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Music and words: Connecting the love of music with language

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Abstract

Children from different cultures have a natural affinity for rhymes, rhythm and music. Imagine if students were able, from the beginning of their education and experiences with academic writing and literacy, to access the unconscious and original selves from which to create their writing. The study of music can help to access this aware, inventive side that can enhance anyone's writing. As early childhood writing teachers and a composition teacher, we draw on their experiences with young children with words and music. We examine the relationship between music and words in an effort to bring the primitive drive of music into the emergent writing capabilities of children.

Keywords: music, words, literacy.

Introduction

Children from different cultures have a natural affinity for rhymes, rhythm and music. Imagine if students were able, from the beginning of their education and experiences with academic writing and literacy, to access the unconscious and original selves from which to create their writing. The study of music can help to access this aware, inventive side that can enhance anyone's writing. As early childhood writing teachers and a composition teacher, we draw on their experiences with young children with words and music. We examine the relationship between music and words in an effort to bring the primitive drive of music into the emergent writing capabilities of children.

Theoretical Framework

To support our belief that music can enhance and improve emergent literacy and writing, we drew on the work of many scholars. Recent research suggests that a strong correlation exists between music and other mental abilities, such as nonverbal reasoning, literacy development and verbal ability (Schewe, 2009). Gardner (1993) says the first intelligence to develop is musical intelligence. He suggests that music is universal, has a presence across cultures, and has existed at least as long as language.

Sohn (2004) taught freshman English in Appalachia. She noticed a strong connection in her students to local music that informed their literacy. She reported that her students often spent several hours a week singing and playing music at home and/or in church. Some of her students' parents and grandparents wrote music and songs, reinforcing literacy for her students. In the personal narratives of her students, Sohn found examples of language acquisition facilitated by music. Sohn wondered what happened to her students between this special time of discovery of music and literacy in youth when they learned and were excited by music and freshman composition courses. She added assignments about music in her course and suggests more music be integrated into the school curriculum in upper grades where music is largely abandoned.

Elbow (2006) states that written composition is trapped in the medium of time and that traditional forms of organization tend to stress the arrangement of parts in space. He further recommends experimenting with different forms, like music, to explore new approaches to academic writing. “We can look at music in space on the page, and good musicians hear sounds and rhythms as they look – just as most of us can hear sounds when we read a silent text” (p. 663). Even if Elbow overstates the extent to which all of written composition “is trapped in the medium of time...and space,” (p. 663) he rightly gestures to the power of music for new approaches to writing at the stage of invention. Emig (1971, 1964) also suggest appealing to the muses via rhythm, prose or poetry to free writing from provisionally unproductive structures. Both scholars suggest that music and rhythm can be used for freewriting. To better understand under what conditions music might be used as a tool for invention, we looked at what early childhood educators have discovered about the power of music to stimulate writing.

There is support in the literature for a positive relationship between music and literacy from early on in the educational process. Integrating music into children’s everyday activities promotes literacy development (Paquette & Rieg, 2008). Researchers know that repeated rhyming sounds as well as recurring phrases and refrain stimulate brain growth (Elliot, 2000). Sohn’s student writes about how music helped her learn to recognize words

I learned how to read from my mamaw [grandmother]...when I was around two or three. When she sang from her hymn book and followed the words with her finger, I would follow along too, and soon I knew what she was saying and would recognize the words if I saw them in other places. (2004, p. 283)

Regardless of the form or the teacher’s level of musical training, music fosters creativity and enhances literacy instruction.

While studying elementary school children in Minnesota, Torrance (1960) found that only 9 percent of language arts objectives in a given day were related to creative thinking. The rest of the objectives were given over to behavioral norms. This trend has only worsened in the fifty years following and very few objectives are related to creative thinking in public school elementary education. Standardized test preparation rather than creativity has become the priority in most public school education. Torrance suggested valuing original ideas in the classroom and providing activities to engender creative thinking. Song creation, which is presented here in our methodology section, supports the engendering of creativity. Brazerman (2003) says that standardized forms of writing assessment [set] reductionist definitions and expectations of writing” and do not direct “students toward the highest levels of accomplishment” (p. 1).

There is also support from the scholars in using atypical activities to improve student writing, and songwriting activities falls into this category as atypical in the classroom. Grow (1987) used a program of deliberately writing badly to help students overcome the stigma of “being taught,” and he found doing it in an unconventional way was liberating for his students. In primary children’s classrooms, Hargreaves, Galton and Robinson (1996) found that the products of unstructured, unusual children’s activities in creative writing and music received significantly higher overall ratings on those of the scales with an evaluative component than those from structured activities. LoPresti (1987) concludes that not only what we teach, but what students impute as our intentions matter a great deal. He cautions that we should:

downplay any unnecessary, unreasonable or interfering conformity to classroom literacy activities that threaten to convey to students that reading and writing are

primarily testing situations, not experimental situations in which they can explore thoughts or writing conventions they have recently noticed in the texts they've been reading. (p. 224)

The research has supported the relationship between literacy and music education. Johnson (2007) found that students in high-quality school music education programs scored higher on standardized tests, including English, than students in schools with deficient music education programs. Hurwitz, Wolff, Bortnick and Kokas (1975) cited music study as a contributing factor in the acceleration of reading skills of American children in their first year at school. Significantly better differences in academic achievement, including reading, existed between children who received music instruction and those who did not. Lamb and Gregory (1993) found that literacy development and musical development are linked. They found that children's scores of tests of auditory discrimination were related to scores in phonemic awareness. Munson-Benson (2007) states that patterns peculiar to poems, nursery rhymes and lullabies are of special value to young children's literacy development and that these recurring phrases and refrains stimulate brain growth. Gardner (1993) states that infants turn their heads to human voices and match in sounds their parents' songs. He feels that infants are especially predisposed to pick up songs and music rather than speech. McIntire (2007) found that children learn through playful musical activities. Rhythm and rhyme seemed to increase learning and frequently provided an emotional mood to engage students in learning routine facts in literacy.

We ourselves have done research in some of the methodologies we present here. Torres-Santos (2007) looked at the connection between music and language as a form of human expression, with a syntax or common process, with sequence that carries discrimination of various meanings, symbolization and appreciation. Kennedy (2008a, 2008b) found that linguistically diverse students rely on oral linguistic codes for structure in written composition. Kennedy (2006) also found that young students related better to academic writing while using creative forms such as the lyricism and rhythm of poetry to advance their writing. Writing scholars on various campuses found that students flourished using their vernaculars in writing (Kennedy et al., 2003; Torres-Santos, 2003). The literature clearly showed support for the relationship between music and words that we had researched and use in our teaching practices.

Aim and focus: Connections between music and literacy

If we look at some of the relationships between music and literacy, the following becomes apparent. Decoding skills could be developed by the relationship between sound and symbols in both music notation and written composition in older elementary students. Listening skills could and should be developed through listening comprehension and discrimination of music from infancy on up. Young children would develop critical thinking skills if they composed with both music and the written word. Vocabulary would be developed, especially in English Language Learners, in both modalities in all elementary school children. Memorization of both music and written words would engender and develop literacy skills in all school-aged students. Small-motor developed would be developed through the use of various muscles to play instruments and write or draw in pre-school and early elementary classes. Of course, the satisfaction of creativity and self-expression cannot be underestimated in terms of motivating all students to write and enjoy music. Many of these methodologies are explored in the following section.

in the
sky.

a. phrase

lit- tle
twin-kle, star,
5 Twin-kle,
6 How I
won-der
what you
are!

The teacher could ask students to analyze the elements and structure of the song, how many stanzas comprise the entire song (5 stanzas), how many lines comprise the first stanza (6 lines), how many musical phrases comprise each section (3 phrases [a, b and a], where the first is the same as the third) and how many beats or pulsations comprise each musical phrase (8 beats) after singing the song and clapping along. The teacher can ask them if there is any melodic or word pattern, if the repetition is exact or there is any variation, if the word represents its natural stress, or if each syllable of the song is assigned to one specific pitch (tone) or to a series of pitches (tones).

The teacher could ask children if there is a word syllable with a prolonged and longer duration or if there is a pause separating the word. The teacher could ask them if the melody is comprised of intervals (distance between the pitches or tones) within a narrow or wide range. The teacher could also ask if it is easy to reach all the tones in the song or difficult. The teacher could ask students where the title of the song appears in the song and why that song has that title. For instance, in *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, the first verse, “Twinkle, twinkle little star” is repeated twice [it repeats in the fifth line], the middle lines are “up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky.”

Once children thoroughly analyze the song, creative melody-making can begin. At this point, children can write words and then figure out a melody that would fit, or write a melody and later create the words.

Activity 2: Syllables and Beats: *Come to Me*

Another activity the authors have tried is composing 4 lines of poetry on a theme and then asking students to clap a beat to it:

Come to me

(beats)

X X X
Come to me
Come to sleep
Un- der- stand
I must leave.

A variation of this activity is to have students create a short melody with high and low pitches (tones) and ask them to add words to it.

O O | O O O O O

While simultaneously another person or group starts reading from the beginning
Way up in the sky
The little birds fly

And so on

Activity 6: Hearing the Language: Paired Reading: *Brother John*

Other techniques to improve reading can be done through song-based literature (Perogoy & Boyle, 2008). Song lyrics and text can be used by children for these activities. Paired reading, where one partner reads a passage with intonation and phrasing followed by the other, can be done with a variety of songs, especially those with repeats, such as *Brother John*.

Brother John

One partner reads with the lyrics with intonation and phrasing:

Are you sleeping?

Followed by the other partner:

Are you sleeping?

One partner reads with the lyrics with intonation and phrasing:

Brother John

Followed by the other partner:

Brother John

One partner reads with the lyrics with intonation and phrasing:

Morning bells are ringing

Followed by the other partner:

Morning bells are ringing

One partner reads with the lyrics with intonation and phrasing

Ding, ding, dong

Followed by the other partner:

Ding, ding dong.

Activity 7: Hearing the Language: Echo Reading: *Kookaburra*

Echo reading, where one person reads a sentence and the second student reads the next line, can be done with one song line after another as in *Kookaburra* or *Hey Ho Nobody Home*.

Here's an example of echo reading

Kookaburra

One student sings or reads:

Kookaburra sits on the old gum tree

The second student sings or reads:

Merry, merry king of the bush is he

The first student sings or reads:

Laugh Kookaburra, laugh Kookaburra

The second student sings or reads:

Gay your life must be.

Activity 8: Hearing the Language: Choral Reading: *Frère Jacques*

Choral reading, often used by English Language Learners to learn the language, can be done in song with the teacher modeling the song, with the written text, and the students repeating the song several times. This methodology could also serve well to teach a song in another language, such as *Frère Jacques*:

Frère Jacques

The teacher would model:

Frère Jacques, frère Jacques,
 Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?
 Sonnez les matines! Sonnez les matines!
 Ding, dang, dong. Ding, dang, dong.

The students would repeat together:

Frère Jacques, frère Jacques,
 Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?
 Sonnez les matines! Sonnez les matines!
 Ding, dang, dong. Ding, dang, dong.

Activity 9: Parody: Hokey Pokey

Parody is an excellent way to encourage students to write creatively through lyrics. C. Hildebrant (1998) suggests using popular songs children know to parody, like the *Hokey Pokey*. The teacher can model and then students will be prepared to write and sing their own parodies. Teachers may ask students to use other parts of the body (besides arms, legs, head and nose).

Activity 10: Song Writing: Composing from Words

If the words come first, children should be encouraged to write a melody to go with the words and dramatize them. They should be encouraged to divide a word or break it into syllables. Students should know where the stress is in the sentence. Among the possibilities are making or not making pauses and/or holding a note to emphasize a word or syllable, such as *Amazing Grace*, where the a is elongated.

Amazing Grace

(beats)

x X x x

A- ma-----zing

Children should be encouraged to try different note placements within the beat and emphasize different words until the right combination is found. Children should try different pitches (tones) and be encouraged to assign multiple pitches to a one syllable word. For example, rewriting *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, as *Sue Had a Small Iguana*, would not work in the beat *Mary Had a Little Lamb*

(beats)

 X x X x X x X x
 1 Ma- lit- tle lamb____ tle lamb____
 ry a lit- tle lamb____
 had

Sue Had a Small Iguana

(new version)

Sue____ small__ i-gua-na---- (not recommended)
 a
 had

Sue___

small i- gua-na

(recommended)

a

had

Activity 11: Song Writing: Lyrics for a Melody

If a child has a melody to write words for, encourage him/her to dramatize the music with words. In music, there are several kinds of rhyme: perfect, e.g. joy/boy; false, e.g. down/around; masculine, or stress on an entire word or end, e.g. relegate/segregate; and feminine, or stress on the first part, e.g. walker/stalker. Words can be chosen to enhance the melody and help children in creating early poetry. If a child has a different home language than mainstream English, he/she can be encouraged to compose “hybridity” songs, or songs using both languages to access home culture and make children more at ease with the gap between both languages. Torres-Santos (2006) used this methodology successfully with six first graders, who had different home languages than mainstream English. Kennedy and Torres-Santos (2007) found that early childhood teachers welcomed and enjoyed implementing musical composition methodologies at a workshop for this purpose and expressed great enthusiasm about its possible use in their classrooms.

Activity 12: Songwriting: Writing Songs from Poems

Children can also create songs with prosody, or seamless blending of melody and words, e.g. looking up, looking down, tell me what you see. Some exercises for writing lyrics could include beginning with lyrical poetry. Both Emily Dickinson and William Butler Yeats, among many others, (Luxford, 2000; Yeats, 1932) wrote poems that were set to music.

As an exercise to begin writing, have children look around the room and jot down a list of objects. When they’ve settled on one, have them write a title, e.g. “This Picture of You.” “Give children an image, e.g. “Colder than Ice” or “Just Behind the Mirror,” and then have them create their own titles. After children have their titles, ask them to jot down the information that needs to be conveyed in the first verse to lead the listener to that title. Then have them continue by writing what happens next. Then ask them to begin actual lines of lyrics by expressing one idea and one emotion and maintaining one consistent tense and atone, e.g. the sun was so bright. Then tell them to maintain the continuity throughout the lyrics.

Children can explore their own natural creative process in this way – and relate it happily to the act of writing. Spender (1962) divides artists into Mozartians who instantaneously get in touch with their unconscious when composing and Beethovians, who agonize over every phrase. Children can find their own voice and style and become either “Mozartians” or Beethovians.” In this way, they won’t have to follow composition textbooks to uncover their own creative processes and approaches to writing.

Additionally, children learn many new vocabulary words through music – stanza, rhythm, melody, pattern, to name a few. Teachers can make a word wall with each alphabet letter and classify the new words learned under the letter of the alphabet. Children can create mobiles of musical sounds and symbols and hang them from the ceilings. Teachers may set up a listening center where children can read to music or listen to stories told in song as they read. Children may record their reactions to the music they hear in writing and drawings. Children can write reviews and recommend some of the favorite music they hear. Post rhyming words on the word wall heard in lyrics and songs. All these techniques are definitely recommended to learn these and other songs. Two websites where many songs can be found

are at “Music for Little People” <http://www.musicforlittlepeople.com> and <http://www.kids.niehs.nih.gov/music.htm#index>.

Chicken Soup with Rice is on CD and can be downloaded and is a favorite with young children as literature to music.

In summary, the following could be a typical flow of activities:

Write few stanzas of poetry or provide it from a pre-existing poem

I love you
With all my heart
For-ever and ever
And al-ways be
You and me.

Know how to divide a word (break words into syllables)

I love you
With all my heart
For-e-ver and e-ver
And al-ways be
You and me.

Know the stress in the sentence/stanza (it may vary according to intention)

I <u>love</u> you	I love <u>you</u>
With all my all <u>heart</u>	With <u>all</u> my heart
For- <u>e</u> -ver and <u>e</u> -ver	For-e-ver and e-ver
And <u>al</u> -ways <u>be</u>	And al-ways be
<u>You</u> and <u>me</u> .	<u>You</u> and <u>me</u> .

Clap the beat (steady pulsation)

Recite one syllable per beat

X X X
I love you

X X X X
With all my heart

X X X X X X
For- e- ver and e- ver

X X X X
And al- ways be

X X X
You and me.

Recite various syllables or words per beat

X X
I love you

X X X
With all my heart

X X X X
For- e-ver and e-ver

X X X
And al-ways be

X X
You and me.

*Prolong a syllable or word for more than a beat to emphasis it
Recite and hold word of syllable to emphasize it*

X X X X
I love **you**_____

X X X X X X
With_____ all my **heart**_____

X X X X X X X
For- e- ver and e- **ver**_____

X X X X X
And al- ways **be**_____

X X X X X X
You _____ and **me.**_____

Make silences

X X X X
I love you ()

X X X X X X
With_____ all my heart ()

X X X X
For- e-ver and e-ver ()

X X X X X
And al- ways be ()

X X X X X X

You _____ and me. ()

Add a melody with high and low pitches (tones)

X X X
I you
love

X X X X X X
With
all my heart _____ ()

X X X X X X
e-----
and ver

ver
For- e-

X X X X X
And al- be _____
ways

X X X X X X X X
You _____ and _____
me _____ ()

Learn a song, like “Row, row, row your boat”, by using the techniques of paired reading, echo reading and choral reading

Paired reading

One partner reads with the lyrics
with intonation and phrasing

Row, row, row your boat
Gently down the stream.
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,
Life is but a dream.

Followed by the other partner

Row, row, row your boat
gently down the stream.
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,
Life is but a dream.

Echo reading

One person reads a line

Row, row, row your boat

Second person reads another line

Gently down the stream.

One person reads a line

Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,

Second person reads another line

Life is but a dream.

This technique could also be practiced in the following manner to eventually sing a “round” song

One person or group reads

Row, row, row your boat. Gently down the stream.

The first person or group continues reading

Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, Life is but a dream.

While simultaneously another person or group starts reading from the beginning

Row, row, row your boat. Gently down the stream.

First person or group continues reading

Row, row, row your boat. Gently down the stream.

While the second person or group continues as well but at a different point of the text

Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, Life is but a dream.

And so on

Choral reading

The teacher models the song, with the written text

Row, row, row your boat

Gently down the stream.

Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,

Life is but a dream.

All students repeat the song several times

Row, row, row your boat

Gently down the stream.

Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,

Life is but a dream.

A performance could be staged inviting parents or other classes to witness the wonderful musical creations. Or teachers may invite another class to visit and have the composers and singers perform.

Conclusion

If young children, delighted and developed by song, did not lose their muses in a structure of wording, sentence structure and grammar, but instead drew on the rhythms and incantations of music, their literacy and writing would be more creative, natural and flowing. Music

should accompany literacy learning throughout elementary, middle and high schooling and into college. Teachers in these settings should seek to engender this musical connection so that there is a natural progression that will be made right through the college years.

More research needs to be done on the relationship between music, literacy and early schooling experiences and writing and literacy practices at the college level. Longitudinal studies have been done (O’Conner, Arnott, McIntosh, & Dodd, 2009; Yaden & Tradibuono, 2004) tracing preschoolers through school and sometimes into adulthood and documented the positive effects of a literacy-based education. A longitudinal study could be done tracing the preschooler who began with a music-based literacy education to determine the effects on reading and writing practices in later school years, up to and including college, especially composition classes. Researchers also need to examine not only the effects of musical experiences on preschoolers and early childhood students, but how this impacts the rest of their educations and later lives. Various aspects of musical literacy practices and compositions should be looked at more closely in the early childhood classroom to see if these skills can be drawn upon in later years.

If our students are arriving at our college composition classes as reluctant writers, we need to reevaluate our goals as literacy educators in terms of what our students want and need. Emphasis on high-stakes testing and writing geared to passing these high-stakes tests is not necessarily our end goal. “...as literacy teachers, we must not accept the idea that what work requires of schools is the same as what students require, or even want, from schooling” (Branch, 1998, p. 327). We certainly want our students to be able to perform in writing in the workplace, but ultimately we want them to enjoy their literacy practices throughout their lives.

The traditional academic essay is entrenched in the academy tradition. Unfortunately, it is often formulaic writing that the student has learned to survive academic life – sterile, distant, uninvolved and devoid of feeling or intimacy. The academy is under attack from the workplace to produce students who can perform in writing to meet their job demands.

If children are given warm, happy, comfortable and creative experiences linking music and originality to writing and literacy, a better prognosis would probably ensue when students approach academic writing and eventually arrive at college composition courses. Some of that nonverbal training and words tied to the musical process would perhaps spill over onto the page. Students might happily approach the writing task as they did singing and composing rhymes and songs. Perhaps this could revolutionize the way composition is taught in American schools and make for more creative, happier academic writers when they enter college and eventually, the workplace and beyond.

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