

Principal

January/February 2009

Energizing the Basic Curriculum With Music

Teamwork between classroom teachers and music specialists results in great success.

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As a forward-looking, innovative principal, you are probably aware that arts-centered magnet schools, with on-site or readily available specialists in music, art, dance, and drama, have a proven record of success in vitalizing the basic elementary school curriculum and elevating test scores. They have shown that children love learning when education *through* the arts is carefully balanced with education *in* the arts.

Is there a difference? Absolutely. The mission of education *through* the arts is to use children's innate receptivity to the arts as a springboard for enhancing the learning of specific concepts in the basic curriculum. In contrast, the goal of education *in* the arts is for children to acquire techniques, skills, and concepts in the arts as end products unto themselves.

What Music Can Do

The very nature of music's immediate emotional, physical, and cognitive appeal to children—and adults—gives it primacy among the arts in its power to energize learning across the curriculum. But in this era of No Child Left Behind, coupled with the erosion of arts in public schools, music teachers need to rethink and refocus their roles and resources.

Currently, the typical elementary school music teacher meets every class from kindergarten through grade 5 once a week, or once every two weeks, for approximately 45 minutes. The children might sing (usually from a grade-level songbook), perform folk and modern dances, play various instruments, learn musical concepts, or rehearse holiday or other performances. It takes little effort to link these activities to core subjects.

The No. 1 priority of the music teacher's revised role is to be aware of what the classroom teacher is currently teaching, or planning to teach, in language arts, social studies, mathematics, or science. Armed with this knowledge, the music teacher can then seek and apply stimulating musical materials and techniques to enhance classroom concepts in those areas.

In a sense, the music teacher should play a consultant role similar to that of the media specialist. The difference, of course, is that the music teacher's commitment also includes delivery of lessons in the classroom or music room, as well as providing specific help to classroom teachers.

Literacy

Although music can enhance all of the content areas, an abundance of anecdotal evidence supports and advocates the use of music in pursuit of elementary literacy objectives. Here are some proven ideas and practices that can accomplish this integration when the classroom teacher and the music specialist work as a team.

Language Arts

- In teaching a new song, assume that certain words or thoughts may escape some children. Figure out which ones are most likely and explain them in advance. You will be helping them to enlarge their vocabularies and to make the general context of the song clearer.
- When introducing a new song, organize the lesson so that the students guess the upcoming rhymes, based on the context of the preceding words. Children thrive on the challenge and spontaneity.
- Writing an original song is certainly one of the most engaging, productive, and creative classroom music experiences that children can share. It combines language arts and music in a unique and special union. As for which comes first, the music or the words, there is no set formula. An approach that has proved successful and intellectually broadening is to take cues from a flowchart made up of words and ideas contributed by the students on a particular subject that the song is to explore (e.g., hurricanes). Then ask for student volunteers to sing any musical phrases that pop into their heads and record them on tape. Ask the students which beginning phrase they prefer, put those notes on a screen, and continue using this procedure with subse-

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quent short phrases, stressing the logical connection of words, ideas, and music. Acknowledge the contributions of the entire class and emphasize how the process of dedicated listening and creative thinking can produce a product that every student can share with pride.

- Play a group of short instrumental selections (one or two minutes) from a CD. After each selection, ask the children to write down or record on tape what action(s) might be occurring on a movie or TV screen accompanying the music. This exercise allows children to express themselves freely, create their own mental images, think critically, expand their artistic sensibilities, and motivate their language responses. Or you can reverse the procedure by giving the class visual images on the screen and asking them to pick their own musical selections to accompany the images, and to explain the reasons for their choices.

Social Studies

As life itself is always interrelated, so too are the basics. To teach them in isolation from one another defies the way learning naturally takes place. So while the genesis of a particular lesson or unit may well be in one subject area, the path to the objective is likely to involve other disciplines in a substantive way. Consider, for example, a social studies unit on China. What role might the music teacher play? She or he might teach some Chinese folk songs and indigenous dances, or play recordings of traditional and modern Chinese music, perhaps with accompanying art to heighten the experience. With music, art, and classroom teachers working as a team with the media specialist, the possibilities are infinite.

Math and Science

While music is an art form in the highest sense, it has a scientific structure built on basic mathematics. How that structure is manipulated for aesthetic ends makes the music classroom a most welcome environment for nourishing basic mathematics concepts.

Here are some possibilities for the music teacher:

- Play a short selection from a classical symphony, point out the primary theme of that particular passage, and ask the children to write down how many times they heard it. This helps them with their counting skills while emphasizing the focused listening crucial to all classroom experiences. This type of activity can also be directed to such assignments as listening and writing down the number of times certain solo instruments or specific rhythmic patterns appear.
- Assemble eight identical drinking glasses in a row and tap each one to show children that they all have the exact same sound. Now invite class members to put water in the second glass until it sounds higher or

lower than the empty glass. Adjust the water level so that it sounds like the second tone of a major scale in relation to the first glass, and follow the same procedure with each glass until all eight tones of the major scale can be sounded. Have children strike the glasses with a suitable implement, such as a light metal spoon, in given sequences so as to sound a variety of folk songs. Repeat procedure to produce other scales (i.e. pentatonic), songs, or melodies. Ask children to draw conclusions about the results of the exercise.

- Using the overhead projector, show pictures of the different notes used in music, including eighths, quarters, half and whole notes. Explain that even though they represent units of time in music, they have no specific time values except in relation to each other. Starting with 4/4 time, show and sound out combinations of note values to reinforce the idea that these notes represent fractions in time, just as there are fractions of numbers, quantities, and solids.

I hope that the foregoing illustrations of music-centered interdisciplinary lessons clearly demonstrate the intrinsic, multidimensional, visceral, and cross-cultural nature of music in the elementary school classroom. In the hands of a dedicated music teacher-consultant, and with the enthusiastic support of the principal and classroom teachers, music can energize the basic elementary school curriculum.

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