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The significance of music in early childhood education

Considerations for early childhood teachers and music educators

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Jianda Qi (left in the picture) is a national level musician and music educator and lifetime fellow in the Ministry of Education, China. He graduated from Capital Normal University, majoring in music education. He is a member of the Chinese Musicians Association and Nanjing CPPCC National Committee. With 30 years music teaching experience in the early childhood, primary school and higher education sectors, he is passionate and qualified to provide high quality music education for both children and adults. Currently, he is the principal of Nanjing Arts School (Nanjing Little Red Flower Art Troupe) and an Adjunct Professor at Jiangsu Institute of Education and Nanjing Normal University.

Last year, I went back to my home town in Nanjing, China for my holidays. When I saw my piano in the living room, I was very excited to try it and see whether or not I could play it again. I just tried several single tones on the piano and then automatically played my favourite melody very smoothly. This action surprised me as I have not touched the piano for more than two years! Then, I endeavoured to ask my father, as he is a musician and also an experienced music teacher, why I could still do it. He simply said, 'Because you started when you were five. It is best to learn music at an early stage in my experience.' His answer prompted me to think about music learning and its importance in early childhood. Also, I asked, in regard to the role of teachers in the music education process, how should encouraging students in their lifelong music learning be taken into account. The following interview with my father provides an insight into China's music teaching and considerations for the development of music education nationally and internationally.

Grace: You have been teaching music in China for thirty years. Could you briefly describe music education in China?

Jianda: In China, generally speaking, music lessons in schools have a formal textbook for singing, dancing and simple instrumental learning. This allows children to gain an overview of music history as well as a theoretical understanding of certain musical elements. Twice a week music lessons provide an opportunity for children to touch and think about music, as described in the goals of the curriculum under this education system.

Grace: Why is it valuable for children to learn music in early childhood?

Jianda: According to psychological findings, young children gain advantages when they learn music (Flohr, 2010). Based on these, the optimal period to learn music, particularly musical instrument and singing, is before seven years old. This optimal period refers to a faster and easier development in music learning. In fact,

children have their own natural music, they love to sing, dance and perform freely.

In terms of this, Fox (2000) also points out that

babies have innate musical behaviours and they use music as a meaningful communication in their early years.

Fox's (2000) words can be understood in two ways. Firstly, this innate musical behaviour may be affected by antenatal training, and also this specific natural ability can promote music learning for children.

Technically, children can imitate sounds and movements easily, while adults may find it a little difficult. In contrast, adults have a deeper understanding of music meaning and emotional performance than children.

Therefore, from my point of view, the earlier music learning starts, the better; however, a lifelong span is needed to achieve success as a professional musician.

Grace: *Research has proven that music strongly impacts on children's brain development, cognitive development and self-esteem in early childhood. However, I sometimes wonder whether or not they can keep learning music for a lifelong purpose, as many of them easily give it up at certain stage. Also, I wonder how this theoretical evidence influence teachers' teaching in early childhood.*

Jianda: In fact, a large amount of research demonstrates that music experiences have an effect on the structure of the brain (Hyde, Lerch, Norton, Forgeard, Winner, Evans & Schlaug, 2009). Physically, neural mechanisms supporting music become engaged throughout the brain in coordinated activities.

Music is an active mediator leading brain activities which assist different parts of the brain to develop at the same time, such as motor and auditory areas.

This kind of activity balances the workings of the left and right brain and approaches a cooperative mode for mental development. When we think about this fascinating experience in the brain, it is easy to link brain development with the cognitive process.

Recent research also shows that music has positive impacts on children's cognitive development and academic achievements (Potowitz, Lichtenstein, Egorova & Brand, 2009). Particularly, music learning has been confirmed as helping children to concentrate for longer times, because it enhances their memories for learning and improves self-expression skills. Learning is a complex process and learning music prompts young children's cognitive understanding and stimulates their creative thinking skills, which builds another relationship with intelligence in early childhood.

In regard to the early give-up, I would say that it is very common. This is because not everyone has the potential ability to be a professional musician. At the same time, if children do not have enough guidance from teachers, this would be the second reason to reject music learning. Therefore, early childhood teachers need to observe their students carefully and try to identify children's music ability. Then, they should explore differentiated ways to encourage children's long-term music learning. For early childhood teachers and music educators, they must be passionate to deliver quality teaching in class. Children are normally motivated by teachers' personalities and music performances. Thus, whether their skills are professional or general in music; early childhood teachers need a high standard of music performance to attract children's interests.

Grace: *Yes, research has suggested that music education in early childhood needs to be 'fun' for children by generating a flexible learning environment in the classroom (Levinowitz, 1999). Do you think this is happening in real classroom settings?*

Jianda: I agree with this research. As children have natural musical culture in early childhood, early childhood teachers should provide a free zone in order to encourage them to be creative in the music world. In this way, children can be motivated and may be willing to have a deeper understanding of music in the future.

However, when it becomes a deeper learning stage, this kind of 'fun' environment would not work well in a real classroom. Music at that stage is not filled with the sense of 'play the game', but defined as real knowledge through a professional learning process. Teachers have to change their teaching pedagogy from 'improvisation and encouragement' to 'guidance and imitation'. This is because professional music education is more serious and needs much practice. Understanding different purposes and being able to implement teaching pedagogies in different steps of music education is essential and will depend on children's willingness and potential ability in music. In addition, from a professional music teacher's perspective and personal experience, I would suggest trying to make the 'play' music process shorter. Once children have defined music learning is for 'fun', they would never put themselves into a serious position to explore whether or not they have the potential ability of learning deeply. Therefore, early childhood teachers need to use their pedagogical strategies to tell children that the 'play and fun' domain of music learning is temporary. From a long-term perspective, children need to have technical music training and understanding of theoretical knowledge. I know it would be hard to do, but it is necessary to mention this as early as possible.

Grace: *You mentioned children's natural musical culture. Do you think it is better to use music as background throughout the class (deVries, 2004) rather than a specific subject called 'music'?*

Jianda: Using music as a background to teach is a very significant approach that I would highly recommend for early childhood teachers. I do not mean using background music for every moment, but applying this in class strategically. For instance, early childhood teachers always have story time to read stories to the children. This time would be the best time to utilise background music while talking. As the story progresses, the music can be a kind of drama tool for teachers' to perform realistic-like situations in the story. In addition, teachers can use music as a signal to imply children must react in certain activities. I know some teachers would not agree with this teaching pedagogy as they may think it would interrupt students' learning.

So, it depends on teachers' teaching strategies and skills in choosing the appropriate music. Furthermore, if early childhood teachers do not have enough music knowledge and are afraid to teach music in early childhood settings, a background musical strategy can help them calm down and be confident to deliver music in class.

Grace: *What final advice do you have for teachers of music?*

Jianda: Early childhood teachers and music educators should have a good understanding of children's development and their needs. Young children need to gain a basic knowledge of all types of music and how to appreciate music and arts. Early childhood teachers should be qualified in general music knowledge, music appreciation and music psychology. They need to be all-rounders. In addition, teaching cannot be separated from parenting, particularly in early childhood. The best way I recently found to build a relationship between parents and children was parents engaging in the learning process. That is, teachers and parents need to work collaboratively to achieve sustainable learning because all children deserve to have the opportunity to experience music.

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