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Research Article

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Preschool Teachers' Use of Music in the Classroom: A Survey of Park District Preschool Programs

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how preschool teachers use music and identify the types of music activities available to children in their classrooms. Preschool teachers (*N* = 178) at park district programs throughout a large state in the American Midwest responded to an online questionnaire. Although teachers acknowledged using music every day, examples of music activities were primarily teacher-directed such as singing along to CDs or following music cues. Teachers also used music to build academic connections and to engage children during transitions. Teachers valued music as important to their teaching practice and for its contribution to children's learning and development, but cited limited resources, a self-reported lack of music ability, and an absence of knowledge of the standards for music education, as inhibiting their use of child-centered music activities. Implications for teacher preparation and professional development course work in early childhood and music teacher education are discussed.

Keywords

curriculum, general music, in-service teachers, park district, preschool

Music is an important and vital component of young children's learning and development. While children's first music experiences often begin within the home setting, formal music activities typically are introduced in preschool settings, where the preschool teacher "teaches" or presents music (Kelly, 1998). Importantly, preschool teachers are

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often required to include music in their daily classroom activities for both developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) and to provide young children with a multitude of learning experiences (Kemple, Batey, & Hartle, 2004).

A number of researchers have found that preservice elementary teachers' attitudes toward including music in daily activities and lessons are associated with their music teaching confidence or comfort level (Battersby & Cave, 2014; Richards, 1999). More specifically, in an exploration of preschool teachers' perceptions and understandings of music skills, Kelly (1998) found that "traditional fundamental music skills" (p. 381), such as music theory and composition, were not found to be useful by the teachers and not taught as part of the daily curriculum. One major finding of this study was that the preschool teachers had little to no understanding of the PreK–12 Performance Standards for music.

Additionally, students enrolled in early childhood teacher preparation programs (those pursuing certification in birth through Grade 3) typically take only one music or arts methods course. And, in many university settings, this course is optional. This devaluing of music as an important subject in teacher preparation programs creates inconsistencies in how music is included in preschool settings (Kelly, 1998).

Music in Early Childhood

Just as music educators may adhere to the National Core Arts Standards (2014), preschool teachers traditionally follow DAP guidelines established by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2015). DAP, which was conceived by a consortium of early childhood professionals, often is considered as the primary framework for best practices in teaching young children from birth through age 8 (Copple & Bredekamp, 2010). This framework is divided into sections corresponding to age (e.g., 3- to 5-year-olds) and subject areas, such as math, science, and language arts. Based on the ideas of child-centeredness, individual child development, and cultural context, DAP was constructed to represent a holistic perspective on early childhood education with a focus on play and social interactions (Lee & Lin, 2013). However, DAP only has a limited section focused on music, often including music as part of "creative arts" experiences. This creates a disjointed perception of music in early childhood settings as a greater emphasis on math and language arts curriculum often limits the time available for implementing child-centered music activities (Rajan, 2012, 2014).

Although NAEYC promotes the inclusion of developmentally appropriate activities for children birth through age 8, the examples of how music should be taught and used in preschool settings are often generic or teacher-centered. The most common types of preschool music activities are group songs, fingerplays, or music used in transitions (Dartt, 2009; Gillespie & Glider, 2010). Few researchers have documented how preschool teachers actually use music in the classroom on a daily basis with researchers looking instead to how music is integrated in early elementary grades (Colwell, 2008; Cornett, 2007; Shore, 2002).

While preschool programs exist in many settings (including the home environment), a subset of preschool programs are found in local park districts. Park districts

are special purpose municipal entities that manage parks as well as recreational programs. Park districts may also offer quality preschool programs, in convenient locations, at a reasonable cost for families. Although some park district preschool programs adhere to curriculum and accreditation guidelines set by NAEYC, this is not necessarily a requirement or standard. As such, even researchers examining the types of music presented in preschools across the United States do not make a distinction between park districts and other preschool programs (Nardo, Custodero, Persellin, & Fox, 2006).

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how park district preschool teachers used music and provided opportunities for music exploration in their classroom. The following three research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: How do park district preschool teachers' background, training, and understanding of music support their use of music in the classroom?
Research Question 2: What types of music activities and materials did park district preschool teachers report as present in the classroom, and how are these activities and materials supporting children's active music making?
Research Question 3: What are the challenges that park district preschool teachers encounter when including music in their classroom?

Method

Study Context and Participants

In this study, I focused on park district preschool programs across a large state in the American Midwest. With information provided by the State Park and Recreation Association's Early Childhood Committee, a purposive sampling technique was used to select all park district preschool sites (N = 30) within the state (Patton, 2001). I requested that directors at the 30 school sites forward an e-mail message, with a survey link embedded, to the preschool teachers at each site. The e-mail included information about the study purpose, data analysis method, and steps taken to ensure participant anonymity. By clicking on the survey link and completing the online questionnaire, participants provided informed consent per international review board approval. The preschool teachers received a follow-up reminder e-mail 2 weeks after the initial e-mail was sent. Of the 250 preschool teachers representing the target population, 178 (response rate = 71%, margin of error = 5.6%) completed the questionnaire. The participants received a follow-up e-mail 2 weeks after the initial e-mail.

Survey Instrument

The pool of questionnaire items was developed as a result of discussions with two park district preschool directors and early childhood education specialists at two public universities, none of whom was included in the study. I also based some items on my review of the extant literature about how music is typically presented or used in early

childhood settings (Colwell, 2008; Gillespie & Glider, 2010; Kelly, 1998; Kemple et al., 2004). The draft questionnaire included selection type items (e.g., "check all that reply"), Likert-type scale items (level of agreement), and open-ended items that allowed participants to construct narrative responses. I piloted the 17-item questionnaire with four park district preschool teachers (nonparticipants) who gave feedback related to questionnaire content and item clarity. As a result of the piloting process, questionnaire items that explicitly addressed how preschool instruction aligned with music education standards and children's experiences attending music performances were added to the final version of the survey instrument.

I organized the questionnaire items into four main sections or categories: (a) preschool teacher background, (b) preschool teacher reports of classroom music activities, (c) preschool teacher beliefs, and (d) preschool teacher reflections. Participants used selection-type items to report their highest education degree, any relevant certificates or music training, whether their preschool program adhered to a specific curriculum, and whether they aligned their own teaching with the National Core Standards for Music Education. They also indicated whether there was a music specialist on staff at the school, how often music as used in the classroom, what types of music were included in daily activities, how music was presented to children, when music was used in the classroom, what types of instruments were available to children during the day, and whether children had opportunities to attend live music performances. In responding to the Likert-type items, teachers shared their beliefs about the importance of music to children's learning and their confidence in teaching music. Open-ended items allowed preschool teachers to provide detailed descriptions of how music was used during the day or during a particular lesson, reflect on the value of music in their teaching practice, and outline the challenges associated with using music in their classrooms.

Analysis

Responses to selection type items and Likert-type scale items addressing preschool teacher background, reports of classroom music activities, and beliefs were summarized using basic descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and representative figures. I analyzed the qualitative data in three steps. First, as Creswell (2002) suggests, I individually coded open-ended responses. I then aggregated these codes into five themes including (a) types of music present in the classroom, (b) examples of how music was used in the classroom, (c) experiences with live performance, (d) valuing music, and (e) the resources music teachers had and/or needed for music instruction.

Second, I used a deductive coding approach to compare the emergent themes with the predetermined items (quantitative data) that were listed in the survey (Creswell, 2002). This allowed me to identify if numerical representation aligned with the teacher's descriptive statements. A surprise—or outlier—from this process was how teachers assumed children were experiencing live performance with their families (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013).

Finally, the open-ended statements were further analyzed for any potential alignment of preschool teachers' beliefs and practice with music instruction, and summarized under

one of the three, broader categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This constant comparative approach enabled me to check my original codes and emergent categories against the quantitative data.

Results

Descriptive outcomes and emergent themes are organized and presented according to the main questionnaire categories.

Category 1: Background

A small sample of teachers (11%, $N = 20$) reported holding a master's degree as their highest level of education, with the largest proportion having a bachelor's degree (51%, $N = 90$) or associate's degree (16%, $N = 28$). A large number of teachers (85%, $N = 151$) reported that they do not have any specific training or certificates in music. However, a smaller subsample (36%, $N = 64$) reported singing in choirs, playing guitar, keyboard, or piano, as examples of their individual music engagement.

The teachers were nearly equally divided on the use of a specific curriculum in their programs including the *Creative Curriculum* and *Jolly Phonics*, both widely used early childhood curricula. An overwhelming majority of teachers (87%, $N = 156$) reported that they did not use (nor were aware of) the National Core Standards for Music Education, stating *I have never heard of this* and *We do not know what the National Standards are for music.* Instead, the park district programs adhered to the requirements of the state's Early Learning Standards, which typically have a small section dedicated to the Fine Arts, as a general discipline.

Category 2: Music in the Classroom

Although preschool teachers shared that while there was no designated music teacher for their program (67%, $N = 119$), they still used music daily in their classroom (83%, $N = 147$). For those who had a music teacher who came to the classes (33%, $N = 58$), music was presented only once a month. The most common way that music was presented was through the use of prerecorded CDs and/or singing (97%, $N = 172$).

There was an equal distribution of the types of music used in the classroom, with preschool songs and fingerplays (59%), Disney songs (55%), instrumental music (53%), and classical music (42%) having the most prominence. Some examples of preschool songs included folk songs (i.e., "the Wheels on the Bus"), nursery rhymes, or music composed by popular children's musicians whose music is written and promoted for use in early childhood settings (i.e., Greg & Steve, Dr. Jean, Raffi, The Learning Station).

All types of music reported as being used in preschool classrooms are presented in Figure 1 (available in the online supplemental material). Teachers also reported that music primarily was used during circle time (93%) and as background music (80%)

throughout the day. See Figure 2 in the supplementary online appendixes for a complete depiction of how music is used on a daily basis in preschool classrooms.

A large portion of teachers reported having a variety of music instruments (88%) available to children during the day. These included primarily percussive instruments such as maracas, drums, bells, shakers, rhythm sticks, triangles, xylophones, egg shakers, and bongos. Teachers also explained how children may be invited to explore these instruments through centers or prop boxes:

> We have a music center with a CD player, musical instruments, dancing materials that is available and open at all times during center time.

> We have a piano in our room. There are also a variety of instruments available to the children every day. We also have a sound matching block game.

Teachers also were asked to describe how they used music during the day or as part of a specific lesson:

> We do not have an option for children to pick their own listening preferences.

> At times I bring in tambourines, shakers and other musical manipulatives to use during songs, movement breaks and dramatic play.

As some noted, children were limited by what instruments they could play for both hygienic concerns and preconceived notions of their abilities to respect instruments:

> Children are young, so instruments need to be used while monitored.

> We do not have any trumpets, harmonicas, or other instruments children would put their mouths on to make music.

The final questions asked teachers to respond to open-ended statements by describing how they used music during the day, by describing a specific lesson. The responses included using music during circle time and to make academic connections. The most common way teachers used music was to greet children as they entered school and during circle or group time:

> Welcome song, calendar song, weather song, music for the letter of the day, sing one of our shape songs during circle time or color songs.

Teachers often played music in the background as children were exploring the classroom, reading, or painting. The teachers described how they used music to help children calm down and "be quiet" if they were too loud:

> Later on during our quiet reading time I put on classical music or instrumental music this helps the children to keep a calm self so they can relax and look at books.

> If the children are extremely loud and we need to quiet them down, we play some acoustic instrument music or a cd called "Dining by Candlelight", to set a slower tone in the room. If the weather is gloomy, we might play upbeat children's music such as World Playground or Disney tunes.

Teachers described how music helped children transition from different activities throughout the day. Most of the transition songs were played using a CD player:

> Hello song, clean up song, snack song, goodbye song, days of the week song.

> Greeting at door, circle time, background music, going from one area in the building to another, instrument time, center time, saying goodbye.

One teacher also described a song they use to help children sit (to the tune of "If You're Happy and You Know It"):

> Put your bottoms on the rug on the rug, put your bottoms on the rug on the rug, put your bottoms on the rug now give yourself a hug, put your bottoms on the rug, on the rug.

The teachers also wrote about how they used music, songs, and different movement activities to teach children about academic concepts, including days of the week, colors, shapes, numbers, seasons, and holidays:

> Our songs go over a variety of different things. An example for this month one of our songs is "Down on Grandpa's Farm" which teaches children the different sounds animals make.

> We sing a song for the days of the week, months of the year, weather and use a musical instrument.

One teacher described how songs are used to teach letters and sounds (sung to the tune of "Where is Thumbkin"):

> Where is A, Where is A, Here I am, Here I am, Can you make the A sound, Can you make the A sound, AAA, Ah Ah Ah!

Category 3: Beliefs

In their responses to a series of Likert-type items, a majority of teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that they believe music is important to child development and valuable to their teaching practices (100%):

> Children learn and remember better through music and movement.

> Music is a very important element to our classroom. It's a common bond for the kids to share in.

> It teaches the kids new ways of learning, socializing, rhythm, and learning about themselves and giving them confidence as well.

Teachers also reported that they wanted to use music more frequently in their teaching (78%), and they feel confident teaching music to preschool children (77%). By contrast, just over one half (52%) of teachers felt that they have all of the materials necessary to teach music effectively.

> I wish I knew more about using bells and sticks with the children.

> I am not a good singer, I don't have a music background.

> Not being able to play an instrument in the classroom.

> Budget; wish we had more funds to purchase more CDs and new musical instruments.

Category 4: Music Reflections

A majority of the teachers (76%) reported that their students have attended a live, music performance. However, the descriptions in open-ended responses outlined how the live, music performances actually included having a performer visit the park district, attending shows at local middle and high schools, or having a musician come to perform for the children:

> Last year our director had a performer come to our school.

> We have had a special concert for the whole preschool.

> The middle school does a performance for us.

Some teachers acknowledged that while their programs do not provide opportunities to attend live, music performances, they believed that children were having these experiences with their families:

> We do not attend musical performances as a class, but I know these children have been exposed to this by their families.

> Not at school, perhaps with their families.

Discussion

Music was clearly present in the park district preschool programs, through informal singing and playing, the use of music at circle time and during transitions, and the presentation of prerecorded, themed CDs. However, the quality of these experiences

was limited by the teachers' self-reported comfort with making music and the minimal resources available for materials and instruments. In the following section, the results are discussed in relation to each of the three research questions that framed this study.

An Emphasis on Teacher-Directed Instruction

The teachers primarily held undergraduate degrees in early childhood education, with a large majority having no previous background, training, or certification in music or music instruction. An absence of music experience and knowledge did not seem to deter teachers' inclusion of music on a daily basis, as a large majority reported using music every day. Specifically, singing was one of the most common ways music was "taught" by preschool teachers, who acknowledged having limited singing experience and confidence in addition to lack of familiarity with the National Core Standards for music. In a similar study that focused on how Head Start preschool teachers used music to scaffold instruction, it was found that "almost all examples of uses of music by the teacher were songs" (Gillespie & Glider, 2010, p. 807), with only one example of teachers supervising children playing music instruments.

Although the park district preschool teachers reported that they used music instruments to encourage playing, the open-ended responses highlighted the repetitive nature of these activities, noting how children were imitating patterns, tempo, and rhythm during teacher-directed activities. While teachers described how they deeply valued music in their classrooms both as reflections of their own teaching practice and for how it contributes to children's learning, many of the teachers described how the challenges of securing funds and selecting age-appropriate music limited the resources in their classroom. Similar to findings from previous studies, a large number of teachers reported using CDs (i.e., Disney movies, children's nursery rhymes) on a daily basis (Gillespie & Glider, 2010), and as a primary means of presenting music to young children (Siebenaler, 2006).

Teachers further acknowledged their self-consciousness with making and performing music. This self-assessment of limited music ability clearly influenced teachers' decisions to rely more on prerecorded music rather than engaging children in free vocalizations or improvisation, supporting existing literature on how teachers' backgrounds with music training has a direct relationship to how they use music in their own practice (Richards, 1999; Siebenaler, 2006). This was further delineated in examples of children repeating movements dictated from a recorded song or how the children would stand in a circle while they shake instruments at the same time.

It is possible that a focus on early learning state standards contributed to the generic types of music activities that emerged while limiting how often preschool teachers emphasized child-centered activities such as music exploration (Levinowitz, 1998). Hardly any teachers reported engaging children in composition or improvisation as part of their daily music activities, furthering the notion that classroom teachers tend to avoid or diminish opportunities that support creative musicianship (Hickey, 2012).

Characteristics of Music Engagement in Park District Preschools

Researchers in early childhood education have long recognized that children learn through movement, play, and in "using the body to respond as a musical instrument in many ways to many different kinds of music" (Levinowitz, 1998, p. 3). However, music engagement and exploration in these settings was highly scripted, represented through choreographed group activities or prerecorded songs that dictated how and when children should move. Additionally, the lack of music diversity in these recordings is not responsive to the children's cultural backgrounds and spoken languages (Volk, 2002, 2004). Based on the music activities reported, the songs used were likely basic in tone and form, limiting children's exposure to a range of music patterns and styles.

The teachers relied heavily on using music to make academic connections. Connecting music with academics provided teachers with an avenue for bringing music into the classroom beyond the "good morning" and "goodbye" songs. Early childhood and elementary teachers often use music to connect to math or literature (Colwell, 2008; Cornett, 2007; Fallin, 1995). In many ways, using music to teach curricular concepts validated teachers' use of music in the classroom, giving them reasons for singing (even if they were notably self-conscious) and playing simple instruments (e.g., rhythm sticks and shaker eggs) without needing extensive music training. The use of songs to help children learn the days of the week, months, or seasons was commonplace among the park district preschool programs and has been documented as supporting children's ability to retain and learn new information, particularly in the areas of language arts and vocabulary (Dartt, 2009; Gillespie & Glider, 2010). Academic connections continues to be one of the predominant ways that preschool teachers use music in the classroom (Kelly, 1998).

Experiencing Live Performance

Although teachers reported that children had attended a live, music performance, the majority noted that rather than traveling to visit a performance hall or experience a show outside of the classroom, a musician typically came to perform at the park district. Experiencing and attending live music events is an important part of understanding and appreciating music and shapes a lifelong understanding of music experience (Burland & Pitts, 2014). Specifically, Matthew Reason (2010) highlighted the perspectives of young children as audience members, asserting their ability to engage with live, music and theatrical performance on many levels.

In the park district schools, live, music performances were included as part of programming when convenient (if at all) rather than on the basis of their aesthetic and educational value. This lack of understanding as to how important quality audience experiences are for young children was evident in the responses of teachers who viewed YouTube as an appropriate medium for presenting "live music." In many instances, music experience was limited to what could be included within the classroom, rather than extending music engagement into the community.

Implications for Teacher Education

Music educators often advocate for the inclusion of music in early childhood settings. For example, the growing interest in understanding and developing appropriate music experiences for young children is evinced through the presence of an early childhood Special Interest Group within National Association for Music Education (NAfME, 2014) and a music education workgroup within NAEYC.

With preschool teachers often being expected to include music in some form in their daily activities, meaningful opportunities for music engagement should encourage hands-on exploration, foster self-directed learning, and developing music creativity (Rajan, 2010). Recognizing preschool teachers' challenges with including a subject in which they feel they have not had adequate background furthers an argument for interdisciplinary collaboration, engaging the early childhood teachers and music specialists within the school and community. Therefore, the findings from the present study support two major conclusions and implications for teacher education across disciplines: (a) strengthening teacher preparation programs in both early childhood and music education and (b) developing collaborative professional development.

Strengthening Teacher Preparation Programs

The curricular goals of educators in both music education and early childhood education have the potential to support the creation of dual-teacher preparation programs, encouraging students who want to specialize in both fields while pursuing their degree in education. For example, students enrolled in an early childhood teacher preparation program may be given the option to attain dual certification as a music teacher (or vice versa), strengthening one's knowledge of both music pedagogy and child development. This creates an opportunity for bridging disciplines, encouraging discussions, and strengthening lesson planning across curricula.

A similar structure, or "pedagogy of collaborative inquiry" has already been implemented in some early childhood teacher education programs where students simultaneously take coursework to attain bilingual or special education certification (New, 2016, p. 15). Early childhood specialists and music teacher educators can work in tandem to enact a music education certification. Some ways include encouraging music teachers to visit on-site, early childhood center classrooms, and demonstrate appropriate techniques. Additionally, faculty in music education programs may offer professional development at local preschools, inviting their students to apply early learning theories into actual practice.

There is clearly a great need for music fundamentals and methods courses to be required, rather than optional, in early childhood teacher preparation programs. The current norm, by which a single semester arts methods course encompasses all facets of the arts (music, drama, dance, and visual arts), is not sufficient. If there is a need and requirement for preschool teachers to include music in their instruction, there should be more time and opportunity for individuals pursuing early childhood certification to

practice and develop age-appropriate music experiences. The lack of focus on music as an important subject in early childhood teacher preparation programs devalues this subject in the curriculum (Rajan, 2012).

Developing Cross-Curricular Professional Development

The findings from this study highlight the reality that the preschool teachers often have minimal to no background or training in teaching music to young children. This limitation has influenced teachers to reach for music that is popular and accessible rather than finding ways to develop young children's musicianship or deepen their understanding of music styles and genres. Similarly, Nardo et al. (2006) found that "music was not a priority in the preparation of teachers" (p. 284) and as such, was often relegated to merely 15 minutes of professional development.

While popular music (such as some of that produced by Disney) is often discredited for its quality (Giroux, 2008), the findings from the current study demonstrate how accessibility and familiarity are often driving preschool teachers' decisions when choosing music for their classrooms. This contradiction of value versus practice is evident in the literature, noting how teachers' beliefs are not always realized in their daily activities (Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Daugherty, Howes, & Karoly, 2009; Stipek & Byler, 1997).

One resolve would be to engage educators in cross-curricular professional development opportunities. This could include regional seminars and workshops or presentations at national conferences. For example, faculty in music teacher education could encourage students to present their research not only at the NAfME but at conferences held by the NAEYC and the Association for Childhood Education International.

Conferences hosted by these national organizations bring together early childhood educators from a variety of contexts and would allow music educators to disseminate age-appropriate ideas and activities for younger children while simultaneously having the opportunity to expand their own understanding of the theories currently shaping education today. Nardo et al. (2006) proposed a similar plan of professional development, one that engages classroom teachers in setting realistic music goals for children. Importantly, cross-curricular professional development has the potential to support both music teachers' understanding of child development and preschool teachers' understanding of music engagement.

Music for Young Children

There is a growing interest in providing music opportunities for preschoolers as evinced in both in scholarly literature and the expanding needs of developing communities. For example, parents in West Virginia now have the option to enroll their children in a "music preschool" that centers its curriculum on teaching academic subject matter through music (Farrish, 2014). However, music educators are often trained across grade levels (K–12) with only those specializing in general music graduating with the practical experience of teaching music to young children. While music is indeed present in park district preschool classrooms, there needs to be a greater focus

on understanding and creating child-centered music activities, encouraging preservice music teachers to collaborate with their early childhood counterparts who may have little or no background in teaching music, and recognizing that music education has many shapes and forms across different contexts.

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Supplemental Material

The figures are available in the online supplemental material.

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