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Observations of music and literacy in early childhood education

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OBSERVATIONS OF MUSIC AND LITERACY
IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

A Thesis Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors

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Observations of Music and Literacy in Early Childhood Education

Introduction

Students spend as many as nineteen years in a classroom by the time they are twenty-two. They have countless teachers who all teach in a different style and say that it is the best way for their students to learn. Students have experienced classrooms where they are given a lecture for an hour and then expected to know and understand the content when the test comes. They have also experienced classrooms where they are up and moving, creating models, doing research, or conducting experiments, throughout the class to come to an understanding to share with their peers on the topic given. Teachers are working to provide the best education they can for their students. In the early childhood field teachers have to focus on keeping students engaged more than their counterparts in secondary education may have to because of the younger students' short attention spans. The teachers are working to create effective learning environments while keeping the students involved. Many different styles of teaching have attempted to create this environment for the students.

Educators strive to implement the best practices for instruction in their classrooms. They are constantly working to improve their educational practices and make learning come alive for their students. Music is often a method chosen to engage the students in their learning. Fisher and McDonald (2001) said this about music and literacy in the classroom, "Early literacy/music teaching processes are a natural and frequently occurring instructional component prevalent in many classrooms which serve to heighten children's understanding of new vocabulary within meaningful, active, and expressive contexts" (p. 110). The integration of music is brought up as a positive inclusion in a classroom, but is it actually a positive thing, and if it is, how do teachers effectively integrate music into their classroom?

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This case study describes the ways in which music is integrated into early literacy education in a preschool classroom setting. This case study will document what music integration and early literacy instruction in a mostly English Language Learning preschool classroom looked like. It will also examine the perceived benefits and challenges of music integration and early literacy instruction. Finally, recommendations are provided for integrating music in early literacy education for teachers in other settings. There is a fair amount of research on this topic already but it comes from different fields and therefore is missing connections and consistency between the topics. This case study looks at music integration in early literacy practices from all three lenses to begin to bridge the three fields of research. Teachers have limited time to search through research for best practice ideas and having a study that looks at music integration and early literacy practices from all three perspectives can ease that time commitment from teachers.

Essential Terms

With all of the disparities in definitions and processes of the studies looked at, definitions needed to be set for this study before it could continue. Two essential terms, to be used throughout this study were defined as follows:

1. Music integration- Using songs, chants, or rhythms in a classroom for a purpose other than to teach musical concepts i.e. teaching the parts of the body through song, using a song to indicate a transition in the schedule, etc.
2. Literacy - reading, writing, speaking, and listening abilities of a person.

Literature Review

There is research on music integration and early literacy education from the music education community, the early childhood education community, and the literacy education community. Researchers analyze the benefits and challenges of music in the early childhood classroom in terms of their different fields. With research coming from these different fields, the results and studies have taken into consideration different elements and drawn varied conclusions from their data. As well as having different approaches they are also going into their research with different background knowledge. This means that some of the common concepts through music and literacy are varied in how they are portrayed or defined in the research.

Terminology

Along with the varied research approaches, there are multiple definitions of some terms that are important to this study, in particular phonemic awareness, music, music integration, and literacy. One example that is prevalent throughout the different studies is the definition for the literacy term, phonemic awareness. Gromko (2005) defined phonemic awareness as, “the ability to recognize that a spoken word consists of individual sounds or phonemes” (p. 201). While Runfola et. al (2012) used Sulzby (1991) and Teale’s (1987) definition to define it as, “language and literacy skills that involve patterning, sequencing, and sound discrimination” (p. 8). Fisher and McDonald (2001) stated, “Phonemic awareness occurs when students grasp the concept that letter sounds can be manipulated and recombine to create new words” (p. 109). Wiggins (2007) defined phonemic awareness as, “Identifying and manipulating the smallest sound units in written symbols (e.g. individual letters in ‘stop’) as compared to emphasizing the smallest units of musical sound through musical notation (e.g. individual pitches with a musical phrase)” (p.

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55). Lastly, Hansen et. al. (2007) stated that, “A child who is phonologically aware can perceive and produce rhymes, divide words up into their syllables, and notice that groups of words have the same sounds at the beginning, middle, or end” (p. 41).

These definitions vary in some aspects but they are all defining the same concept. Phonemic awareness relates to the sound of language units in words and links to music, which in itself an aural mode of communication. When studying the relationship of music and literacy it is a challenge to discern what phonemic awareness is and what it looks like in a classroom of preschool students, which may make it difficult to truly see the effects that music has on phonemic awareness. Although this is not easily discernable in the classroom, phonemic awareness and music are related because, when learning a song students are using the same techniques they use to learn a story or other literary piece. In music, as in phonemic awareness, students must look at the smallest aspect of sound and the individual sounds within a word to correctly sing the song or pronounce a word.

Music Integration

The research on music integration consists of many studies that show different ways that music is integrated and tested in classrooms. Fisher and McDonald (2001) focused on instructional goals in early literacy curriculums and then provided musical activities that can foster development in those areas, such as concepts of print, phonemic awareness, background knowledge, and vocabulary. Some of these musical activities included: following along to musical texts, using repetitive songs, talking about verses and refrains, and writing or rewriting lyrics to a popular song. Through their research they looked to provide teachers with knowledge on how to integrate music in the classroom and some of the benefits for doing so. Gromko

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(2005) completed a study of kindergarten students, where half of the students were given musical instruction from nearby university students and half of the students were not. The music taught in the class was not directly linked to the literacy curriculum in the classroom. Both groups of students were given the same literacy instruction and both were tested at the beginning and end of the study using the standardized literacy assessment, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills test. Gromko's study showed the results that the students who had the music instruction improved their mean scores by 9.21 and 16.11 and the students who did not have music improved their mean scores by 7.83 and 15.72 respectively from the pre- to the post test (2005). This shows more significant gains from the students who received music instruction than from those in the control group who did not receive music instruction. Runfola et al. (2012) completed a study in a preschool setting where 11 classrooms participated (seven experimental and four control). The experimental teachers participated in a two year musical training and professional development course as well as an intensive summer program and were then asked to use the curriculum created in their classroom. The difference from pre- to post test on oral vocabulary for the students in the experimental group's mean score increased 4.18 points while the control group's mean score increased by 2.21 points. Similar scores were shown throughout the other literacy tests in this study. Each of these studies that incorporated music did so in a different way but they all showed a larger increase in scores on literacy assessments for the students involved in the music integration activities than their peers who did not participate in the music integration activities.

The studies reviewed showed students who ranged from having intense musical training, such as years of individualized lessons on a musical instrument, namely the piano, to students who only sang songs in the classroom as part of the daily activities. They also have shown the

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wide variety of literacy concepts tested in relation to music, such as phonemic awareness and singing. All of the studies reviewed show a positive relationship between music and literacy in the classroom (Fisher & McDonald 2001; Gromko 2005; Runfola et al. 2012). The current study focused on music that is integrated in the classroom and not the students' musical abilities outside of the classroom.

There is little research on music integration and literacy, especially in the early childhood setting, from the three different fields of study combined. Because of this, most of the research does not encompass the classroom as a whole but looks at different aspects individually. This case study works to provide a more cohesive perspective between the three different fields of study, leading to an easier approach to finding best practice for teachers.

Research Question

How is music integrated into early literacy practices in a preschool classroom?

Methodology

This research was done in a case study format. The ideals of a case study include looking at real-life problem in its original context with other factors involve. Yin (2009) a leading researcher in terms of case studies, defined a case study as, “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). This method was chosen because of the ever moving parts of the preschool classroom and the uniqueness of the setting that is hard to replicate in a controlled research setting. Educational research often

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looks at case studies because of that difficulty and the more realistic data that can be obtained in the context of the classroom.

This case study began with finding a teacher willing to participate, and with gaining approval from the International Review Board (IRB) as to the protocols used throughout the case study. To gain teacher interest, letters were sent to preschools in the area that asked for preschool teachers who would be willing to participate. One teacher agreed to complete the case study in her classroom. The teacher worked in a private religious school that had students ranging from three year old preschoolers to fifth grade students. The classroom willing to participate was a four year old preschool classroom. It was made up of fifteen students, twelve of which were non-native English speaking students, also called English Language Learners (ELL), speaking two main languages with different dialects as well. After Mrs. H understood the research project and consented to the study she was given a survey which she completed. It documented her perceptions of her musical abilities and education background, both in music and in educational practices. The survey also included a section on some general background knowledge of the teacher, such as how long she has taught and at what levels she has taught (see Appendix A: Teacher Survey). Next, observations were completed in the preschool classroom for three, 30 minute sessions, totaling approximately 90 minutes in the classroom. The stipulations provided for the times the observations were completed where that they should be a time that the teacher thought she would be using either music or literacy without having to change her daily schedule. Observations were conducted in a naturalistic setting. They were to be done with no adjustments made by the teacher or the students to their regular schedule. During these observations, data were recorded through written anecdotal records as well as videotaping the activity in the classroom during each 30 minute observation. The third, and final, part of this study consisted of

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a guided video interview with the teacher following her second observed lesson. The interview consisted of questions related to the activities the students participated in that day, the plans the teachers had, and the teacher's observations of the musical and literacy related activities present in the classroom (see Appendix B: Teacher Interview). The interview was completed as close as possible to the end of the second observation so that the time is still fresh in both the teacher and investigators' minds. It was completed within 48 hours of the observation being recorded.

Data were analyzed through an iterative coding review process. After the data was collected, it was thoroughly processed and analyzed to identify trends and patterns of how music is integrated into early literacy education in the preschool classroom. First, the survey completed by the teacher was reviewed to gain an understanding of the teacher and her experiences and opinions about music and literacy before observing her in the classroom. Then, following the three observations, the data recorded during observations and through the interview was sorted into three categories, music related activities, literacy related activities, and activities that fit neither category. After the initial sort the data recorded related to music and literacy activities were looked at to record data points where music activities and literacy activities overlapped. This data was recorded into Table 1 shown below in the data analysis. Finally, the teacher's survey was reexamined to look for the connections between the data observed and the experiences and opinions the teacher had about music and literacy and how they work together.

The trends and patterns identified included how often music and literacy were used separately, how often they were used together, and if the teacher's opinions related to the data observed in the classroom observations. These trends and patterns will contribute to the depth of knowledge on music and early literacy education. These trends resulted in recommendations to

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classroom teachers at the preschool level and possibly for teachers with older students who are still working on early literacy practices as well.

Data Analysis

Teacher Survey

The survey collected data for four different topics: the teacher's background experience, her musical background, her literacy background, and her opinions on music and literacy. The first topic was Mrs. H's educational background. Mrs. H has been teaching for over thirty years, in grades preschool age three through sixth grade, with eight years specifically in a preschool setting and this particular classroom for the last five years. She is certified to teach birth through sixth grade and has her reading endorsement as well. The second section of the survey focused on her music experiences. Mrs. H was involved in band and choir in her own schooling, but had had a bad experience with them and had not continued past middle school. When asked what she considered music in the classroom she responded, "movement pieces; chants, rhymes; sounds that remind us of a rhythm, beat, etc." (Teacher survey, question 9). When asked what she used personally in her classroom she said she tried to do everything she listed above and used Dr. Jean videos and music as well as chants for routines to incorporate those ideas.

The third topic covered in the survey was Mrs. H's experience with literacy. As mentioned in her background experience Mrs. H does have a reading endorsement, meaning that she completed specific classes on implementing literacy strategies with students. Her description of what literacy included in the classroom said this about what literacy was; it is, "interest in books, looking at and exploring books, inquiring questions while looking at books, and reading

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or retelling books” (Teacher survey, question 12). She stated that she used all of these practices to incorporate literacy into her classroom and switch out the books and materials to match the interests of the students. The final topic looked at through this survey were Mrs. H’s opinions on the integration of music and literacy in the early childhood setting. Her response to the importance of music in the classroom was also posted as a sign in her classroom. It was, “music is the universal language of mankind, lyrics stay in our head forever” (Teacher survey, question 15). Mrs. H also had positive expectations of music and literacy working together in her classroom and the benefits it provided to her students, “I also have found DLL (Dual Language Learners) find it more comfortable to sing along with familiar songs rather than speaking” (Teacher survey, question 14). This survey was completed before observing in the classroom.

Classroom Observations

The data collected from the observation piece of this study was divided into two separate ideas, literacy related activities and music related activities. Times when the two were being used simultaneously were then looked at and recorded. The data was recorded in this way to first show when elements of both literacy and music were used individually and then to see if they were used together to supplement each other.

Literacy focused Activities/Observations

Looking first at literacy elements that were observed over the three observations in the classroom a list was compiled of common practices observed (see Table 1). When the students first arrived they were immediately given literacy tasks, from finding sticks with their name on them and moving them to the word ‘school,’ to sitting on the carpet and free reading once their

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backpacks were put away. From there they moved to circle time and their morning routines. Mixed throughout these activities are literacy elements; a student reading the daily schedule aloud to their peers, students reading the words on the activity cards once they have been put together to form a word, being asked to recite a classroom chant with the teacher, and reading captioning on a video.

The students were asked to speak whether they were reading a schedule on the wall or reciting a daily prayer. They participated in a read aloud as part of their weekly Bible story. They formed words by correctly putting cards together during their ‘mat man’ activity. They had to identify words they heard in a song and relate them to items dispersed among their peers. They read books at a reading level appropriate for four year olds and several students asked the teacher for help with a word or sentence while they were reading. These activities happened in two of the three observations completed with the majority of them happening in all three observations.

Table 1. This table shows all data recorded related to literacy activities, music activities, and integrated activities.

| Literacy Activities Recorded | Music Activities Recorded | Music/Literacy Integrated Activities Recorded |
|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding popsicle stick with name on it • Independent reading time • Reading schedule aloud • Mat Man cards • Classroom chant • Video captioning • Teacher read aloud • Asking teacher for help reading a book • Taking home a book each week | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Song to begin Circle time • Mat Man song • Song to begin Religion time • Song to end Religion time • Music and Movement time | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mat Man activity • Videos during Music and Movement time • Videos for songs during Religion time • Introduction to Circle time |

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Music Focused Activities/Observations

The first musical element observed was that the teacher started circle time with a song each day. Throughout their morning the students continue using music as a medium of learning (see Table 1 for complete list of recorded music activities). They completed their daily mat man activity where the teacher plays a song about the body and what each part does, and the students sing along as they put together the figure of a body corresponding to each part. As the song said a specific body part the student with that body part got to put it on the figure they were putting together. For example, “Mat Man has two eyes, two eyes, two eyes. Mat Man has two eyes so that he can see,” and the child placed the two eyes on the head of the figure (Observation 1, 11/1). During one observation the class had their religion study which began and ended with songs played off of a laptop, that the students sang along. The students suggested the song they wanted to sing for the end of the religion time and Mrs. H played that song for them (Observation 2, 11/8). This classroom also has a large group time, called Music and Movement, throughout the day. During the first observation they participated in this time. The teacher played a DVD created by Dr. Jean, an early childhood educator, who works with movement. The students sang and did actions to each song as the videos played on the wall in front of them. Because this preschool was part of a larger school the students were also able to go to a music classroom weekly.

Integrated Music/Literacy

Students were observed participating in both music and literacy elements while the singing the song for ‘Mat Man’ through having to listen for specific words and phrases to be called out and also creating words from the pieces that created the body of “Mat Man.” While

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watching the videos during music and movement and religion time the students were engaged in both music and literacy activities through singing the songs, reading the closed captioning, and breaking apart words into smaller phonemes to match the rhythms of the songs. Also, while the students and teacher sang the gathering song for circle time the students were participating in both music and literacy elements. Integration of music and literacy primarily appeared to relate to developing concepts or vocabulary, such as labels to body parts or movement directions.

Teacher Interview

Following the second observation in the classroom an interview was conducted with the classroom teacher looking at three distinct topics. The interview was completed by having the teacher watch the recorded video of the second observation and then answer the prescribed questions (see Appendix B: Teacher Interview) which she had been given prior to the interview so she had knowledge of what would be asked. The interview included three separate topics to be looked at and discussed.

The first topic looked at was the times where the teacher saw activities related to music and literacy separately. The list created from the teacher matched the list created during the observations. The second topic discussed during the observation was where the teacher saw music and literacy working together in activities. This varied slightly from the observed list. The teacher pointed out two instances of music and literacy working together in her classroom. They were: giving the students the song books to take home (including a book and CD for the student to listen to) and the “Mat Man” activity, which came from a curriculum called Handwriting without Tears. The teacher pointed out that the “Mat Man” activity was used as an introductory activity to more challenging literacy developments.

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The third topic focused on during the interview was how much of the experience was planned and how much of it came organically in the classroom because of the students. Looking at the video recorded, the teacher said about half of the experiences, whether they were music, literacy, or combined music and literacy, were planned and half happened because of the students. The teacher said that she liked to include music activities because she saw the benefits of them on literacy but if the students requested a song, like they did in the second observation, she tried to accommodate them and use the song they wanted instead of the one she had chosen. She pointed out that many of the observations of students working on literacy activities individually were times that the students asked questions to engage in the literacy activity and that she did not initiate those activities. Overall the teacher said that she laid the outline for music and literacy activities but let the students engage with the activities and take them in the ways they want to learn.

Discussion

In every recorded observation of a music-related activity the students were also engaged in a literacy related activity. Because the music used in this classroom, mostly singing along with either the teacher or a CD/DVD, involved words or lyrics, the students were looking at the words in each song and therefore engaging in literacy. In this classroom music acted as a supplement for literacy learning. The students did not seem to realize they were learning to read and communicate in an unfamiliar language for the ELL students. They appeared to just enjoy the music they got to sing.

Student Reaction

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The students were also more engaged when they were doing a music task than when listening to the teacher or attempting to answer the questions asked by the teacher. It was observed that during songs the students were up and doing actions as well as singing along. The students were watching the teacher or the video and doing the related actions, whereas during circle time when a student was reading the schedule, the other students were not watching the reader and, when asked questions, struggled to be able to come up with an answer to the question asked. For example, during circle time the students were looking at their peer reading the schedule for the day, and the teacher asked one of the students sitting down to read the next item on the schedule. The student was unable to come up with an answer (Observation 1, 11/2).

Some of the students in this classroom did not talk much outside of being directly called on. However, during a song, those same students were actively involved in the music, singing and doing the actions along to the video or teacher. Music is an easier way to involve a student in the learning. Students who have a more restricted vocabulary than their peers may feel scared, nervous, or even threatened if they have to speak out in class, so music in a group setting can reduce that threat level. It is a less threatening way to interact, and often it is less likely that their peers will notice if the student were to make a mistake.

Conclusion and Recommendations

“Regardless of the musical form and despite a teacher’s level of musical training, the value of fostering creativity and enhancing literacy instruction through music is vital in today’s diverse early childhood classrooms,”

- Paquette & Rieg, 2008, p. 227

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The students in this case study were more engaged in their learning when music was used compared to when they were doing other large group activities. The students were up and moving, trying to sing along to the songs to the best of their abilities, during their daily routine. Wiggins (2007) said this about the engaging nature of music in the early childhood classroom, “In the early learning setting, music’s engaging nature encourages children to attend during reading activities, invites them to be active listeners, and promotes comprehension and dialogue” (p. 62). Using music in the classroom has shown no negative data in this case study. Every time the music activities were analyzed alongside literacy concepts the results showed positive outcomes for the students and the classroom as a whole. From this study, recommendations have been compiled for practicing teachers.

It is recommended that music be a part of every early childhood classroom. While this study did not provide quantitative data to show student learning from music integration, there were many observed instances of higher student engagement through music integration. Music can supplement the learning of each core academic subject, as well as having its own benefits that it contributes to learning. Music combined with literacy can be a tool for students to be engaged in classroom activities in a less threatening way. Students whose self image and confidence are easily threatened by humiliation and being wrong are given a chance to practice and learn through music in a group setting. Therefore, if they have to do a task later that requires the skill they are nervous about, they have had practice with the music. Hansen et al (2007) stated that, “educators know that literacy learning, as all learning, happens most easily when students have high interest levels and strong emotional connections to the material. Musical play and musical activities clearly provide an emotional environment in which learning can occur” (p. 29). Students do not always realize they are learning the content as they are memorizing and

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singing a song. The integration of music in the early literacy classroom is beneficial to the students who need a non-threatening and engaging way to work with their literacy skills in the classroom.

Another advantage of music in the early childhood classroom was that it served as an entry point for the English Language Learners in the classroom. Students who are trying to learn English for the first time get the chance to hear other students, the singer, or the teacher say the words as they read the captions (when provided). They could hear and see the words in the song and were more willing to try communicating in a non-threatening environment. It is recommended that teachers provide a way for the students to see the words they are hearing in the song, whether that is with captions on a video or having the song written out on chart paper near where the class sings the song. This would be beneficial not only to the students who are learning English as a second, third, or fourth language but also to the students for whom English is their first language. In preschool, students are starting to read and understand words, and by being able to see the words they are singing and hearing, they may be able to better connect those words later in their reading practices.

Considerations

There are considerations that need to be made because this is a case study of a single classroom. This study was completed at one school that was a private religious school and housed students in preschool through grade five. It is a different style of classroom than what may be found in a public school or stand-alone preschool center, either public or religious. Preschool classrooms, as any classroom, vary greatly from center to center (or school) and even classroom to classroom depending on the teacher's strengths and weaknesses. One other

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consideration for this study, which was mentioned during the description of the case study, is that this is a classroom that had a majority of the students who were part of the ELL program at the school. English is not their first language and the teacher in the classroom was adjusting her curriculum to fit the needs of her students. Teachers play to their strengths to help their students grow to the best of their abilities. By not having another classroom to compare to these observations, it provides less data to be able to support the following recommendations.

Further Research

There is still a need for further studies to be done in other preschool classrooms to provide comparison and delve more deeply into the connection between literacy and musical achievement. This study focused more on the student engagement with the integrated activities. There are a wide variety of preschool classroom types available, and research should be completed in more of them to see what is working in different classrooms. Because of the vastness of the topics of literacy education and music integration, as well as the large variety of preschool types, the research needs to continue to benefit students and help guide teachers.

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Appendix A: Teacher Survey

General Teaching

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. What levels have you taught at?
3. Where did you attend school?
4. What degrees or certifications do you have?
5. How long have you been at this particular school?
6. What other experiences do you have working with children (besides being a lead teacher)

Music Experience

7. What is your prior experience with music in schools (i.e. where you in band/choir/orchestra, did you take a music class, did your teachers use music in your general classroom)?
8. Do you have any formal music education (i.e. individual instrument/voice lessons, music classes past basic general music classes)?
9. What do you consider music in the classroom?
10. What have you done to incorporate music in the classroom?

Literacy Experience

11. Do you have a reading endorsement?
12. What do you constitute as literacy in early childhood?
13. What do you do to incorporate literacy in the classroom?

Opinions

14. Do you think that music and literacy are beneficial to each other?
15. Do you think it is important to have music in early childhood? Why or why not?

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Appendix B: Teacher Interview of Observation Two

The following questions are starting questions and follow up questions may be added during the interview if necessary.

1. What were your goals/objectives for this time?
2. How did you see literacy elements during this time?
3. Were they planned?
4. How did you see music elements during this time?
5. Were they planned?
6. Did you see a relationship between music and literacy activities during this time?
7. Is this video an example of your typical literacy and music instruction? Why or Why not?