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Integrating music and the language arts in the elementary school

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Integrating music and the language arts in the elementary school

Abstract

The whole language concept emphasizes student involvement in the language processes to create meaning. This involvement can be supported by music activity. The rhythm, cadences, rhyming lyrics, and patterns found in songs make music a natural vehicle for introducing children to print and for nurturing language abilities. Musical experiences offer many opportunities for students to engage in the language processes of reading, writing, speaking/singing, and listening. This multi-sensory approach can heighten children's interest in language activity, thus nurturing their thinking-language abilities.

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Introduction

The whole language concept emphasizes student involvement in the language processes to create meaning. This involvement can be supported by music activity. The rhythm, cadences, rhyming lyrics, and patterns found in songs make music a natural vehicle for introducing children to print and for nurturing language abilities. Musical experiences offer many opportunities for students to engage in the language processes of reading, writing, speaking/singing, and listening. This multi-sensory approach can heighten children's interest in language activity, thus nurturing their thinking-language abilities.

Statement of Paper

The purpose of this paper is to present a rationale for integrating music and the language arts in the elementary school. A review of the literature will offer support for this integration as one means of extending the whole language concept. The implementation of music as an integral part of a literature-based language arts program will be discussed.

Review of Literature

Rationale for Integrating Music into a Language Arts Program

Much discussion is found in professional literature to support the integration of music into the elementary language arts program. This integration of music can enhance content and

process, thus nurturing children's emerging thinking-language abilities.

Content

According to Huck, Hepler, and Hickman (1987), a literature-based language arts program is founded on quality works from the different genres. This base supports the study of themes and concepts. Music integrated into a literature-based program can enhance learning by extending themes and concepts.

Music provides motivation that energizes children to become involved with content while learning language. Jalongo and Bromley (1984) relate, "Song picture books can motivate children to listen, speak, read, and write in ways that not only facilitate cognitive growth but also promote general linguistic competence" (p. 844). Activities based on songs or song picture books expose children to vocabulary, syntax, semantics and the rhythm of language.

Children experiment with language as they develop thinking-language abilities. Children also find fulfillment in experimenting with music. Engaging in repetitive texts and refrains in music is both fun and supportive of language development (Kuhmerker, 1969).

Music can inspire new ways of thinking about the world. From musical experiences, children can discover meaningful topics for writing that can result in enjoyment and fulfillment (Brown &

Mathie, 1991). Also, notes on a staff, as language symbols, can offer children a way to construct meaning. Reta Upitis (1990) relates that a child said to her, "Miss U! I've discovered a secret. I know how you compose. You just put together patterns of notes" (p. 59). This is equivalent to a child saying, "I know how you write; you put together patterns of words that tell thoughts."

Process

The overlaps in the music and language arts processes can be capitalized upon to promote children's literacy. Both music and language are composed of sounds and symbols that are subject to certain rules and regulations. Written symbols, both music and language, can be converted into meaningful sounds. Patterns of language and music represent thoughts. Each pattern contains symbols that have little meaning when used singly, but when they are organized into certain combinations, definite meaning is created. Selected combinations of letters, words, and sentences create meaning; also, selected clusters of sounds and tonal patterns represent ideas and feelings (Forcucci, 1969).

The rhythmic element of music can stimulate children's involvement in the reading and language processes. While singing songs, children can focus on the progressive reading experience: As children enjoy a song/story for meaning, they can read words in meaningful context, recognize words out of context, recognize

phonics elements, and read unfamiliar texts (Handy, 1989). While responding to the rhythm in music, children can express their interpretations of the world and then can find a more meaningful experience with text. A multi-sensory experience in which children see, hear, and feel their language through music experiences can extend children's comprehension of the text and can nurture their imagination (Laughlin & Street, 1992).

Music experiences can assist in developing vocabulary. New words are more easily learned in musical rhythm and repetition experiences. By learning the patterns of words in a song, children become familiar with vocabulary and sentence structure. Singing songs fosters vocabulary development in other ways. For example, as children respond to music with different voice inflections, they learn words like soft, loud, low, high, same, different, up and down (MacIntyre, 1978).

Good readers read rhythmically and vary their inflection. Music can assist in developing auditory acuity that leads to these attributes. Vocal expression is rhythmical and changes inflection naturally when singing songs (Uhl, 1969).

Auditory discrimination, the ability to differentiate among sounds, is closely related to learning to read. Music experiences can offer children opportunities to identify the direction a sound is coming from, to discriminate between high or

low pitch or sound intensity, and to isolate sounds when heard together (Uhl, 1969).

Music activities that include staff notation can help children see differences among graphic representations. When children come to understand that an open circle note with a stem symbolizes more time than a closed circle note with a stem, they are perceiving differences among graphic symbols. When they notice that the position of the notes indicate different tones, they understand graphic relationships which can transfer to reading text. If students learn to recognize the subtle but important differences in music notations, it helps them to appreciate and to identify analogous differences in letters and words. They can see that words like "pie" and "tie" or "lap" and "map" are different but have similarities. This ability helps them learn new words more quickly and read more fluently (Lloyd, 1978).

Lloyd (1978) says that when children memorize songs they are practicing visual sequential memory, which is "the ability to remember sounds and words long enough to obtain meaning" (p. 324). Visual sequential memory is an ability essential to all language activity.

Because the processes of musical writing and composition parallel each other, music integrated into the language arts program provides children opportunities to compose and to perform

(Graves, 1983). Music activities, as language activities, can encourage freedom of expression, identification of composer/author purpose and message, development of comprehension strategies, and opportunities to compose (Duke, 1987).

Whether encouraging children to assume ownership of their musical or language compositions, Cambourne's Natural Learning Model (1988) is noteworthy. The model applies to the processes of learning both music and language. Uptis' discussion of the music processes has been extrapolated to Cambourne's model (1990). The elements are presented below:

1. Immersion. To promote music and language abilities, teachers need to offer children a wide variety of meaningful experiences appropriate to their needs.

2. Demonstration. Teachers need to model the music and language processes for the children. Examples can be also presented from professional musicians and writers and peers.

3. Feedback. Teachers need to encourage children to experiment with sounds and music notation and language symbols to create meaning. Positive feedback can be cultivated by the teacher and peers.

4. Expectations. Teachers need to respond in ways that indicate to children that their music and language responses are important. Children need to understand clearly the expectations

for activities and to be given a supportive environment in which to engage in the music and language processes.

5. Responsibility. Teachers need to help students set realistic goals for the completion of musical or written compositions and performances. They need to help students learn as they pursue their individual goals and hold them responsible for learning and task commitment.

6. Practice. Teachers need to provide children with time to listen, respond, read and write through the music and language processes.

7. Approximation. Teachers need to regard children as true composers of music and writing. Children need support as they gradually gain control of their expression through music and writing. Children should not be expected to know everything about music and notation to begin composing. The same is true about involvement in the language processes. Children are not expected to know how to spell every word or know all the punctuation rules before they begin writing but should be encouraged, as they create meaning, to approximate form. When too much time is spent getting students ready to compose music or to write through teaching form, they lose interest and the creative process is dulled. Upitis (1990) points out that even though demonstrations are essential, children learn more through

engaging in the processes and then in interacting with others concerning the meaning they have created.

8. Engagement. Teachers need to provide a stimulating, supportive environment that is nonthreatening so that children can experience moments of understanding and fulfillment as musicians and writers. Students need to gain insights into how musicians and writers respond to their world and how they translate their responses to music/written language compositions. A bibliography of picture books that give musical insights can be found in Appendix A. To assist children in becoming better writers, teachers can share author information, such as is found in the reference series, Something About the Author (Telgen) and The Junior Book of Authors (Holtze).

Curriculum Recommendations

Music Activities to Nurture Literacy

The specific music experiences that are suggested in this section can extend the content of language instructional programs and children's involvement in the language processes. Essential to effective implementation of these activities is the teacher's confidence and enthusiasm for music.

A major misconception about integrating music into the regular classroom curriculum is that many teachers believe they are inadequate as musicians. However, most teachers do have ample musical background from experiencing music in their culture

to provide music experiences for children. Teachers need to perceive themselves as learners along with their students. It is possible for them, as well as their students, to extend their music abilities and knowledge. Upitis (1990) relates, "Any teacher can set conditions for making sound, listening to sounds, experimenting with sounds and enjoying the sounds that he or she and the children make, later recording those sounds and developing ways of sharing them with others" (p. 141).

Content and Related Activities

Several sources are available for providing music as content for the language arts program.

Single illustrated songs. Many high quality, colorfully illustrated picture books with lyrics of songs can enliven reading experiences for children of all ages (Jalongo & Bromley, 1984). In Appendix B a bibliography of picture books with song texts is presented. The addition of illustrations can amplify lyrics, thus strengthening children's verbal-visual literacy. Many expressive activities can follow these reading/singing experiences.

Patterned and predictable songs. Music can be infused into a literature-based program by the inclusion of picture books with predictable song texts. These picture books are especially beneficial for young students. Goodman (1978) contends that the most important thing about beginning reading materials may be

their predictability. Predictable patterns guide and support the decoding process. There are many songs in picture book form that have predictable patterns, such as Down by the Bay, (Raffi, 1987), This Old Man, (Koontz, 1988), Fiddle-I-Fee, (Stanley, 1979), and I Know An Old Lady (Rose, 1987). Providing illustrated songs in a shared reading experience gives teachers opportunities to model behaviors that children can incorporate into their thinking-language abilities, such as predicting, concluding, inquiring, questioning, developing, describing, sequencing, dialoguing, vocabulary building, and developing a love of literature (Lamme, 1990).

From experiencing patterned songs such as "Down By the Bay," "Down on Grandpa's Farm," or "Aikendrum," children can then contribute their own verses to the familiar pattern. In the process of drafting these new verses, they can collaboratively develop lists of words with their peers to select the ones that best describe their ideas (i.e., lists of action words, farm animals, and body parts).

Ballad and work songs. Ballad and work songs are important resources for learning content through music (MacIntyre, 1978). The ballad of "Davy Crockett" enhances the folklore of the Western Frontier. The ballad of "John Henry" inspires learning about the advancement of the industrial revolution and the development of the American work ethic. The natural story

progression of ballads gives students a good model for story structure and for sequencing and predicting.

Work songs such as "I've Been Working on the Railroad" and "The Erie Canal" focus on America's development of transportation trade and the collective efforts for a common goal. Rhythm patterns and repetition in work songs can help develop reading fluency. The refrains and verse structure in these songs can help students see that writing form is useful and enjoyable (Cohen, 1974).

Process and Related Activities

These music activities can nurture children's emerging literacy.

Movement activities. Action songs that involve large muscle movements can serve as reinforcement to meaning (Kuhmerker, 1969). When children relate through movements to the rhythms of specific songs such as "Shoo Fly Don't Bother Me," "I'm a Little Teapot," or "The Noble Duke of York," they exhibit their comprehension of the lyrics. In order to enact the movements, they must know what the words mean.

Children's imagination can be tapped through movement. In experiencing Saint-Saens' program piece, Carnival of the Animals, children can respond with animal movements that are suggested by the music. As the music sparks their imagination, students might become a lion roaring, a swan gliding, a kangaroo hopping, or an

elephant lumbering. This kind of kinesthetic involvement can serve as a springboard for reading and writing about animals. After dramatizing with this piece of music, children can make lists of words describing animal movements, habitats, and physical features. They can be inspired to find more information about animals through reading experiences. Writing songs, poems, stories, or factual reports can follow naturally. The ease and confidence with which children write can be supported by kinesthetic involvement, shared verbal responses, and reading resources.

A teacher can introduce experiences with writing following kinesthetic involvement with music. For example, when studying whales, the children can pretend they are beluga whales while singing the song "Baby Beluga." As they learn more about whales, they can be more aggressive, or whale-like, with their bodies. Children may wish to experiment with writing from a whale's point of view after the kinesthetic movement activity.

Auditory and visual language activities. Many songs provide expressive opportunities for fostering auditory discrimination. For example, the song "I Am a Young Musician" requires children to differentiate between the various sounds of instruments. The song "Little Sir Echo" offers challenges to identify the direction of sound. The songs "Wabash Cannonball" and "Rock Island Line" can nurture the ability to discriminate

between high or low pitches or sound intensities. Listening to Benjamin Britten's program piece, A Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra, provides an excellent opportunity to practice isolating sounds when several are heard at once. "She'll Be Coming Around the Mountain" or "Follow the Drinking Gourd" assist in developing auditory acuity through the rhythm and changes of inflection.

To help develop visual discrimination, Lloyd (1978) suggests experiences with discriminating various graphic representations of notes. Alphabet and counting songs such as "The Alphabet Game" or "Roll Over" are ideal for such practice. Because the song lyrics and tunes are familiar, children can focus on the graphic representations of notes and their relationship to the tones and time values that are being sung.

Vocabulary activities. Singing songs fosters vocabulary development. For example, while singing the song "Chicken Soup With Rice," children can enjoy the repetitive refrains and the monthly organizational pattern while viewing the lyrics on a chart. New words of significance to the children can become more familiar as they retell/resing the story again and again. In the subsequent reading/singing of texts, children delight in recognizing the words they have learned. For example, they might encounter the song "Months of the Year" and recognize the words "May" and "October" which they learned in "Chicken Soup With

Rice." They might also recognize the same words when seeing a calendar on the bulletin board.

Singing songs fosters vocabulary development in other ways. As children respond to music with movement, they learn words like skip, trot, gallop, and march. For example, the teacher can write the word "skip" on the board as the children enact the rhythm in "Skip To My Lou" or the word "march" when children are marching to "Colonel Haithis' March" in Kipling's Jungle Book.

Along with learning words that describe movements, children can learn concept words. For example, when they become the little man in the counting song, "This Old Man," the key words such as "shoe," "knee," and "door" can be learned. As they enact the actions associated with the words, the new vocabulary is more meaningful and more easily retained.

Song picture book activities. After singing and reading song picture books, children can become involved in creating their own picture book or big book. They may want to use reference materials to trace a song's history, write parodies of familiar tunes, locate different versions of the same songs, or compare and contrast the work with other songs of its type (Duke, 1987).

For example, singing and reading "Yankee Doodle" can lead to making a picture book about the little boy going to camp with his father and Captain Gooding. The children can trace the

song's history determining facts about the Revolutionary War: What is a fife and drum? What are cornstalk fiddles? Why did they wear feathers in their hats? What did knickers and buckled shoes look like on the soldiers? Children can choose to compare and contrast the historical version of the song with a humorous version--one being the real story of a little boy going to camp during the war that reflects realistic sights and events and the contrasting one relating "he stuck a feather in his hat and called it macaroni." Another expressive activity can involve associating this song with other marching songs, such as "When Johnny Comes Marching Home."

Composing music activities. Another way music can strengthen a language arts program is by providing opportunities for children to engage in the process of composing music. Using musical staff paper, children can be given an opportunity to write a song. While composing notes and lyrics, they can experience the importance of structured and sequenced writing to create a clear meaning. The teacher can assist children in understanding the relationship between this type of written expression and story writing by showing them that both forms of writing involve pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and final form. Both are ways to create meaning.

Summary

Many instructional elements are associated with implementing the whole language concept into a school program. One instructional element is the integration of music and the language arts. Music can facilitate emerging language abilities by enhancing content and process. The themes and concepts that emerge in a literature-based program can be extended through music activities. These activities motivate student learning and provide enjoyable practice with language. Similarities between music and language processes enable children's language development. Music also nurtures literacy by enhancing vocabulary development, comprehension, and visual/auditory discrimination. Many activities for enriching language programs through music are available to teachers.

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Appendix A

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Appendix B

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