
Aproaching Musical Intelligence in the Classroom



Rae Ann Hirsh

Artigos Meloteca 2010

(...)

The MENC standards indicate that there is much more to music than listening to it in the background while performing unrelated cognitive tasks. Musical intelligence involves understanding, interpreting, responding to, and creating music. Opportunities to interact with music should be available daily. Fully integrating musical intelligence into the classroom is possible while respecting and understanding the following principles.

1. Music facilitates brain development (Jensen, 2001).
2. Early childhood music experiences should revolve around understanding, interpreting, responding to, and creating music (Andress, 1999).
3. Music is facilitated through musical education (Gardner, 1993).
4. Musical intelligence develops in stages.

Brain Development and Musical Intelligence

Music has an effect on brain growth and bodily systems. Jensen (2001) reports that music reduces stress and enhances the function of the immune system. Music can help children relax or can be used to excite. It affects the heart rate, blood pressure, and improves blood flow (Jensen, 2001) and also has an effect on memory. It develops the memory through melody and beat, and through its connection to the emotions. Music can also improve coordination and the ability to listen and respond.

The tempo and genre of a musical selection influences blood pressure, relaxation, respiration, and body temperature. Music that is loud and fast can slightly raise body temperature, quicken respiration, and elevate blood pressure. Music that has a slower tempo and is softer can lower body temperature and slow respiration. Music has an effect on brain chemicals and physical systems in the body (Jensen, 2001).

Understanding, Interpreting, Responding, and Creating

Music involves interaction (Andress, 1999). It is not a passive experience, but an active one. The interaction occurs through understanding, interpreting, responding to, and creating music. In order to interact with music, music must be listened to, as opposed to being heard. Hearing and listening involve two very different processes. Hearing is a passive physical process that is

used to take in stimuli (Jensen, 2001). Listening involves the ability “to filter, analyze, and respond to sounds” (Jensen, 2001, p. 43).

How does one facilitate listening in the early childhood classroom? Through creating experiences to understand, interpret, respond to, and create music (Andress, 1999). Talk to children about the music they hear. Ask what the music sounds like; is it fast or slow; what kind of feeling does it communicate; what instruments might be involved; what instruments could they use to recreate it? Provide opportunities for children to manipulate objects to create sounds, play musical instruments, and clap out musical beats. Children may respond to music by talking about it, dancing, moving, and creating representations of it through drawing, clay, or other medium. Children should have the opportunity to create music through construction of musical instruments, experimentations with the notation system, and through pretending to be a conductor or musician.

Musical Education

As stated many times throughout this section, music involves more than hearing music. Musical intelligence requires interaction within the musical realm (Gardner, 1993).

Mozart Effect

During the last decade or so, there has been incredible media hype concerning the effects of Mozart’s music on intelligence and performance (Weinberger, 2000). Claims are made that suggest listening to Mozart for only a few minutes can increase attention, spatial ability, intelligence, and performance on intelligence tests. Many of the claims are unsupported by documented research. The studies that do exist do not support these claims. The research study that began the interest in the Mozart effect was conducted in 1993 by Frances Rauscher, Gordon Shaw, and Katherine Ky. The researchers concluded that listening to a few minutes of Mozart before engaging in a spatial task may help the brain to perform the spatial task more easily (Weinberger, 2000), although the effect only lasts a few minutes. The music may simply serve as a tool for warming up the brain. The researchers do not make any claims suggesting that a few minutes of Mozart increases intelligence. Some individuals performed slightly better on spatial tasks after listening to the music. The study has been difficult to replicate.

Norman Weinberger (2000) cautions us about the recent media hype relating Mozart, young children, and intelligence. It is important to note that the research that has been carried out on

the Mozart effect has been centered on adults in controlled situations. Teachers and parents have been bombarded with CDs and cassettes that claim to boost a child's potential through classical music. Women are even encouraged to play Mozart to their unborn child. The hype over the Mozart effect could be attributed to America's never-ending quest for the quick fix (Weinberger, 2000). Many parents, teachers, and educators buy into the hype because it promises increased intelligence with only a couple minutes of listening a day. However, musical intelligence involves a great deal more than simply listening to classical music a few minutes each day. This is not meant to downplay the idea of classical music in the early childhood classroom. There is a benefit in just listening to classical music for the sake of listening to it. It is important to note that supplying background music for children is appropriate at times, but not all the time. Children should also have the benefit of working in a quiet environment, devoid of background noise. When music is played in the background, many children only regard the music as background noise, and may filter it out as they would a dog barking or an airplane flying overhead. Music should be played for children purposefully, when they can fully attend to it.

Children can respond to the music in a variety of ways. It's critical for the early childhood teacher to understand that music is important and beneficial in the classroom. Classical music is not a quick fix, though. Educators should use caution when approached with a quick-fix method regarding any area in education. This includes quick-fix approaches to intelligence, behavior, and test performance.

What Does Mozart Offer Children?

Should the criticism of the Mozart effect discourage the use of classical music and other types of music in the classroom? Certainly not; however, it does bring to light the importance of music education (as opposed to playing a few minutes of classical background music). Musical intelligence is something that develops in children out of interaction with people and materials in the environment. It is not a frill or something that can be attended to in a few minutes. Music must be fully integrated and attended to in the early childhood classroom. While a few minutes of Mozart may not have an effect on performance, music education has a lifetime effect on an individual.

Mozart offers children beautiful music to listen to, respond to, connect with, interpret, internalize, and symbolize. It may inspire a future musician, composer, or conductor. The

Approaching Musical Intelligence in the Classroom

Rae Ann Hirsh

5

music may elevate mood, encourage imagery, and increase musical awareness. The music of Mozart represents a beautiful part of humanity that needs to be shared, enjoyed, and valued with children.

In addition, music fosters many mathematical skills. Interaction with music and music education may develop and stimulate areas of the brain that will be needed for complex mathematical operations. Listening to a few minutes of music may not do this; however, experience and interaction with music on an ongoing basis may have an effect on the musical part of the brain that prepares or creates connections to the logical/mathematical part of the brain.

Value of Music Education

The criticism of the Mozart effect emphasizes the importance of music education and musical intelligence. Research has supported the value of musical education to other intelligences.

Music offers the child experience with patterns, rhyming, sounds, boundaries, rhythms, left to right orientation, and auditory discrimination skills. All of these experiences are vitally important to the development of other intelligences.

Manipulation of the voice is another critical and valuable musical skill. The voice can be manipulated and experimented with through singing, reciting poetry, musical games, and puppetry. The manipulation of the voice helps to facilitate linguistic intelligence as well.

Music provides a developmentally appropriate way to expose children to other cultures. Music and dance can also provide opportunities to use and manipulate language and the body. This manipulation enhances verbal and nonverbal communication skills.

Teacher-directed and child-directed musical experiences need to be incorporated into the rest of the program to fully foster musical intelligence. Teacher-directed musical experiences can create interest in music, ease transition times, and provide a comfortable routine. Child-directed activities allow him or her to engage in musical activities that he/she is intrinsically motivated to investigate. This allows for further development of self-esteem, musical competence, and self-knowledge of musical interests and abilities.

Approaching Musical Intelligence in the Classroom

Rae Ann Hirsh

6

There are a variety of musical materials available for use in the classroom. Instruments can be purchased, made by the children, or obtained through donations from local organizations and parents. Cassette tapes or CDs providing a variety of different types of music are important. Local musical groups may be willing to perform for the children, which will put the children in touch with how different cultures interpret musical intelligence. Many books offer musical games, rhymes, and interpretations. Puppets and dolls can also be used to encourage children to sing and experiment with different sounds. Puppets and dolls are especially helpful when a child is embarrassed about their voice or embarrassed to perform in front of others. Puppets are allowed (and are supposed) to sound different and funny.

The child's environment is full of sounds. Play guessing games with the children and have them identify familiar sounds. Take the child outside to listen to nature's music. Try to identify different animal and environment sounds. The child can try to imitate these sounds and create a melody with them. The natural world was man's first music. Many of the instruments that exist today were inspired by natural sounds in the environment.

Teachers need to be aware of musical skills in order to facilitate them in children. It is recommended that a musical specialist be on staff or one can be consulted to provide in-service training for staff. A music specialist can also introduce specific musical skills to the children. Musicians can be invited into the classroom to demonstrate various types of music and musical instruments.

It is important to keep in mind all the musical interests of the classroom. It is also important to communicate that music is an integral part of daily life. Musical experiences can be incorporated into the housekeeping, block, manipulative, woodworking, science, and reading areas of the classroom. Music is everywhere and is not isolated from the rest of the world. Musical experiences bring people together. Each child and adult may interpret the meaning of a musical experience differently, but still appreciate and share it. Music should be an integral part of the classroom, and not limited to separate experiences that reflect limited awareness of, and appreciation for, the musical arts.

The comfort and language experience of music begins early in life and music is often an early source of comfort for an infant.

Excerpt from *Early Childhood Curriculum: Incorporating Multiple Intelligences, Developmentally Appropriate Practice, and Play*, by Rae Ann Hirsh, 2004 edition, p. 101-105.