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SONGS AS A MEANS OF CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

Songs are one of the main resources used in the classroom in preschool and primary education. Their use allows the development of skills that not only affect the musical education field, but also enable to promote the comprehensive training of children in three major areas: cognitive, sensory-motor, and affective-social. In the affective and social sphere, songs will allow the approach of the cross-cultural education and teaching values in general. The acceptance of diversity, the respect for different cultures and ethnicities and the strengthening of social relationships will be the subjects which can be connected with the songs selected to be worked on in the classroom. These songs will sometimes be based on stories and other literary works suitable for the level of the students to whom they are addressed. Thus, the combination of the story and the song will have a multiplier effect that will extend the type and characteristics of the activities to be carried out. In this way, the song will provide different working contexts, with special reference to commemorations, celebrations and festivities, through which the students will be able to become aware of the cross-cultural reality of their classroom, school and environment.

1. Introduction

The progressive loss of importance for Arts Education in the school curriculum, not only in Spain, but in the majority of Western countries, has become an expression of neoliberalism and reflects an economist vision of children's education as a future-oriented investment of a savage and global capitalism. In this regard, music and its teaching are excluded from the education reform agenda. Thus, in light of ideological positions, and without relying on scientific evidence, instrumental subjects (like Spanish Language and Literature, Mathematics and Foreign Languages) are promoted within the school curriculum, being 15 of the 25 weekly lessons that make up the school timetable in Primary Education.[1] However, various studies have shown that, with more music being included in the curriculum and its use in subjects such as Language and Literature (Hoskins, 1988; Patel, Gibson, Ratner, Besson, & Holcom, 1998; Schön, Magne, & Besson, 2004), Mathematics (Chao, Mato, & Chao, 2015; Edelson & Johnson, 2003; Geist, Geist & Kuznik, 2012; Ibáñez, Aguilera, & González-Martín, 2014) and Foreign Languages (Medina, 1990; Schwantes, 2009; Swaminathan & Gopinath, 2013), there are significant benefits not only from a cognitive point of view (Črnčec, Wilson, & Prior, 2006), but also in the academic achievement of children (Reyes Belmonte, 2011).

Children's participation in working contexts where music is a unifying element, where collaboration and cooperation take place to absorb complex ideas and where creation of social meaning and cohesion is fostered. Music is a tool for the promotion of cross-cultural understanding and its diminishing presence in the curriculum is a concern that could be called a matter of social justice, since its neglect means the violation of educational rights (Acker & Nyland, 2017).

According to Muñoz Sedaño (1997), the aim of cross-cultural education must be to recognise and accept cultural pluralism as a social reality that contributes to the social development through equal rights and equity and that, at the same time, favours the establishment of harmonious inter-ethnic relationships. Thus, we believe that a cross-cultural education is the solution that must be given to the diversity in schools and that, on the basis of the equity principle, promotes a dialogue between various cultural concepts (Peñalva & Soriano, 2010) and does not only include those categories accepted as cultural diversity and traditionally assigned by ethnic groups, linguistic minorities, immigrants..., but also other forms of cultural diversity such as those related to age (childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age), functional diversity (intellectual, physical, sensory, psychic), gender or socio-economic levels (Aguado Odina, 2003).

2. We sing to integrate ourselves

Singing is present in our lives from our early years through the melodies sung to babies in the family environment. It is a means of relationship and communication between mother and child (Morant, 1999). From the cultural point of view, singing is one of the basic elements that defines cultures, as Kodaly points out: 'A strong musical culture has only been developed when singing has been the basis. The human voice is accessible to all and, at the same time, is the most perfect and beautiful instrument and must be the basis of mass musical culture' (in Ördög, 2000, p. 6). In addition, singing has been used in the development of these cultures as a means to express feelings, sensations, emotions and experiences of human beings. In

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[1] Annex II of the Order of 17th March 2015 developing the curriculum for Primary Education in Andalusia (Spain).

this regard, Willems (1981) goes on to assert that 'it can be said, without any doubt, that singing is the principle and soul of music' (p. 140). From the point of view of its importance in education, it should be noted that singing can develop skills that are not just musical. For instance, skills related to audio perception or it can even enhance the treatment of psychomotor skills (Phillips, 1992).

In a singing context, attention is usually focused on the aspects we have presented. However, there are other aspects linked to teaching values that are particularly relevant to this activity, mainly when it takes place in a group setting. The action of singing requires the willingness of participants to show solidarity, since the final result will be the sum of contributions of each of the people involved. This solidarity is what makes teamwork a basic pillar for their development. For this to be possible, it is essential that all singers feel a part of the group and, as such, they all feel included in it. It is difficult to think of singing in a group if its members do not accept, respect or value each other, since there will be no way to control their own performance and, particularly, the influence of personal emotions on the singing. For this reason, when we propose a singing activity in the classroom, whatever the level is, we enable students to improve social relationships, as well as strengthen the solidarity and integration of all of them, regardless of gender, race, culture, religion or social level.

This dimension of singing as a means to promote integration and cross-cultural interaction becomes much more noticeable when a suitable selection of the songs to be included in our classroom repertoire is made. The subjects covered in every song will lead children to all aspects concerning cross-cultural interaction.

In addition to the importance of children's song in the field of Musical Education, it is worth highlighting its role as a centre for the integration of activities from different areas of expertise, from preschool to primary education (López de la Calle, 2007; Estévez, 2008; Martín Escobar, 2010). The importance of children's song in their musical education has always been pointed out thanks to Hemsy de Gainza's (1964) famous quote: 'Children's song is the most important musical food the child receives' (p. 113). Its importance in the educational field is addressed by Bernal and Calvo (2000), who pointed out its significance not only for music learning, but for learning in other areas of expertise: 'Children's song is an excellent teaching resource, since it demands the direct and active participation of the child, which makes it a basic element both for children's musical education and for learning and internalisation of other areas of the curriculum' (p. 83).

Its teaching rationale through the possibilities offered in the field of the comprehensive training of children should also be emphasised (Oriol & Parra, 1979; Cámara, 2005). Along these lines, the use of songs as a means to develop other skills, such as memorising melodies and texts, is promoted while offering an endless source of vocabulary and connection to diverse subjects of different areas of expertise (Pérez Miguel, 2003). From this perspective, Muñoz Muñoz (2003) highlights song as the most comprehensive and globalising musical work context of those commonly used in the classroom, and that is able to integrate both musical and extra-musical skills and content.

In this way, songs can be used as a means to encourage reading in preschool education (Muñoz Muñoz, 2017). The use of songs based on stories, poems and other literary works brings children closer to their first readings and books. On the other hand, music plays an active role in the emotional education of children (Bisquerra, 2017). Songs and singing are often used as a means to promote emotional development through their text and the group performance taking place in the classroom.

Music promotes teaching values at different educational levels (Conejo Rodríguez, 2012). Songs and singing enhance cross-cultural education and respect for others, regardless of race, gender or religion (Bernabé, 2013). Similarly, they contribute to children training in the education of peace and non-violence by promoting attitudes and behaviours of a culture of peace (Cabedo & Moreno, 2018). The promotion of values through songs and singing has the advantage of being able to be proposed from preschool education so that it can be continued throughout the primary education (Moya, Hernández, Hernández, & Cózar, 2014).

3. Why use story-based songs

We will use story-based songs as the basis for the development of our working proposal. Stories are a key element as a teaching resource in preschool and primary education, due to the training possibilities and advantages they offer. From the point of view of the educational importance of the story, Cone (1976) sees it as a means that will communicate happiness and will foster and encourage the children's feelings. In his opinion, this is clearly a strong argument that justifies the educational use of the story, which also contributes to emotional-affective, intellectual and linguistic development (Gómez & Rodríguez, 1994).

Characters, times, situations, actions and the world of reality and dreams will help us to take the students to different moments that will be used as experiences of the subjects we intend to deal with (Nobile, 1992).

The songs that we use are based on children's stories or literary works whose subject matter is related to cross-cultural interaction. The text of these songs should seek to summarise the content of the story, on which is based, the main actions that are developed and their characters.

The text of the songs plays an important role in their use, since the educational level of the songs and the activities to be carried out with them will depend on it. On the other hand, the characteristics of the text: vocabulary, sentences, dimension, or even its simplicity or complexity for memorisation, should be suitable for the knowledge and experiences of children concerned. In this way, we will be able to make the comprehension of these texts and the editing of the songs easy to perform them in a quick and direct way.

The rhythm of the songs must be simple, of little contrasts and repetitive, while at the same time striking, stimulating and motivating, in order to create a willingness to learn them and to participate in the activities we want to propose with each of them. Similarly, the melody must have the same characteristics as the rhythm: simple, with no large jumps between notes and repetitive. If rhythm and melody do not attract the attention of students, they will hardly show an appropriate willingness to the activities to be carried out.

4. Activities for the development of cross-cultural interaction

Proposing a piece of work about songs based on stories and literary works necessarily makes us pay particular attention to the selection of stories and songs to be used. In this proposal, we have opted for a series of stories that deal with issues related to cross-cultural interaction in different ways, taking into account that all of them have a song written about its content. Their subjects will lead us to the culture of

different countries and ethnic groups, while addressing issues related to diversity, solidarity, integration, acceptance and respect for all people, without discrimination.

The activities that we can perform with story-based songs can be categorised into storytelling activities, musical activities, and activities of analysis, commentary and awareness-raising of the subject matter.

It is important to plan how to introduce children to the story on which the song to be worked on is based. According to the characteristics of the story, we can use different strategies:

- Story-reading, in which we should take advantage of the possibilities offered by the voice, so that the changes in intensity, tone, duration and speed can help us to attract the attention of the students, to bring personality to each of the characters in the story and to emphasise the actions carried out in the development of the story.

- Storytelling, which allows us to present the story more freely and with greater adaptability to the circumstances and characteristics of the students, but also to those of the story.

- Story staging, which is traditionally performed once the story is known. However, here we propose that it will be used as a strategy for telling the story.

The musical activities with story-based songs do not differ much from those we carried out with other songs. They can be varied as much as we want, according to the time available, as well as the age and knowledge of the students. We would include, among other activities:

- *Song editing through imitation, repetition or decoding.* The use of imitation and repetition will depend on the characteristics of the song we are working on and, particularly, on the length and complexity of its text. The process of editing by decoding will depend on the level of knowledge of musical language acquired by the children. We should think that editing through imitation or repetition enables students to learn the song more quickly and participate fluently, almost from the very beginning.

- *Song performance.* The performance of the song can involve many variables. We can do a performance that simply adjusts to what is set out in the song, but we can also do performances in which simple variations of tone, intensity, length and height are carried out (Muñoz Muñoz, 2017). Other performances may focus on the performance of different genres and styles.

- *Instrumental accompaniment.* The accompaniment, as with editing, can be carried out through imitation, repetition and decoding. We are going to focus on the accompaniment based on imitation and repetition. This is ultimately a simple accompaniment, which is based on following instructions given to the students by the teacher as they go along. Initially, the instruments to be used will be: natural body instruments, objects of the surroundings and small percussion instruments with undefined sound (wood blocks, claves, triangles, maracas, tambourines...). Other times, we could use small percussion instruments with a specific sound (glockenspiels, xylophones, metallophones...) and other common instruments.

- *Gestural and movement accompaniment.* Gestural and movement accompaniment is also made through imitation and repetition. Its greatest importance is to allow children to take part in the performance of the song from the very beginning, even without knowing the song (Muñoz

Muñoz, 2017). Just by imitating the teacher, from the beginning of the editing of the song, it can be accompanied by simple gestures and movements.

The activities of analysis, commentary and awareness raising on aspects concerning cross-cultural interaction can be performed at different times of the working sessions with story-based songs. Some of them can be performed at the beginning in order to be used as background for what they are going to deal with; others are developed during the working session once the story is told or the song has been sung for the first time. Finally, others are proposed as the final phase of the work in order to assess and raise awareness of what we are dealing with.

- First contact and previous knowledge activities, which will be used as a first point of contact for children to be informed, but also to encourage them in relation to the subject matter we are going to deal with. At the same time, we will use them to find out what the students' previous knowledge on this subject matter is.

- Analysis activities, which are proposed during or at the end of the session. The right moment is once the story has been read, told or staged, or when commenting on the subject matter, actions and characters or, in short, everything that is connected with the content of this story. The other time, which can be used for this type of activities, is once the song editing has been completed. We can comment on the content of the lyrics and their relationship with what we know about the story. This will lead us once again to the specific subject matter that we are focusing on. In all these activities, the aim is to enable students to exchange opinions on this subject matter, to express themselves orally about it, to know the opinion of their classmates, as well as any other additional information that may be provided by their teacher.

- Awareness-raising activities, which will help us to value, respect and take into account all those issues concerning cross-cultural interaction. The exchange of ideas, discussions and oral presentations will help us to show positive attitudes related to our subject matter. Through them, students take on personal commitments in order to make those attitudes a reality both in the classroom, at home and in their everyday lives. These are simple commitments, but at the same time real and accessible. They are, in short, awareness-raising activities on cross-cultural interaction.

5. Conclusion

The musical activities that we propose can be adjusted to the knowledge, experiences and characteristics of any type of student. The performance of these group activities enables us to develop working and cohabitation situations in which all these students can be truly included. Performance or vocal, instrumental and movement accompaniment favours the integration of the members of the class group. And if, additionally, the works selected allow a direct relationship to be established between the cultures of the students, a rich and varied cross-cultural context that will help to understand the cultural reality of each of them will be promoted.

Teamwork will lead to situations of solidarity, cooperation and help, always with respect for others and appreciation for the roles played by each one in order to achieve the final products, which are the result

of the efforts and contributions made by all the students. At the same time, situations in which children can live in groups, comment on different information related to the content of stories and songs and, therefore, to aspects concerning cross-cultural interaction are also being promoted. The flexibility of the musical ensembles and the rotations that we propose for them are helping to strengthen the relationships between their members and the acceptance of each other. In this way, an effective inclusion of children without restrictions or distinctions will always be promoted.

On the other hand, whenever the age of the students and the characteristics of the activities to be carried out allow it, they will be in charge of planning the piece of work. These situations lead to an exchange of ideas, discussions and the search for information that will once again bring children into contact with the cross-cultural subjects addressed at that time.

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