

Creative Teaching & Learning

Volume 2.3

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Investigating primary thinking skills

Teacher, Lisa Casey, investigates good practice in schools where thinking skills are embedded at the heart of a learning community.

Remembering Mike Lake & Dorothy Heathcote

We look back at the life and work of two great innovators.

Prompting poetic thinking

Discovering the educational and emotional benefits of triggering poetic writing



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Hands up, hands down!

Who thinks they can teach music?

Follow Bradford primary school teacher, **Marj Newbury**, on her journey to musical enlightenment. With a little help from Jolly Music, she discovers that all is not lost for teachers not blessed with natural musical flare!



I love teaching children to read and write. I think Numeracy is almost magical, and teaching Science excites all my curious children. I love encouraging Art and Design, enjoy promoting a sense of wonder and awe in caring for the world around us, and equally look forward to wearing them out in the hall in Physical Education.

Unfortunately, music has definitely been the one area of the curriculum that for years left me floundering. The main reason for my lack of confidence is my lack of ability. I am a total non-specialist. However, like many primary teachers, I find myself in the juxtaposition of believing that singing and playing simple percussion instruments should always play a large part in the balance of the curriculum, but not feeling competent enough to teach it.

It only takes one person to say it to you and it sticks forever: "You can't sing!", I was told at Key Stage 2. I can't remember the exact words but it was something along the lines of 'what I lacked in pitch, I made up for in volume!'. I had really enjoyed singing prior to then. I still do, but I know, deep down, that unlike some hopeful X-Factor contestants, I really cannot sing very well.

I never learned an instrument when I was younger, yet I have always loved music. I was chosen for the choir when I was at school, but I know it was more to do with my eagerness than my pitch. I have always felt that musicians are truly blessed from birth and we mere mortals should just leave it to them to pass it on. When starting any new post, it was always a relief to know that there was a Music teacher! It seemed to be the one area of the curriculum in which you couldn't just 'make it up'. You either can sing or you cannot, and as for teaching music in any shape or form, I can honestly say that it has always been way beyond me.

How important is music really? It may seem hard to visualise. Watch an episode of Big Brother to witness what happens in a world without music: twelve housemates are

asleep in the house; 'Big Brother' decides to cruelly wake them up early, and does so by suddenly filling the house with a seventies disco anthem. So starved of music are they, that all twelve housemates, no matter what age, size or status, immediately jump up and bounce about on their beds. Their hair is sticking up, their eyes are half-closed and their pyjamas askew, but each and every one has an enormous smile on their face. They sing, dance, move, clap, gyrate and laugh. The music then stops. They all flop down on their beds and groan with almost physical anguish at the sudden silence.

Another example comes to me following a visit to see my father-in-law who is now ninety years old and lives in a large specialist nursing home for patients suffering with dementia. He, and his housemates are regularly treated to musical entertainment. I have been considerably moved when I see how these people, whose memories have now become so elusive and tangled, become so animated when someone sings for them. Hands move, feet tap, shoulders sway and smiles appear. Music is so important and so inclusive.

By experiencing the impact of music, you begin to comprehend how important it is to feel armed to teach it, whatever age or stage your pupils may be. Non-specialist teachers need to feel confident and competent.

When I joined the staff of a small village primary school in the mid-eighties, I was in awe of one of the Key Stage 2 teachers. She taught singing with the older children but with a fundamental difference, she taught them to sing with their hands! I was so intrigued by this. For every note (doh, ray, me etc) she taught them a hand sign. Doh was low down and as she went up the scale, the hand signs went up too and were varied in shape. She told me that this was the Curwen* method of music and it helped the children to sing accurately as they connected note with hand sign, allowing them to pitch correctly. She could even move her hands without singing, and they would sing what they saw. No piano. Just voices. And hands. The three most powerful components of successful teaching and learning: Visual. Auditory. Kinaesthetic.

I was delighted when the Music Express scheme was published, and loved the idea that each year group had appropriately-chosen music materials. I realised that you could customise the lessons to suit your topics and so took my year's selection and created my own pathway. The ideas, lesson plans and supporting CDs were such a breath of fresh air. They were giving me learning objectives that included fancy words like 'pitch' and 'pulse'. I actually began to feel a lot less guilty about my lack of expertise.

Unfortunately, it began to dawn on me that, whilst the scheme was demarcated by year group, it was not progressive, lesson on lesson. The fact that we could move lessons around to fit in with the topic was good, but we were not building up any strong musical knowledge and understanding. I realised that I still felt that my teaching of music was the one curriculum area that, basically, I did not teach well.



However, events were soon to change for the better. I am in the very fortunate position of being a Jolly Phonics trainer, and was asked by Jolly Learning if I would like to trial a new music scheme. It was to be called Jolly Music, but would have no connection with the phonics programme. However, this said, anyone who knows about children learning letter sounds by making hand signs will note that there is a connection.

Jolly Music has been written by Cyrilla Rowsell and David Vinden, both of whom teach music through the principles and philosophy of Zoltan Kodaly, who was born in 1882. He was a Hungarian composer and teacher, and based his teaching on children learning music through visual, auditory and above all, kinaesthetic methods, incorporating Curwen's hand signs. His belief was that all music teaching should start with the child's first instrument - their voice.

My interest was immediate upon hearing that the programme was to be drawn from the origins of Curwen. I agreed to be part of the pilot and met up with the other schools taking part. By sheer coincidence, the other schools were all from the south of England and all were represented by their music specialist! I was so pleased when Cyrilla and David said that one of the testers of their scheme would be me. Total non-music specialist and working in down-town Bradford!

As the Foundation Stage co-ordinator of a very large three-form entry school in Bradford, I had enrolled my two fellow colleagues to embark on this pilot together. Again, all three of us were non-specialists, but were immediately calmed by the very attractive but careful lesson plans that gave a gentle blow by blow account of what to do. Each one of these 18 lessons built on the previous one, and the obvious layers of progression immediately made us feel confident. The content was pitched perfectly for the age group, and the supporting CDs meant that our own singing quality was not actually that important. Initially we met before each lesson to work out what we were doing, but increasingly we began to use our intuition and initiative.

The children quickly built up a bank of songs where they moved to the pulse and clapped out the rhythm. They demonstrated the pitch with their hands, whilst puppets demonstrated the volume and speed of the song. The songs we were teaching were comprised of just three

notes, all very reminiscent of playground songs and quite soon we didn't even need to listen to the CDs as we could see how to sing the songs ourselves. Our over-whelming feeling was that we were actually teaching music. Proper music! We could see how the lessons were building up the children's knowledge and understanding.

All of our children are second language learners. Some children come to our school with no English, some speak English only at school, whilst others speak their home language and English, and then read Arabic at the mosque. Each class may be made up of about five or six different languages and some children will not speak at all. However, this method of teaching of music has had an enormous impact on each of the classes.

Overall, it was the confidence of the children that we noted first. Children who would not even answer the register were joining in. Children who were shy and withdrawn from small group discussions were laughing as they moved and sang. They were invited to show off their musical skills by performing from 'The Singing Chair', and we gasped with delight when complete outsiders volunteered to sing to everyone! Even Ofsted, who arrived on the last week of term before the Christmas break noted the quality of the singing in our Foundation Stage nativity. The school was filled with the sound of children singing.

In the dining hall, the playground, even the toilets! To sit and sing with your children when every child can clap to the correct beat is truly wonderful. Research has actually proven that there is a definite link between the ability to identify a regular pulse in music with a child's intellectual abilities.**

So now, when my teaching assistant pops her head around my door with that dreaded 'inside play' message, I ask the children if they would like to sing. We then have to vote for which song, and we choose from about 40 different ones. We then have 15 minutes of non-stop, all inclusive, all action, all fun singing, where our voices, hands, bodies and heads are exercised fully and I know that, at last, I am really teaching Music.

Marj Newbury, teacher at Byron Primary School in Bradford

*John Curwen was an English Congregationalist minister and the founder of the Tonic Sol-fa system of music and he was born in the early 1800's only 5 miles from where I was teaching at the time.

** Research by High/Scope Educational research Foundation – Timing in Child Development, Kuhlman and Schweinhart 1999

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Previous issues have covered

- **'Criminal Negligence.'** – By Jenny Talbot, investigates how a scandalous number of young people with learning difficulties end up in prison because interagency work fails to address their needs.
- **'Identifying Learning in the Early Years.'** – Chris Quigley's article outlines the preventative measures that can stop the issues discussed in 'Criminal Negligence;' before they have a chance to develop. Quigley describes how it is the most vulnerable children who would benefit most from a clearer understanding of child development.
- **'Getting it Together.'** – Lisa Curtis reports on the new 'Skills Development Framework,' which has been specifically developed to generate good interagency practice.
- **'Grasping the Nettle.'** – As the momentum for early intervention gathers pace, Tim Lineham summarises the latest findings on best practice from C4EO.
- **'Generating Genius.'** – Anti-racist policies are patronising and do nothing to expand the world of young black males, argues Tony Sewell.



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