

## Music Ventures: Linking the Processes of Music and Language Literacy

BY NICK RABKIN

In 1999, James Catterall reported<sup>1</sup> that analysis of the Department of Education's NELS: 88 database indicated strong correlations between high arts participation, higher student achievement, and healthier social development. Earlier studies had found correlations between arts learning and achievement in other areas—higher SAT scores have been commonly found to correlate with higher participation in the arts, for example. But these data were suspect because high arts participation also correlates strongly to higher income, and income is the strongest predictor of success or failure in school. The NELS database, though, was large enough to include a statistically significant number of low-income students who were also high arts participators. Catterall found that the relationship between arts participation and school success was actually *strongest* for low-income students. This was the first clear evidence that the arts could play a role in addressing one of the highest priorities of school reform, closing the achievement gap.

Catterall's study was not fine grained. "Arts participation" included a hodgepodge of formal and informal instruction in school and out, and all of the art forms. The data in NELS is simply not detailed enough to offer clues about what kinds of arts instruction make a difference, how much might be necessary, or whether particular kinds of arts learning correlated with particular kinds of achievement.

*New Ventures in Integrated Teaching and Learning* does explore these questions, and this makes the study significant to more than the field of music education, though it certainly is that. The research presented here is significant to all of arts education and to the entire field of education. It is a serious contribution to a body of knowledge about how we think—cognitive science—and to education generally.

Teaching artists in all of the art forms have reported anecdotally for some time that structuring curriculum and pedagogy in a way that intentionally links processes in an art form with analogous processes in another learning domain—literacy, math, science, history, whatever – appears to set a kind of cognitive resonance in motion. Some call this approach integrated arts education, and name the linkage "parallel processes." It is characterized by a kind of cognitive movement, back and forth, between domains, activating the parallel processes in each. When it is done effectively and imaginatively, as it was in the Music Ventures program, report after report claims that learning is enhanced in both domains.

This would be consistent with much current thinking about the fundamental processes of cognition and learning. Cognitive experts like Mark Turner believe that all thinking and learning is

**THE NEW VENTURES REPORT STOPS SHORT OF DEMONSTRATING THAT THE CORRELATIONS BETWEEN ADVANCES IN LITERACY AND MUSIC HAVE A DYNAMIC CAUSAL RELATIONSHIP...THE STUDY'S FINDINGS DEMONSTRATE THE NEED FOR A FOLLOW-UP STUDY THAT INCLUDES SOME MEASURE OF CONTROL TO DETERMINE IF GAINS IN MUSIC VENTURES CLASSROOMS—IN BOTH MUSIC AND LITERACY—ARE GREATER THAN GAINS IN CLASSROOMS WITHOUT MUSIC OR WITH MORE CONVENTIONAL MUSIC INSTRUCTION. IF THESE IMPLICATIONS ARE INDEED INVESTIGATED AND SUPPORTED BY RESEARCH, THE NEW VENTURES STUDY WILL PROVE TO HAVE TAKEN AN ENORMOUS STEP TOWARD A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF THE BEST WAYS TO TEACH BOTH MUSIC AND LITERACY, AND WILL HAVE MADE A VITAL CONTRIBUTION TO NEW LEARNING THEORY.**

dependent upon making sense of new experiences and ideas through prior experiences and ideas in a process he calls "conceptual blending." "Teaching for transfer," as is done in the Music Ventures program, is a strategy designed to prompt conceptual blending between musical skills and literacy skills. The Music Ventures curriculum linked basic musical skills—reading and clapping rhythm patterns from musical stick notation, for example—and matched them to analogous basic literacy skills. For example, clapping musical rhythms was linked to clapping syllables while reading words. The data show a close correlation between both sets of skills.

One intriguing dimension to this study is that there was a significant group of English Language Learners among the children participating in the Music Ventures program. Clearly this group of children starts with disadvantages in English literacy, and these are reflected in lower levels of correlation between their music and literacy scores. However, the data show that as these children's English skills improve in Grades 1 and 2, the correlation with musical skills becomes stronger. Could it be that if they were taught and tested in their first language, the correlation would be just as strong from the start? And could the Music Ventures approach contribute to the

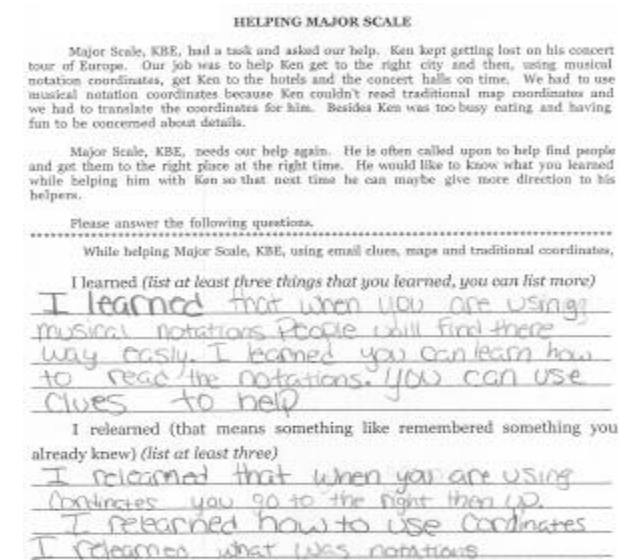
tantalizing possibility that musical instruction could help them develop English language skills more quickly?

The *New Ventures* report stops short of demonstrating that the correlations between advances in literacy and music have a dynamic causal relationship, though the evidence suggests this *could* be the case. The study's findings demonstrate the need for a follow-up study that includes some measure of control to determine if gains in Music Ventures classrooms—in both music and literacy—are greater than gains in classrooms without music or with more conventional music instruction. If these implications are indeed investigated and supported by research, the *New Ventures* study will prove to have taken an enormous step toward a new understanding of the best ways to teach both music and literacy, and will have made a vital contribution to new learning theory. ¶

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<sup>1</sup> Catterall, J. (1999). *Involvement in the arts and human development: General involvement and intensive involvement in music and theater arts*, Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning. (Washington: Arts Education Partnership).

<sup>2</sup> Turner, M. and Fauconier, G. (2003). *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books).



*Teaching for transfer—as is done in the Music Ventures program in Vista, California and in the Learning Through Music program at MIE Learning Laboratory Schools like the Ramsey School in Minneapolis—is designed to help students make the deep connection between different kinds of literacies. For example, when students learn to read maps and music at the same time, they discover two different applications of the x-y axes in coordinate systems. In the artifact above, the student locates an area on the map of London through north/south/east/west coordinates, as well as through the musical coordinates of rhythm and pitch. (See Larry Scripp's "The Evolution of the Learning Through Music Consulting Group-Ramsey IFAC School Learning Laboratory School Partnership" in this section of the Journal).*