

Music and multi sensory learning

Sue Southey



Sue Southey is co-director, and preschool group teacher in a C&K community kindergarten in Springwood. She is also a trainer and early childhood consultant for the Forte Music Group, a franchise organisation in music education throughout Australia, and overseas.

In her role at Forte she worked as part of a multidisciplinary team to develop Jungle Music, an early childhood music programme for parents and children. She is currently working on a new music programme for PrePrep aged children. As a trainer she works with early childhood music teachers to enable them to deliver high quality music programmes.

Sue is a regular presenter of music workshops at seminars, conferences and teachers meetings in Brisbane, regional areas of Queensland and Melbourne.

“Music has the power to inspire, to delight, to transform and to motivate. It can touch the soul and bring peace and healing to the listener. Feelings of anticipation, wonder and joy are evoked through the creative process of music-making. Music can also have a unifying effect by helping to break down barriers between people” (Wylie, 1996)



Whilst most early childhood educators agree that music is an important part of young children's education experience, many are unsure about how to utilise and present musical experiences other than as singing games and transition routines.

In early childhood settings outside of schools, children rarely have access to teachers specifically trained in music education. Even within school systems where music specialists have weekly contact with classes, many music specialist teachers are not experienced with teaching in the context of early childhood classes. Ideally, music education for young children should access expertise from both early childhood and music education.

Music education versus early childhood education

Surprisingly, “playing” is at the heart of both early childhood and music education. Unfortunately, the term means different things within each discipline. In the context of music, “playing” is focussed on practice, performance, repetition and perfection. It is, therefore, not usually a realistic and valuable experience for very young children, except when initiated by the child. For children in early childhood settings, play is much more open-ended, social and discovery based. The challenge for teachers, therefore, is to provide young children with valuable music experiences that fit within a play-based philosophy of discovery and creativity, whilst introducing children to the building blocks of music.

Feature Articles

What are the building blocks of music?

Music teachers generally agree that there are fundamental elements of music that allow adults and children to engage with music. Not just to hear sounds, but enabling children to listen, respond and enjoy. These elements include pitch, beat, rhythm, tempo (speed), timbre (sound texture), dynamics (volume), and form (patterns in the music) (Bridges 1994). A quality early childhood music programme needs to develop young children's experiences of these elements of music, whilst allowing them to engage and respond in a creative way.

Facilitating children's growing responses to music

Children come to early childhood settings with a multiplicity of backgrounds and experiences in music. Initially, they need opportunities to be immersed in rich environments where they can explore and discover. They need musical connections to their own and other cultures. They need exposure to good models who respond musically; and with experiences that allow them to respond and create. The teacher's role is to provide resources such as high quality recorded music, props for dance and movement, materials for sound making and musical role models.

As children engage with musical activities, they begin to respond to particular elements such as pitch, beat, rhythm and form. A teacher who is familiar with the elements of music, can plan experiences that allow children to notice and respond to particular aspects of music. This enables children to filter what they hear so they can build a range of musical responses that enable them to interact with music. The challenge at this stage is to know what is appropriate to teach and how to teach music effectively to enable all children to access these experiences.

How do we provide appropriate musical experiences?

Music, by its very nature, is predominantly an auditory process. To allow young children to access and respond, teachers need ways of presenting music so that it provides auditory, visual



and kinaesthetic sensory input. This method of teaching is frequently referred to as multi sensory learning and has been used effectively by teachers of children with special needs. However, it is less frequently used in regular school settings. In multi sensory learning experiences, children are encouraged to combine movement and visual stimulation, alongside an auditory response, around a particular concept such as reading a word in order to maximise the child's sensory input into the brain. In musical terms, movement of an object, for example rocking a parachute from side to side to feel the beat, can express particular aspects of a piece of music such as the beat.

Early childhood classrooms are ideal settings for teaching using a multi sensory learning approach. Teachers have access to a wealth of play materials and educational resources not always available in classrooms for older children. Whilst there are

Feature Articles



many commercially available music resources such as Rainbow Rings, scarves, dancing ribbons and percussion instruments, there are also many everyday items in early childhood classrooms that can be used in musical activities. Lengths of fabric such as Lycra are useful bounce beanbags, allowing children a multi sensory experience of beat, rhythm and form. Scarves and ribbons add a visual experience, allowing children to feel the phrasing and style of the music. Hoops provide an excellent way to define a small area of space that can be manipulated and explored. Children working in pairs with hoops can investigate ways of moving the hoop through space — in front, behind, above, below, between, inside and out. Appropriate music provides the structure from which children can explore these materials.

Classroom sets of percussion instruments such as rhythm sticks (claves), bells and shakers are wonderful for allowing the whole group to engage in playing, again providing a visual, kinaesthetic and auditory experience. Quality instruments are expensive, particularly as full class sets. Early childhood teachers however, are masters at improvisation. Short pieces of dowel can replace rhythm sticks. Shakers can be made from rice-filled plastic bottles, or seed pods. Plastic grocery bags can be rolled and shredded at one end to make cheer leading “pompoms”. Blocks and collage boxes can become drums with chops sticks as mallets. Even objects that make no sound, such as Beanie Toys®, can be tapped, tossed, and balanced so children can experience the beat in different ways. The availability of

objects to use musically in a multi sensory fashion is limited only by the imaginations of the teacher and children!

As children gain experience and competence with using materials in musical ways, they will build a repertoire of responses from which they can generate their own ideas. A range of recorded music and singing games will provide a structure that allows the children to create their own musical responses. In the same way that early childhood teachers support children’s play by observing, reflecting, and suggesting alternatives, this is also appropriate for musical play experiences. This support allows children to generate ideas, solve problems and design their own responses to music.

Music, therefore, can be much more than singing and transition games. By using a multi sensory learning approach, teachers can introduce young children to the elements of music, allowing them to listen, enjoy and respond to music in creative and meaningful ways.

References

- Wylie, J 1996 *Music, Learning and Your Child*, Canterbury University Press, Christchurch
Bridges, D 1994 *Music, Young Children and You*, Hale & Iremonger, Alexandria 1994

“Music has the power to inspire, to delight, to transform and to motivate. It can touch the soul and bring peace and healing to the listener. Feelings of anticipation, wonder and joy are evoked through the creative process of music-making. Music can also have a unifying effect by helping to break down barriers between people” (Wylie, 1996)