

Exploring Early Childhood Music Literacy

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In 2014, the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards (NCCAS) established a conceptual framework for arts learning with a focus on artistic literacy. The new standards identify artistic processes and creative practices in which artists engage: creating, performing, responding, and connecting (NCCAS, n.d.). These standards introduce a contemporary interpretation of music literacy, where the four artistic processes are a means of emphasizing conceptual understanding as students develop and demonstrate literacy in various aspects of music (National Association for Music Education, n.d.).

The discussion of music literacy is especially pertinent to early childhood music. According to Alper (2013), preschool age is a crucial time for children to be exploring literacies and enacting what they learn. Music education researchers have noted that the early years of a child's life are critical for learning. Edwin Gordon (1990) emphasized that the years between ages three and five are the most important for learning because it is during this period that children develop a foundation for their educational development through structured informal and formal guidance.

Young children are capable of displaying capacities and skills that are directly relevant to their literacy development before they have had formal literacy instruction (Snow, 2008). For young children, experience precedes their ability to demonstrate literacy (Phillips & Piasta, 2013). It would follow, then, that young children need opportunities to engage with music in an environment that nurtures music literacy by providing developmentally appropriate experiences.

Literature Review

Much of what has been written about music literacy has revolved around reading and interpreting melodic and rhythmic notation. For example, Feierabend (1997) and Gordon (2004) emphasize the importance of aural music experiences preceding the reading of music. However, music education researchers have begun to expand the definition of music literacy beyond music symbols to include other music interactions (Broomhead, 2010).

Literacy is multi-faceted and encompasses more than reading and writing (Alper, 2013; Kress, 2003; Roskos & Christie, 2011; Snow, 2008; Tomlinson, 2013; Wohlwend, 2011). In their book *(Re)imagining Content Area Literacy Instruction*, Draper, Broomhead, Jensen, Nokes, and Siebert, define literacy as "the ability to negotiate (read, view, listen, taste, smell, critique) and create (write, produce, sing, speak) texts in discipline-appropriate ways or in ways that other members of a discipline would recognize as 'correct' or 'viable'" (p. 29). The

definition of text is of particular interest, as a text is defined by Draper and colleagues as any resource or object that can be imbued with meaning as a student creates or interacts with the object to achieve a particular purpose (Draper et al, 2010, p. 28).

Broomhead (2010) defines music literacy as "the ability to interact (perform, listen, contemplate, and create) appropriately with musical texts" (p. 70). According to Broomhead (2010), a text in the context of music is any resource that conveys musical meaning. Examples of music texts could be music instruments, music notation and symbols, an audio recording, or a conductor. Broomhead states that, "All music resources are seen as texts. All skills and understandings needed to negotiate and create these resources are seen as literacies" (p. 80). As a student interacts with musical texts through performing, listening and responding to, or creating, they are developing and/or demonstrating musical literacies. For example, a set of desk bells would be considered a musical text. An example of a literacy that may be developed through a child's interaction with the desk bells would be the ability to distinguish between higher and lower sounds.

In the process of the negotiation and creation of texts, students may also utilize tools. Tools differ from texts in that they are used to facilitate the interaction with a text. An example of a tool would be a stereo used to play an audio recording; the audio recording itself would be an example of a text.

The Study

As literacy continues to be a topic of discussion among many education researchers and new definitions of literacy continue to emerge, the researchers of this study wanted to explore what music literacy looks like in early childhood. Specifically, the researchers examined the definition of music literacy proposed by Broomhead (2010) through observations of young children during centers and circle time in a music preschool lab. Two research questions guided the study:

1. What does music literacy look like in early childhood?
2. What musical texts do children at this age (2-5) interact with that help build music literacy and what are examples of some of the literacies young children develop as they interact with these texts?

Methods

The setting for this study was the Brigham Young University Young Musicians Academy (YMA). The YMA is a musical preschool lab that meets once per week for 20 weeks throughout the school year. Four classes are offered each week to accom-

moderate different age groups (ages 2, 3, 4, and 5). Each class period is divided into two sections. First, there is a 40-minute free exploration segment in which children explore a variety of music centers with parents, university students, peers, and teachers. The centers in this preschool are intended to facilitate music experiences in listening, singing, notating/playing with music symbols, and playing instruments. Second, children participate in guided group activities that include singing, moving, listening, reading, and playing instruments.

Primary participants were the 42 children enrolled in the Brigham Young University Young Musicians Academy. The participating children were ages two to five, and of the 42 children there were 19 girls and 23 boys. Secondary participants included the parents of the children, teachers, and university students. The researchers assumed both participant and observer roles. As participants, the researchers interacted with children and adults during free exploration time and circle time. The researchers observed and video recorded the children playing and interacting with music materials (e.g., music instruments, recordings, notation stamps, floor staff, manipulatives related to songs and nursery rhymes, etc.) in two randomly selected music centers each week for five weeks, and video recorded and photographed each 20-minute group circle time.

The researchers collectively and independently analyzed and

coded video recordings identifying texts and literacies as defined by Broomhead (2010). The researchers began data analysis by analyzing the videos of three centers and two circle time segments together to establish reliability in coding procedures. The researchers then analyzed the remainder of the data independently and conferred frequently to discuss interpretation of events and make necessary coding adjustments. Information gathered from observations was used to substantiate interpretation of themes.

Findings

Music literacy in early childhood is developed through play and exploration. It was evident to the researchers that as the children played and interacted with various materials in the centers during free exploration time, many of the objects with which the children engaged were serving as musical texts. As the children played, manipulated, listened to, or otherwise interacted with various texts, the researchers were able to identify music literacies. Overall, the most common texts the researchers observed during centers and group circle time included songs, recordings, voice, live performances, instruments, notation and music symbols, parent, teacher, and peer models, ensemble, and gestures or movement (see Table 1).

Table 1: Common Texts and Literacies Observed

TEXTS	POSSIBLE LITERACIES
Songs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to distinguish/produce a variety of pitches, rhythms, and words • The ability to distinguish/convey meaning through expressive elements (e.g., tempo, dynamics)
Voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to coordinate what is heard with vocal production • The ability to distinguish one voice from another (timbre)
Recording	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to distinguish/identify the genre of a piece of music • The ability to distinguish/identify instruments played within a piece of music
Live Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to visually identify instruments • The ability to listen and not participate (audience etiquette)
Instruments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to produce sound on a given instrument - blowing, striking, etc. • The ability to aurally recognize/identify an instrument (timbre)
Notation/Music Symbols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to recognize that musical sounds can be represented by written symbols • The ability to recognize that music symbols have specific names
Parent/Teacher/Peer Models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to attend to/produce the same sounds as a model • The ability to copy the gestures of a model
Ensemble	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to recognize that more than one sound can occur simultaneously • The ability to simultaneously hear the group and produce sound
Gestures/Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to use movement/gesture to demonstrate awareness of musical elements

While children interacted with many of the same texts, the literacies that manifested were not always the same for each child. As one child played a small drum set in the instrument center (see Table 2 and Image 1), he played the various drums and cymbals (text), and in the process demonstrated developing literacies, such as the ability to produce sounds on the drum set and the ability to hear/distinguish between the different sounds made by the various drums and cymbals. While observing another child's interaction with the drum set (text) researchers noted the demonstration of different literacies as he began to create various short rhythmic patterns on the drumset. Finally, a third child sitting at the drum set listened to his father (text) clap a short rhythmic pattern and immediately imitated the pattern on the drums. All of these examples demonstrate how children using the same text, a drum set, can manifest different literacies. In the case of the child imitating a parent's rhythm patterns, the parent model is an additional text because the child is given information that informs the way he interacts with the drum set.

Table 2: Example of the Drum Set Center and the Texts & Literacies Observed

CENTER & DESCRIPTION	TEXTS	LITERACIES
<p>Drum Set</p> <p>This center is a child-sized drum set, complete with various cymbals.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different drums and cymbals • Model 	<p>The ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the sound of drums/cymbals • Identify the name of drums/cymbals • Distinguish that different drums/cymbals make different sounds • Produce sound on the drums/cymbals • Produce short/long and loud/soft sounds on the drum set • Produce patterns of sound on the drum set • Transfer modeled patterns to the drum set



Child playing drumset

Table 3: Example of the Instrument Wall Center and the Texts & Literacies Observed

CENTER & DESCRIPTION	TEXTS	LITERACIES
<p>Instrument Wall</p> <p>This center consists of a fabric wall with the same rhythm instruments in pockets on either side. Children may just explore the various timbres, or, another student or adult may attempt to find the matching instrument as one is sounded.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variety of Rhythm Instruments • Model 	<p>The ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively listen • Distinguish different instruments by sound (timbre) • Distinguish different instruments by sight • Produce sound on different instruments • Distinguish/label the quality of different sounds (e.g., clicking sound) • Match instruments by sight and/or sound • Know the names of different instruments

A popular center was the music instrument wall (see Table 3 and Image 2). The music instrument wall center consisted of a fabric wall with the same rhythm instruments in pockets on either side. The center provides an opportunity for children to explore the timbres of various rhythm instruments. The instrument wall can also be used by two children, or a child with an adult, each one sitting on opposite sides of the wall. To play a matching game, one person performs a sound using an instrument from their side of the wall, while the other attempts to match the sound to the same instrument. In this case, the instruments were the texts the children explored while using the instrument wall center. Often, the children interacted with a musical model, such as a parent, university student, or peer. The literacies that the researchers observed children developing and/or demonstrating included active listening, distinguishing different instruments by sound (timbre), distinguishing different instruments by sight, producing sounds on different instruments, distinguishing/labeling the different sounds (e.g., clicking sound), matching instruments by sight and/or sound, and identifying the different instruments by name.

The Five Little Ducks singing center (see Table 4) provided researchers with insight with regard to the differences between a text and a tool in literacy development. The Five Little Ducks singing center consisted of a “mother” duck with a guiro beak, plastic baby ducks that join together, and a picture book with the lyrics/song. The texts in this center included the song, the voice, the duck guiro and, in some cases, a model. The plastic ducks and book, however, are examples of tools that facilitate the song, but are not considered texts because they do not necessarily in and of themselves convey musical meaning.

Table 4: Example of the Five Little Ducks Center and the Texts & Literacies Observed

CENTER & DESCRIPTION	TEXTS	LITERACIES
Five Little Ducks This singing center consists of a “mother” duck with a guiro beak, plastic baby ducks that join together, and a picture book with the lyrics/song.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Song • Voice • Model • Duck Guiro 	The ability to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinguish/ reproduce pitches, rhythm, words, form • Distinguish the timbre of the guiro • Respond to cues in the music • Produce sound on the guiro • Recognize that songs can tell stories

The number of texts the children engaged with during free exploration at centers and how the children engaged with those texts varied from child to child. The variance in the interactions with texts yielded different outcomes in terms of the literacies that were demonstrated. The same can be said of group circle time (see Table 5 and Image 3). In offering a variety of musical activities and interactions during circle time, the children were provided the potential to develop and demonstrate many different literacies as they engaged in singing, moving, playing, reading, and listening, which involved a variety of texts. Table 4 outlines the activities of a single four-year-old circle time experience. While analyzing the various activities used during circle time, it was not possible to know the extent to which each child was developing the identified literacies. Therefore, these data indicate potential literacies associated with each activity.



Child and BYU student explore instrument wall

Table 5: Example of the Music Texts & Literacies Addressed During Group Circle Time

CENTER & DESCRIPTION	TEXTS	LITERACIES
Hickety Tickety Bickety Bame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Song • Gestures • Model • Voice • Ensemble 	<p>The ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate aural input with vocal production • Distinguish/reproduce appropriate words, rhythm, pitches • Feel and show the steady beat • Perceive the phrases • Respond to cues in the music
Vocal play following visual lines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lines (iconic notation) • Model • Voice • Ensemble 	<p>The ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate visual/aural input with vocal production • Coordinate vocal production with the group
<p>“Scotland’s Burning” & “Are You Sleeping?” With icons</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Song • Icon • Model/Conductor • Ensemble • Voice 	<p>The ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate aural input with vocal production • Distinguish/reproduce appropriate words, rhythm, pitches • Coordinate vocal production with visual symbol (icon) • Perceive that icons represent chunks of sound • Create/read new songs that use the same chunks of sound • Distinguish the organization (form) of original and improvised versions of the song(s) • Maintain tonality in original and improvised versions of song(s)]
Live Performer on Flute	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performer • Performance • Songs • Instrument • Ensemble 	<p>The ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinguish the timbre of the flute • Identify/label the flute • Identify/label the woodwind family • Distinguish the mechanics of playing the flute • Listen without participating • Take cues from the music • Recognize familiar songs in a different timbre (Mary Had a Little Lamb, Twinkle, Twinkle) • Sing along with the flute (different registers)

Table 5: Example of the Music Texts & Literacies Addressed During Group Circle Time, cont...

CENTER & DESCRIPTION	TEXTS	LITERACIES
Listening - "Linus and Lucy" by Steel Drum Band	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recording • Model • Ensemble • Movements 	<p>The ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively listen • Feel and respond to the steady beat through movement • Move as an ensemble • Distinguish the timbre of the steel drum • Recognize a familiar song in a new context • Engage in choreographed in response to the form • Create movement in response to the music
"Sally Go Round the Sun" Lapmat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Song • Lapmat • Model • Voice • Ensemble 	<p>The ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinguish/reproduce appropriate words, rhythm, pitches • Coordinate vocal production with visual symbol (lapmat) • Improvise words for the song through cues from the lapmat

Discussion & Conclusion

Throughout their development, children need numerous opportunities to experience and explore various music elements. Exposure to multiple texts appears to be one way of providing the multi-faceted, diverse music experiences children need in order to foster their music development. Children interact with texts through the musical processes outlined in the national music standards—performing, creating, responding and connecting. These processes are all invitations to engage with texts, which in turn leads to the development of music literacies. This development, then, seems to facilitate even greater desire and ability to interact with a given text, yielding greater ability to perform, create, respond, and connect, creating a cycle of learning.

The researchers also observed that as children participated in a variety of musical activities, both in free-exploration time and circle time, the breadth of music experiences led to the development of additional literacies. In other words, interacting with a drum set led to a different set of literacies than being sung to by a parent. To ensure the broadest possible foundation for music development it may be useful for teachers to consider the number and variety of musical texts that are included in a lesson or a music environment.

According to Alper (2013), lack of support from caregivers while children are having literacy experiences can create a scaffolding gap. In the present study, the researchers observed a similar pattern in terms of the importance of an atten-

tive and nurturing guide or model in maximizing musical literacy development. This model could be a parent, a college student, or peer. However, the presence of the guide was not the key factor in maximizing literacy development. It was the attentiveness, knowledge, and responsiveness of the guide that appeared to determine the depth of the child's experience. An example of the role of the guide in facilitating literacy development was observed during two interactions at the desk bell center. John explored the desk bells with his mother. The text in this interaction was the desk bells. While his mother was there, she did not model for him. The potential literacies observed included *the ability to*:

- produce sound with the desk bells
- distinguish the timbre of desk bells
- distinguish different pitches
- hear/distinguish/produce pitches that "matched"

Ginny also interacted at the same center with her father. The texts in this case were the desk bells and the modeling of her father. Her developing literacies included the *ability to*:

- produce sound with the desk bells
- distinguish the timbre of desk bells
- distinguish different pitches
- hear/distinguish/produce short and long sounds
- produce repeating pitches



Circle Time

- order pitches from low to high
- hear/label half steps
- hear/label the sound of an octave
- know that pitches have letter names
- hear/play the bells simultaneously with another person

In comparing these two interactions at the desk bell center, the difference an attentive, informed guide can make in the depth of music experience for children becomes more apparent. By combining effective modeling and guidance with opportunities to negotiate many music texts, children can have both a broad and a deep musical foundation on which to build.

This new definition of music literacy has the potential to broaden a music educator's understanding of what music literacy development might look like in early childhood. Accepting the idea that a musical text is a resource that potentially conveys musical meaning encourages one to thoughtfully consider the resources used in the music curriculum. The idea that children can form music literacies by interacting meaningfully with various musical texts through performing, responding, creating, and connecting, provides an opportunity for educators to thoughtfully consider how they can create a classroom environment that promotes music literacy. Observation of young children as they

interact with various musical texts yields an awareness of their musical understandings and their individual needs for further literacy development. Finally, educators can promote literacy development by being aware of their important roles as a model and guide.

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