

Music, storytelling and dance in early childhood

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Louise Dorrat previously taught music in the Bachelor of Education at Swinburne TAFE, Victoria University and Deakin University. She worked professionally in children's theatre for many years and currently conducts professional development nationally. Louise's energetic workshops have taken her around Australia. Her presentations are at once engaging, entertaining and educative. ECTA is proud to have sponsored Louise to present workshops throughout 2015 in Hervey Bay, the Sunshine Coast, Gympie, Cairns, Townsville, Mackay, Rockhampton, Gladstone, Yeppoon, Toowoomba, Brisbane North, Sunshine Coast, Logan and Biloela.

The dramatic arts are a fundamental part of life and have the capacity to transport children to different places to become someone or something else. Humans are innately musical and children's pleasure in music is evident from birth (Ilari 2011). When children are active participants they make discoveries about how their body moves, how their voice works and the connections they have to the world around them.

What are the benefits of introducing babies and young children to music, dance and storytelling?

The most critical time for the development of the brain is the first five years of life (Shonkoff 2000). From birth children can feel the beat, hear melody and words and are able to freely move, vocalise and express themselves. Experiencing beats and rhythm wires the brain and repeating this strengthens the wiring (Schiller 2006).

Children learn best when they are enjoying themselves. The dramatic arts are hands on which fosters an immediate sense of fun that engages and encourages children to let go and explore their inner musician and storyteller. When educators encourage children to be part of a call and response experience, they become



Engage children to be participants



Experiencing beat and rhythm



Put on some gloves

active participants which builds confidence and self-esteem. Music and storytelling can be used to create an environment or mood to support young children to relax in the hurried world around them. Songs and chants can provide a predictable structure for routines and transitions making the day flow smoothly.

The *Early Years Learning Framework* (2009) highlights the importance of music and stories:

- Shared singing supports the development of secure and trusting relationships.
- Children's communication skills are enhanced when they listen and respond to sounds and patterns in stories and rhymes.
- Families' cultures, traditions and beliefs can be incorporated through stories and songs to promote in children a strong sense of who they are.
- Children responding through movement to traditional and contemporary music shape their learning and development.

Music and storytelling strengthens language, listening and concentration skills and are excellent socialising tools. These experiences encourage children to use their imagination, build coordination skills and assist with the concepts of rhythm, rhyme, repetition, beat, tempo and pitch.

I feel uncomfortable singing and dancing in front of children

There is a Zimbabwe proverb that says, 'If you can walk you can dance and if you can talk you can sing'. This could be taken a step further to say, 'If you can breathe you can dance and if you can make a sound you can sing.' There is no right or wrong in the dramatic arts, as long as you are enjoying yourself, the children will usually follow.

What are some ideas for educators?

The use of a variety of musical experiences, such as lullabies, songs, percussive instruments, ditties, singing games, rhymes and raps provide both structured and unstructured experiences using a range of simple and culturally diverse props.

Here are a couple of ideas:

- Always have available a class set of egg maracas and clapping sticks. These can be used for all ages to shake or beat along with the music or the rhyme.
- Put on some gloves
I have ten little fingers and they all belong to me
I can make them do things, would you like to see?
I can shut them up tight
I can open them up wide
I can clap them together
I can make them hide
I can make them jump high
I can make them jump low
I can fold them quietly
And fold them so
- Moving to music
Use a tambour or clapping sticks and encourage the children to move to the beat and freeze when you stop. Then repeat with music. Find a variety of music



Oral story telling

that you love; classical, contemporary, jazz and world music. Cut holes in pieces of large fabric so children can put over their heads or use as a scarf and move to the music. Ensure that there is a variety of fast, slow, rap, rock etc.

Attach ribbons or bells to elastic for babies' hands.

Give each child a small paint brush and provide three bowls with pretend paint in them. Encourage children to paint the walls and chairs to the music. Alternatively, paint outside with water to the music.

- For transitions

To the tune farmer in the dell

If you're wearing stripes (blue/a zip)

If you're wearing stripes

You can go and wash your hands

If you're wearing stripes

- Stories in boxes

Choose your favourite story and memorise it. Then find simple props to represent the characters and place them in a box. i.e.

- *Dear zoo*
- *Green sheep*
- *Billy goats gruff*
- *Peace at last*
- *Who sank the boat*
- *Big hungry bear*
- *Brown bear brown bear*

Oral storytelling

Oral storytelling is one of the most ancient art forms and has always played an integral role in Indigenous communities. Dreaming stories have been passed down from one generation to another for 40,000 years embedding the history of the land, the seasons, people, animals and culture. Non Indigenous Australians can learn from the First Nations Peoples about the significance and the art of storytelling.

The beauty of oral storytelling is that you can do it anywhere; outside under a tree or inside, sitting in a circle watching the flame of a candle. You can tell a story to one child on your knee or a group of children lying down.

How do you tell a story?

Draw the children to you by using your eyes and varying your voice, tone, pitch and volume. Be authentic and avoid being cutesy and patronising. Stand up, move around or sit in a circle. Starting in a circle for older children is beneficial in a number of ways including; the absence of hierarchy and clear sight of all participants, including the teacher.

Encourage children to choose any position where they are comfortable. Never force them to sit with their legs crossed and up straight as if they were in the army. I do not like sitting like that when I am singing or listening to a story so I imagine it is more difficult for children.

The use of props and puppets can strengthen participation by creating a visual aid which assists in children's engagement.



Possibilities exist everywhere



Spontaneous opportunities throughout the day

When and where do you provide a dramatic arts session?

Music and storytelling does not just occur at 'group time' or 'music time'. Children benefit from a variety of methods structured and unstructured throughout the day. Possibilities exist anywhere and everywhere. An authentic and responsive music program is one that recognises and promotes naturally occurring and spontaneous opportunities throughout the day. These may be inside, outside, with individuals, small groups and larger groups of children.

How do you respond to children who do not wish to be involved?

Many years ago, I facilitated a series of ten weekly music and movement sessions, one child appeared not to be participating. She did not look up, open her mouth or look at all interested. When the parent enrolled her for the following term, I discussed my concern with her. She told me that at home after each session, her daughter placed her teddies in a circle singing the songs that she had learnt that day to the teddies. This was a clear message to me to never force a child to participate as each child responds to participation differently.

Children participate in singing sessions when they are developmentally ready and feel

comfortable. As with any learning experience, never put pressure on a child to participate (DET 2010). Children should be free to come and go. However if it is interesting enough, they usually stay. Our role is not to teach the arts but to encourage children to experience the arts in a positive and non threatening way.

Conclusion

The dramatic arts through voice, poetry, stories, rhymes, chants, puppets, music and dance should be embedded in the curriculum every day. Engage children to be participants rather than an audience and if you are passionate about the experience, the children will usually be transported with you.

References

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Schiller, P 2001, 'Brain research and its implications for early childhood programs: applying research to our work', *Exchange*, vol. 140, pp. 14-19.

Shonkoff, J 2000, *From Neurons to neighborhoods: the science of early childhood development*, National Academy Press, Washington, DC.

Resources

A variety of music that you love. The World section in the music shop or iTunes is great for fabulous diverse music.

Oxfam shops sell wonderful fair trade boxes

Indigenous resources

<http://www.yarnstrongsista.com/>

<https://aboriginalfabrics.com.au/artists>
(for fair trade fabric)