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Early Language Learning With and Without Music

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Abstract

Eighty students who spoke Spanish at home were randomly assigned one of four teachers. Two of the teachers used a great deal of music in their classrooms while the other two did not. The students and their teachers remained together for two years – kindergarten and first grade. Literacy achievement data suggests that music had a positive effect on oral language and reading scores. Differences focused on the use of music for morning opening, music and signing while working with words, and the use of music during listening stations.

Children's music and chants are a popular medium that parents often use with their young children. In fact, many students arrive in kindergarten already knowing a full range of jingles, songs, and rhymes. Parents seem to naturally sing with their young children and clap along with songs. Classroom teachers are also interested in the role that music can play in their instruction. During the past decade, a number of articles have been published that provide classroom teachers with ideas about using music in the classroom (Langfit, 1994; Smith, 2000). More and more teachers are using music in their classrooms, especially during language arts instruction (Cutietta, 1996; Kolb, 1996; Towell, 1999/2000). Harp (1988) believes that music complements reading instruction because language, especially that of children, has rhythm and melody. McCracken and McCracken (1986) maintain that poetry, songs, and stories are central to quality literacy instruction. In fact, entire language arts curricula have been written in which singing songs assume a central role (Sing, Spell, Read, & Write by International Learning Systems).

However, few studies have been conducted on the specific language learning gains attributable to music and music education. Notable exceptions are those by Douglas and Willatts (1994) and Lamb and Gregory (1993). Douglas and Willatts (1994), for example, demonstrate an association between rhythmic ability and reading in seven and eight year-old students. Lamb and Gregory found that both phonemic and music sound discrimination was related to reading ability in 18 British first graders. In a bilingual context, Van Asselt (1970), studied the influence of rhyme, rhythm, and melody on third grade students learning German and noted support for the use of music in teaching language.

While studies on the relationship between music and language development are limited in number, evidence for the use of music for literacy development with English language learners in elementary school is essentially non-existent. Thus, the focus of the present study was to determine if the use of music in primary grade classrooms resulted in increased literacy performance of students in bilingual programs. And if students' literacy performance improved, how did teachers use music in their classrooms?

Method

Participants

The researcher purposely selected the school. This school has been a professional development school for three years thus allowing the researcher significant access to teachers, students, and classrooms. The school consisted of over 1450 elementary age students in grades K-5 and operated on a year-round calendar. All students in this urban elementary school qualified for free or reduced lunch and 45 percent of the students participated in bilingual education programs.

Of the 160 kindergarten students who enrolled in bilingual classes, 80 students were randomly selected for participation in this study. All of the students spoke Spanish at home and qualified for free lunch. Each student was randomly assigned to one of four classroom teachers. Each of these teachers was credentialed and had tenure with the school district. None of them played an instrument at home, but each had taken a three-unit music education class as part of her preservice credential program. Each teacher maintained her students for two full years through kindergarten and first grade. Each of the four teachers implemented the three-hour literacy block consistent with the district framework. The literacy block was divided into read aloud, guided reading, writing, independent reading, and working with words. Two of the teachers used music as an instructional material during the literacy block while the other two did not. The two who did not use music did not have CD players in their classrooms and used the tape recorder for playing books on tape. All four teachers planned together and aligned their curriculum so that they were teaching the same thematic units at the same time.

Data Sources

Reading achievement assessments. Each of the 80 students was assessed at the beginning of kindergarten (September) and again toward the end of first grade (April). Thus, 19 months elapsed between the initial and final assessments. Students were given the Student Oral Language Observation Matrix [SOLOM] (California Department of

Education, 1981), the Yopp-Singer Test of Phoneme Segmentation (Yopp, 1995), and the Developmental Reading Assessment [DRA] (Beaver, 1997). The SOLOM assessment provides a numeric score based on oral language proficiency and is judged by the teacher. The Yopp-Singer test also provides a numeric score based on the number of correct phoneme segmentation activities the student correctly produces. Finally, the DRA is a criterion-referenced assessment in which students re-tell information from the text after reading it. Each of the four teachers participated in district-level training focused on implementing each of these assessments.

Classroom observations. Classroom observations were conducted in two of the classes each week, one class that used music and one that did not. Thus, each classroom was observed twice per month over the 19 months of the study. The observations were unannounced and occurred during the literacy block of time and typically lasted between 60 and 100 minutes. Field note forms (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) were used to create a record of classroom events and conversations.

Analysis

Reading achievement scores were quantified and compared using t-tests and chi-square tests. Observational data were categorized using a constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Three areas of difference were identified following multiple reviews of the data (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) including the morning opening, the ways children completed their word study, and the use of listening stations. Each of these categories was identified and samples from the observational data that typified the category were identified. In addition, direct quotes were obtained during the observations.

The four teachers also participated in a member check to review the draft findings (Creswell, 1997). A copy of the written "findings" section was provided to each of the teachers and a meeting was scheduled to discuss these findings. The member check discussion lasted approximately 40 minutes and was tape-recorded. No significant changes were made to the findings as a result of the member check, but additional quotes from the teachers were obtained. The teachers worked

closely together and understood the purpose of the study and that their teaching philosophies were different.

Findings

The present study focused on four classrooms at the same elementary school. Students in these classrooms were randomly assigned their class in kindergarten and the students remained with the same teachers for two years. Each class had 20 students, all of whom qualified for free and/or reduced lunch and all of who spoke Spanish at home. None of the 80 students demonstrated oral fluency in English at the initiation of the study and no significant differences in SOLOM, Yopp-Singer, or DRA were identified. At the end of the 19 months, 71 of the 80 (89%) students remained at the school.

In terms of the student's oral language development, students with experience with music averaged 13.2 on SOLOM compared with 8.4 for students not exposed to music at school ($t=5.5$, $p<.001$). Similarly, students performance on the Yopp-Singer Test of Phonemic Segmentation seem to improve based on music in the classroom ($t=2.1$, $p<.04$) (see Table 1). In terms of the DRA, ten students in the music rich classroom read at grade level in English and Spanish whereas only one student in the non-music classroom read at grade level in English and Spanish ($\chi^2=6.7$, $p<.03$). It is clear that the students in the two classes that used music as part of the language arts curriculum outperformed students in the two classes that did not. Thus, the question remains, what did these two teachers who used music in their classrooms do? How did they structure their language arts time in such a way that it resulted in significant gains in early literacy achievement?

Classroom Similarities

Much of the time these four teachers engaged their students in similar lessons and activities. For example, during a unit on farms, they all read aloud the same books each day; they added farm related books to their classroom libraries; they took a field trip together to a farm, and they all invited their students to create a diorama of life on the farm. Despite their differences in the use of music and song texts, each of these four teachers implemented a three-hour literacy block and divided this

time into read aloud, guided reading, writing, independent reading, and working with words. For the most part, the print materials they used were the same. These four teachers met with the rest of their grade level team weekly (about 16 teachers in all) to plan curriculum. While there were clearly several similarities, there were also a number of differences revealed during the classroom observations.

Table 1. Summary of Post-Test Findings Using t-test

	SOLOM Mean (SD)	Yopp-Singer Mean (SD)
Non-Music	8.4 (2.45)	17.1
Music	13.2 (4.93)*	19.5**

*p<.001

**p<.04

Classroom Difference #1: Morning Opening

One of the differences between the classes was the way in which teachers started their day. In two of the classrooms, the day started with a song. During classroom observations, students sang every morning and the songs typically focused on self-esteem, pride, and feeling good. During kindergarten, students seemed to like to sing morning songs in Spanish such as De Colores and En Las Pulgas De San Jose. In first grade, students seemed to especially like the songs by Linda Lungren (1996) for their opening. In particular, they liked to sing I Feel Good About Myself, I Can Dream Dreams, and Only The Best. The two teachers who incorporated music into their classrooms consistently allowed the student leader for the day to select the morning song. In the control classrooms, the morning typically began with a review of the calendar and the weather.

When asked about the difference, Ms. Benito said, “I like to start off in a good mood. I think that many of these children have difficult lives and that my job is to make sure that they are ready to learn. Singing about pride in the morning gets them ready for the other things that I do.” Ms. James responded, “I really don’t have time to do a lot of

singing in the morning. They get that in the music class. They are behind in their work and I need to focus them on their lessons.”

Classroom Difference #2: Working with Words

All four of the teachers in this study used part of her literacy block for working with words activities (Cunningham & Hall, 1994). Two of the classroom teachers used word lists generated by commercial programs while two of them used words from song titles. Thus, all of the students were required to create one-letter words, two-letter words, and three-letter words and so on until all the letters were used to create the mystery word. In the two classes that used music, the mystery word was always a word in a song title that the students sang following their work with words. For example, 12 weeks into first grade, the letters were “SDNIAORU.” The students identified one-letter words (I, A), two-letter words (e.g., IS, OR, NO), three-letter words (e.g., SUN, SON, RUN), and four-letter words (e.g., SAID, SUNS, RUNS). When it was time for the mystery word, one student excitedly reported “DINOSAUR.” At that moment, Ms. Rodriguez played the CD version of The Dinosaur Dance in which the students all participated.

When asked about the difference in implementing working with words activities, Ms. Salazar said, “I think it is important that students combine and re-combine letters to see the various words they can make. It isn’t a game to me, it’s very serious work for our students.” Ms. Benito commented one morning in her classroom, “See how they love to find the mystery word? They know we’re going to sing a song and that the CD with the words will be available in the classroom library after we learn it. The connections they make are great. They know the words because we sang together. On their own, they get to see the words in print and hear them over and over again.”

Classroom Difference #3: Listening Stations

A third difference in the use of literacy time was the choices for listening stations. In all four classrooms, listening stations were used during center time. Between four and six students sat together and listened to books on tape while looking at the pages. This resembled a small group read aloud. During some weeks, students were allowed to

select the book they wanted to listen to while other weeks the teacher based on the social studies or science theme determined the listening selection. In the classrooms in which music was used, student choices included several books that came with song CDs. For example, during the middle of their kindergarten year, students were asked to listen to What A Wonderful World by George David Weiss and Bob Thiele (1995) while listening to Louis Armstrong's song that matched the words exactly.

At the beginning of first grade, the teacher used the song I Can't Spell Hippopotamus at the listening station. The words of this song introduce students to various onset and rhyme patterns such as "I can spell hat, h-a-t. I can spell cat, c-a-t. I can spell fat, f-a-t, but I can't spell hippopotamus." Each student had a recording sheet and recorded each of the words that were spelled during the song and then added additional words with the same spelling pattern to the list.

Toward the end of first grade, during a unit of study on respect, the teachers used the book No Mirrors in My Nana's House (Barnwell, 1998) that comes with a CD. The CD includes two different singing versions of the text as well as a spoken version of the text. Classroom observations during this unit of study indicate that students re-read the book at least three times as the CD played. In addition, students were observed on the playground singing the song from the book.

When asked about materials selection for the listening stations, Ms. Rodriguez noted the importance of quality read aloud. She said, "I want my students to hear lots of different voices read to them, not just me. Like the other teachers here, I read aloud every day to my students. They need to hear more than just me. I think that the variety, including the use of books with CD songs, keeps them interested in that particular center and allows me to focus on my guided reading groups."

Conclusions and Implications

The findings from this study suggest that music can be used in an elementary school classroom to benefit students' language development. Thus, this study adds to the growing database that suggests that musical listening activities do in fact influence literacy development (Douglas &

Willatts, 1994; Fisher & McDonald, in press; Lamb & Gregory, 1993). While long-term outcomes from these four classrooms cannot yet be determined, the evidence thus far suggests that teachers should integrate music into their literacy instruction. A follow-up study on these 80 students to determine if and when these effects diminish would be interesting.

The findings also suggest that music can be used in specific ways. While the teachers in this study differed in three ways, there may be more ways to use music in the classroom. However, it seems reasonable to suggest that teachers of young students might consider using music during their morning opening, for listening stations, and for sustained word study activities.

Many variables were held constant for two years in this study, including the teachers, the students, the curriculum, the teaming structures, and the socio-economic environment. However, teacher rapport with students and the climate that is created is difficult, if not impossible, to control. The two classes in which music was used consistently had a low buzz of student talk, general excitement about school on the part of the students, and students were often observed humming along as they worked. The two classrooms in which music was not part of the instruction were consistently more quiet and reserved. Students worked in groups, but talked softly. It may be that the teachers' personalities played a significant role in the outcomes of this study. However, the two teachers who used music in their classroom both report that music helped them maintain their enthusiasm and demeanor.

Perhaps the most important lesson learned from this study was the ways in which teachers infused music into their literacy instruction. The two teachers who used music in their classroom did so as part of their overall literacy effort. The songs they selected were, by and large, based on the curriculum themes or language structures being taught. The music complemented the instruction rather than detracted from it. It seems reasonable to suggest that the addition of music to a classroom must be planned. It is unclear if the addition of music to language arts instruction that is not tied thematically or developmentally would positively impact student achievement.

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