



Music, Learning and Early Childhood Education: A Review of Literature

Mangwaya Ezron

Educational Foundations, Management and Curriculum Studies,
Midlands State University, PB 9055 Senga Road, Gweru, Zimbabwe
Email: mangwaya@gmail.com

Abstract: Oftentimes teachers consider learning in the formal classroom as the best approach to teaching early childhood learners. Activities such as music and dance are usually regarded as opportunities for relaxation and therefore not useful as tools for effective teaching and learning. This review of literature demonstrates that singing or music as it is currently known provides invaluable avenues for concept acquisition across the early childhood school curriculum. The review thus proposes various ways which early childhood education teachers can adopt in using music as an avenue for effective teaching and learning.

Key words: Early childhood education, singing, music, early childhood learners.

Introduction

At early childhood education level learners can talk, dance, draw and sing their understanding of the world. The essence of this write up is focusing on how young learners sing their understanding of the world. Appropriate illustrations will be used to show how they do that. Key terms singing and early childhood education are to be defined first. Mukherji and O' Dea (2000:13) define singing as "sounds that are arranged in patterns that are pleasant to listen to." Stebbing (2005) says singing is pattern making with sound. The two definitions show that singing is something fun and enjoyable and it has sounds. Chauke and Chauke (2000) define early childhood education as an attempt to teach a child from birth up to the age of around seven. Brewer (1995) defines early childhood as all that contributes to a child's readiness to begin formal school. The two definitions show that early childhood education is the teaching and learning instruction given to young pupils from zero years to eight years.

Lessons from Literature Review

Research has shown that children respond to music very early. McDonald (1979) in Brewer (1995:329) suggests that "the starting time for learning about music is the same as the starting time for any learning." This shows that music is as important as any other subject that children meet at school. Through singing children reveal what they know and how they think. For example, in the song 'Heads and shoulders, knees and toes' children will be touching their body parts as they sing this song. They identify the head, knees, shoulders and their toes. They can even go on to show that they understand the functions of these body parts through singing a Shona song called 'Todada naye Jesu, wakatipa musoro wekufunga nawo' (We are proud of Jesus who gave us a head to use when thinking). In this song children show an understanding that they think using the head, hear using the ears, see using the eyes and laugh using the mouth. This is supported

by Essa (2011) who observes that music is a basic way of learning, experiencing and communicating. Children can use it as a valuable tool to gain content knowledge and make sense of their experiences.

When teaching young learners, the educators should choose songs that appeal to the children. In his/her plan the teacher can put a song that has an attractive tune to children. This makes the children remember the song easily. The song should not be too long and it should have a chorus. Brewer (1995) postulates that a chorus song encourages even shy children to join in. Children usually join readily in song. When teaching about keeping the environment clean, children can go around picking up papers and at the same time singing 'Usarase marara pose pose, clap*2, ukarasa marara unoita cholera.' This song is sung using a tune of a well-loved song 'If you are happy and you know clap your hands'. The song has been made appealing to young pupils because the tune is attractive, well known and the song is short. Children quickly learn that land pollution is not good. They learn that pollution leads to consequences such as suffering from diseases like cholera. So children will keep their environment clean and dispose waste matter properly.

Feeney et al (1996) are of the idea that through music, feelings of love, empathy and patriotism are evoked in young pupils. Singing provides a direct link to emotions. Many good songs for children touch on sensitive subjects, the hard edges of life that adults sometimes try to eliminate from the classroom. Young learners often do not have words to express themselves. They need positive ways to release their emotions. At early childhood level some young learners can convey their loneliness through a song like 'Dai ndiri shiri ndaienda kuna mai vangu' (If I were a bird I could fly to my parents). The child could sing such a song mostly because he/she lost a parent, especially his/her mother. When the child gets to the part of the song that says, 'bhururu kwiyo, ndaienda kuna mai

vangu' there are some actions involved there. The child imitates the flying of birds, thereby forgetting his or her loneliness and loss.

Stebbing (2005) proposes that for children to understand stories and sequence of events, story songs can be used. A song like 'Mumba musina Jesu hamuna rugare', tells a story of what causes squabbles in a family. The song teaches children at a younger age that believing in Jesus is important in their lives. If there is no love nor Jesus in the family, this causes fighting within family members. The song goes on to say 'Baba vatsamwa varova mai. Mai vatsamwa varova bhudhi.....' Up to the last part of 'nzungu dzatsamwa dzamera mumba'. Children can develop the skill of recognizing beginnings and endings. It's the father who gets angry first up to the end where groundnuts germinate in the house.

According to Essa (2011) children pleasantly remember facts that might not otherwise be easy to recall. At grade one level it might be hard for a child to remember whether Q comes before or after R. So through singing the A B C D song they learn the alphabet. It also helps them to remember which letter comes first.

Neaum and Talck (2000) postulate that sharing cultural differences is important for young pupils. Music transmits culture and is an avenue by which folktales can be passed down from one generation to another. Through singing children learn and are aware that some people in their immediate environment are different from them. They learn to consider other people's views and respect each other even if they are different from them. The educator can encourage young learners to tell folktales in their own mother language in small groups. The folktales should have a chorus to accompany them. There is a folktale which has a Nyanja song, 'Rosemary asiya chuma pamazi, chuma pamazi abwela Jonha atenga, Johna atenga ayika muchingoma chake....' Others join in on the chorus.

This makes the Nyanja child feel being accepted by others who are different from him/her. So through music children are brought together.

Singing tends to be repetitive. Brewer (1995) says that sometimes children repeat only a phrase that has caught their attention. In the song 'Twinkle twinkle little star' children could repeat that part 'How I wonder what you are' even when they are doing other activities. Pavlov, a behaviourist emphasizes the importance of repetition in learning. Pavlov says repetition helps in ensuring that concepts are mastered by children. Children's language is developed as they repeat 'how I wonder what you are'. Language is being reinforced in a natural context, both with structures and vocabulary.

Additionally, young learners can show understanding of numbers through number songs. The number songs like 'Five little ducks wake up one day, over the hills and far away, the mother duck said quack, quack, and four little ducks came to see me back' reinforce pre-maths skills and counting. Children hold up fingers for the relevant number. When they say, 'four little ducks came to see me back' they should be holding up four fingers. The concept of subtracting will be introduced as they play. Through such songs Essa (2011) says music is being used well as a vehicle to develop other areas. In this song its subtraction in Mathematics. Young learners can learn how to count in Shona or Ndebele using songs. Songs like 'Uyu ndiTeke, Uyu munun'una waTeke, uyu chidapakati, uyu chinongedza ishe, chikokota hari,' 'Motsiro dendere.....' are some such songs which assist in understanding number at early childhood education level.

Feeney et al (1996) say that bouncing back after a disturbing event is not something we are born with, it must be learned and sometimes that takes time. There is no vehicle more joyful and playful for providing such training than early childhood music. A long time ago, young learners used to sing the song, 'Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry

me home.' This was after a disturbing event of war. Even after the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe, this song was sung at what we called nursery schools. It helped pupils to do away with memories of what they had seen and witnessed as young ones. So when they went to school 'swing low' was sung. They felt they were being taken back home where there is peace and love through this song.

From all the illustrations given above one can say that the early childhood program would be much poorer without music. Children can profit from this early creative work of singing if teachers value and foster music or singing at such an early level of learning. Educators should therefore make singing part of the school day.

References

- [1] Brewer, J. (1995) *Introduction to Early Childhood Education Preschool through primary grades*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon
- [2] Chauke, S. P, and Chauke, A. (2000) *Comparative Education*. Delhi: Hindustan Offset Printers
- [3] Essa, (2011) *Introduction to Early Childhood Education*. Singapore: Wadsworth Cengage Learning
- [4] Feeney, S., Christenen, D. and Moravick , E. (1996) *Who am I in the lives of children?* New Jersey: Merrill Prentice Hall
- [5] Mukherji, P. and O' Dea, T. (2002) *Understanding Children's Language and Literacy*. London: Nelson Thornes Limited.
- [6] Neaum, S and Tallack, J. (2000) *Good Practice in implementing the preschool curriculum*. New York: Nelson Thornes Limited.
- [7] Stebbing, B (2005) *Learning through play*. Harare: Action.