

REPORT FROM THE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE: SOUND LEARNING AT BARNWELL ELEMENTARY IN ATLANTA

by

DOUGLAS BROWN

At Barnwell Elementary School in suburban Atlanta, Georgia, arts integration has been an important part of the school culture for more than a dozen years. We are convinced that the integration of the arts into the curriculum actively involves students as observers, creators, and evaluators and thus makes them better learners. So when Dr. David Myers (Associate Director of the School of Music and Director of the Center for Educational Partnerships at Georgia State University) first approached the administrative staff at Barnwell with the idea of a partnership involving musicians from the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra with support from the University, our response was an immediate and enthusiastic "Yes!" In the four years since the program was first implemented with our students, our support and enthusiasm have only increased. The program began with visits by musicians to first and second grade classrooms and expanded quickly to include all of our students in grades one through five.

The most important activity to insure the success of the program is the training that is provided for classroom teachers and musicians each year. Teachers new to the program are sometimes concerned about interacting with professional musicians, just as the musicians who are just joining often have concerns about interacting with professional educators. The connections provided by these training sessions build a bridge between the two "worlds," and a level of comfort is quickly established. The group, together with support from the staff at Georgia State and building-based music specialists, is able to develop plans to get the project rolling. Continued communication most often takes the form of email between all of the parties involved and is aided by a healthy amount of "live-and-in-person" support from Georgia State staff.

For example, during the 2003-2004 school year, Christina Smith, ASO principal flute, and Elisabeth Remy, ASO harpist, teamed up to work with our third and fourth grade students. One of the third grade teachers suggested it would be fun to write a school song to be accompanied by the musicians. Taking this as a challenge, site coordinator Suzanne Shull spent a day with the third and fourth grade students and, using the method suggested by Jackie Wiggins in "Teaching for Musical Understanding," helped the students write two verses and a chorus. The students generated and organized the poetry, melody and harmony one classroom at a time, each class building on what the previous class had done. The following day, Christina and Elisabeth accompanied the students while they sang their new song.

While the impact of these efforts is often difficult to quantify, it is clear that involvement in the program has been positive for all of our students at Barnwell. This approach develops language and communication abilities, higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills, and creativity. Arts-infused education stimulates logical and intuitive thinking, personalizes knowledge, and yields aesthetic pleasure; in short, it motivates and facilitates learning in other content areas and improves concept retention through multi-sensory instruction.

DOUGLAS J. BROWN HAS BEEN ON THE STAFF OF BARNWELL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA, FOR MANY YEARS, FIRST AS ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL, AND AS PRINCIPAL FOR THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS. A NATIVE OF UPSTATE NEW YORK, HE HOLDS DEGREES IN MUSIC EDUCATION FROM SUNY POTSDAM AND TWO ADDITIONAL ADVANCED DEGREES IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP FROM THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF WEST GEORGIA. HE IS ALSO A LONGTIME MEMBER OF THE ACCLAIMED ATLANTA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA (ASO) CHORUS AND THE ASO CHAMBER CHORUS.

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Assessments of Sound Learning have typically been project-based. Projects take shape based on the school curriculum, the theme of the ASO concerts for the year, and discussions between the site coordinator and teachers. For

example, last year our fifth grade students were asked by the Sound Learning musicians from the Lyra String Quartet to draw shapes corresponding to the forms of music that they heard in class. On the first visit, musicians and teachers

observed that students were unable to listen and draw at the same time. Some witnessed real frustration among students who were engrossed in the performance but who also wanted to comply with instructions. Through discussion, it was decided that on subsequent visits students would make their drawings *after* the performances. Several of the student works were proudly posted on the Lyra website (www.lyraquartet.org).

As a means for students to report on and bring closure to their musical experiences, Barnwell students and teachers frequently write letters to the visiting musicians. Musicians can be seen sharing notes from students during rehearsals, and the Sound Learning bulletin board near the ASO musicians' lounge backstage at Atlanta's *Symphony Hall* is a source of pleasure and pride for the participants. A small sampling of these letters appears below. ¶

Birds sing; they like music
I think there are musical birds
And their voices are instruments.
Sing birds.

— Pearl (1st Grade)

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I liked the music you played because:

- It was very beautiful
- I liked watching the bow move and your fingers move
- I would listen to what you said and played
- I liked figuring out the forms of music

Thank you!!
Jennifer (4th Grade)

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I am very thankful that you came to Barnwell to teach us about music. I have never learned about different types of music forms. I have had a great time. You let us participate which really made the experience great. You especially got us involved. Thank you again.

Sincerely,
Palani (5th Grade)

Thank you so much for coming to play for us. I really enjoyed it because it's soothing and you can really learn a lot. It was cool to know about different forms, like sonata. The ABA patterns were cool also. Thanks again from coming and spending your time to play for us. I hope to see you next year.

Sincerely,
Haley (5th Grade)

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I just want to say thank you for coming to Barnwell, and sharing your elaborate music. You must enjoy playing your viola. I love that relaxing sound called music that comes out of it. You really taught me a lot about music in a way I could understand. I said I would never play an instrument because it would be too complicated, but you showed me a different point of view. So I say, thank you so much.

Sincerely,
Mikaila (5th Grade)

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