

Music as a Tool for Joyful learning.

In the first piece of follow up reading undertaken during the CPD course, there were two sections that started the research process going.

The article, written in 2002, was ‘Transcript of Talk - How Young Children Learn ‘ by Marion Dowling:

The first section, which instigated the majority of my assignment, was:

‘Music and all forms of movement nurture both areas’ –this referred to the developing brain. Our brains are divided into two sides. The left side deals with our more organisational and logic responses, while the right tends to the creative and is more emotionally responsive. A thick cable links the left and right side of the brain and in order to allow our entire personalities to grow, both sides need to be stimulated.

The second section was:

‘Nothing without joy’ – this is the transcript of a notice in the foyer at the Diana pre-school in Reggio Emilia, northern Italy. It highlights that joy is the key element to successful learning.

Music is a medium that has a direct effect on the way we feel, it would seem logical to use it to help to create a joyful learning atmosphere. I would like to research some of the further implications of using music as a tool for joyful learning.

In the area of ‘personal development’ research shows that music in a secure, supportive environment, plays a key role in helping each child feel ‘good enough’.

Teacher directed activities help self-esteem by initially providing guided, enjoyable experiences that help children feel at ease. A hello song or a regular pattern of songs and rhymes helps everyone settle in. It consequently helps children feel confident enough to have a go at new experiences (whether teacher directed or open-ended). This zone of comfort, this settling of the reptilian brain, is what helps us to move on, to feel I’m good enough, and be ready to undertake new learning, which in turn will enhance our self esteem and promote self-satisfaction.

So much of music is open-ended. Therefore there is no pressure of right or wrong.

A child can bang a drum, and that is his own personal sound at that time. It is just as important as anyone else’s sound. A child, who may be shy about expressing themselves in words, doesn’t have the same difficulties in finding an instrument that reflects how they feel. Once they have the confidence to make a noise alongside everyone else, it is one step on the way to join in with the nursery rhymes and then use their voice in other ways.

From 2000 to 2003, Yorkshire Youth and Music managed ‘Sounding Out’, a major Study Support project in 21 schools. YYM argued that ‘ Music was a key element in young people’s lives.’ (D.Price 2003: p 5) One of the most telling quote was from one of the older pupils: ‘I’ve got a personality, I can play an instrument.’ The summary of the project was conclusive in noting, ‘marked improvements in a number of key areas: pupils self confidence and self esteem; behavioural problems; concentration levels; interaction between pupils; cooperation and collaboration’ (D Price 2003 :p38)

Another aspect of self-esteem is the identity of self, within a group. A child needs to feel its contribution is as valuable, as ‘good’ as anyone else’s and to enjoy the feeling of security and support within a social environment.

Through musical activities, it can be emphasised that everyone has an equally important part.

‘Music promotes social interaction and collaboration through joining in songs, dances and ‘band sessions’ ‘ (Pound and Harrison 2003) When sounds and voices are combined, a bonding and a feeling of belonging is promoted. The satisfaction of hearing lots of sounds together, is all the more so, because everyone has a part in it.

Music in a nursery situation is rarely a private activity because of its auditory nature. If a child chooses to go to the instrument box and start experimenting, another child hears it, causing him to become curious. He goes to investigate. A box of sound makers invites active participation and usually leads to shared sounds and pleasure.

To allow the sounds to combine and not overwhelm each other, a theme or structure introduced by a teacher is often necessary. The teacher is part of the team and helps the children to be sensitive to each other’s sounds and to really enjoy, ‘the shared language of sound making’ (Wright 1999)

Add to this the shared concentration and achievement of creating silences to contrast with different sounds. The power of silence highlights the need for every child to be totally committed to the same aim.

Body sounds combining two or more people e.g. ‘Pat-a-cake’ hand clapping with a partner, is another lovely way to value each others contributions. The physical nearness and touching strengthens the group relationship.

As well as ‘band sessions’ reinforcing the value of a team, many nursery songs offer opportunities for group participation and turn taking. Indeed the children, through their musical experiences, will come to realise that these are beneficial in order to reap the optimum pleasure. The joy involved in singing ‘Ring a ring a roses’ is enhanced by dancing round in a circle with your friends and the satisfaction of combining together to make a ring as you sing about a ring. Each child exercises some conformity for the enhancement of the song, the benefit of the group and everyone’s personal pleasure.

‘Even children who would have difficulties on other situations can be led by music to follow rules and conventions.’(Pound and Harrison 2003: P 72).

Many nursery action songs require unselfish turn taking, which is another great plus in a young child’s personal development.

‘Regular involvement in music enhances the social climate of the classroom with children showing ‘increased social cohesion....greater self-reliance, better social adjustment and more positive attitudes’ (Pound and Harrison2003, citing Hallam 2001:16, citing Spychiger *et al* 1993 and Hanshumaker 1980)

It is very difficult to stay still and take part in music activities. Music is a natural motivator for movement. (See Appendix 1)

Gardner (1994 quoted in Pounds and Harrison 2003) describes music in the early years as ‘primarily a kinaesthetic experience for the young’

This free and uninhibited movement to music is their own form of ‘dance’, their personal expression that is the essence of modern educational dance. When exploring music as a tool to physical development, it is important to allow time and opportunity for their own ideas and alongside this, enhance their movement vocabulary, with specific teacher directed sessions and ideas.

Gross motor skill development benefits from the stimulation of an enjoyable activity e.g. a song requiring whole body movements like ‘Hop Little Bunnies’. As for fine motor skills development; there are opportunities for purposeful manipulation of ‘tools’, when playing instruments, which ‘provide

challenges in motor control' (Janet Wright 1999) and then there are all those wonderful finger rhymes that help to develop fine motor skills. These controlled movements of our hands are appropriate to the child's proximo – distal development. They are exactly what two to three year olds need to be practicing.

Music is a joyful tool to aid movement, but it works both ways; music and movement enhance each other. Movement plays a large part in helping children feel a pulse or rhythm in music. Therefore in order to understand some of the components of music, children need to move.

Not only does music give us a joyful reason to move, but also because we are moving and developing our motor skills, we are forming and cementing vital connections in our brain. These will be invaluable to us in learning that comes later on in life. Piaget believed that practical activities involving the senses contribute fundamentally to the child's developing intelligence. Motor development is crucial if 'he or she is to make and strengthen neural connections, which form the main pathways for many later learning skills'. (Merle Hunt 2001)

The nursery stage is the time that these pathways need developing. Our movement skills are in a sequence of development and although ages for specific movements vary by 6-12 months, the sequence rarely does. The music curriculum can be planned to enhance the specific progression of physical development. And:

'Research is unequivocal on the point that good motor skill learning in children has positive effects on their cognitive development.' (Merle Hunt 2001)

(See Appendix 2)

Music helps us develop creatively through dance, and also, in playing with sounds, either vocal or instrumental, music can give us an alternative emotional vocabulary to language. Before we could express ourselves in language, ancient civilisations enjoyed sharing dancing and vocalising to rhythms. 'Music offers an opportunity to express oneself in a fundamental or elemental way, as humans danced and sang before they spoke' (Pound and Harrison 2003: P81)

Young children can tune into the elemental messages of music. They partake in 'the elixir of creativity' (H Gardner 1993: P56)

Another lovely way to use music to help express creativity is to let the children finger paint in a way the music suggests to them.

A child's reaction to listening to a piece of music may not always be positive. A negative effect is also an expression of how they feel and is an important facet of their creativity. Music allows us to express and celebrate our individual differences. This acceptance of our differences gives us confidence to be creative in our own way. Listening to music from different lands can stimulate an awareness of other cultures. Often children do not like sounds that are unfamiliar to them, but once these do become more familiar, the child is more receptive to enjoying the tremendous variety of sounds that fill his world.

'In our culturally diverse society, music can provide an accessible initial insight into different traditions' (Pound and Harrison 2003: P74).

Music helps our understanding and respect of differences, and to listen to different kinds of music feeds back and enriches, even inspires, our own music vocabulary.

Music and its enhancement of creativity also have a positive effect on the brain. It mainly nurtures the right side of the brain, the side that is responsible for imagination and original thought. This side needs a positive encouragement in a present day curriculum that often focuses on literacy and numeracy, so that it can balance and enhance the development of the left side of the brain, the side that favours organisation and logic. A thick cable links the left and right side of the brain and in order to allow our entire personalities to grow, both sides need to be stimulated. (The Lancashire Early Years Teacher

team ran an interesting course (April 2002) on Planning for Learning, where the functions of different sections of the brain, and its impact on how children learn, were discussed.)

‘Neuroscience reinforces what many have long believed, namely that stimulation of both hemispheres enables children to develop cross lateral thinking and problem solving skills, which can be applied in any area of life.’ (Pound and Harrison 2003: P81)

Music provides a wonderful context for exploring, investigating and making for a purpose. ‘The pupils’ spontaneous music will be a medley of exploratory improvisation’ (Wills and Peter 1996: P10) There are so many different ways of producing sound, and many are totally accessible to young learners e.g. banging, shaking, blowing, and plucking. They are all physical ways of discovering the variety of their musical vocabulary for themselves. Sound experiments allow open ended, safe investigations where the child can take their time, puzzle out whys and wherefores and develop ‘sparkly thoughts.’ (Dowling 2002) Music provides an enjoyable media for scientific investigation, and these investigations enhance their musical awareness of sounds.

Many instruments are specifically designed to be visually stimulating and rewarding to touch. They invite a child to then investigate the auditory, by manipulating them; engaging visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning styles at one go.

At a simple level of music technology, music gives a reason for using a tape recorder. Listening to pre-made sounds and making and recording their own sounds. The excited revelation of children recognising their own sound is always magical.

Research studies in Europe and the USA have provided evidence, though not conclusive, that children who listen to music and are actively engaged in music making ‘do better at everything else’ (Pound and Harrison) For example children from 5-7 who were given special music and art lessons performed better in maths tests than those who did not.

There does seem to be logic in the way music can enhance maths and visa versa. A fundamental component of maths and music is pattern. Patterns need to be experienced, recognised, remembered and used in different contexts. It is interesting to note that Bruner puts forward the theory that learning involves the search for patterns, regularities and predictability.

More specifically to the Early Years curriculum, nursery number rhymes are a fun way of cementing number patterns. Number songs and their related actions help to concrete the child’s concept of first numbers by providing fun and active examples. Interestingly the part of the brain concerned with counting is also the area that governs fingers!

A musical pulse is a form of measuring time and is internalised by young learners. It is not surprising that music is seen to be helpful in promoting an overall understanding of time.

Many nursery songs provide examples of positional language, also important in mathematical development e.g. ‘The Grand Old Duke of York’

As a baby we naturally make sounds to let others know how we feel. As we start to develop words, we slowly assimilate this new means of communication, but there can be frustrating moments of disequilibria. Once the pathways of word usage are practiced, and nursery rhymes play a part in this, we are ready to leap forward again, using the marvellous tool of language. Music can help by providing an occasion to join in with the pattern of words, where attention is not focussed entirely on you. Even self-conscious children are happy to sing along with their friends, enjoying the security and support in numbers.

Songs provide a rich pattern and a pleasure in the sound of words. Joining in with these songs helps to reinforce a child's vocabulary as well as introduce less familiar words. Young children can absorb our language's phonology through songs. Making up our own rhymes and words reinforces these patterns.

An appreciation and experience of rhyme can help to build spelling and reading patterns. Displaying the words of known nursery rhymes at their height arouses a lot of interest in the written word.

(See Appendix 4)

Inviting children to 'make pictures of the sounds' (Janet Wright) they've made, encourages visual sequences. They can then use their pictures to repeat their pattern of sounds, a very helpful predecessor to writing and reading.

The words of a song create the rhythm of the song. As their sound reinforces our understanding of rhythm, rhythm increases our enjoyment of the sound of words. Much of our language development relies on listening and imitation. Much of our musical development relies on the same things.

To conclude, music is encompassed in so many different areas of learning. Perhaps this is why it does not have the same localized area of brain placement as some other areas of learning.

'Certain parts of the brain play important roles in perception and production of music. These areas are characteristically located in the right hemisphere, although musical skill is not clearly 'localized' or located in a specifiable area.' (H Gardner 1993: P18)

Music is a medium that promotes learning across all areas of Early Years development. Many areas of the curriculum are enhanced by music, and they in their turn, enhance the children's musicality. It is a mutually beneficial process. That so many areas of the curriculum can be touched by this all-encompassing medium of music, and the wealth of experience in all areas that music provides, is truly amazing.

'Bringing different kinds of subject knowledge together can be the most fruitful way of promoting learning' (Nutbrown 1999, pg110 citing Hurst and Joseph 1998)

As my assignment has progressed, my conception of music as a tool for learning has grown.. Most importantly music provides nursery children with a joyful learning atmosphere. It is a happy activity we all enjoy sharing. This joy becomes infiltrated into all facets of our learning.

And we learn 'Nothing without Joy.'

2744words

Appendix 1

An example of a music activity encompassing many areas of learning

Hey Diddle Diddle-i.language patterns ii.sound experiments iii.spontaneous movement iv.being a member of a group v.joy

Hey,diddle,diddle the cat and the fiddle – we sang the rhyme, we enjoyed the rhythm of the words. We shared and enjoyed the pictures in the nursery rhyme book.

The next session, I showed the children my violin /fiddle. We made some interesting sounds with it. Then I put on a recording of an Irish band playing a jig featuring a very good fiddle player. The result was fantastic. Their faces lit up and nobody could stay still. We all danced until we were tired. ‘Can we hear it again?’

The response to this music was immediate, instinctive, joyful, and wonderful.

Music is a wonderful tool at this age. Inhibitions and reserve have not ousted our natural gut reactions to what we hear. It enables us to share happy experiences at nursery with our friends. It helps to create a joyful learning environment, which filters through into all areas of the nursery.

Appendix 2

Music used to aid specific physical needs.

I have recently had some personal experience in the importance of developing neural connections in early life. This is one of the reasons for undertaking this assignment. Last September, Joseph, a little boy with right sided hemoplegia, started at my nursery. The conversations I have had with his therapists have been enlightening. I have come to appreciate the way our brains require nurturing to stimulate and reinforce neural connections. That these connections are strengthened through his planned and unplanned curriculum is vital in his early years.

Music can be used very deliberately to add fun to practising a motor skill that requires attention. For example: Joseph who needs to exercise both sides of his body and bear weight on either side, does not choose to do so. But unless these neural pathways are developed in his early years, he may miss his chance of ever being able to do so.

Add an element of fun, rhythm and a familiar tune, add a desire to enjoy a group activity with his friends, and the same child will march around the room to the ‘Grand Old Duke of York’, exercising both sides of his body

Appendix 3

‘I’m Doing The Best I can’- coping with frustration, using music to lighten an experience that is proving difficult.

‘Music has the capacity to act as a calming influence’ (Pound and Harrison 2003: P11)

The children had been experimenting with hole punches and finding out how they worked. I introduced some threads and ribbons to thread through the holes. One child wanted to do this but found the manipulative skill challenging. I said that when I found things tricky, I sang a little song and sang it for them:

‘I’m doing the best , doing the best, doing the best I can, can , can.
Doing the best, doing the best, doing the best I can!’

Before long we were all singing away and having a go at threading, and it didn't seem to matter if it was a bit tangled up!

We started to move our upper bodies along to the rhythm of the tune –which probably made the threading more difficult!!

Appendix 4

Using posters of Nursery Rhymes to encourage visual perception of letters and words.

The children know what the rhyme is from the picture clues.

The rhymes are divided into shortish lines. Through the tune of the rhyme, the child can feel when a new line is appropriate. They can follow the words left to right, knowing what they say. They can pick out letters they are familiar with.

Rhymes can be chosen that provide a repetition of a particular letter, in order to practice and reinforce it. I have a list of rhymes I have compiled with this in mind, e.g. Ring **a** ring **a** roses, **B**aa **b**aa **b**lack sheep,) The repetitive nature of the rhyme helps the child look for patterns in the words and to begin to recognise them

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