

My Teacher Story: Row, Row, Row Your Boat

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"Let's go for a boat ride! Put on your life jacket and get ready to row your boat." As I spoke these words to my Kindergarten class, I picked up a container filled with blue and red rhythm sticks and chanted, "Choose one stick – red stick, blue stick, bumpy stick, smooth stick – pretend it is a paddle." As I offered each child an opportunity to choose the stick he or she wanted, I sang "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" and encouraged the students to try out their paddles in the water. I sat down, facing the children and positioned my stick in front of me and started to sing "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." As I sang, I demonstrated a rowing motion with my stick, and as I sang and rowed, the students started to row along with me. I rolled my shoulders and extended my arms in a dramatic movement.

The trip ended with the words, "Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream." The song ended and the rowing stopped. "Great rowing!" I exclaimed. "Let's do it again! This time, let's see if we can row together; paddle in the same direction." As the leader I said, "Put your paddle in front of you and when the song begins we will all start to row on the right."

Chaos erupted at this instruction, but it gave me an opportunity to teach left and right. When I saw that everyone was ready, I prepared the class to row by singing: "Are you ready and here we go" and with an exaggerated motion to the right on the word 'row' I began to sing and row. The students watched and listened and enthusiastically joined me in the rowing.

We rowed in a variety of ways. We rowed on the right side. We rowed on the left side. We rowed alternating sides. Then I asked, "Should we row faster?" The children responded enthusiastically with diverse and definitive comments like: "Yes," "Let's go faster", "I can go really fast" and "I know I will be the fastest." I told them to get their paddles ready to row quickly and prepared the faster tempo by singing "Are you ready and here we go" with a strong beat and at a quick tempo. The children picked up the tempo and away we went! The children loved rowing faster! The children's eyes sparkled and their voices were filled with excitement.

After we rowed ‘fast’ a number of times I said, “You must be tired from rowing so fast. It’s getting late so let’s get ready to row home – let’s row home s-l-o-w-l-y!” This time with a strong beat and a slow tempo I sang, “Are you ready and here we go” and we sang and rowed our boats back home, s-l-o-w-l-y.

We sang and rowed many times that day. On reflection, I saw the individuality of the children and the varied responses to this activity. I cannot say with certainty what each child captured or retained from participation in the activity but I can surmise what some of the children may have learned from watching their reactions. Some children just followed the “instructions” while others sang and rowed in sync throughout the activity. Some children, though they sang and rowed, were not fully committed to the task but participated intermittently. What I can say with certainty is that all of the children were engaged in the activity. They were aware and attentive to the physical task and the music. They adapted the speed of their rowing to the tempo of the song and the style of their movement to the beat, activities that supported comprehension of vocabulary. They watched, listened, played, and had fun to the extent they felt comfortable and willing. All of the children responded playfully to the song.

Niland (2009) contended that when children respond playfully to a song, they create their own musical learning; they use play to build their own curriculum. Through my teaching experiences and research, I have learned that children need time to watch, listen, and explore before they can respond and that they will make attempts to join in the singing and participate in the actions when they are ready.

What Does the Research Say?

Positive Influences and Learning Opportunities for Young Children

Music permeates the essence of every person. It influences young children’s development and learning in many ways, some demonstrative, some subtle (Harris, 2011). As a communicative tool, music is a natural medium to influence and express emotions and thoughts (Kim & Kemple, 2011). Providing children with structured and open-ended music activities creates an atmosphere of not only trust and respect, but comfort, solace, confidence, and inspiration (Niland, 2009). Paquette and Rieg (2008) maintained that notwithstanding a teacher’s level of aesthetic appreciation and musical training, the value of fostering creativity through music is vital in today’s diverse Early Childhood Education (ECE) classroom.

Studies have shown that musical experiences improve young children's language and literacy skills (Harris, 2011; Yazejian & Peisner-Feinberg, 2009). Wiggins (2007) focused on promoting literacy in a music-enhanced environment and explored the relationship between music and literacy. She contended that there are parallel skills in reading and music and that a music-integrated literacy environment will nurture auditory and visual discrimination, eye-motor coordination, and language reception. Wiggins maintained that emergent literacy will be nurtured in an early childhood environment where literacy experiences are integrated with meaningful music activities. She believed that all early childhood educators can develop the knowledge, skills, and ability needed to bring music into the classroom.

Wiggins (2007) and Niland (2007) noted that the linking of musical experiences (such as singing, playing instruments, moving, and dancing) to story experiences provides the opportunity for sensory engagement. The relationship between text and illustrations contributes to meaning-making for young children. Niland (2007) contended that music, text, and illustrations have similar relationships, which can be used by children to make meaning from the narratives, and the addition of music adds extra sensory, semiotic, and aesthetic dimensions to the experience.

Children's experiences with both literature and music contribute significantly to the development of aesthetic appreciation. Both provide a sense of pleasure or satisfaction and lead children to begin to form visual and aural preferences. Picture books provide an aesthetic experience both visually and aurally. Music provides an aesthetic experience which is aural and kinesthetic. Given that children engage so much with their senses and bodies, the experience of music and literature together has a rich potential for expressive responses. (Niland, 2007, p. 8)

Songs present opportunities for developing automaticity with language (Paquette & Rieg, 2008) – knowing what to say and producing language without pauses. Many children's songs and rhymes follow a repeated verse form with rhyme, and are easy to follow. Often verses lead back to a logical refrain and theme, which helps teach logic.

The repetitive nature in children's songs is also of value to students who do not have English as their first language because they hear and experience the repetition of words and phrases (Paquette & Rieg, 2008). Wiggins (2007) supported the use of music with English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners. She maintained that the use of songs not only helped in

the development of phonemic awareness, it also gave children who are learning EAL an opportunity to sing in their first language and in English. This activity supports the child's first language, while promoting oral proficiency in English. This activity also promotes self-esteem of the young student, who can engage in a linguistic activity with ease and without fear of criticism by others.

The Value of Nursery Rhymes

Kenney (2005) spoke to the subtle value of nursery rhymes and encouraged ECE teachers to incorporate nursery rhymes into their teaching and play with children. Kenney (2005) maintained that when children learn nursery rhymes, marvelous things happen.

The child learns new vocabulary about people, places, ideas that may not yet have been part of his or her life. Perhaps the most wonderful part is that this learning takes place without anyone really knowing it, in a joyful, delightful, loving setting. Nursery rhymes may well be one of the most important foundations of the young child's development. These bouncy, often nonsensical rhymes stimulate the social, emotional, physical, intellectual, and musical development of children in ways we may not realize. (Kenney, 2005, p. 28)

Nursery rhymes carry the parts of language that lead to speaking and reading. When children hear vowels and consonants in rhyme, they imitate the sounds. One of the joys and values of nursery rhymes, as an educational assist, is that they are short. Children can repeat them easily and delight in sharing the rhymes with others.

Nursery rhymes set the foundation for creative and expansive thinking. They expand vocabulary and expose children to words they may not hear in ordinary language. They are like miniatures stories, stories opening children's minds to new ideas. The more rhymes children know, the more ideas they will have to think about (Kenney, 2005).

Mastering nursery rhymes helps develop children's ability to memorize, to sequence, and to hear, speak, move, and feel patterns. Patterning is the basis for all reading and math study and forms the basis for all rhymes. And, of course, words attached to rhymes help children learn the alphabet and counting. (Kenney, 2005, pp. 28-29)

Studies undertaken by Fisher and McDonald (in Harris, 2011) and Goswami and Bryant (in Harris, 2011) indicated that learning nursery rhymes can help children develop phonological awareness, the auditory understandings that include awareness of words, phrases, sentences,

paragraphs, and so on. The development of such phonological awareness can impact upon reading skills. Harris (2011) stated, “Nursery rhymes contain repeated phrases with memorable and predictable structures” (p. 140). By working with the repeated phrases and predictable structures, children also develop phonemic awareness, an auditory differentiation of the sounds within the words and phrases. Because these auditory sounds can be combined with the visual stimuli of alphabet letters in phonics instruction, the simplicity of these nursery rhyme structures “contribute to [their] popularity with the exponents of phonic reading methods” (Verney, in Harris, 2011, p. 140). Phonological awareness, and within that phonemic awareness, are skills that will develop naturally, particularly when children are exposed to the rhymes (Wright, in Harris, 2011).

Play-Based Music Curriculum

Niland (2009) considered the value of play in early childhood music education. She posited that play is at the heart of contemporary early childhood pedagogy, and that this concept of play has led to a strong belief in the importance of an emergent, child-centered approach to curriculum.

Many early childhood educators argue that it is important in this period of children’s lives to consider music as an integrated part of life and the curriculum. Research is increasingly showing that humans are innately musical beings and therefore it is crucial that all children are given a musically enriched environment to bring out the musicality with which they were born. During early childhood, music is not just about nurturing talent; it is about a holistic approach to exploring the world in musical ways. (Niland, 2009, p. 18)

A play-based, child-centered music curriculum includes songs that relate to children’s interests and opens space for a range of playful instructions. Educators who engage children in musical activities give opportunities for children to create and imagine; to discover and invent. It is also an opportunity for children to learn about themselves. Learning about oneself can give students the courage and desire to learn about others and, beyond that, to learn about and experience the world.

Teacher Resource Document: Music Activities for the Early Childhood Educator

This resource document is intended for early childhood educators. The focus of this resource is to show how play-based music activities can be implemented into the early childhood

classroom and to encourage teachers to offer a space where children are able to use music as an active part of their play and exploration. My hope is that teachers will adapt this resource in ways that best suit their classrooms, their students, and themselves.

The video vignettes demonstrate ways to incorporate music into early childhood activities. The dialogue describes the animation, enabling me to comment on the activity, the lessons taught, and the spontaneity. While each of the video clips contains different examples of teaching activities, four areas I featured for comment are the use of: a) props, b) stories that are sung, c) nursery rhymes, and d) rhythm instruments.

The children appearing in the video attend a daycare centre. None of the children auditioned for this video, nor were any of the children or their parents known to me prior to the filming. The setting for this video was at the daycare on a normal weekday and the lesson was presented to the four and five year old children as a fun activity (The lesson in its entirety appears on the fifth link of the resource).

Video Resource Section

Nursery Rhymes

Nursery rhymes are a way for children to hear and experience language in a flowing, musical way. These *miniature stories* give young learners the opportunity to hear and feel musical phrases in ways that are playful and fun.

I suggest that teachers compile a collection of nursery rhymes that have been shared with the class (black line masters can be made into booklets) and ensure these booklets are available to, and at the disposal of, the children. Children may then be motivated to “read” these booklets, engage other students to participate, use their recall ability, and develop independence and leadership skills.

This vignette features the nursery rhymes, *Jack be Nimble* and *1-2 Tie My Shoe*.

Click [here](#) for video

Props

Young children learn by interacting with their environment (Kenney, 2004). Kenney contended that it is important for teachers to provide a musical environment for their students, an environment which presents young children with opportunities to play, to explore, and to discover music.

Props provide a reason to repeat a song or a rhyme a number of times. Props help children remember a song, a rhyme, a story, or an activity. They are visible and tangible. Children can see them, touch them, play with them, interact with them, use their imagination with them, and have fun with them.

Jana broke out into song while accompanying herself with an electric auto-harp. Ella loved singing “Eeensey Weensey Spider” while she manipulated a small yarn spider tied to a piece of PVC pipe (the water spout). . . . Some teachers add music things to non-music centres to encourage music exploration. One teacher added a bell on a cupboard in a kitchen centre and while “fixing dinner,” five-year-old Jason picked up the bell and began singing “Jingle Bells” while ringing it. As he finished the chorus, he continued singing about the food he was preparing, creating his own little song. (Kenney, pp. 30-31)

Once a song or a rhyme has been introduced to the students, a toy or a prop placed in the children’s play space may elicit a response from the children. For example, if the class has learned the rhyme “Jack Be Nimble,” the teacher might put out a candle in a candle holder. Alternatively, the children might be encouraged to say the rhyme and jump over the candle stick on their own. Other examples include: a teapot (“I’m a Little Teapot”), stuffed kitty cat (“Naughty Kitty Cat”), train set (“Engine, Engine Number 9”) or a pot and spoon (“Pease Porridge Hot”). Once the rhyme or song is selected, the playing field can be as broad, imaginative, and as expansive as the teacher contemplates, invites, or stimulates the play.

Here you will see me use props to enhance the nursery rhyme, “Jack Be Nimble.”

Click [here](#) for video

Rhythm Instruments

Children love to play rhythm instruments. Most often rhythm instruments are stored on a shelf and are only taken out when an activity is teacher-directed. It is important in our early childhood classrooms to provide opportunities for our students to play, discover, and create music independently. Encouraging spontaneous or free-play with rhythm instruments creates an opportunity for children to enjoy their own music making.

The teacher must also assume the role of observer, watching the child and then interacting with the child in ways that will deepen the child’s knowledge. . . . the teacher might make music with the child drummer by playing another drum at the same time, creating a duet. There are many opportunities to interact during play. Sometimes the

teacher's job is simply to wait, giving the child time (one of the greatest gifts to give in this rushed world) to play, explore, and discover. (Kenney, 2004, p. 29)

This next vignette features a teacher-led rhythm sticks activity. It demonstrates ways to incorporate play and discovery into a teacher-led activity and supports the idea of embracing music as an experiment or as a space where children are able to make choices, use their own ideas, and be creative.

Click [here](#) for video

Stories That Are Sung

Singing a story or sharing a story with a musical recording is an enjoyable activity for young children. A sung story highlights the rhythm of the words and engages the children's musical ears. For this reason, I maintain that it is important that ECE teachers share quality literature with their students – literature that is rich in vocabulary; literature that children can see themselves in; and literature that is beautiful in its poetic form. It is important to note that it is the quality of the literature not the quality of the teachers' musicality that is important. This educational tool is not exclusive to a music teacher and is attainable by any classroom teacher. What is important is the involvement and engagement, not a virtuoso performance.

Another technique to engage students in music exploration is to keep storybooks accessible during play time. Storybooks that have been sung to the class may motivate a child to sing.

The stories that I sang and presented in this video segment are "The Teddy Bears' Picnic" and "The Little White Duck."

Click [here](#) for video

Conclusion

The human heart and mind are drawn to music. Young children, with their uncluttered minds and blotter-like ability to absorb, are particularly susceptible to the magic and learning power of music. When ECE teachers create and support a play-based music environment in the classroom, their students will have opportunities to explore and experience music in meaningful ways.

For full video, click [here](#)

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