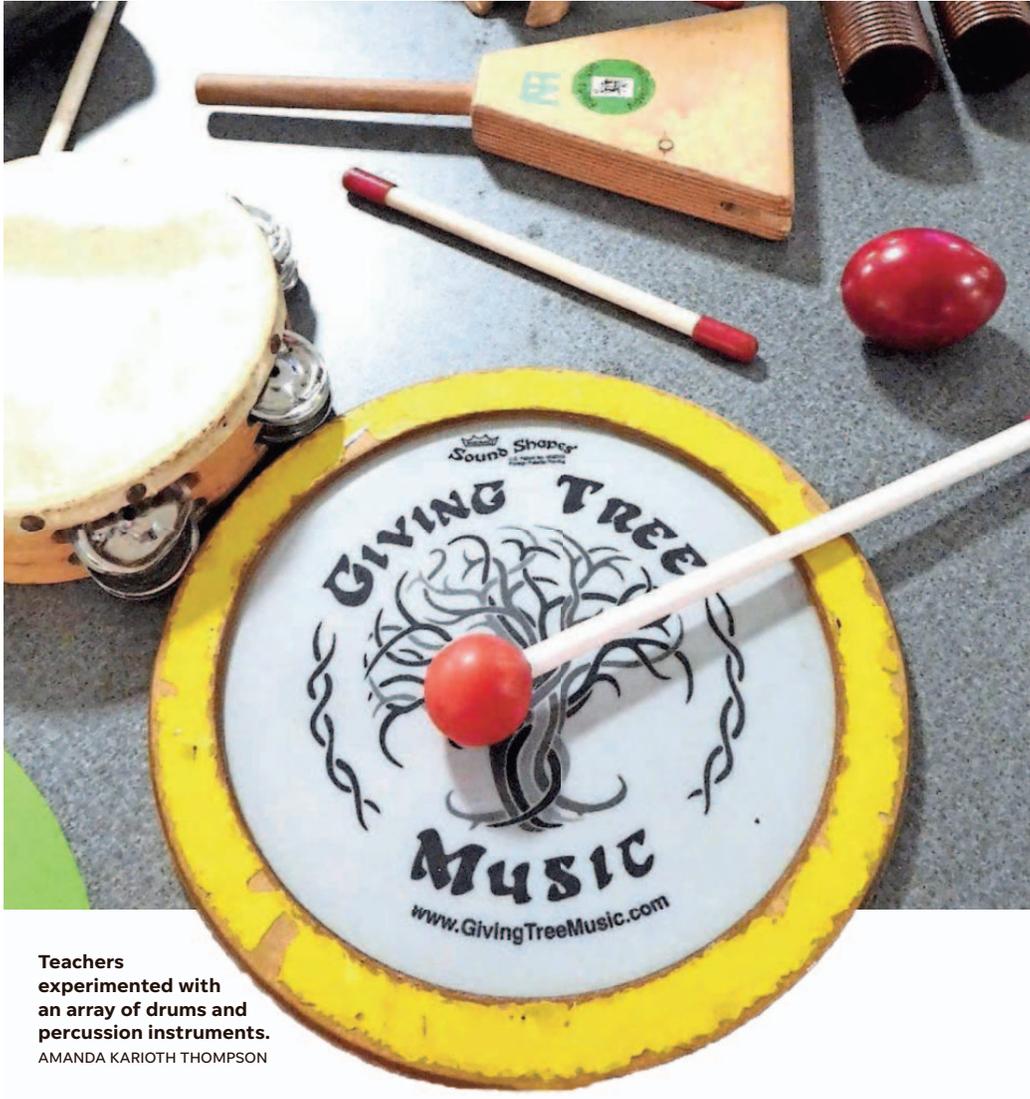


Playtime *refreshes*



Teachers experimented with an array of drums and percussion instruments.
AMANDA KARIOTH THOMPSON

Teachers renew connections at the drum circle

Amanda Karioth Thompson Council on Culture & Arts

Jerrod Walters never dreamed of a career in education, though his recent success as the music teacher at Riley Elementary School would indicate otherwise. ● Admired by his peers and students alike, he was recently selected as the school's Teacher of the Year. Though he's relatively new to the position, he has proven himself in just two years as a faculty member.

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Mary Register conducts the drum circle musicians. TALLAHASSEE

Teachers

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In that time, Walters has drawn heavily on his background in music which began in middle school with piano. As a college student at Florida A&M University, he played alto saxophone in the Marching 100 and was a member of FAMU's symphonic band, jazz band, gospel choir, and concert choir.

Even with all his experience as a musician, he leans on fellow music educators to learn best instructional practices. "I get a lot of help from my colleagues, and they are so generous with their knowledge and expertise," Walters said. "I can't do it without these people."

Continuing education for teachers

Mary Register is one of those people. She's a veteran music teacher at Springwood Elementary School and serves as the district's music developer. She recognized a need for teacher professional development opportunities which have been significantly curtailed because of the pandemic. Continuing education is important for all teachers, especially new ones like Walters.

"We've had a lot of teacher turnover in the past few years and it's been a long time since we've had any drumming in-service," explained Register. "We have a lot of new teachers that might be coming fresh out of their degree programs and they may not have a lot of hands on drumming experience in their classroom."

School budgets are especially tight these days and Register knew she'd need to identify an outside source to support the seminar she envisioned. What she didn't know was that the Council on Culture & Arts (COCA) had just received a grant through the Duke Energy Foundation's Powerful Communities program to fund exactly these kinds of professional development opportunities.

Register and COCA invited Giving Tree Music, Inc. to lead a six-hour "playshop" open to all elementary school music teachers in the district. This nationally recognized organization facilitates teacher trainings and drum circles and Steve Turner has been doing this kind of work for more than 20 years.

"There's really not a group I haven't worked with at this point, from nuns to jails and everything in between," said Turner. He wants teachers to see that they don't need a classroom full of drums for their students to have a meaningful music making experience. "Everything can be used as a drum," he emphasized. This concept provides freedom for teachers who have a limited collection of instruments.

'A breath of fresh air'

Turner brought an array of drums and other percussive options for attendees to experiment with. Teachers were encouraged to bring some of their own classroom percussion instruments to learn new ways of incorporating them into their instruction. Mich'ele Barrington brought her favorite boomwhackers which are lightweight, hollow, color-coded, plastic tubes, tuned to a musical pitch by length.

Barrington is the music teacher at Sabal Palm Elementary School. She said "boomwhackers are one of the least expensive ways to apply music and the kids love them. I don't have a lot of the tubano and djembe drums so I'm going to try a drum circle with boomwhackers, hand drums, and some of our other percussion instruments."

Barrington added that because professional devel-



Jerrod Walters and Mich'ele Barrington listen to Steve Turner's instructional strategies. AMANDA KARIOTH THOMPSON

opment opportunities like this have been rare over the past few years, the drumming seminar felt like "a breath of fresh air. We got to learn and play a little bit. As a teacher, you're always a student as well. I've gotten a lot of creative ideas from this workshop that I can add to what I already do and some new things I can try. It keeps the excitement in it and it's always good to get more ideas and reboot yourself as a teacher."

Walters echoed those sentiments and said "this has been invaluable because it's given me so many options on how to engage students. Drumming is something that every student can be involved in no matter their skill level. The networking is the best part to me because you can gather ideas and hear what other people are doing."

Drumming renews smiles and energy

Register was hoping for that outcome and recognizes that "as music teachers, we're islands in our own schools. There's one elementary music teacher in every school, so coming together like this is a way for us to connect and to support and encourage each other."

"This was a good shot in the arm. We don't know, from week to week, what the next change is going to be. The teachers' faces when they came in this morning, they looked pretty stressed. Everyone is tired but there are now smiles everywhere and people have more energy. They're connecting," said Register.

Turner's main goal is to facilitate these kinds of connections through drumming, and he wants teachers to experience it so they can pass it on to their students. "Drums don't care what color you are, who you love, who you worship, or where you were born. They just give people an opportunity to connect. That's the most important thing for the future of our world."

This article is part of COCA's Creativity Persists collection and highlights how area arts educators are continuing to teach and inspire during the COVID-19 pandemic. Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).