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# Effective Integration of Music in the Elementary School Classroom

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## Introduction

For the past 25 years, I have been fortunate enough to call my gig as a performing musician my “day job.” I have also always loved working with children, and they, for reasons I do not always understand, seem to love working with me. I have often believed that *teacher* was what I was intended to be, and a blessed 25-year career as a musician just got in the way of that. My musical background and my desire to be the best teacher I can be are what have now led me to wonder about effective music integration in the classroom and throughout the curriculum.

This project was conducted as part of the requirement for a practitioner-oriented research course within my teacher education degree program at a private nondenominational Midwestern university. The purpose of the project was twofold: (a) to investigate ways in which music can be integrated into the elementary school curriculum; and (b) to examine how music can serve as a medium of both improving the overall class environment and promoting a better understanding of the curricular material.

## Literature Review

After spending quite a bit of time searching for and reviewing various academic sources on this topic, it became clear to me that there is quite a variety of ways that music is being used effectively in the classroom. I have consolidated these musical integration concepts into four themes which appeared to be most pronounced. The first theme addresses the use of music for curricular learning of traditional subjects such as math and language arts. The second theme, while related to the first one, focuses on how music is used as a means of personal expression and creativity. The third theme deals with how music is used to alter mood in classrooms. Finally, the fourth theme centers on how classroom cohesiveness and classroom management can be enhanced with the use of music-related activities. However, I would be remiss if I did not begin the Literature Review section with a discussion on a concept that provided the foundation of all four themes and was evident in several of the different articles I read, that of Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983).

### Multiple Intelligences Theory

In 1983, Howard Gardner published his widely acclaimed book, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, in which he proposed that intelligence is not simply one entity but rather many different forms of intelligence. He distinguished between eight different intelligences:

linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalist, and musical. Of particular interest for this project is Gardner's notion of musical intelligence. Gardner affirmed what some teachers had always believed, that is, that traditional paper-and-pencil language arts tests and logical mathematical tests were not enough to measure a student's intelligence. Gardner's findings were the catalyst to new ways to learn and assess learning. Kassell (1998) wrote that the multiple intelligence teaching model emphasizes education for understanding and application—not just the memorization of rote facts. Gardner thought, for example, that if a student was having difficulties understanding a principle in mathematics (the content), then the teacher could provide an alternative route (pathway) to understanding the concept using one of the other intelligences as a medium for comprehension. Kinney (2012) gives us a straightforward example of a student who does not enjoy expressing himself through traditional language arts mediums. Kinney describes how a student named Christopher performs very poorly in school; however, he loves writing lyrics and creating rap music. Christopher's songwriting motivates him to spend several hours a day after school working on writing expressive lyrics for his recording projects, thereby confirming Gardner's ideas. Gardner's multiple intelligence theory has a particular relevance to effective music-based teaching strategies and activities.

Dyer (2011) quotes Jensen (2000) who says that “music carries with it more than just feelings: The melody can act as a vehicle for words, as well (p. 5).

### **Music for Curricular Learning**

There is a plethora of studies focusing on various music-centered strategies to aid in the comprehension of subject matter in the curricular areas of language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science. For example, Smith (2002) points out the most unequivocal example of music use in the classroom: “Millions of English-speaking children have learned the names of the alphabet letters more easily because someone set them to the tune of ‘Twinkle Twinkle Little Star’” (p. 646). This concept is the simplest, yet best example of the use of a music activity to learn curricular material. Smith goes on to suggest that adapting other popular children's songs to teach different literacy or mathematics concepts is very effective for comprehension.

Dyer (2011) is also a major proponent of using music-based activities to further literacy skills. Dyer suggests that music increases elementary students' engagement, helps with memory and recall, and enhances phonemic awareness during literacy instruction. Feinstein (2006) states that the human brain is built for sound: “Hearing is the first sense to develop in the womb, establishing brain structures for processing sound” (cited in Dyer, 2011, p. 238). Oral language and music are intimately connected, and the brain processes music and language using the same structures. Feinstein goes on to say that “neuroscience shows that the same left brain region designated for split second discrimination between sounds like ‘pa,’ ‘ba’ or ‘da’ is activated during music listening” (cited in Dyer, 2011, p. 6). Zull (2002) discusses the concept of using music activities as a great way to reduce habituation in the classroom. Habituation is the process of gradually tuning out a repeated sound (like a teacher's lecturing voice), and using music to vary sounds in the classroom can reduce this effect, increase brain activity, and ensure that what the teacher is teaching actually gets heard (as cited in Dyer, 2011).

Dyer (2011) suggests that learning happens most effectively when students have high interest levels and strong emotional connections to the material. Dyer (2011) quotes Jensen (2000) who says that “music carries with it more than just feelings: The melody can act as a vehicle for words, as well. Students remember and retrieve information more effectively when they can link that information to music” (p. 5). Music has one other benefit, she adds; it increases phonemic awareness through pitch discrimination and the differentiation of sounds in speech. Kinney (2012) adds, “Lyric writing can be linked to instruction on prosody, intonation and phrasing” (p. 402). Dyer (2011) echoes the earlier suggestion of adapting different words to popular children’s songs or even having children write their own lyrics to some of these songs. A second strategy Dyer (2011) suggests is to take children’s literature—picture books, for example—and add music (instrumentation or simple percussion sounds) to it to make it come alive.

Jensen (2005) says, “Research confirms that engagement activates more of the pleasure structures in the brain than do tasks of simple memorization. More attention to the learning also usually means better results” (p. 35). Jensen goes on to say: “The reason music works is because of the brain. Our body releases dopamine and norepinephrine during movement and fun activities. Human studies show that these chemicals enhance long-term memory when administered either before or after learning” (p. 709).

According to Dulabaum (2003), in a perfect world, along with reading and writing, language arts instruction would include music, movement, drama, dance, performance poetry, and the study of rhythm and how it affects and relates to language. Dulabaum goes on to say that “these subjects are all celebrations of language and are the true tools that people need to be able to clearly and creatively communicate throughout their lives” (p. 15). With the current attention that is unfortunately paid to standardized test results, this “perfect world” may not be possible. However, Dulabaum does have several practical suggestions that include a variety of different songwriting and rhythm creating activities to enhance literacy instruction that will be discussed further in the next theme on creativity.

While language arts has a large volume of literature related to it, several different authors also discuss mathematics as a subject that could certainly be enhanced with music. Geist and Geist (2008) suggest that using musical activities that focus on patterns, rhythms, tempo, and beats helps to foster mathematical thinking in elementary-aged children. The authors offer suggestions of many developmentally appropriate musical counting activities for use in the classroom. An (2013) states:

Music is an ideal form of art to be integrated in mathematics instruction. The links between music and mathematics are very rich and include melody, rhythm, intervals, scales, harmony, tuning, and temperaments. These musical concepts are related to the mathematical concepts of proportions and numerical relations, integers, logarithms and arithmetical operations and the content areas of algebra, probability, trigonometry and geometry. (p. 2)

The following is a general summary of some potential math and music lessons that An (2013) suggests for elementary students:

1. using percussion instruments to teach addition;
2. using a song like “Five Little Ducks” to teach subtraction;
3. using note value to teach function;
4. using handbell-based instruction to explore simple composition using patterns;
5. counting music notes using percussion instruments; and
6. using song-based word problems. (p. 7-8)

An (2013) goes on to assert that when teachers utilize music-integrated math lessons, they have a great potential to improve students’ attitudes toward learning mathematics, and thus a greater chance of increasing their students’ mathematics achievement level.

Cornett (2007) speaks persuasively to the practice of integrating music throughout the curriculum. In the same study, Cornett discusses several research-based findings that generally show that music-based instruction helps to increase students’ self-concept, language, cognitive development, listening skills, critical thinking, and social skills. She claims: “Every musical experience that we offer our students affects their brains, bodies and feelings. In short, it changes their minds permanently” (p. 463).

### **Music as a Means of Personal Expression and Creativity**

In many ways, this theme relates directly to the previous theme where learning certainly takes place. However, I felt that, based on my own beliefs and the wealth of literature available, personal expression and creativity deserved particular attention.

Dulabaum’s (2003) study was the motivation behind my original wondering of improving literacy through songwriting. Central to Dulabaum’s study is the songwriting process and thus creativity and personal expression. The author suggests several different songwriting concepts to promote literacy. These include writing a class song that is written and then sung together as a start-the-day or end-the-day activity. Dulabaum is also a proponent, as others have suggested, of taking popular children’s melodies and having students rewrite the words to express themselves.

Cornett (2007) advocates approaching the songwriting process as any writing that includes prewriting, writing, revision, editing, and then publishing. Cornett suggests initially cowriting lyrics to familiar melodies with students to help scaffold the songwriting experience and help with rhythm and rhyme. Cornett (2007) goes on to say that “teachers harness the mnemonic power of music by teaching students how to put curricular information into songs, raps, and chants. Learning how to write original songs that transform content information builds student confidence and grows creative thinking” (p. 492).

In terms of creativity, Flohr (2006) recommends that students take their favorite songs and create illustrations or a book. Children can collaborate on different parts or verses in the song and work together to create such a book. Flohr goes on to assert that the students can act out a song as well and bring drama together with music.

Dyer (2011) says, “Teachers can gain immense insight into the students’ understanding by looking at what facts and vocabulary they decide to include in their songs” (p. 6). Another method that Dyer proposes is to add instrumentation to literature to enrich activities like read-

alouds. It is a great way to actively engage students and is especially good for students who have difficulty with attention. Creative and personal expression activities are excellent at engaging students in their learning, and music is a great avenue for creativity.

### **Music for Altering Mood**

By all accounts, using music to change the mood in a classroom is the easiest to implement. It can be as simple as finding the right background music and pressing play on your device. Cornett's (2007) study is especially relevant to this project. Cornett says that as teachers we can all help to create an "aesthetic learning environment" by using background music. She cites several studies that have shown that the use of appropriate background music during key times of the day can have a multitude of positive effects on children. "In general, teachers use background music to promote positive feelings about school and learning (i.e., to motivate). Music can also heighten awareness, stimulate imaginative thinking, increase concentration, relax during tests, and serve as a great background for silent reading, writing and art" (Cornett, 2007, p. 486).

Ohlhaber (1998) adds that music is a tool to accelerate students' learning processes: "Accelerated learning takes place in the presence of music" (p. 32). Background music can also be used to manage behavior. It has direct access to the state of the student: "It affects the heart rate, the posture, and mental images of the listener" (Ohlhaber, 1998, p. 33).

In terms of practical suggestions, Cornett (2007) says that all music should be purposefully selected. In other words, is the purpose to calm, excite, or motivate? To create a state of "relaxed alertness," she advocates Baroque music with the likes of Bach, Mozart, Handel, Vivaldi, and Pachelbel. These artists' music typically matches the average heartbeat of 60 beats per minute. For imagination and creativity, the recommendation is to play "new age" music with woodwinds, piano, and strings. Having nature sounds blended in can also be inspirational. Personally, I have created separate playlists for my classroom that are labeled "Classroom Quiet," "Classroom Creative," and "Classroom Dance Party." Cornett's (2007) basic advice is to have the music be predictable and repetitive. Instrumental music (especially single instruments like piano) is best. Playing the music at as low a volume where everyone can hear it is optimal.

Cornett (2007) cites schools in Tucson, Arizona that participate in a program called Opening Minds through the Arts (OMA). These schools play classical music all day in the hallways to calm and relax students. They also extensively use music, opera, dance, and visual arts to teach academics. The research has shown that all of the OMA schools score higher on their local standardized testing than the non-OMA schools. Cornett also discusses research that shows students have far less off-task behavior when listening to music.

Finally, Cornett discusses the research done by Swiss educator Emile Jaques Dalcroze that he called *Eurythmics*. He believed that control of balance and body movements, along with the use of the senses, prepares children to attend and concentrate. He observed that sensory-based learning relaxed muscles while maintaining alertness, and helped to open learning channels for concentration. In *Eurythmics*, music and movement are inseparable. Dalcroze showed that any musical idea could be transformed into movement and any movement could be transformed into a musical idea. A practical idea with this concept is to energize students by asking them to "become" the music as they listen and move to a particular song.

## **Music for Classroom Cohesiveness and Management**

Music, often referred to as “the universal language,” has a natural way of bringing people together regardless of their beliefs or backgrounds. The same can be said for music in an elementary school classroom. As much as music enhances learning, inspires creativity, and helps to create a conducive learning environment, it can be the glue that holds a classroom together.

Generally speaking, any activity that increases student engagement is going to have a positive effect on both cohesiveness and behavior issues within the classroom. Distracted or uninterested students are the ones who typically are the catalysts to problems. In other words, keep them interested, keep them out of trouble, keep you as the teacher happy! All of the music-related recommendations listed to this point help with that engagement. Specifically, as I mentioned earlier, Dulabaum (2003) suggests that students work collaboratively to create their own class song that can be used at the beginning or end of the day to help with classroom cohesiveness. He also indicates that students working in small groups to write their own expressive songs is a great way to engage children. Putting those songs together on a recording, or making videos and posting them on a class YouTube channel is wonderful for classroom unity.

Smooth transitions are very important for classroom management during the school day. Switching from one activity to the next is not an easy task for most elementary students. Time is often wasted putting away what was just used and then getting out new materials. Jensen (2005) suggests that using music is an excellent way to influence or change the states of your students, and to help with those transitions or bring them back from a break and let them know it is time to start something new.

Cornett (2007) has some excellent practical suggestions of musical things to do to create harmony within the classroom. Generally speaking, having daily or weekly musical activities helps children establish routines that are always good for classroom rapport. Some ideas for this include starting every day with a particular song or energizing dance, and having special songs for transitions, lunch time, snack time, story time, or the end of the day. All of these activities can be very helpful. For example, music and songs can be used as part of cleanup rituals. Here is a song that Cornett (2007) used for that purpose (to the tune of “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad”):

We've been working in this classroom, all the livelong day.  
We've been working in this classroom, it's a mess now wouldn't you say?  
Can't you see the clock ticking?  
Soon the bell will ring.  
Let's get this place in order.  
Clean up as we sing! (p. 502)

In addition, fast tempo songs like the William Tell Overture can be used to speed things up in your classroom, if need be.

The author also suggests a “music critic” of the day to give his or her opinion on a piece of music selected by the teacher. Finally, having a handful of inexpensive percussion instruments on hand

Giles and Frego (2004) report that “there are many different factors that affect how much and in what way music is included in an elementary school classroom. One of the most apparent factors is the attitude of teachers toward their musical ability and their beliefs and values regarding the inclusion of music” (p. 14).

(or even simple hands clapping or fingers snapping) to create drum circles, where one student starts a beat and then the others join in, can be a very unifying activity.

Generally speaking, there has been a wealth of research on the topic of effective music activity integration in the elementary school classroom. The studies vary in the ways they discuss the topic and which curricular subjects they focus on, however, each of them is very positive regarding the potential of music use in the classroom. They all indicate that music has had a positive impact on the engagement level of students, their comprehension levels, and their

motivation to learn. So, with all of these positive reports in mind, why is it that music integration is not universal in every elementary school classroom? Giles and Frego (2004) report that “there are many different factors that affect how much and in what way music is included in an elementary school classroom. One of the most apparent factors is the attitude of teachers toward their musical ability and their beliefs and values regarding the inclusion of music” (p. 14). Lack of time was also cited as a major reason why teachers don’t employ the use of music on a regular basis. This project contributes to the studies that examine ways in which music can be integrated into elementary school curricula.

### Method

For the purposes of this project, I relied on several sources of data. First, I created a quantitative survey (Appendix A) that I distributed among 46 elementary school teachers who teach at two elementary schools in the western suburbs of a large Midwestern metropolitan city. These schools are quite diverse ethnically, with each having over 38% of African American, Asian, and Hispanic students. A little over 10% are English language learners. Economically speaking, most are from middle to upper middle class, with less than 4% considered low-income students. Of the 46 surveys sent, 25 were returned. After the distribution of the survey, I conducted a semistructured qualitative interview with the teacher who is known to be a strong proponent of using music in her second-grade classroom (Appendix B). This was her 23<sup>rd</sup> year of teaching primary grade children. Additionally, throughout the project, I kept a journal of observational and self-reflective notes that assisted me in the final stages of the data analysis process.

### Discussion of the Findings

During the first stage of the project implementation, I collected data from a quantitative survey distributed among 46 elementary school teachers. A robust 55% of the survey responses were returned. The responses came from teachers from a nice variety of grade levels and experience.

Table 1



*Quantitative Survey Respondents*

| Grade level           |   | Teaching experience |    |
|-----------------------|---|---------------------|----|
| Kindergarten teachers | 5 | First-year teacher  | 1  |
| First-grade teachers  | 4 | One to three years  | 4  |
| Second-grade teachers | 6 | Four to 10 years    | 7  |
| Third-grade teachers  | 3 | More than 10        | 13 |
| Fourth-grade teachers | 4 |                     |    |
| Fifth-grade teachers  | 3 |                     |    |

Further, I conducted an in-person interview with the second-grade teacher who has been teaching for 23 years. The interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. I complied with the anonymity and confidentiality requirements for research with human subjects. The interview participant was properly informed about the purposes of the project. I assigned a pseudonym, Ms. Mach, to protect her identity. Upon the aggregation of all data, I attempted the analysis that consisted of coding both the survey and the interview responses. The data analysis resulted in identification of several categories described below.

**Beliefs and Perspectives**

To get an idea of their overall conviction toward music, I asked the teachers a couple of questions that had “agree,” “tend to agree,” “tend to disagree,” and “disagree” as possible answers. I first asked, “With a music specialist in the building, I do not feel it’s my job to incorporate music in my classroom.” As a believer in the importance of music, it was encouraging to see that only three teachers “tended to agree” with this statement, and the other 22 disagreed on some level. I also asked, “Two half-hour sessions of music each week is adequate to fill the basic musical needs of students.” Forty-eight percent of the teachers felt that one hour per week was not enough, while the remaining 52% felt that it probably was adequate. It was interesting to note that while all of the teachers used music of some sort on some level in their classrooms, few formally put it into their lesson plans on a regular basis (48% never did, 36% did “sometimes,” and 16% did it more than “often”). Interestingly, I asked a question to teachers who only used music occasionally why they didn’t use music more often. All three who replied to this answer indicated “a lack of musical training or ability” as the reason. However, overall I got the sense that the teachers I surveyed generally believed that music was an important element to the children’s education.

Ms. Bach was convinced that music is one of the most important elements in engaging children in learning. She stated, “Anytime I can link information with music, I do. The kids just learn better.” She then added, “We’re living in a computer world, lots of video and audio and we have to tap into that. The traditional ways (of teaching) just aren’t working. We’re competing with a video game, so we’d better be entertaining!”

**Music to Alter Mood**

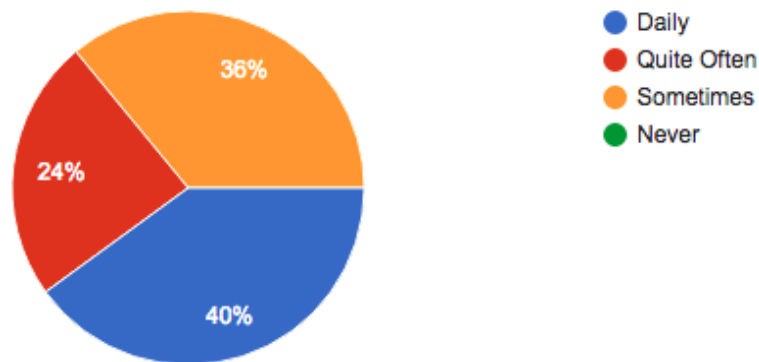


Figure 1. Twenty-five teacher responses to using music to alter the mood in their classrooms.

I asked the teachers how often they used music to alter the mood (energize or relax the students) in their classrooms, and every single teacher said they used music for this purpose at least “sometimes.” Ten of the teachers responded that they did this on a daily basis. My final question was an open-ended one that asked the teachers to cite specific music integration methods. I categorized those responses and included the replies that relate to using music for mood alteration here:

- I use music to set the mood (either for a writing assignment or to calm them during an activity).
- I use videos for movement breaks.
- I love brain break videos/songs.
- I like to play relaxing music when students are working quietly and independently, and more “fun,” upbeat music when we are working on less rigorous academic activities.
- I always have Pandora playing in the background.
- I like to use the Kagan CDs during projects, writing, and reading. They are scientifically proven to aide in concentration or in productivity based on the beats per minute. Brain breaks: Kidz Bop, Pandora.
- We also use it as an exercise break. The students love to have dance parties.
- I use background music to help the students stay focused.
- We use music videos for movement breaks.
- We dance to music to take brain breaks.
- I use relaxation music to help students think.
- I use music as “thinking music.”
- Fun Songs for brain breaks.

I observed that my cooperating teacher (Ms. R.) in my first-grade classroom utilized background music at the beginning of every day when the children came into the room and were completing their independent morning work. She likes to use a Pandora station that plays children’s instrumental versions of popular songs. None of the children ever mention it, but it is definitely one of the components that helps the students stay quiet and on task at the start of the day. The teacher also uses GoNoodle videos get the energy up when the children have been sitting too long. Mrs. Bach, during my interview, said that she is a big fan of YouTube videos for brain breaks and to “get the energy jumpin’” when the students start to slow down.

## Music to Teach Core Subjects

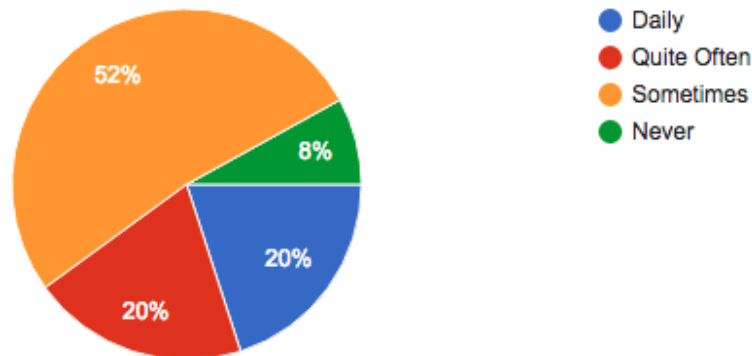


Figure 2. Twenty-five teacher responses to using music to teach core subjects.

I asked the teachers how often they use music to help teach core subjects like math or literacy. Two of the 25 never used music for this purpose, however, the remaining 23 teachers did use music on some level to teach the curriculum content. Here are the responses that they added in the open-ended section of the survey:

- I use music to teach spelling.
- Typically, I try to find songs that teach concepts, like math. It helps the students remember the material.
- I use songs to learn the days of the week.
- I use videos for learning content.
- I use some videos with music to help enforce academic concepts.
- I find songs on YouTube to go along with the math concepts we are studying to help students remember concepts, rules, and equations.
- Sometimes we use instruments with reader's theaters. I try to find songs that go with the topics we are studying.
- I use songs to help with various math concepts.
- Learning CDs and YouTube videos for counting, strategies, and memorizing information.
- We listen to classical music as we work to learn information that basically has to be memorized like the continents, oceans, etc.
- We watch music videos (like or similar to *Schoolhouse Rock*) to add to our learning.
- I use music to teach the letter names and sounds.
- Music helps students remember facts.
- My students loved "The Water Cycle," a song I found on YouTube.
- It helps teach parts of speech, math facts, states, etc.
- Many of the poems we do are sung to tunes.
- I love music videos of historical topics that lead to discussions.
- We listen to and make up songs to help reinforce concepts in social studies, science and math.
- I use iPod and YouTube songs (Jack Hartmann, Harry Kindergarten, Dr. Jean, Heidi Butkus) including Learning Station.

- I write my own songs regarding content area (speaking, listening, reading, writing, and math).
- I use “learning” songs from YouTube (math and literacy).
- I use music to help students memorize information.

Mrs. Bach said that she uses educational videos like *Schoolhouse Rock* and GoNoodle all the time to help the children remember important concepts and facts: “These types of visual and audio stimuli really help keep the children engaged—especially when the material is a bit dry.” Ms. R. uses GoNoodle to both energize and learn fun facts.

### Music for Personal Expression and Promoting Creativity

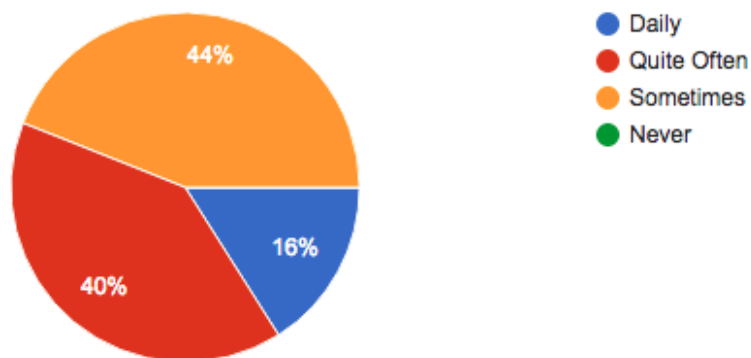


Figure 3. Twenty-five teacher responses to using music to promote creativity and personal expression.

I asked the teachers how often they used music to help promote creativity and personal expression, and all 25 teachers use music for this purpose at least occasionally. Here are their specific responses to how they use music for this purpose:

- I use mood music during journaling.
- I love nature sounds during independent work.
- I like to play relaxing music when students are working quietly and independently, and more "fun," upbeat music when we are working on less rigorous academic activities.
- We play soft music when writing.
- Quiet classical as we work.
- I play Pandora “study music” while the students work independently.

### Music for Classroom Management and Cohesiveness

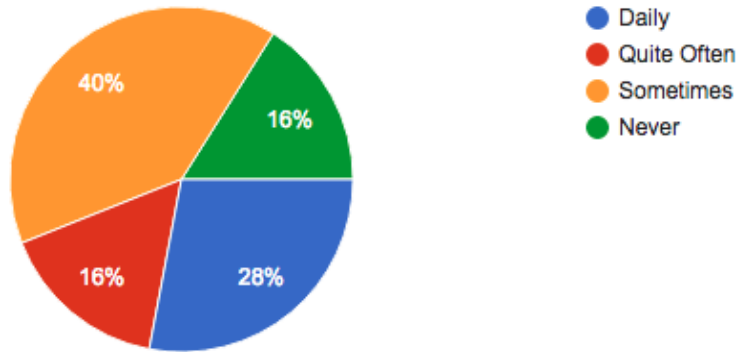


Figure 4. Twenty-five teacher responses to using music to help with classroom management and cohesiveness.

The teachers were asked how often they used music to help with classroom management or cohesiveness. This category had the widest range of responses, from four teachers never using music for this purpose to seven of them using it daily. Here are their specific responses to how they use music for this purpose:

- I use it as a transition piece in the classroom. The students know that the song is their cue to get cleaned up and back to their seats or on the rug.
- I use music as a behavior reward.
- I love holiday music and use it during transitions this time of year.
- We celebrate with music, most recently, singing "Go Cubs Go!"
- I love Christmas music while students work in the classroom.
- I use drums, whistles, wind chimes, and Zen chimes as attention getters. The students really respond to this.
- I use music to help establish routines with my students.

Ms. R., in my first-grade classroom, uses a chime several times each day to signal a transition from one activity to the next. The children have learned that when the chime sounds, they: (a) stop what they are doing immediately, (b) clean up any mess they've made, and then (c) move *silently* to the next activity.

### Conclusions, Recommendations, and Reflections

Music is a significant part of most people's personal lives outside of the classroom, and too often it gets turned off once the child enters a classroom. This is counterintuitive to what we already know from personal experience: Music greatly affects and enhances our lives. So, why turn it off when the students go to school? As educators, we should utilize the power of music to enhance children's learning. The results of this research project indicate that the integration of music in the everyday elementary school classroom is important to the current elementary school teachers I surveyed, interviewed, and observed.

This study shows that music is used fairly extensively for four distinct purposes:

1. to alter mood;

2. to teach core subjects;
3. to promote creativity and personal expression; and
4. for classroom management and cohesiveness.

Within these four major themes, music makes the learning process more interesting and more fun. It can help children to learn because it can (a) improve engagement, (b) create a desired atmosphere, (c) focus concentration, (d) improve memory, (e) keep children on task, (f) energize “slow” activities, (g) increase attention, (h) relax, (i) help build a classroom community, (j) help set a particular mood, (k) trigger imagination, (l) help establish routine, and (m) introduce an element of fun.

There is certainly merit for further research that could have implications for classroom teachers, music teachers, and teacher education programs. Not all teachers use music in all of the categories. As was indicated in the survey results, “a lack of training or ability” may be the main reason behind the lack of an even greater amount of implementation in the classroom. Further study could explore this concept to help devise a workshop or seminar to help teachers more effectively employ the powerful medium of music in their classrooms.

For now, in lieu of that training, I would like to include a list of specific recommendations for current classroom teachers to help them integrate music on a greater and more effective level. These are just basic suggestions to prompt musical implementation thoughts, and each of these ideas can easily be further explored with a little time spent on the internet.

### **Music to Alter Mood: Suggestions**

- To relax or promote deeper concentration, use Baroque music by Bach or Handel that is 50-80 beats per minute. This style of instrumental music helps with learning vocabulary, memorizing facts, taking tests, or reading independently.
- Upbeat music from different cultures helps to broaden the children’s musical horizons while energizing their bodies and minds.
- Playing reflective music like solo piano as students are writing or journaling helps to keep them on task for longer periods of time than they would without the use of music.
- When students seem tired or have low energy, try one of these activities: (a) Have a 3-minute dance party, (b) play a “freeze dance” game, (c) energize them with a “movement” video from a source like GoNoodle, or (d) have a drum circle with everyday things found in your classroom.

### **Music to Teach Core Subjects: Suggestions**

- Using songs, chants, poems, and raps will improve the memorization of core subject content details and facts. It’s the use of rhythm, rhyme, and alliteration that accomplishes this. Teaching these things to students or having them write their own is a very effective memory strategy.
- Classic videos from *Schoolhouse Rock* are still excellent for the teaching of a variety of curricular concepts.
- Set the mood for learning particular subjects (e.g., play Native American music when talking about Native Americans).
- Use rhythm and tempo.

### **Music to Promote Creativity: Suggestions**

- Use instrumental jazz to foster creativity.
- Use “contrafactums” (writing new lyrics to popular melodies like the ABC’s song, “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” or “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”) as a way for students to do creative writing, memorize facts, or help learn new material.
- Have students “become the music” as they dance to different songs. Using culturally diverse tunes adds another level of learning to the experience.
- Have the children write what a song means to them after listening to the song with lyrics projected.

### **Music for Classroom Management and Cohesiveness: Suggestions**

- Using background music as children enter or exit your room really helps to set a mood, whether you need to perk the children up or calm them down.
- Select a classroom theme song that you play at some defined time (beginning of day, before lunch, end of day, etc.) to help build cohesiveness or community. Better yet, have the class collectively write their classroom theme song.
- If you have older elementary children, you could assign a DJ of the day to be responsible for the day’s music (start the day, the morning dance, transition times, goodbye song, etc.).

Music is a powerful medium that exists in most walks of life. Music can be a dynamic motivator, and much of student motivation to learn in the classroom depends upon a connection of that material to life outside the school walls. Music is definitely out there! Embracing and utilizing this gift and not sequestering it to “once a week music class” is as integral to a student’s education as music is to our everyday lives. However, music integration begins where teachers are, with whatever musical experience and abilities each has. Classroom teachers do not need to sing well, play an instrument, or read music to bring music into the classroom. Maybe you “can’t carry a tune in a bucket,” but you can certainly press play to start a playlist you’ve created on your phone. Where I and other musicians might play and sing a good morning song or accompany students on a cowritten curriculum-related song, another teacher might tap into a playlist for that morning song or use a karaoke-based version of a recorded song to accompany their students. The bottom line is that music should be creatively integrated and taught at the teacher’s ability level, regardless of what that level might be. As indicated earlier, music is fun, and fun is fundamental to children’s engagement level and their motivation to learn. In other words, music makes children happy, and happy children learn better!

*James DiDomenico has been a professional musician for over 25 years. He has been a second-grade teacher for just over two months. He loves both gigs and enjoys combining his love of music and teaching to be an engaging mentor to his kiddos.*

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## *Appendix A*

### Teacher Survey

The following are the questions that were asked on the survey:

- What grade level do you teach?
- How long have you been teaching?

The following had possible answers of “daily,” “quite often,” “sometimes,” and “never”:

- I use music to alter the mood in my classroom.
- I use music as a way to teach core subjects like literacy or math.
- I use music to help promote creativity.
- I use music to promote classroom management and/or cohesiveness.
- I use music when the children are working independently.
- Music is formally part of my lesson plans.

The following had possible answers of “agree,” “tend to agree,” “tend to disagree,” and “disagree”:

- With a music specialist in the building, I do not feel it is my job to incorporate music in my classroom.
- Two half-hour sessions of music each week is adequate to fill the basic musical needs of students.
- I’m comfortable singing to/with my students.
- I’d rather use audio/video recordings than my own voice.

The last question asked them to list specific examples of their personal classroom music methods.

*Appendix B*

Interview Guide

After asking some general introductory questions, these were questions I asked her specifically about music integration in her classroom:

Have you always included music in your classroom?

Did you have any musical training or play an instrument? (No, but good background stuff.)

Other than singing, what else do you include?

Do you use music to alter the mood?

Do you use music for curricular learning of core subjects?

Do you use contrafactums (writing new words to existing popular melodies)?

What are benefits of including music in your classroom?

Do you collaborate with other teachers on music elements in the classroom?

Do the kids sing along with you?