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Literacy Skills in Music Class: Tool for Preservice Teacher Growth

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Abstract

Music educators have a unique opportunity to strengthen a cross-curricular foundation in literacy, as they teach the “universal language.” Enrolled in a content area reading course, 20 preservice teachers in music education at one, large southeastern university discovered that using language skills as a lens sharpened their observations of student behavior in music classes at the elementary, middle and high school levels.

The inclusion of a few brief lessons featuring listening, reading or writing strategies revealed unanticipated academic needs, which impacted classroom behavior and musicianship. With increased awareness deepening their understanding of young students as learners, the preservice teachers adjusted their lesson planning and management skills. Techniques more finely attuned to each class resulted in preservice teachers, who were more confident in their practice and encouraged by improved levels of musical performance.

Literacy Skills in Music Class: Tool for Preservice Teacher Growth

Giving formal place to literacy objectives in the music education curriculum began to appear in the literature in the late 1990's, as an outgrowth of the *National Standards for Arts Education*, (Consortium of National Arts Educations Associations, 1994). That document identified the knowledge and skills basic to competencies in the arts and highlighted a “positive correlation between a substantive education in the arts and student achievement in other subjects and on standardized tests” (p.7). With the *Goals 2000*:

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Educate America Act, (1994), music education attained legitimacy as a core subject. During this same decade, a stream of various “report cards” [from the National Center for Educational Statistics, the National Reading Panel et al., (*Reading Today*, p.4)] detailed the nation’s literacy levels; and legislation underscored the obligation of public schools to raise the literacy level of all students (*U.S. Department of Education*, 2002). “Reading Across the Curriculum,” an inter-disciplinary staple of literacy learning in progressive school districts nationwide, suddenly became the norm.

Public school music teachers saw this as a surprising shift. Long accustomed to justifying the existence of music in school curricula by collaborating with content area teachers, they were now faced with reinforcing basic language arts skills within their music classes. Though Stewart and O’Brien (1989) reported that most secondary teachers felt unwilling and inadequately prepared to teach communication skills, public school faculty members and officials at the state departments of education grappled with how to implement these new federal mandates. Similarly, university faculty members in teacher-preparation programs sought to align their courses of study with a cross-curricular literacy focus.

Inserting objectives for language literacy into graduation requirements for students in teacher preparation programs affected education majors in all content areas including music. This study investigated how preservice music teachers at one NCATE-approved college of education learned to blend literacy lessons with music foci for public school students. In particular, the study examined the impact that integrating listening, reading and writing skills into three consecutive music lessons had on preservice music teachers’

perceptions about the students they taught in elementary, middle, and high school practicum placements.

Literacy and the Curriculum

According to Hladczuk and Eller (1992), literacy is “the vehicle of education, the means through which ideas, information, knowledge and wisdom are expressed and exchanged” (p. ix). Literate individuals possess the capacity to function fully in society: to make reasoned choices, to acquire meaningful employment and to participate in civic affairs. Reading and writing represent literacy in its most familiar forms: the process of scanning letters or symbols to gain meaning and the recording of thought in a somewhat permanent form. Listening and speaking is the second pair of language skills that identify a literate people. Speech is a mode of oral communication, expressing thought; listening assumes a thoughtful consideration of sound whether verbal or musical. Listening is also an attribute of student conduct, which is the core of classroom management plans. In tandem, reading, writing, listening and speaking are the four literacy processes that shape cognition.

Ryan (1992) disagrees and states, “The most fundamental educational skill is not reading, but thinking. Reading is important precisely because it provides food for thought in nourishing doses” (p. xii). Regardless of its goals and outcomes, reading in America has long been “our common concern and collective responsibility” (Ryan, 1992, p. ix). In fact, the federal government provides grant monies for states to monitor reading abilities and to provide remediation for those children who do not meet the standard (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). As a result of that stimulus, teachers in all disciplines at school districts receiving such grants band together to ensure that no child remains at risk or is left behind.

Teaching reading and writing across all disciplines, including music, is a norm in these settings.

Literature

Woody (2004) suggests a spiral curriculum for music education programs to “develop students’ abilities to respond emotionally to the expressive properties of sound” (p.36). In that model, children develop musical literacy skills by exploring sound through singing, moving, playing instruments, composing and improvising with increasing sophistication, as they advance from grade to grade. Because several of these musical skills parallel language literacy skills, music teachers and researchers have found ways to make the language literacy-music connection possible.

Sims and Nokier (2002) and Smialek and Boburka (2006) offered practical tips to develop focused listeners. Remembering that listening was one literacy skill, several researchers (Dunn, 2006; Zerull, 2006) urged music teachers to expand students’ listening skills. Woody (2004) specified developing “sensitivities” in listening skills (p. 32). Bresler (2005) noted that listening to music and/or performing “involves [sic] empathic connection to a mood, an emotional quality” (pp. 175-176). Renwick (2002) combined lessons on jazz listening with reading jazz literature.

Others emphasized how learning to read print and to read music were complementary skill sets, because both utilized text and symbols (Darrow, 2008; Hansen & Bernstorf, 2002; Locklear, 2008). Calogero (2002) connected music and children’s literature as alternate forms of expression to enhance “ideas and themes implicit in both”

(p.23). The ability to make those connections is desirable when building language literacy skills.

Hansen (2009) and Pearce (2000) maintained that writing about music expanded students' musical vocabulary and their "conceptual understanding...of the art form" (Hansen, p.28). Various researchers (Easton, Witek, & Cione, 2005; Whitaker, 1994) reported positive outcomes when they employed the Writer's Workshop Process, as a basis for teaching children to compose music.

Bell (2002) emphasized the importance of teachers using clear, oral communication when rehearsing children in choral and instrumental ensembles. Liperote (2006) combined speaking and listening in her band classes by stressing the singing of rote songs. Peisch (1995) described an inquiry approach to the musical ensemble that encompassed all four literacy skills.

Method

Twenty preservice teachers consisting of 10 females and 10 males, participated as subjects in this study. All were senior year music education students at a large southeastern university. They were student teaching at area schools and taking a required course where the topic was reading in their content area. By choice, two preservice music teachers were placed at elementary schools, seven at middle schools, and eleven at high schools. See Table 1. Each school was located in a predominantly rural area where the population consisted of students from varied socioeconomic (SES) levels and racially diverse towns. All schools surrounded the university community.

Midway through their reading course and after information in instructional reading levels, comprehension strategies, and the readability of school-issued texts had been

presented, each preservice teacher was asked to choose and observe a music class to identify one language-related issue that appeared to interfere with optimal teaching and learning. Students watched band, chorus, string ensemble, or general music classes. With approval from the supervising teacher, each preservice teacher developed and implemented three consecutive lessons to address the problematic area. Lesson format was a personal choice and included mini-lesson, entire period, small group or whole class instruction; but selecting one literacy skill such as listening, reading, speaking, writing as the strategy for instruction was a requirement.

The following examples illustrate the lessons preservice teachers created. In listening lessons, band students heard six scales and identified differences in pitch, while being mindful of rhythm and changes in major and minor modalities. Other band students listened to the first fifty measures of a CD while following the written notation, exchanging music with the player of another instrument to sight read the next fifty measures with correct notes and rhythms.

To enhance reading skills, chorus students read song lyrics without notation in two different tempos and sang an entire section with the correct pitch, rhythm and text. Band students read musical notation for etudes from a book, and practiced naming the notes and counting to develop basic knowledge of music theory. Using a worksheet, they practiced placing stems on notes and identifying fingerings. String players read about the lives of the composers who wrote the pieces they played in order to understand the musical style within a particular historical context.

To meet objectives for writing, students in string classes were asked to clarify the difference between eighth and sixteenth notes in a few sentences of prose or to write

summaries about the music they were playing. Some band classes used graphic organizers to write a descriptive paragraph about two pieces of music currently in their repertoire. In general music, students listened to a CD; and in short paragraphs, they commented on rhythm, style, instruments, expression or musical terms.

Each preservice teacher kept a reflective journal and notated, after each lesson, what was and was not successful and what they would change for the next lesson. After the third and final lesson, each preservice teacher completed a two-page summary sheet of reflections and a questionnaire designed to invite analysis, synthesis, and additional comments. Items on the questionnaire included: (a) Did your lessons go according to plan? (b) What did you learn about your students through these lessons? (c) Did you learn something about your students that you might not have known otherwise? (d) Did the lessons OR new learning make a difference in how you planned for instruction? (e) How will you transfer this awareness to your own professional practice? (f) Any random comments? We did not ask questions of the preservice teachers, asking them to assess the acquisition of language literacy skills on the part of the students they taught, because the experiment did not include a pre-test to determine where the levels of literacy acquisition were prior to the implementation of the special lessons.

At the conclusion of the project, the preservice teachers met near campus in small peer groups and presented five-minute summaries of their projects to each other. One at a time, they identified the literacy skill they had selected, described one lesson they had taught, and shared what they had learned. The presentations were graded by an outside rater, and submitted to the course instructor. In addition, the preservice teachers gave their reflective notebooks to the instructor to use as data for this study.

Utilizing the four literacy skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as the study's basic framework, the instructor, who was also the researcher and principal author for this study, looked for patterns and themes by reading and coding the reflective summaries, sorting data by school placement and music class. Next, she listed the preservice teachers' responses to questions numbered two through six. A total of 67 responses out of a possible total of 80 participant responses to questions two through five were received; there were 13 instances in which participants provided no comment. A total of 6 participants shared random comments in response to question six; 14 of 20 had no comment. Because results for the introductory question, which asked how well the lessons followed the plan, were unanimously affirmative, the researcher excluded this data from the study.

The researcher categorized responses according to which literacy skill preservice teachers had addressed. Although each question stimulated a direct response, some questions provoked a more reflective answer. The researcher created subgroups in a category called "new understandings" to denote these contrasts. In order to prevent bias, a colleague, the co-author of this study, with no connection to the course or to music education students also reviewed the data and confirmed the researcher's findings. In addition, the classroom music teachers, whose classes the preservice students taught, provided anecdotal data. When combined, information from the principal researcher, the co-rater and the classroom teachers provided data that could be triangulated to claim validity.

Since the course instructor was also the principal researcher, it is important to note that the outcomes preservice teachers found for this project did not impact their final course grade.

Results

Table 2 shows that both preservice teachers at elementary schools chose to focus on listening skills, followed by 3 of 7 (43%) at middle schools, and 7 of 11 (64%) at high schools. By contrast, only 3 (43%) in middle school placements focused on reading, while reading concerned 2 (18%) in high school placements. One (14%) at the middle school level selected writing as a focus, as did 2 (18%) at the high school. Neither reading nor writing appeared to be an issue at the elementary level; speaking was not a concern at any level.

Table 3 reveals that 12 of 20 (60%) preservice teachers in any kind of music class chose to focus on listening skills, while 5 (25%) selected reading, and 3 (15%) chose writing. No music educators selected speaking as an area needing dedicated lessons. As can be noted, listening seemed most important in band and general music classes. Reading garnered the attention of two (18%) in band, one (16.7%) in general music, and one (50%) in strings' class. The only choral preservice teacher also chose reading as a focus. Three preservice teachers deemed writing an important focus: one each in band (9%), general music (16.7%), and string class (50%).

Tables 4-7 display the responses of preservice teachers to four questions designed to help them analyze and synthesize the results of their experiences with literacy lessons in music classes. Tallies vary in number because some participants offered multiple comments, while others declined to comment, as previously noted.

Many learned to differentiate among students who understood the material, and those who did not. See Table 4. Preservice teachers frequently noted that students chatted informally with friends throughout class discussions about music or composers. Those,

who focused on listening skills, reported that students required them to repeat directions multiple times. While one complained, “Most things said during band must be repeated at least once for the students to hear the instructions given,” another observed that “most problems students have with listening are a result of attitude and habit.” Still another student noted the familiar cliché that teacher directions “go in one ear and out the other.”

Some, who were committed to reading skills, quickly recognized that “many students at the middle school level don’t read as well as they should.” A preservice teacher added:

The tone of a student’s trumpet playing was never a problem, but when trying to play notes on a page, [he] would be sabotaged by his inability to read and interpret rhythms and notes within a given tempo.

Another discovered that doing “something new [reading music-related handouts] with students took longer for them to get the idea of it.”

A few, who had selected writing skills, became convinced that “lack of writing proficiency comes from not reading carefully and a lack of understanding grammatical rules.” Others cited the lack of “prior knowledge needed to write about music” as a core issue for many students.

Table 5 indicates what preservice teachers thought they had learned about students through the delivery of literacy lessons. It reveals that they observed different degrees of student engagement throughout the lessons and gradually recognized in students a mix of nine different developmental and instructional needs.

Table 6 details how knowledge gained might influence instruction. As they became aware of what their students needed, they planned differently. Sometimes they modified their teaching style by strengthening the procedural elements of their instructional

planning to match students' zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1934/1978). They adjusted their style, methodology, and/or course content.

Table 7 lists the responses preservice teachers provided to how this expanded understanding of student development might shape their future practice. Over half of the group (n = 12) pragmatically listed nine separate, effective strategies that they would use in their classrooms.

Creating appropriate instructional and delivery techniques for an integrated curriculum, is noted in Tables 6 and 7, and paralleled an increase in both personal and professional growth for some preservice teachers. As a result of multiple opportunities for written reflection, several identified instructional concepts that seemed to promote student learning more than others. They also recognized personal qualities that could enhance their interactions with students, as evidenced by an increased number of comments categorized as "self-awareness" and "insights" in Tables 6-7. The six preservice teachers, who responded to a request for random comments about the project, which was question #6, expressed similar insights and growth in self-awareness.

Table 8 summarizes the instructional methods students need in order to explore musical concepts successfully, as synthesized by preservice teachers after teaching the requisite three classes noted above.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that preservice teachers gained new knowledge about their students and about themselves as practitioners. The literacy lessons provided a lens through which they could sharpen their observations, appraise student behaviors, and select appropriate instructional goals for all learners.

The preservice teachers began their student teaching experience armed with music skills, knowledge, and pedagogy. Understandably lacking the daily exposure to students, they were “unaware of how many students were not skilled in listening and understanding or even just listening at all,” and unfamiliar with the physical (musical instruments, sectionals, other schools’ band rooms) and social (conversations, whispers, daydreaming) distractions inherent in the public school teaching environment. One said, “I was used to planning for the normal music lesson, but hadn’t really thought about how to change other behaviors during band class.”

A second finding in the study was that preservice teachers became sensitized to the effect of literacy skill levels on student learning. “Reading vocal music is not a hard task; but when a student struggles with reading to begin with, it can be frustrating.” Aware that “many students [are used to] learn[ing] visually instead of aurally,” one preservice teacher pondered whether young musicians might be unable to tell whether their instrumental or vocal part was right or wrong without deliberate lessons in listening.

With limited experience with strategies for teaching literacy, participants were initially uncomfortable linking a literacy project to music. One said, “I was actually rather nervous to conduct this project in a music, performance-based, classroom setting.” Although music students constantly listen to others rehearse, distinguish one’s own instrument from the larger ensemble, and sight read, university educators could add mini-lessons in literacy to rehearsal strategies for emphasis. In this study, integrating multiple strategies streamlined rehearsals, which indirectly supported the development of more expressive musicians and thus, facilitated ensemble performance.

The third finding in this study was that teaching “to the level of the students” led some preservice teachers to critically examine the impact of their instructional style on cognitive growth. A student explained, “The students get very distracted at certain points in the lesson; this caused me to look at the types of activities incorporated.” Some preservice teachers found success by directing the students’ attention toward listening to each other, thus “becoming a more involved member of a performing group rather than an individual player.” Others kept “constantly thinking of small ways to improve instruction...and to change behaviors,” challenging themselves to differentiate content to match learning styles and capacities. A preservice student wrote,

After the first listening journal, we discovered students were having a great deal of difficulty writing. To help solve this problem, we decided to make the listening journal a daily thing and also use it as a rehearsal journal.

By including visual, aural and kinesthetic learning modalities and integrating literacy skills from “everyday life into a musical setting,” preservice teachers realized that they could enable “certain learners to learn in a more comfortable way.”

The actual organizing and sequencing of objectives in lesson plans spurred preservice teachers to consider appropriate goals for all learners and move students systematically toward them. Music teacher educators, who collaborate with preservice teachers in planning activities tailored to learner needs and preferences, demonstrate invaluable support for curricula that respects cultural, economic, and linguistic diversity in the classroom.

Conclusion

Current music research indicates that purposeful listening not only improves solo and ensemble performances, but also enriches lifelong listening experiences (Bresler,

2005; Brooks, 2001; Dunn, 2006; Zerull, 2006). Some link listening naturally with speaking and reading in the music class (Hansen & Bernstorf, 2002; Liperote, 2006), and some link music composition with writing (Abrahams, 2005; Webster, 2003). This study revealed that infusing literacy skills as integral elements of the secondary musical classroom impact performance on many levels.

Recent research in content area literacy reaffirms the role of all teachers in empowering students to become independent learners (Alvermann, Phelps, & Ridgeway, 2007; Vacca & Vacca, 2002). The abilities of students to listen, read, and write well determine the level of that independence and their overall success in school. Ballinger and Deeney (2006) strongly suggested that all teachers must “capitalize on literacy teaching and learning in every environment possible” so as not to “leave many children ill-prepared for later life” (p. 19).

Music teacher educators provide preservice teachers with multiple opportunities for classroom experience and promote the inclusion of strategies that affirm child and adolescent development. Emphasizing literacy instruction within music curricula can further enrich music teacher preparation and personalize instruction for public school students. Studies to determine precisely how best to link theoretical knowledge with the formal curriculum found in public schools seem necessary.

While researchers debate the shape of reform in music teacher preparation programs (Asmus, 2001; Bidner, 2001; Brophy, 2002; Burton & Greher, 2007), preservice teachers are transitioning from course-based knowledge to field-tested experiences to public school positions every semester. Preservice teachers can definitely blend literacy

skills with musicianship and gain instructional and professional strength, as they passionately nurture their students' musical gifts.

Table 1
Distribution of music education pre-service teachers

Placement	Band	Chorus	General Music	Strings	Total
Elementary school	0	0	2	0	2
Middle school	4	0	1	2	7
High school	7	1	3	0	11
Total	11	1	6	2	20

Table 2
Distribution of literacy skills selected for lesson focus by school placement

Literacy Skill	Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Total
Listening	2	3	7	12
Reading	0	3	2	5
Speaking	0	0	0	0
Writing	0	1	2	3

Total	2	7	11	20
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Table 3
Distribution of literacy skills selected for lesson focus by music class

Literacy Skill	Band	Chorus	General Music	Strings	Total
Listening	8	0	4	0	12
Reading	2	1	1	1	5
Speaking	0	0	0	0	0
Writing	1	0	1	1	3
Total	11	1	6	2	20

Table 4
Question 2. What did you learn about your students through these lessons?

New understandings	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Writing	Total
Many students learn visually.	1				1
Students' attitude and habits affect listening.	1				1
Students' background knowledge affects results.	1	1		2	4
Students improve when they are interested.		1		1	2
Students need to hear directions repeated.	2	1			3
Tests motivate student follow-through.	1				1
<i>Self-awareness</i>					
Awareness of why students don't listen is important.	1				1
Helping students understand concepts is hard.	1				1
<i>Insights</i>					
Clear plans/demonstrations produce improved student response.	1	1			2
Communication skills are always in use in music.	1				1
Total	11	4		3	18

Table 5

Question 3. Did you learn something about your students that you might not have known otherwise?

New understandings	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Writing	Total
Students are capable of improvement.		1			1
Students' background knowledge affects results.				1	1
Students can be well behaved.	1				1
Students can reveal their level of cognitive understanding.	1			2	3
Students can understand what music is all about.	1	1			2
Students need a more authoritarian approach from me.	1				1
Students need to hear directions repeated	1				1
Students need varied instructional strategies.		2		1	3
Students want consistency.	1				1
<i>Self-awareness</i>					
Awareness of why students don't listen is important.	1				1
Clear plans/demonstrations produce improved student response.	2				2
Student growth is slower than I expected.		1			1

<i>Insights</i>				
Poor skills/habits must be dealt with early in the year.	1	1		2
Total	10	6	4	20

Table 6

Question 4. Did the lessons OR new learning make a difference in how you planned for instruction?

New understandings	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Writing	Total
Applied cross-curricular techniques to differentiate learning.		1			1
Developed ideas to change student behaviors.	1				1
Expanded my thinking skills.	1				1
Organized students' thoughts, reinforced previous material by brainstorming, using charts	1			1	2
Planned for students to do independent research and reading.		1			1
Read directions aloud/asked questions to check on student understanding.		1			1
Rephrased my instructions for improved student understanding.	2				2
Slowly adjusted my teaching style.	2				2
Wrote directions on board for visual learners.	1				1
<i>Self-awareness</i>					
More aware of different levels of student understanding.		1			1

My instruction and pace need work.	1	2	3
Should focus more on difficult material.	1	1	2
Should have more open conversations.	1		1
<i>Insights</i>			
Better preparation ensures better delivery.	1		1
Class sizes, lack of structure create distractions.	1		1
Important to listen to and analyze music	1		1
Literacy skills increase with and need regular practice.		1	2
Preparation for class should be well in advance of delivery.	1		1
Students are more attentive to well prepared lessons.	1		1
Students need concise directions.	1		1
Total	17	5	27

Table 7

Question 5. How will you transfer this awareness to your own professional practice?

New understandings	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Writing	Total
Find new ways to help all students.	1				1
Give clear, complete directions.	3				3
Implement strategies that work.		1			1
Include a warm-up exercise.		1			1
Model expected behavior(s) multiple times.	2				2
Monitor student progress; give feedback.	1				1
Use listening journals.				1	1
Use overhead projector.		1			1
Write directions on board.	1				1
<i>Self-awareness</i>					
Discovered how to include communication skills in a musical setting.	1				1
Discovered patience and observation are the best ways to understand students.	1				1
Improved understanding about integration of other subjects into lessons	1				1
<i>Insights</i>					
Awareness of problems leads to easier solutions.	1				1
Band literature often has some sort of story.		1			1
Frequency of (listening, reading) exercise develops understanding of concept.	1	1			2

Learning exercises are important.	1	1		2
Reading material has to be interesting.		1		1
Short lessons help skills develop over time.	1		2	3
These lessons will help students when problems occur.	1			1
Total	16	7	3	26

Table 8

Distribution of music students' instructional needs, as observed by pre-service music teachers

Instructional needs	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Writing	Total
Background knowledge		1		1	2
Clear demonstrations	1	1			2
Consistency/regular practice	1	1		1	3
Deliberate, thorough planning	1				1
Directions repeated, rephrased	1	1			2
High interest materials		1		1	2
Scaffolded/reinforced instruction		1		1	2
Short lessons (10 minutes)	1	1		1	3
Varied instructional strategies		1		1	2
Visual and aural approaches	1	1		1	3
Total	6	9		7	22

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