

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Hands on Harp: An Introductory Instrument for Young Children By Bobbie Gibson Warash, Ed.D.; John Lozier, Ph.D. and Traci Curry, B.S. at West Virginia University

Introduction

The background music playing in the preschool classroom is classical harp. Children are busily engaged in various learning centers. Emily sits down at the table with the child-size harp and plays "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star". Then her five-year-old hands play through all of the octaves with strength and confidence. She proceeds up the scale playing thirds, then fourths. And she demonstrates to the teacher how to play thirds and fourths in an alternating pattern, using her pointer finger and thumb. Emily tells her teacher she wants to play like the music she hears on the CD player.

Emily is a promising young musician who has been developing skills on the harp through play and experimentation. The child-size harp was introduced in the preschool classroom three months earlier. All the children in Emily's class have had a "hands-on" opportunity to play the harp, and most have made significant progress. The "Harp Project" is a new learning center that has had a tremendous impact on our classroom.

A primary goal of any good program for young children is to maximize the children's creative potential. Preschools need to offer a wide range of challenging experiences with the visual and creative arts. In order to do this, early childhood programs must offer opportunities for children to make choices, engage in processes, share ideas and develop skills that enable them to create in an environment filled with a variety of materials for expression. In fact, given the right opportunities, young children can express themselves beyond what might be expected of

their age. Vygotsky (1978) says there is a zone of proximal development, which is the distance between the actual developmental level, as determined by the child's independent problem solving, and the level of potential development, as determined through problem solving under adult guidance. This theory guided the teaching strategy used to introduce the harp to preschoolers at the West Virginia University Nursery School.

The Nursery School has always offered an extensive program using the creative arts integrated with various curriculum areas. Children can choose to play, dance, sing, move, construct and create from the numerous materials that are available. One aspect of the program includes children acting out their dictated stories that the teacher writes in their own scrapbook (Warash & Kingsbury, 1988). Children in essence become directors of their own plays, even though they are relatively short manuscripts. From previous research (Warash & Workman, 1993), it was found when children have the opportunity to further use their original stories, whether it is through editing, acting or writing a puppet show, the composition of their stories becomes more complex. Children appear to have a stronger commitment to their endeavors when they know it will be used in subsequent activities.

At the preschool, children also have many opportunities to become involved with the visual arts. For instance, children experience prints of famous artists. And activities are provided where children can emulate styles of different artists and comment on the artist's work. Art reproductions

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with children's comments are hung throughout the classroom. This gives the children time for individual observation and further reflection of the art pieces.

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Music also needs to be integrated into the curriculum so that the same kind of challenges can be provided. The Nursery School was implementing music activities that were typical of most preschools. Children listened and danced to various music, played child instruments, shared in songs and finger plays and participated in different rhythmic programs. All of these activities were beneficial, but there was no systematic music program that extended their musical thinking. Just as acting out original stories offers children with a way to expand their own stories or commenting on art reproductions was a method of increasing children's aesthetic awareness, similar experiences in music were needed.

The Harp Project

When children have experiences with music, they are learning other things as well. Instrumental exploration provides children with opportunities to categorize sounds and acquire manual and

conceptual skills. When children hear the sounds of musical instruments, they begin to understand that hearing has directionality, and that sounds have pitches, durations, and volume levels which are determined by the materials and methods used to produce them (Hoffman, Kantner, Colbert & Sims, 1991).

Musical principles are most clearly seen in simple instruments. For example, xylophones and harps allow children to observe a connection between action (striking or plucking) and a consequence (a particular tone or vibration). Both the harp and xylophone afford visual clues linking larger elements with low notes (long strings or keys) and smaller elements with high notes (short strings or keys). The harp and xylophone are superior in these respects to piano and electronic keyboards which conceal the physical basis of musical sounds. Harps have another advantage with small children: they are familiar from storybook pictures.

While singing is an important activity at the Nursery School, none of the teachers had any in-depth music experience with simple instruments such as a harp or xylophone.

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We knew that experts in the field of music say that early childhood music programs can be done without teachers possessing performance skills (Lucky, 1990). However, the Nursery School did not have a program for instrumental music.

During the spring of 1997, a local harpist approached the staff of the Nursery School, offering to collaborate on a project using the harp with young children. John Lozier, President of the Harping for Harmony Foundation, was acting on recent reports of research linking music lessons and the development of spatial recognition (Newberger, 1997). Specifically, piano lessons have been mentioned as a good instrument for young children (Begley, 1997). Lozier suggested various aspects of the harp that might be better than the piano for preschool children. Our experience does not yield a basis for comparison, but we have demonstrated that the harp is indeed a useful instrument for promoting musical creativity with young children.

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The senior authors designed a plan for collaboration. A student intern, referred to as

the teacher in this article, was recruited to participate in the project.

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The Harping for Harmony Foundation provided a child-size harp. The harpist visited the Nursery School weekly for several weeks, training the student intern to use the harp with children.

The harp was introduced to children of the four year old class as a free play option two afternoons each week. Play is important for all aspects of the child's development. Using play as the mechanism for children to experience the harp fit our program's philosophy and is an intricate part of the theories of Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1951). Play is satisfying in itself and the child is free to experiment and explore without fear. ~~Introducing and using the harp during free play gives the child plenty of time to touch, feel, and explore the instrument. Presenting the harp in a structured method would contradict the theories of Piaget who identifies preschool children as being in the preoperational stage of development but still very sensorimotor in their learning style. Playing with the instrument and letting the children use their senses to investigate it would accommodate this approach to learning.~~ In summary, the harp was

introduced as a learning center available to all children.

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Incorporating Vygotsky's theory on the zone of proximal development to the introduction of the harp during play added another dimension to investigate. Children could "play around" with the harp which we felt would be beneficial and if they showed interest in further guidance, they could go beyond what they could do at the play level. Going beyond the play level would be solely determined by the child.

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The teaching method for children who wanted further instruction was primarily verbal. In musical terms, the harp is a diatonic scale instead of the more complex chromatic scale characteristic of the piano. The harp strings are numbered 1-7, red strings are called 1, and blue strings are called 4. Since there are three octaves on the harp, strings 8 and 15 are also red, and children learned to call them 1 strings.

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Once children could count the strings, then they learned tunes by memorizing the numbers associated with the melodies. They also could read the number and play the strings. This is simpler than standard musical notation, which is beyond the grasp of preschoolers. The diatonic scale is completely adequate for virtually all of the simple songs and folk tunes that are popular with small children.

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The teacher kept an extensive log on each child's progress. Together we developed a system of scoring. Several observation checklists were developed to help us determine the children's level of interest and progress. The initial phase of our observations was called the "pre-harping" phase. The observations were primarily designed to see if children had an interest in the harp and to give us information as to what direction we should go. The designed checklist had the following headings: pays attention or looks at the harp when it is in the room, watches others play the harp, strums the harp briefly, creates own songs and games and attempts to play songs from ear. This gave us information as to who and how many children showed an interest in the harp. During the first three months, nearly all the children noticed and investigated the harp in some way. Many would stop what they were

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doing to watch another child attempt to play the instrument. Something novel in the classroom generally attracts attention, but this attention to the harp was consistent over the first three months. Children exhibited a definite interest in the harp.

As interest developed and additional skills were learned, we had to update the checklist to reflect current skills. New headings on the observation checklist included: playing songs with coaching, playing songs without coaching, finding strings and playing thirds, fourths, fifths and octaves. It is interesting to note the different strategies children were using to play the harp. Some children wanted the teacher to call out the numbers that corresponded to the correct string on the harp so they could pluck that string. Other children preferred the numbers written on paper so they could read them and pluck the right string. And some children used a combination of the teacher verbalizing the number and the numbers printed on paper. Several children did not need the coaching or the paper with the numbers, they had memorized the sequence of notes.

Still other children experimented with the harp by trying to strum songs. They were simply modeling the style of the harpist. For many children, "playing around" was the method they liked which was appropriate for this age. We even observed children attempting to play the harp together in a playful manner. One child would pluck a string and another child would pluck the same string and they would continue up the scale.

Individual Styles of Children

Emily showed an exceptional interest in the harp. She was the first child that discovered there were four number 1 strings and three number 4 strings. On one occasion, the teacher explained octaves to Emily and she demonstrated an

understanding of this concept by playing some octaves. Her progress was remarkable. Emily was introduced to the notion of chords which seemed to fascinate her. The teacher demonstrated this construct by playing various strings together and Emily would inquire about other combinations of strings. She continued experimenting with chords. Within a month of beginning the harp project, Emily could play "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" with very little coaching. Her expertise often caught the attention of other children. They would stop what they were doing and come over and listen.

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Emily attempted other songs but would revert

back to playing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" if at any time she became frustrated. One time, when the teacher was flipping through the music book looking for other songs that Emily might want to learn, Emily noticed an exercise of numbers that were scribbled on a page. The teacher explained that it was an exercise to practice alternating between the pointer finger and thumb. She wanted to try it and after the teacher showed her, she accurately completed it. Emily's mother made a special effort to come early to listen to Emily play the harp one day. This was a very special day for Emily.

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Emily continued to make progress on the harp. She was beginning to alternate her fingers using her thumb and pointer finger. She also started to experiment with different sounds. For example, she would hold one string and then pluck the same string with the other hand, creating what

she called a "tick tock" sound. Emily tried to use both hands to play. The first problem she encountered was she couldn't get her hands all the way around the harp. She figured out a method by propping the harp against her leg and using both hands on the same side. She played "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" several times with both hands.

Jessie had a unique style of learning to play the harp. During the initial phase, she seemed more distant in her approach, often looking on as other children would play. When she finally started experimenting with the harp, her progress was rather rapid. At first, she preferred to use scrap paper with the numbers of the strings from the song written down, along with coaching from the teacher. Eventually, she gave up the assistance from the teacher and her "crib sheet" and played "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" from memory. She worked hard to accomplish this feat and after her first time of playing the song, Emily who was working on an art project nearby, chimed in with, "Good job, Jessie". She also mastered playing thirds with relative ease and on several occasions would show other children how to play thirds. Peer tutoring was a viable part of the harp project. Jessie could rearrange sections of "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" and play them all in different order, which indicated she had not merely memorized the song but was internalizing the music.

Sophia was very methodical when she attempted to play her favorite selection, "Yankee Doodle Dandy". She would play until she struck one note that did not sound right, then she would go back to the beginning and start over and when she got to the point where she "messed up", she would try another note. Her strategy was one of playing by ear.

Christopher who had not shown much interest since the initial phase of introducing the harp had a renewed interest several months later. The

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teacher asked him if he would like her to verbalize the numbers so he could pluck the corresponding strings, but he declined. He played "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" straight through. The teacher was quite surprised with his accuracy and asked him how he learned to do this and he replied, "From watching everyone else".

The harp center became so popular that the teacher had to resort to a sign up sheet where children wanting a turn would sign their name or make some type of mark that represented their signature. All of the children had spent some

time investigating the harp and most could find the correct string upon request. Children were playing such songs as "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" with some coaching and several were playing on their own.

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After Christmas break, we had to adjust our school schedule so that we could make the harp more available. Children were reaching different milestones. They were working on new songs and practicing alternating their fingers. The harp center averaged seven to ten children each day. Some children spent as much as 20 minutes at the center.

Conclusion

The harp project has accumulated a year of experience. It was a learning event for all involved. Using play as the mechanism for creating an inviting environment so that children could experience the harp was the appropriate method of instruction. And offering some formal instruction to children who wanted to learn more was also appropriate. Children had plenty of opportunity to "play around" with the harp but they could also extend their success by getting more direct guidance from the teacher. Children

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initiated their own level of involvement. All children in the program chose to work on the harp at some level. Some children functioned at the "play around" level while others played songs using a strategy that was comfortable for them. Children appeared to use strategies that complimented their learning styles, much the same way beginner readers and writers do. The children that peaked the "playing around" stage and wanted more, approached the harp very systematically. They had their own method of investigating the harp that empowered them to be triumphant. The teaching strategy of child experimentation combined with verbal demonstrations and guidance from the teacher proved to be successful.

The addition of the harp was not only educationally sound but it gave us insight into children that have a very special interest and talent that would not have been ordinarily unveiled in our program. We were not looking for child prodigies but discovered children that had a good ear for music and strong commitment to learning how to play the harp. The project will continue.

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