored by First Global Bank. One primary school had its own classroom, while the other school had class outside in the school parking lot. The high school had a more limited set of instruments, but most students owned their own recorders. The high school also had access to technology. At the primary level, students participated in music once a week for 30 minutes. High school students in 1st form had class twice a week for 40 minutes while 2nd and 3rd form students only met once a week. CXC students preparing for the national exam had one 80 minute class and one 120 minute class per week. Oftentimes class was shortened due to transitions to and from other classes, disciplinary concerns (classroom management), and uncontrollable matters (e.g., power outages, school assemblies, student attendance, etc).

Interviews

Goal of Music Education in Jamaica	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use music as a means to enhance learning in other subjects, primarily "numeracy and literacy" • Provide students the opportunity to make music a career
Discussion of Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should include all genres (even popular music) and contain theoretical and practical applications • Curriculum guides incomplete and non-sequential. Must be supplemented by teacher. • Students can be bored, unmotivated (secondary)
Importance of music in the school curriculum	When asked to rank the importance of music on a scale of 1–10 (1 not important, 10 extremely important): community members: 4, teachers and students: 8
Music Education and Community Dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little parent involvement in school activities • First Global Bank "Perfect Pitch" Initiative • Often used to promote schools (national choir competition, performances for gov't officials).

CONCLUSIONS

Curriculum

Results from observations, interviews, and a review of national curriculum guides including the Revised Primary Curriculum (1999), Reform of Secondary Education or ROSE (2000), and Caribbean Examinations Council or CXC (2011) show that efforts to incorporate a music curriculum into Jamaican schools is inherently disjointed and incomplete. If the curriculum is to be strictly followed, many students would have difficulty matriculating into the ROSE and CXC programs because fundamental knowledge needed for each is not addressed in the previous curriculum. Thus, teachers must supplement the curriculum (assuming the teacher has the appropriate training to properly do so) to ensure student success.

School Structure

The value schools place on music education is evident by how much class time is devoted to music instruction. Students often had difficulty retaining information due to once per week classes. Because of tracking and a subject-specific vocational focus in schools, music is often viewed as an unnecessary subject. Lastly, the grading scale employed by the schools is as follows:

A: 85-100, B: 84-70, C: 50-69, D: 25-49, E: under 25

If a stricter scale were to be employed, student achievement could potentially increase (Elikai & Schuhmann 2010).

Community Interaction

Results of observations and interviews suggest that the greatest relationship between the community and music education is the First Global Bank "Music – Perfect Pitch for a Sound Education" Initiative that seeks to assist primary schools by providing instruments and teacher workshops so students can increase math and reading skills.

Students enrolled in CXC music classes will have the greatest impact on the community because they are the ones who have the most desire to learn and perform.

School communities may benefit from student ensembles when music is needed for a competition or school function.

Summary

The quality of music education programs is inherently linked to the value the school, community, and government place on the subject. Students who learn the most have properly trained teachers, curricula to which they can relate, and supportive learning environments. Although some previous scholarly claims still hold true, there is evidence to support the idea that the state of music education in Jamaica is improving.

REFERENCES

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*A full list of references is available upon request