Using Stories to Support the Musical Development of Children

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Abstract

This study investigates whether the musical development of children can be enhanced by using children's stories. The musical skills being developed are composing, performing, listening, and appraising. Two stories by well-known author Julie Donaldson and inquiry-based learning were used to engage the pupils' imaginations. The study shows that children aged 5 to 6 were extremely engaged with the story and created interesting elemental rhythmic compositions consisting of basic rhythms with minim, crotchet, and quaver notes and rests that enhanced their experience of the story. During the study, data were gathered from pupils and teachers by means of interviews, behavioural observation, questionnaires, and co-creation activity. The children were divided into five mixed-gender groups across two classes, each group comprising five children of mixed ability. The study indicates that children can be very receptive in creating their own basic music compositions in response to a story they have experienced.

KEY WORDS: *Cross-curricular study, musical development, literacy, composition*

Analysis and Evaluation of Action Research

The intended objective of my action plan for the teaching project under consideration was to have pupils develop a sense of independence in expressing themselves through their musical compositions. I also wished to develop my teaching for creativity. Teaching young children elemental music composition using simple rhythms can be intimidating. "Creativity," according to Tegano et al. (1991, 8) "in dealing with young children … should be … the process (i.e. developing and generating original ideas), which is the basis of creative potential." During my study, I discovered that many of the students expressed their ideas through musical compositions once the opportunity and context were created for them.

Implementing a new focus in music lessons at my school commenced with a meeting among class teachers and the author. We perused the books in the classroom library and agreed on the selection of *Zog* and *The Gruffalo* by Julia Donaldson. These books were chosen because they reinforced the 'Golden Rules,' which are essentially the code of conduct in our primary department. Another influencing factor was the rare opportunity for the Year One class to attend a performance of another work by Donaldson by a renowned children's theatre company based in the UK, which has staged a number of works by this author. After seeing the performance, which our Year One pupils and teachers thoroughly enjoyed, and reviewing the materials from the performers given to me by the local organisers of the festival, I was really inspired by the suggestions of games to dramatise the story. Also, seeing how one could take an element from the story and develop a simple song, embellishing it with body percussion and percussion instruments, was exciting!

Guderian (2012) states: "During collaborations, teachers examine the characteristics of each discipline to determine connections between the disciplines. With that knowledge, they can design learning experiences to make students aware of the connections." (20) In the planning meeting with the Year One teachers, we shared our respective objectives. This allowed us to chart a course that was most beneficial to both teacher and students. Such undertaking is of paramount importance, since classes "must also hold potential for learning experiences that will add to students' understanding of and skills in all disciplines involved" (Guderian 2012, 20). My students had composed elemental music previously, and I sought to extend their experience of composing by using material or elements from *Zog* or *The Gruffalo*. I thought this would not only amplify the meaning of the story, but get children to explore the rhythm of the text, and even add movement to enhance the story if they chose to do so. Thus, students would not only be honing their sense of pulse and their rhythmic skills in music, but would also attend to meter in literature, specifically the iambic pentameter. I hoped that students would use the rhythmic material, as well as other elements in the story, as a basis for their elemental compositions: they delivered with little intervention from me.

After students had completed the opening exercises for the music lesson, which usually consists of singing and sometimes a Dalcroze exercise, they repeated the simplified objective of the lesson: We are learning to create movement in response to a visual stimulus. This exercise took the two classes four lessons to complete, from introduction to plenary to the student surveys. I introduced the lesson on *Zog* by writing the word 'dragon' on the electronic touchboard, and then asked students if they were familiar with the word or had seen it before. Many students recognised the word and in the mind-mapping exercise offered many other words they regarded as associated with it.

The mind-mapping technique, a form of brainstorming, was used to elicit "more focused starting point questions and exemplar activities … to scaffold learning, to begin from children's own experiences and what is familiar" (Terry 2011, 137). After the word approach, a picture of the Zog was used to determine if this would enhance their responses or provide additional ideas to describe the creature. As soon as the picture was on the touchboard, I observed excited faces and a plethora of hands being raised. All in the class recognised the picture as that of a dragon and those who had prior knowledge of the story immediately identified it as the picture of Zog. This approach was adopted to determine whether pupils would get more ideas from a specific word or a picture. They would then use this information to create their own dragon-like movements. Would I have gained more responses if I had drawn the picture first? Probably yes, but I wanted the responses not to be influenced by a colour picture, but to emerge from their imaginations. Also, this helped in teaching me how much they knew about dragons from other stories or other contexts.

With the other Year One class, which was focused on the Gruffalo, I employed a similar mind-mapping approach, following the same sequence of presenting the word first and then the picture. Only four students recognised the word 'Gruffalo,' and two immediately recognised the picture as the Gruffalo, while some students identified it as a wild hog. One very observant student made a connection between the picture on the touchboard and a poster of me in my room holding a book called *Hog Penny* created by our school library to promote reading in the school. I then briefly shared with them that the hog is on the Bermuda one cent piece, and that hogs were present in Bermuda when it was discovered. In this context, it is interesting to note that, according to Greene (2012, 37), in cross-curricular lessons "each lens gives us a unique perspective. Combine them and understanding deepens." Also, "at the interface of different disciplines, new discoveries can occur … Suddenly, a 'discipline' is not a permanent stone structure, but a flexible building with numerous open doors that encourage travel and transitions" (Greene 2012, 37).

After my historical detour, I refocused on *Gruffalo* by having pupils move to a steady drumbeat, using the words on the touchboard from the mind-mapping exercise as a stimulus for movement. The class focusing on Zog did a similar exercise, and the level of engagement was very gratifying. Both classes came up with the movements on their own, using the words they shared as a stimulus. I noted some students from both classes using sounds to enhance their own creations as they fully engaged with their respective characters. Smiles were evident, as were facial contortions in conjunction with some movements and there was some laughter, communicating to me their

obvious delight in the activity (See Appendix Ai).

During my visit to Lincoln in the United Kingdom for the commencement of school placement and teacher seminars, a tutor introduced me to the concept of the teacher interacting more and intervening less. Crabtree et al. (1998, 35) state there is "the need for teachers to interact with and, consequently, teach children by providing intentional as well as spontaneous modelling, demonstrations, feedback, mediation, and explicit instruction as needed." The words on the electronic board plus imagination provided the basis for the movement observed in pupils in both classes. I simply contributed a steady beat, which can be considered a framework for their original and unique expressions in movement in that lesson.

In the second lesson on both *The Gruffalo* and *The Zog*, the behavioural objective was for students to create and perform sounds in response to a visual and aural stimulus (see Appendix Aii). This lesson entailed showing the children the cover of the book and then reading the story to them. I observed at a certain point in my initial read-through that some students were repeating the recurring parts of the story with me. Soon, the whole group was engaged in this activity. I should also note that in my read-through, I used different voices to represent different characters to create and sustain interest. Huffman (2013, 24) encourages teachers to "give students many opportunities to hear you read fluently and with expression. Students love listening to an enthusiastic reader. Read a favorite book aloud." This was confirmed in my reading of the books to both classes. They were attentive and responsive. Huffman (2013, 24-5) further states: "As you read, change your voice for different characters, and/or invite your students to portray different characters when a word or phrase repeats throughout the book."

After I had completed reading the books, with my students joining in for the refrains, I divided the children into groups and gave them rhythm sticks. *The Zog* class was divided into five groups to represent each year the dragons studied and the various activities they engaged in to eventually gain the coveted medal. *The Gruffalo* class was also divided into five groups to reflect the number of characters in the story. My instructions to pupils were to respond with the rhythm sticks after I read a sentence about their character or group. This I did to get them thinking about what they would compose as a group. I also sought to make them familiar with the character or group they were composing about. That exercise went well, again with varied interpretations, reflecting an action or personality of a character or group. Students achieved this using different techniques of playing the rhythm sticks, including tapping, scraping, or just letting the sticks fall to the floor to produce a specific effect. The class was assigned five minutes to discuss ideas and create an initial composition, which they were encouraged to share.

During the next lesson, the students were given ten minutes to meet again about planning their composition. During this time I walked among the groups to offer suggestions through questions rather than instructions. Johnston as cited in Kerry (2011, 52) states: "Learning should be practical and exploratory … learning is enhanced through effective peer interaction … learning requires effective adult support and interaction."

I have adopted this constructivist approach because it gives children ownership of their learning. Tegano et al. (1991, 13) state:

> As adults when we look back on our favorite classroom experiences … we find that these experiences probably were not "lecture and test-type" courses. They often contained elements of divergent thinking, discussion, and debate about the "best way," hands-on experiences, and opportunities to learn rather than to be taught any particular concept.

The next phase in my lesson plan was the feature event, when students would share their rehearsed compositions. I once again observed a variety of playing techniques in both classes, but this time groups included movement in their presentations to represent characters such as the dragons flying in zig-zag formation, or the snake as it spoke to the mouse in *The Gruffalo*. Some groups also carefully arranged their elemental compositions using a tiered approach similar to composing a fugue, where a single subject or theme enters at different points. This was extremely fascinating, gratifying and, most of all, fun!

Following these wonderful expressions, I asked students to critique their own work as a group, stating one thing they liked and one thing they thought they could improve. I then requested that groups critique each other in the same manner. Overall, the groups were able to express opinions constructively, even asking questions about why a particular playing technique was chosen and about other elements of a group's composition. I also observed that groups generally were able to effectively link what they composed to what was happening in their respective stories through their explanations or answers to questions about their compositions.

In developing the student survey, I followed the general principles of organisation guiding our Human Rights Friendly School. These general principles are:

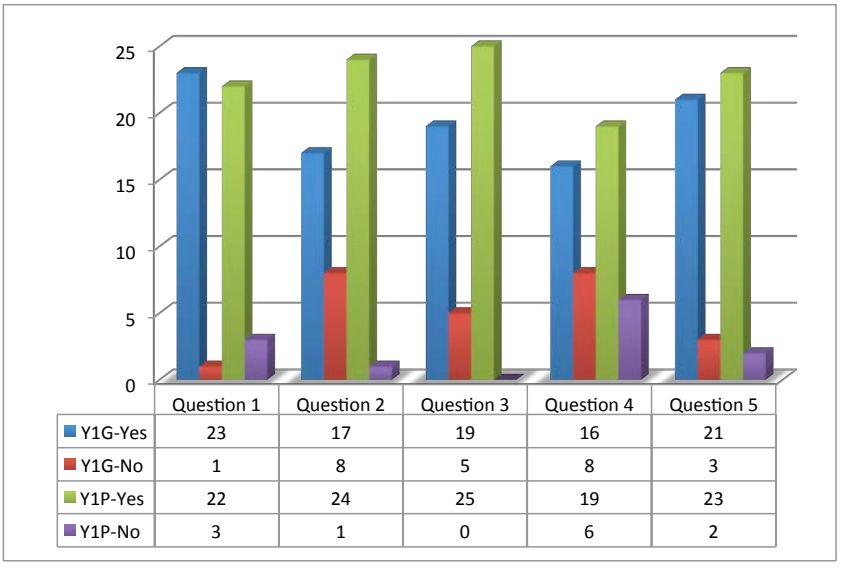
> … equality, dignity, respect, non-discrimination and participation. [A Human Rights Friendly School] is a school community where **human rights are learned, taught, practised, respected, protected and promoted** … [it is also] an approach which goes beyond the classroom and into all aspects of school life, commonly called a "whole-school approach," a "holistic approach" or "rights-based approach," [so that] both schools and young people become powerful catalysts for change in their wider communities. (Amenit 2014, Original emphasis)

I sought permission from the administration and parents to conduct this survey. The parents' letter is in Appendix B. The five questions posed to the Year One pupils are:

1. Did you know the story of the *Zog*/*Gruffalo* before you heard it at school?
2. Did you enjoy the story of the *Zog*/*Gruffalo*?
3. Did you enjoy how we used instruments to help tell the story of the *Zog*/*Gruffalo*?
4. Was the use of instruments helpful in giving you a better understanding of the story?
5. Would you like more activities with stories and instruments in your music lessons?

The questions were in simple language, at the students' level. No personal questions were asked, nor were children harmed during this exercise. All participated willingly. I used the concept of colouring a smiling face if the answer was yes, or colouring a sad face if it was no (See Appendix C). The graph below illustrates the results obtained from the questions.

***Figure 1: Zog* and *Gruffalo* pupil survey results**



	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Question 5
Y1G-Yes	23	17	19	16	21
Y1G-No	1	8	5	8	3
Y1P-Yes	22	24	25	19	23
Y1P-No	3	1	0	6	2

The survey results indicate that quite a number of students were familiar with both stories before hearing about them in my class. InY1G, in which 24 pupils (n=24) took the survey, about two-thirds enjoyed *The Gruffalo*. ForY1P, which studied *The Zog*, the entire class of 25 pupils (n=25) enjoyed the book. The children in both classes clearly enjoyed the use of instruments to enhance the story and to create their own compositions. This pleasure was also reflected in the response to the final question, asking whether they would wish for more activities like this in future music lessons. A strong 87.5 per cent of Y1G and 95.8 per cent of Y1P answered yes. Inouye and Inouye (2012, 34), in speaking about the benefits of cross-curricular work in the arts, state: "their creative work becomes more personal, voluntary, and involved … As students develop pride in their work, they are eager to share it. They also better appreciate the work of others." I concluded that my pupils were eager to explore new ideas in their work and were confident in sharing them with others.

The interviews with the classroom teachers revealed that we conduct our lesson introductions in similar ways with visuals and questions (see Appendix D). Their introduction to a story is inquiry based, in the case of one classroom teacher by making use of predictions about the story. Art is another subject used by classroom teachers to assist pupils in connecting with a particular character. Also, there is much oral discussion about the story and this prepares students to show their understanding of it and write a response. They do this in an exercise known as Big Writing, which employs different modalities to make writing less intimidating, while teaching pupils key concepts in effective writing. This was the first time my interviewees had collaborated with a music teacher. They were definitely open to the idea of future collaboration, with the following caveats. The teacher of YIG stated in her interview that in order for this to work properly, "teachers need to carve out time to meet so that it's a true collaboration and so we are aware of the overall objectives" (Y1G, 2014). Y1G also cautioned that "we also have to discuss the results of what has gone on so that we can assess the students more accurately" (Y1G, 2014). I certainly concur with Y1G and know that communication is key to keeping track of progress in both disciplines. Y1P very succinctly stated that "planning and communication is the key for this to work" (Y1P, 2014) (see Appendix E).

Crucial to an effective experience of cross-curricular work is first having willing participants and clear objectives that serve to make the experience an enduring one for pupils and teachers. Guderian (2012, 20) states: "The challenge for teachers is to design teaching and learning experiences that help students develop each discipline's necessary understanding and skill proficiency for use in ongoing learning settings and life situations." To meet Guderian's challenge, teachers also need to recognise the advantages and disadvantages of this cross-curricular approach. In many schools, there are children who struggle with creative writing and literacy. Kelly (2012, 7-8) states:

> Many readers will recognise that they are much more prepared to make the effort to learn something that is thought to be "difficult" when they are interested in the topic, and it is more difficult to learn when they are not interested or do not see the point of learning something. Many will also recognise the buzz they get when the children in their class are engaged and show interest and enthusiasm for a particular lesson or topic, whether this is in a discrete subject or as part of a cross-curricular topic.

There are those colleagues not as amenable to the idea of cross-curricular work, arguing that that "basic skills and baseline content information may be lost within the context of integrated studies" (Crabtree et al. 1998, 33). There are also other areas of concern for opponents of cross-curricular approaches:

> An integrated approach may tend to emphasise some content areas to the neglect of others … [and critics have detected in an] integrated curriculum … the absence of instruction or direction and … an overemphasis on affect, process, and children's interests. They prefer clear goals and objectives for the basics (reading, writing, listening, speaking, and computing), as well as for the specific content areas (Crabtree et al. 1998, 33).

In examining the advantages and disadvantages of this cross-curricular approach, I ask the question, whose benefit is more important, the teacher's or the pupil's? Does not the end justify the means? As teachers we hope our pupils are considering and connecting meaningfully with the subject(s) they are studying. As a parent, I observe how my

own children regularly connect drama and history, music and maths, among other subjects. If they learn about their world, which consists of multiple dimensions, through elements of play, discovery, and experimentation, should this not extend into the classroom as well? Perhaps as teachers, we may be able to help them navigate and learn about the world through our interactions and at other times through intervention and instruction. Maybe the classroom should be an extension of this approach, taking into account curriculum expectations, other demands on time and context, among other factors. Mason (1970, 105) states, "We know ourselves in knowing what we do, in the picture we build of our strengths … we need an awareness of the techniques that suit us best and this is what we should be helping children to discover in the course of their enquires."

In attempting to make cross-curricular links, Laurie (2011) as cited in Kerr (2011, 128) mentions "making tenuous links might be described as the 'keyword approach'." Laurie goes on to show the failed attempt at using the 'theme of water' to link the subjects of history, geography, literacy, and music. She does state that some links were possible, but others were suspect: "selecting them merely because they have some relationship with water misses the true meaning of cross-curricular learning. It fails to support coherence in teaching history, geography, literacy, or music, or the development of key skills and concepts" (Laurie 2011, 128).

To achieve this coherence in cross-curricular planning, the challenge of time to develop these ideas properly was mentioned earlier. At our school, where there are specialist teachers, not as much time is needed as would be the case in primary schools where the classroom teacher is required to teach all subjects. As a specialist, I am able to determine what my students need to know in my discipline and, furthermore, as an Orff-Schulwerk-trained music teacher, integration of curriculum and collaboration is an accepted approach or philosophy. I see myself as assisting the classroom teacher in both our ultimate objectives. By using a number of modalities such as visuals, chant using the text, and application of instruments to reinforce rhythmic concepts, I can make a story come alive for a child who is struggling with the traditional approach. For example, in partnership with two Year Five teachers I did cross-curricular work in science and music. I still remember the 'buzz' in the music room as I removed the panel from the upright piano to reveal the integrated network of strings, wood, metal, and felt that makes the piano work. This did not take a huge amount of time to plan. Contacts in the community provide me with added resources. This greatly assists the classroom teacher in surmounting challenges: thus, more time can be devoted to the actual selection of materials and implementation of the plan.

The final challenge is assessment. How do you assess learning in a cross-curricular context? Fortunately, literature abounds on the topic. Assessing this particular approach is different from assessing discrete subjects, because it needs to "take account of how children apply subject-specific knowledge" (Kelly 2012, 10). I use an inordinate amount of oral feedback and dialogue in my teaching to assess where pupils are and what they can do to improve their work. Taylor (2011) states that "dialogue that helps the child reflect will reinforce and consolidate learning as well as extend it" (Taylor cited in Kerry 2011, 146). Therefore, it may be more important to help children achieve understanding of a subject relative to their environment, than for them to know where they are in terms of a grade, which could serve as a barrier, if the teacher is not prepared to help them through their strengths.

Conclusion

This study has documented my journey in the implementation of an action plan. My objectives were achieved, namely empowering students to express themselves independently in their elemental musical compositions, with some interaction with me but little intervention by me. I have seen pupils work with each other and also think on their own to create their own compositions and willingly respond, sometimes at length, about their previous encounters with dragons. Others just confirmed their knowledge of the story being studied. A willingness to learn and experiment to create their own elemental musical compositions was evident. At the conclusion of this action plan, I can confidently guide pupils in creating their own compositions. This means trusting students to create and guiding them in improving and even discovering new ways of self-expression. This journey has also alerted

me to the pitfalls and criticisms of cross-curricular work, knowledge of which is necessary in planning effective integration of disciplines. Finally, work will continue with colleagues open to this collaborative approach and to challenging pupils to achieve a better understanding of their world.

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