

Music Integrated Instruction for the Inclusive Classroom

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Abstract

Music integrated instruction has been an alternative teaching method for many years. Educators and authors have developed published curriculum that entails music integrated instructional methods. Students in general education and special education need the opportunity to explore learning through more than one sensory mode, or one method, that a teacher chooses to use throughout the school year. This qualitative study will help the reader gain insight of the perceptions of one teacher's curricular use of music-integrated instruction as a teaching method and help readers understand how to "reach outside the box" when contemplating teaching methods in the classroom.

Keywords: qualitative study, teaching method, music-integrated learning, multisensory learning, diverse learning, inclusive practice, inclusive classroom.

1. Introduction

When educators contemplate the use of alternative teaching methods and take into consideration the existence of multiple learning styles, music becomes one of those vessels. Music has been a standard subject in public schools since the beginning of compulsory education in America (Hanna, 2007; May, 2020). Even though music is an established subject, music educators are constantly defending their programs from budget cuts. This forces music educators to rationalize the ways in which music education programs contribute to academic performance in other subject areas; hence the method of music-integrated learning (Hanna, 2007; Jorgenson, 1995; May 2020). Conventional teaching has not proven itself to be the sole concrete method for learning. Historically, academics have consisted of a skill-driven program with practice exercises and learning has been more about memorizing facts than understanding processes (Jorgenson, 1995).

2. Purpose and Question of Study

The question for the study: "How does a teacher describe her practice of using music-integrated instruction with a diverse learning population?" The purpose of this study was to explore a teacher's process of teaching with use of music as a device for the learning process. The goal of this study was to explore, examine, and understand the teacher's view of why she uses music-integrated instruction for a diverse learning population. In achieving the stated goal, this study assists in contributing research to help progress the method of music-integrated instruction toward what is considered an 'evidence-based method' or 'best practice' for inclusive classrooms. To accomplish this goal, the study focused on one classroom. The schedules, methods, interactions, energy level, teaching methods and learning processes were all observed.

Some of the focus questions put together to launch this study included, but were not limited to, the following:

- How does the teacher describe herself using music to implement and/or enhance her lessons?
- What is the teacher's view of the classroom during music-integrated instruction?
- How does the teacher perceive her class's content-intake and response to this teaching method?
- Does the teacher feel this method is useful for all learners in her class?
- Why does the teacher use this teaching method? (Does the teacher have any background in music or formal education? Did she observe this method previously and liked it? Did she explore research on the practice of using the method?)
- What does the teacher value about this teaching method?

3. Literature Review

Beginning with Jean Piaget in the 1920's, researchers have demonstrated that young children learn best through play in an emotionally risk-free, enriched environment (McIntire, 2007; Ries, 2008; May 2020). One researcher noted that new connections in the brain were being made through environmental stimulation. Music and the arts are examples of environmental stimulation (Ries, 2008; Beatty, 2017).

The roots of integration can be traced to the ideals of progressive education at the beginning of the 20th century (Bresler, 1995). Dating back to 1933, yearbooks from the Music Educators National Conference (MENC) included topics such as *Projects in the Interrelation of Music and Other High School Subjects* and *Fusion of Music with Academic Subjects*. History reveals that music has long been a consideration for alternative teaching methods as education has progressed (MENC, 1933).

Cognition is defined as thinking and thinking is an active process (Hanna, 2007). All information enters the brain through a form of sense; the more senses activated while learning, the more information that is encoded. In today's practice, we refer to this practice as the *Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (Gardner, 2006). The human brain has memory systems that operate using visual, auditory, and kinesthetic pathways. Educators can enhance memory by exercising as many of those pathways as possible (Ries, 2008; May 2020). Psychologists believe that music may facilitate a more focused thinking pattern for the benefit of general intelligence. Sensory stimulation, such as music, has been labeled as "brain food" because it enriches the brain (McIntire, 2007). Music also aids in the understanding and transfer of knowledge and facilitates verbal memory by further developing the left temporal lobe of the brain, which is the part that processes verbal memory (Ries, 2008).

Engaging in musical activities, rhythm, and rhyme can increase the learning of routine facts by sending messages to the brain through various pathways (May, 2020). Rhythm and rhyme increase learning and singing frequently provides an emotional hook that can engage students in learning routine facts. Learning musical skills can be linked to learning literacy skills (Ries, 2008; May 2020). Even though people share the same basic information processing structures, no two people learn, or prefer to learn, in exactly the same way; each person's learning style is as unique as his fingerprint (McCarter, 2008). The key to learning style instruction seems to focus on different modalities; providing instruction that appeals to more than one sense makes the instruction more meaningful to the learner, which subsequently allows the learner to take in more information (McCarter, 2008).

Music is a powerful tool for personal expression within daily lives (Brewer, 2009). In the 20th century the western scientific community has conducted research to validate and expand the analytical knowledge of music. This research supports the fact that music greatly affects and enhances learning and living (Brewer, 2009). The intentional use of music in the classroom will set the scene and learning atmosphere to enhance teaching and learning activities. Using music for learning can make the process more fun and interesting. This is beneficial to all types of learners (Brewer, 2009; Gardner, 1983). Music helps any type of learner succeed because it will establish a positive learning environment, build a sense of anticipation, energize learning activities, change brain wave states, focus concentration, increase attention, improve memory, facilitate a multisensory learning experience, release tension, enhance imagination, provide inspiration and motivation, and add an element of fun (Brewer, 2009).

Models for teaching have evolved and will continue to be developed (Gardner, 1983). Some of today's leading learning technologies embed the use of music to assist in learning. Almost all methods of teaching can be enhanced with the use of music to assist all types of learners (Brewer, 2009; McCarter, 2008). Currently, three

successful learning models exist in which the use of music is relevant (Brewer, 2009). Researchers need to continue to search for links between music instruction and cognitive performance because disregarding these effects may overlook a potentially important educational intervention (Ries, 2008).

4. Methodology and Data Collection Strategies

Data for this research were gathered via a case study. The reason for this was to attempt to capture different aspects, views, and perspectives of one teacher while engaged in a lesson presented through music-integrated instruction. One method used was classroom observation. This method was used to watch the teacher and students and take field notes of what was occurring, spoken and unspoken, during the music-integrated lesson. This observation took place in a second-grade classroom. Being in the classroom, as the researcher, did not prove to be intrusive, and allowed for some reflexivity. An informal conversation with the participating teacher also took place. This recap was used to note her thoughts, perceptions, and reasoning behind the use of this particular teaching method. This was helpful in clarifying how she thinks during the lessons. All collected data were stored in a secure area as to protect anonymity and confidentiality.

5. Criteria for Participant and Site Selection

The site selected for this study needed to fit the following criteria: a primary level school consisting of a diverse learning population of students; this includes general education learners, gifted and talented learners, and learners with special needs.

The participant for this study needed to fit the following criteria: a primary grade teacher with a diverse learning population in her classroom who uses music-integrated instruction for at least one element of her curriculum.

6. Setting

The school that was chosen for this site fit the above outlined criteria. The school is located within the western region of the United States and located within a middle- to upper middle-class neighborhood. The site contains a diverse learning population including general education, special education, and self-contained special education classrooms, and a gifted and talented program.

The classroom chosen for this study was a second-grade general education inclusive classroom. First through Third grade classes, in this particular school district, have regulated class sizes of no more than 18 students. This class consisted of 16 students. The students' desks were clustered in groups of four, facing each other. The teacher worked from a low, round table easily accessible to her and the students.

7. Participant

The participant chosen was a primary level, second-grade teacher. She is bilingual, speaking both English and Spanish. This participant has been teaching at the primary level for over 10 years. She has always used music as one of her teaching methods in her classroom and has a diverse learning population. The participant uses music-integrated instruction in her classroom and was willing to be observed and interviewed for this study. She can be described as a happy, energetic teacher with stringent expectations. She described herself as being the only teacher at the site using music to implement curriculum content.

8. Report of Preliminary Findings/Data Analysis

8.1 History of the Participant

My initial findings within my data focused on the history of the participant. I am giving the participant a pseudonym, Rica. Rica says she lives a happy personal life and works to keep happiness in her classroom; she feels that using music-integrated instruction in her classroom contributes to the happiness in her class. Rica started as a bilingual teacher, working with a co-teacher, educating Spanish-speaking-only students and has been teaching for over 15 years. These students were primary level and in class to learn English along with curriculum content. Rica and her co-teacher chose to incorporate music into their lessons. The co-teacher did the research to find music-integrated materials. Rica incorporated the materials into the lessons.

8.2 Reasoning behind Use of Music Integrated Instruction

Rica uses music as a means to teach her students specific skills such as patriotic themes, spatial themes, language acquisition, letter sounds (literacy themes), and math skills. She may use music-integrated instruction for other themes, this is just what I observed during the time I spent in the classroom. Rica also stated that using music as a teaching method helps to make what kids perceive as boring more interesting and exciting. “When the kids are singing, they are excited and having fun, not even realizing they are learning!” Rica has observed several students improving in their literacy by major leaps and bounds as a result of music-integrated instruction.

Rica stated that a few other teachers use music in her school, but only for transition purposes (moving the class from one activity to the next). She shared with me how her principal, who was new to the school at the time of the study, came in to observe the class and asked her to only use music as background support and not as a teaching method. Rica stated “I do not care about the principal’s opinion of my teaching method because I know it (music-integrated instruction) works and helps keep my students focused”.

8.3 Success with Use of Music Integrated Instruction

The theme of success emerged from listening to Rica talk about her past and present experiences with using music-integrated instruction. In the past, when working with Spanish-speaking-only students, she and her co-teacher observed that using music to assist in implementing their lessons would help the students feel more comfortable, allow for greater exposure to the English language, and would develop stronger language acquisition in the process. They (the teachers) had surprised themselves when they saw the method working; students were memorizing songs quicker than they expected. The students acquired English words and phrases quickly.

More recently, Rica has documented success in her students that had very poor literacy and fluency skills and made tremendous improvements in their reading performance. “They are reading beautifully”, she says. Rica showed me the songbook they use during class and each student has one. “This book assists in teaching organization, ordinal numbers, and how to use references. The students know how to find their songs each morning during music time.” Rica also stated that she is able to teach her students content beyond the second-grade curriculum because they have already acquired their material for the year. For example, her class was required to learn the 2, 5, and 10’s multiplication tables, which they mastered, and have now moved on to the 3’s tables.

8.4 Description of Observation/Interpretations

Upon my entering the classroom, I took a seat in the corner of the room. The teacher chose not to introduce me to the class. I participated in the pledge of allegiance with the class and listened to school announcements on the television. After announcements, Rica directed the students to get their song books out of their desks, which they did. The teacher proceeded to ask them “Which song do we sing first?” “*Dom dee deedee*”, replied the class. The teacher started the music and the students began to sing, following along from their books; some sang loud, some didn’t sing at all. I noticed the students stayed seated at their desks while singing. The teacher began to prompt the class “Let me hear you” and started praising those participating, “Good Alex”. The teacher then changed the music and told the students to turn to song number two. The teacher prompted again, “Let me hear you, good job”. Out of the sixteen students in the class, 8 were participating at this point. The teacher continued to roam the room “What comes next?” she asked the class. “*Wiggle Worms*”, the class responded. The class was much louder and more students were participating during this song and started moving to the music at this point. This song was about ordinal numbers. The teacher continued to roam the room, stopping between pairs of students, gently dancing, and prompting them by touch. The class started using voice inflection. The students continued moving through their book as the teacher would change the music for the subsequent songs. The following song required more movement, the class started clapping and stomping; their voices got louder as they followed the cues of the song. “Great singing, Miss Greason (the music teacher) would be super proud of you right now”; the teacher stated to the class. Next, the class sang “*Three is a Magic Number*”. The students started out singing this song softly, the lyrics were a little faster. More of the students were singing. This song was teaching the times tables for the number three. The class became louder as they counted by threes over and over. “Good Job”, reinforced the teacher. By the middle of the song, the entire class was participating. The teacher had the class stand up for the

next song, “*Shine Las Vegas*”. The song began and the students all started dancing with choreographed movements they had previously learned. Some students moved to the front of the classroom to do the dance with the teacher. A lot of smiles came out during this song. The last song the students sang to was “*America the Beautiful*”. “This is a serious song, you have to sing this song with pride, stand up straight, sing with respect”, said the teacher. One student asked, “Can we put our hand over our heart?”, the teacher said “Yes”. Three students put their hand over their heart. The entire class participated in this song. Once music time was complete, the students in the classroom were calm and students started doing independent work.

9. Discussion of Personal Perceptions during the Study

The students seemed comfortable with me in the room, as if they were used to having visitors. I was happy to see involvement, despite my presence. As students came in to start their day, they got themselves settled. Most of them looked like they were still waking up. Some of them looked ready for the day, bright eyed with smiles on their faces. A few of them told the teacher they felt sick.

Once the teacher stated it was time to start instruction with music, all students stopped their independent work and pulled their songbooks out of their desks. All of them knew exactly what to do; this reflected several thoughts to me regarding the students: independence, self-confidence, and organization.

As the students progressed through their lesson, they seemed to become more alert and more involved. The students sounded louder and more excited as they moved through the lesson. I noticed extreme concentration occurring as the students followed along to the song in their songbooks. They seemed to really be working hard to track the words to the songs. The students were very comfortable dancing in front of each other, I did not perceive any self-conscious feelings from any of the students which is fantastic!

10. Conclusion

I was able to collect a significant sample of data to start a more progressive study in the future. In questioning the perception of the teacher regarding why she uses music-integrated instruction, enough themes emerged from the data to reflect perception and reasoning of the use of this method. The themes are covered and discussed in this study.

It is important to understand that this topic has limited research. Most of the literature reviewed comes from the late 1990’s into 2020. Music-integrated instruction deserves more attention in the field of inclusive education. This study was a start to reignite interest in the topic and promote further studies to support this method as an evidence-based practice.

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Appendix

Sample of Coding Method

Each student has a songbook. The book is tabbed by subject and has a table of contents in each area. She stated that this book assists in teaching organization, ordinal numbers, and how to use reference. Rica stated that the students know how to find their songs each morning during music integrated instruction.

Green = actual occurrences

Blue = success with use of method