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Patrick Groff
San Diego State University

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THE EFFECT OF MUSIC ON READING

Patrick Groff

SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

It is apparent that music and language reading are both perceptual acts. To read either language or music one obviously must pay close attention to selective details of a graphic display. To listen to music or to words read aloud also involves some common perceptual abilities. Therefore, it is predictable that some have claimed that children's experiences with music will help them to learn to read language. There are several "parallels" in music and language reading, Monroe¹ contends.

Music Affects Reading

Music activities can create certain attitudes, moods or self-concepts in the child which will help him learn to read, it is asserted.^{2 3} Music listening moreover can develop a general capacity for listening which can profitably be transferred by the child to his reading lessons, some say.^{4 5 6} Even the child's auditory perception is believed to be enhanced through experiences with music.⁶ For example, it is felt that having the child match pitch in music will help him recognize words.⁵

Beyond this, the singing of songs is defended as a means to develop good diction, which in turn is maintained will assist in the development of language reading abilities.^{6 7} This leads to the conclusion that "most problems in children's reading comprehension are caused from reading with the wrong inflection."⁶ In this context, the lyrics of songs are recommended as the basic material for beginning reading lessons.² It is presumed appropriate that children learn sight vocabulary from written song lyrics, as they would from a basal reader. Music lyrics used in this way are also said to be useful in teaching the child to predict outcomes, to follow story sequences, to identify the speaker in dialogue, to recognize humor, and to understand inferences.² Song lyrics are especially recommended for use in reading lessons with retarded readers.⁸

Otherwise, it is held that music affects language reading since the two acts purportedly involve similar visual functions. That is, when reading language and when reading music the child is seen to use the same kinds of eye movements.⁵

As well, music is called a universal language.⁹ This universality of music extends to the listening of music, it is argued, since both the reading of language and the listening to music are done as total meaningful configurations.¹⁰ It is even judged that "music has a grammar, a syntax."¹¹

Finally, there are two empirical studies that support, to some extent, some of these testimonials to the interconnections between music and reading. First, Nicholson¹² found that beginning readers taught to match music pitch with letters and the alphabet scored significantly higher on

reading readiness and achievement tests than did pupils given no such instruction. In the second study, Movsesian¹³ had first and second graders taught the music reading skills of note reading, meter comprehension and tonality. He found these pupils made significantly greater gains in language reading than did pupils not taught these music skills.

Does Music Affect Reading?

Do these claims and research data settle the case in favor of the purported interrelatedness of music and language reading? Can we now accept without question the importance of music instruction in beginning reading development? I think not, for several reasons.

Virtually all the comments of a favorable nature about music's affect on language reading growth are testimonials by obviously enthusiastic observers of this relationship. However, without some kind of systematic verification it is impossible to say whether teachers in general could duplicate the exceptionally good results that these testimonials avow have occurred.

The notion that there is a general faculty for listening which can be developed through music activities and then be transferred, when needed, to language reading lessons, also appears without foundation. The existence of such separate mental faculties, as listening, has long been discredited, even though it is revived by some of those who stick to the idea that music will favorably affect children's language reading abilities.

Equally unacceptable is the proposal that improving a child's oral reading, by correcting his diction, inflections, rhythm and articulation through the singing of songs, will overcome his lack of reading comprehension. Oral reading, it is known, is a symptom of a child's reading comprehension, not a cause of it. The training of oral reading through the singing of songs is thus a remote and doubtless ineffective way to help a child overcome the true causes of any reading comprehension deficiencies he may have.

The idea that song lyrics are exceptionally good vocabulary for beginning reading instruction is also a doubtful matter. The suggestions for such use of song lyrics follow a look-say or whole-word model for reading methodology. This method would delay the use of phonics instruction until after a "sight" vocabulary supposedly has been learned by the child. It has been repeatedly demonstrated, however, that decoding or phonics methods are superior to the use of such whole-word methods in beginning reading.^{14 15} The successes of phonics methods suggest that the reading vocabulary for beginning readers should be carefully chosen as to the predictability of the spelling of these words; and, as to their length in syllables, since polysyllabic words can be shown to be more difficult for beginning readers to identify than are monosyllabic ones.¹⁶

Other psychological evidence can be marshalled that questions the supposed positive relationship between music and reading some claim exists. It is not true, for instance, that the eye-movements of music readers and those of language readers are very similar. In fact, the eye-movements used in music reading appear to be different in several respects to those used

in reading words.¹⁷ It has also been found that the relationship between music reading and language reading abilities as measured by tests is “too low to warrant an assumption that the skills involved in music reading are closely related to the language reading skills.”¹⁸

The notion that music and language reading both involve language can also be negatively criticized. One expert in the psychology of music notes that there is “a fallacy in the thinking of those who would make music a language in the sense that English and French is a language.”¹¹ This is because “the ‘messages’ of music are more in the affective than the cognitive realm. Music stimulates little detailed imagery of a sort that is universally shared,” he explains. Words and music are also different in that words are in no sense direct visual representations of their sound, as are notes in music. Then, language seeks to represent things outside itself, while music has for its main concern the patterns or configurations of sound itself.¹⁹

Finally, the two pieces of research^{12 13} which have been noted as support for the contention that some sort of training in music skills will bring on exceptional reading growth for children are open to faultfinding. For one thing, both of these studies trained their experimental teachers to perform the empirical activities called for, but did not give equal kinds of training to the control group teachers involved. It has become widely accepted, however, that unless both the control and experimental teachers of an empirical research project are given equal attention by a researcher that these two groups of instructors are in fact rendered unequal. In this case, the well-known Hawthorne effect comes into play. This may explain the favorable results obtained by the experimental teachers in Nicholson’s and Movsesian’s studies.

Then, as stated, Nicholson’s research¹² investigated only whether associating musical pitch with alphabet letters would help children perceive these letters. That it did is not surprising. What is still unknown, however, is whether this is the most effective means of achieving this end. As for Movsesian,¹³ he gives no explanation or hypothesis of how the teaching of music reading skills, which is a highly sounds-oriented activity, could have helped the pupils in his study read the basal readers they used. These were whole-word, look-say texts in which the sound-letter relationships, or “phonics is usually buried under masses of other material.”¹⁴ In these texts “recognizing words as wholes remains the prime means of word recognition.” Therefore, “scant attention” is given to the use of sounds as a cue to word recognition.¹⁴ Left unexplained is how pupils’ abilities to discriminate sounds, taught in Movsesian’s music skills lessons, could have any effect on their whole-word reading of basal reader vocabulary.

Conclusions

This discussion of the likelihood that music activities will teach children to learn to read suggests, it is fair to say at this point, that one cannot accept this hypothesis. The claim that music instruction has an especial capacity to teach children to read, one that surpasses that found in normal reading instruction, does not seem to be supported. The anecdotal accounts to this effect are not convincing. Neither are the two pieces of research which

uphold this contention.

It seems reasonable, therefore, to advise teachers of reading that they would be in error to suppose that the displacement of regular methods of reading instruction in their classes by music activities will bring on exceptional gains for their pupils in this skill. This is not to say that music activities should be banned from reading programs. They may be used to enliven parts of reading lessons. It does say that one should not credit music with extraordinary powers to teach reading. To say otherwise would be to set up false hopes for both music and reading teachers.

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