

# CULTURE-BUILDING

## It Starts with the Feeling of Family

By Sundas Mohi-Truong

**F**ew things are more important than the culture of a program. Culture influences everything we do and how we do it. It shapes how music is prepared, how we interact with students, how students interact with each other, and how the community perceives the program. A positive culture directly supports the success of our performances and the overall experience in the classroom. Building the desired culture can be daunting, but taking daily steps to foster a sense of family is a great place to start. To build this sense of family within our programs, I suggest focusing on the following priorities.

### FAMILY MEMBERS NEED TO FEEL LOVED

Building relationships with your students requires intentional effort. Developing genuine connections with as many students as possible is crucial for fostering a positive culture within your program. However, building these relationships doesn't come naturally to everyone and can be challenging if the initial connection isn't strong. Nonetheless, it remains the single most important factor in creating a sense of family within your program. In fact, I consider building relationships with my students to be just as important as teaching musical technique, if not more so. This should be a fundamental part of your teaching toolkit, just like the pedagogical knowledge behind any other musical or technical skill. Here are some important points to keep in mind:

- It takes time and effort; there are no shortcuts.
- Every student is unique and responds differently to various strategies.
- Authenticity is key. Students will know if you're not being genuine. What works for one educator may not work for you, and that's okay. Finding the right strategies for you will take time.

- It's a lot of work, but it's well worth the effort. *If you're not working to get to know your students, you're missing out on the most rewarding part of our job.*

### RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING STRATEGIES

Start with small, low-stakes strategies. For example, consider asking a question of the day at the door. It could be related to class music, their favorite food, or a simple *this or that* prompt. Committing to greet every student at the door even one day a week can significantly impact your classroom's atmosphere. Everyone feels seen when someone asks them questions about themselves, and being noticed can improve overall engagement and musical performance.

A simple strategy that works for us is distributing a *3H Check-in* sheet once weekly during the last five minutes of class—an idea gained from my colleague Taniesha Pooser. The questions are simple:

- What is one **highlight** in your life?
- What is one **hard** thing?
- What do you need **help** with?

Students fill it out and turn it in at a designated location in our room. Through this quick and easy check-in, you'll learn details about their lives. Some check-in sheets may lead to longer conversations, while others simply give you an opportunity to connect with your students beyond the music in your classroom.

Additionally, leverage your personal strengths to build relationships. For example, I enjoy baking for my students and writing notes of encouragement to them before big performances or auditions.

As you think about your classroom culture, answer these questions and consider how they might be impacting your relationship with your students:

- What is your office policy? Can students come and go, or is your space off-limits? If it's off-limits, is there another space where students can visit with you casually?
- Is there a space to relax in your classroom, like a hangout corner, rug, or couch where students can wait for their other classes or rides home? Making your classroom a welcoming space can eventually turn it into their space.
- Do you utilize surveys or activities to get to know your students? If so, do you read and follow up on the responses? Students often believe their teachers don't read those about-me activities assigned at the beginning of the year, and those assignments are useless if we don't follow up with conversations.

Remember, consistency is key. Stick to a few strategies over a longer period and understand that all students want to be seen in different ways. Building rapport takes time, but it's well worth it.

### **FAMILY MEMBERS NEED TO BE HEARD**

Finding opportunities to give your students a voice within your program is crucial for building a student-centered culture. When students know their voices matter, they perform their best and

become advocates for the program within the community. To start, intentionally ask yourself whether there is any way you can involve students in the task you're doing right now. Reflecting on this will reveal endless possibilities for student input. Here are some ways I intentionally give voice to my students:

*Expectations Chart:* During the first few days of school, students are randomly split into groups within each class period and answer three questions:

1. What do [class name] students expect from each other?
2. What do [class name] students expect from their directors?
3. What do [class name] students expect from all students in this program?

The question directors answer is "What do the directors expect from [class name] students?"

Students spend half of the class period brainstorming answers, followed by a class discussion to create and agree upon a collective chart. Because students have significant input in creating the expectations for their class, it is much easier to refer to this chart later in the year if expectations are not being met. In my experience, this approach works better than the traditional handbook-reading at the beginning of the year.

*Repertoire Selection:* Students know I am open to musical suggestions. They often request to play certain pieces and incorporate popular music into our repertoire

cycle. When I am unsure about a piece of music during the sightreading process, I ask for their opinions before making a final decision.

Sometimes, I even share the skills I am looking for in a piece and ask students to help find one that meets the criteria (for example, a grade-three piece with a spiccato bow stroke). I commonly welcome discourse about music selection—these discussions reveal how deeply students care about the music they are performing. While it can be challenging to relinquish total control over repertoire selection, students perform at a higher level when they have invested themselves in that selection.

### **FAMILY MEMBERS ARE HONEST WITH EACH OTHER**

While maintaining professionalism is essential, I believe that showing vulnerability with our students fosters genuine relationships and creates a sense of family. If you're having an off day, let your students know—they will often go out of their way to ensure the class runs smoothly.

Transparency about your goals for the class and the program is also important. If you want to enter a festival or competitive performance, ask your students if they're interested and explain the commitment required before entering. In speaking with colleagues, I learned that some avoid discussing competitive goals with students for fear of creating a negative, competition-centered atmosphere. I believe that by being transparent and modeling a healthy approach to ambitious musical goals, we can help students not only in the short term but also in applying this attitude to other aspirations in their lives.

Another aspect of transparency is being honest, firm, and kind when expectations aren't met. Throughout the year, classes can lose motivation or temporarily fail to meet expectations (e.g., lack of practice, missing assignments, not following procedures). In these moments, it's important to address the issue and, if you're comfortable, explain how it affects you. It's powerful for students to understand that their actions impact others and that you care about their success enough to feel upset by their lapses. When having these discussions, end by reaffirming your belief in the student or class and their ability to meet the expectations set at the beginning of the school year.



Lastly, acknowledging our mistakes and apologizing when necessary is crucial. We can't expect students to take accountability for their mistakes if we don't do the same as adults. Modeling sincere apologies and acknowledging that everyone makes mistakes is an essential skill for young people to learn, and it is a vital element in building trust with your students.

### FAMILY MEMBERS HAVE FUN WITH EACH OTHER

While we strive for polished performances, we should also let our students see our personality and have fun with them in the process. In my first years of teaching, I was afraid to show too much personality, fearing I might lose control of my class. With experience, I've realized that allowing moments of silliness within lessons is necessary, especially when working on tedious details within a repertoire set. Here are some ideas I've used to lighten the mood in my class:

*Switching places with a student:* Let a student conduct a phrase while you play their instrument. This is even more effective if you play on a secondary instrument.

*Various alternative seating arrangements:* During UIL season, we feature "Twisted Thursdays," where students randomly mixed themselves into different seating arrangements. They might draw seat numbers or sit shortest to tallest within the ensemble. This not only helped students by breaking up the routine, but also helped them play better together as an ensemble because they were listening to each other in a new seating arrangement.

*Sightreading on secondary instruments:* With groups mature enough to handle switching instruments, we spend a class period sightreading a grade-one piece on secondary instruments, led by a student conductor (e.g., *Dragonhunter* by Richard Meyer). This is a great way to mix things up when a break is needed.

*Slang list:* Ask students to help you learn

ways to incorporate their favorite slang in a musical context and see how many words you can use in one lesson.

We all strive to build a strong culture within our programs that leads to high-level performances, but nothing can happen until students feel cared for, heard, and valued. I truly believe that if you focus on creating a feeling of family, everything else will follow. This priority has been the cornerstone of my personal cultural vision, and I hope you can adopt one of these strategies for building relationships with your students—you will see the difference!



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