

WHY SHOULD I TEACH MUSIC IN MY EARLY FRENCH IMMERSION CLASSROOM  
AND WHERE DO I BEGIN?

by

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### **Abstract**

All students have a right to music education at the early primary level, and yet many schools in British Columbia do not have a music specialist. It is often up to classroom teachers to provide music instruction, and many report a lack of confidence and competence in doing so. In the realm of French Immersion, there is a lack of connection and communication between classroom teachers with an interest in teaching music, and resources which go beyond simply teaching songs to develop foundational music skills are few. This paper provides a rationale for why French Immersion classroom teachers should include music teaching in their practice, and describes a new website created by the author to assist them in this endeavour ([www.musiquepourtous.weebly.com](http://www.musiquepourtous.weebly.com)).

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## Introduction

Some of us love sharing music with our students, and for some of us it conjures up feelings of nervousness, guilt, and even fear. Whatever your personal relationship with music and music education at this moment in your teaching career, it is difficult to overestimate the value of music in the lives of children. Sarah Hennessy calls music the “statutory entitlement” of all students (2000). Children have a right to learn and to play, and few things accomplish both of these goals more naturally, effectively, and joyfully than music. Music education is not only the process by which we nurture future musicians, but it also helps to develop the whole child (Ko, 1999). Even children who will not go on to pursue music in their adult lives benefit from a childhood rich in musical experiences. Joanne Rutkowski suggests that singing, which is arguably the simplest and most important component of the primary school music experience, is also one of the most personal forms of expression available to human beings (1996).

Human kind has a long history of making music for social bonding, communicating, and creating relationships (Small, 1999; Dunbar, 2012). In other words, music may be considered our birthright. Research in the field of music education strongly supports beginning music learning in early childhood. Edwin Gordon, a central figure in the field of early childhood music education, established that a child’s musical aptitude – her innate ability to understand and create music – usually stabilizes by age nine, and can be improved before this time with exposure to and engagement with developmentally appropriate music activities (Flohr, 1981; Gordon, 1980; Gouzouasis, 1987; Gouzouasis, 1991). It is therefore of paramount importance that students participate in music learning activities before the age of nine so as to develop their musical skills to their full potential. Even those students who possess high musical aptitude need exposure and a

chance to practice and play with music, or their natural music potential may atrophy over time (Gouzouasis, 1991; Levinowitz, 1992).

In the French Immersion classroom, where young students are learning to speak, understand, read, and write in a new language, music is a powerful tool. Through singing, students practice their newfound oral language skills. Music is also an enjoyable way of teaching multiple skills at once, while enriching vocabulary, grammar, and love of the French language.

### **Outline**

Having established that music is an important part of the human experience and that music education is most effective when it begins in early childhood, I will now outline the remainder of my discussion regarding music teaching in the French Immersion early primary classroom. In the next section, I will delineate what researchers have discovered regarding the effects of music learning on other areas of experience and education. Music has far-reaching implications for both intellectual and social development and there is a vast body of research on these topics. I will then discuss the specific case of classroom teachers engaging in music education with their students. While much of the research in this area has focussed on the deficits and insecurities of classroom teachers, there are also studies and treatises emphasizing the positive impacts these teachers can have on their students' musical learning. Next I will explore some central components of music learning in early childhood, namely the babble stage, diversity of musical repertoire, audiation, use of the singing voice, and steady beat. Finally, having reviewed the pertinent music education literature and outlined the various components of early primary music learning, I will introduce the new "La musique pour tous" website ([www.musiquepourtous.weebly.com](http://www.musiquepourtous.weebly.com)) and demonstrate how it relates to the research and to the music learning concepts discussed in the

preceding section. I will use the theoretical framework of Edwin Gordon's Music Learning Theory throughout the paper both in advocating for music education to begin in early childhood, and in presenting ideas and approaches which facilitate musical development within Gordon's framework.

### **Secondary Effects Of Music Learning**

There has been an extensive amount of research conducted in the area of the "secondary effects" of music education – the positive impacts that music learning has on other areas of life and other forms of learning. There have been several major literature reviews and research compilations in this area, including *Champions of change: The impact of the arts on learning* (Fiske, 1999), *Critical links: Learning in the arts and student academic and social development* (Deasy, 2002), *The nonmusical outcomes of music education: A review of the literature* (Wolff, 2004), and *The power of music: Its impact on the intellectual, social and personal development of children and young people* (Hallam, 2010).

### **Intellectual And Academic Development**

Reported herein are some of the major findings that have arisen from the research included in the above publications. In the areas of intellectual and academic development, students who participated in a Kodaly music training program saw an increase in spatial reasoning, reading tasks, motor development, abstract conceptual thinking, verbal responses, and improvisation and originality in play (Hurwitz, Wolff, Bortnick, & Kokas, 1975; Kalmar, 1982). Frances Rauscher, author of the famous "Mozart Effect" studies, reported that music listening can improve spatial-temporal performance at least temporarily, and that keyboard instruction can potentially have similar long-term effects on these cognitive abilities. (1994, 2000). Other studies have shown

positive links between music and memory (Bilhartz, 2000; Butzlaff, 2000). With older students, Gouzouasis, Guhn, and Kishor (2007) found an exciting predictive relationship between participation and achievement in high school music courses and academic success in some core academic subject areas. For Grade 11 students, high grades in music predict high grades in mathematics, English and science. Regarding the effects of music on literacy learning, there are numerous parallel skills involved in both music and reading including phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, orthographic awareness, cueing systems awareness, fluency, vocabulary acquisition, comprehension, and narrative skills (Darrow, 2008; McEwing, 2011).

Research in French Immersion classrooms has found many links between music and second-language learning. Both require the learner to discern between perceptually discrete elements and to become familiar with a system of organized structure and sequence. In fact, music and language learning share many neural areas, meaning that the same parts of the brain are implicated in both activities (Slevc, 2006.) Research has also found that music positively correlates with improved oral grammar and comprehension in a second language (Lowe, 1995).

### **Social-Emotional Development**

There have also been many studies addressing the effects of music education on social-emotional skills and social climate. Music education positively impacts classroom attitudes and behaviour (Gardiner, 2000). Students enjoy music activities and find them very motivating, leading to a decrease in behaviour challenges. Researchers have found a positive link between students who participate in music activities and higher self esteem (Rickard et al, 2013). When engaging in music activities, students are often invited to participate as a whole class, and this ‘doing-together’ can help bolster students’ confidence and lead to a greater sense of belief in self.

Music education has also been positively correlated with healthy relationships, social cohesion, social skills, empathy, respect and tolerance, cooperation, and problem-solving (Blandford & Duarte, 2004; Kim, 2004; Levine, 1997; Palmer, 2001; Peretz, 2005; Sawyer, 1991). As with many other subjects, when teaching music we are often also teaching turn-taking, sharing, creativity, flexibility, and supporting one-another. Studies of young children engaging in music have found links with positive mood and higher levels of positive experience (Custodero, 1998). That is to say, children tend to be happy when engaging in music, and enjoy music activities in which they can shine and engage in their true nature while making meaningful sounds and moving their bodies.

In a study exploring the community-building aspects of music-making, Maria Spychiger (1995) and her colleagues found that music activities emphasize cooperation versus competition, lead to a low tendency to exclude individuals, and increase positive social connectedness. Researchers have also found that a shared musical repertoire and shared musical experiences can lead to a stronger sense of community and unity (Mark, 1982). Classes who make music together see themselves as a community and not simply a random grouping of students and teacher(s).

### **Classroom Teachers Teaching Music**

Having explored many of the secondary impacts of music education, I will now address the fact that the majority of school districts in British Columbia do not have music specialists working in all schools. Classroom teachers are often entrusted with the responsibility of delivering the music curriculum. Many classroom teachers find this position intimidating, and report a lack of resources, knowledge, and music education training as obstacles to implementing a music education program (Russell-Bowie, 2009). There are, however, many advantages to classroom

teachers taking an active role in the musical education of their students, and these teachers are in a unique position when it comes to music instruction. Classroom teachers spend most of the school day with their students. They are able to provide students with many music activities throughout the day, and can easily tie music into the life, themes, and routines of the classroom (Mills, 1989). (Following up on this suggestion, the “La musique pour tous” website provides several simple songs that teachers can sing to bring music to such routines as practicing counting in French, transitioning to the carpet, and reminding ourselves about the expectations for polite listening.) Gouzouasis (1994) reiterates that music acquisition is dependent on adequate exposure to music, and that even more time than twice-weekly lessons with music specialists is ideal. Classroom teachers can play a vital role in reinforcing music learning; in fact, Gouzouasis goes so far as to suggest that “committed classroom teachers are a vital key” (p. 23). Armed with simple resources created for French Immersion early primary classroom teachers who don’t yet feel very confident teaching music, classroom teachers can take some first steps toward ensuring that all students receive an adequate amount of music instruction in childhood.

### **What Are You Waiting For?**

Music is a powerful and joyful addition to the primary French Immersion classroom. Children are naturally drawn to singing, rhythm, and movement, and making music with your students creates opportunities for community building, creativity, and unadulterated fun. As was previously mentioned, there are many advantages to including music activities in your practice, from improving second-language vocabulary and grammar to improving behaviour and positive mood in the classroom.

We may not all be experts in music, but as primary teachers, our capacity to bring out the best in our students is not due only to our knowledge of the subject matter. The content that constitutes the primary curriculum is fairly simple and well within the grasp of most adults, teachers or not. What sets us apart is our pedagogy – our ability to break down the skills our students must learn, to see where a student is currently working along the spectrum of learning, and to confidently guide them to the next step. And with the suggested lessons and “big ideas” contained within the “La musique pour tous” website ([www.musiquepourtous.weebly.com](http://www.musiquepourtous.weebly.com)), I am confident that you can add some music activities to your teaching repertoire, and that you and your students can reap the joyful results.

### **Where Do I Begin?**

You are hopefully now convinced of the value of including music teaching in your classroom practice. That said, where should you begin? What should be your focus? Music is a vast subject and brings to mind everything from singing together to playing instruments to reading music notation. What is the scope of music learning that is appropriate for early primary learners?

Luckily for anyone who may feel intimidated to try teaching music, the most important “big ideas” for kindergarten and grade one learners are few and they are simple. The British Columbia Ministry of Education identifies competencies, big ideas, and learning standards for arts education. This paper and the “La musique pour tous” website focus on those musical elements which are most important to young learners, and which can be successfully implemented by teachers who do not have a background in music or music theory.

First and most important, our job is to bring children into a practice of communal music-making and to establish or maintain a positive relationship with music and music learning. Musical experiences at the early primary level should be replete with fun and play.

### **The Babble Stage**

In terms of musical development, Edwin Gordon (previously mentioned above regarding his work in determining children's musical aptitude) found that there is a "babble" stage of music development similar to that experienced in language development (1988). Children often emerge from the babble stage by age 6 or 7, therefore many children in kindergarten and grade one classrooms are still in this period of musical maturation (Gouzouasis, 1982, Gordon, 1990). Our job as early primary music educators is to help all of our students to progress past this babble stage. Children have moved beyond this phase when they are able to consistently follow along to and (re)produce a steady beat (for example clapping their hands or tapping their knees in time), and use a singing voice to accurately sing tones or pitches in melodies (some children in the babble stage "sing" along with a regular speaking voice or keep their voices on the same note for the duration of a song.) Gordon also delineates stages of music development beyond the babble stage. For young primary music learners, music education should have an aural/oral focus. Children need to learn to "audiate" music (more on the concept of audiation later) by hearing it and singing it before they begin to assign labels to the various components of the music or read musical notation. This is good news for classroom teachers who may not have extensive background and knowledge in music theory. Children can and should eventually learn music notation, names for the various pitches (e.g. do, re, mi) and rhythmic durations (e.g. ta, ta, titi-ta), but this comes later. First and foremost, young learners need to hear music (aural) and to sing music (oral), and

they can focus on attaching labels and analyzing the various music components in a system of music theory afterward. In the beginning, it is developmentally and educationally sound to sing notes and speak rhythms on “neutral syllables” (“pa pa” or “la la”) for students to repeat, without adding names for the pitches or rhythm durations (Hedden, 2012).

### **A Rich Musical Environment**

How can we facilitate the musical development of all our students beyond the babble stage? Just as with language learning, children need a rich musical environment and exposure to many different kinds of music on a regular basis. A child learning to speak benefits from hearing as much speech as possible, listening to a wide range of vocabulary and structures, and being encouraged to participate and experiment often with their budding language skills; so it is with music (Levinowitz, 1992). In our current society, an overwhelming majority of “children’s music” is in a major tonality (some people might call it “happy” sounding) and has a two-beat feel (Gouzouasis, 1991). Ideally, children will be exposed to a wide variety of musical tonalities and meters. A good beginning for the classroom teacher is to expose children to songs in both major and minor modalities (again, some may perceive of these as songs in both “happy” and “sad” or “spooky” keys) and to songs with both a two- and a three-beat feel (a waltz is a well-known example of music with a three-beat feel.) The audio tracks included in the “La musique pour tous” website contain a mix of songs and activities in major and minor modalities, and with both a three- and a two-beat feel. Classroom teachers should also feel encouraged to play children music from a wide variety of styles and cultural origins during any music listening activities (for example a music listening centre or soft music during quiet time).

### **Audiation**

Perhaps Edwin Gordon's greatest contribution to music learning is the concept of audiation, or the ability to conceive of music in one's mind. Gordon explains that audiating is the act of hearing and conceptualizing music in one's head, whether audible music is present in the moment or not. Audiation is to music as thought is to language, therefore audiation is a fundamental ability if we are to produce meaningful musical utterances (1999). In the context of singing, we can think of audiation as "singing in our head." Audiation is a powerful tool for learning music, and it is very important for students to be able to hear music in their heads. We audiate when we sing, listen to music, play an instrument, compose new music, improvise and play with music, notate music we hear or think, and read musical notation. The "La musique pour tous" website provides many activities which help develop audiation abilities, including leaving words out of songs when singing so that students can focus on hearing the words, notes and rhythms in their heads.

### **The Singing Voice**

Another key role of the early primary teacher is to help children learn to use their singing voice. Some children at the kindergarten and grade one level still "sing" songs in a speaking voice; this is usually very easy to hear and identify, as their lower speaking voice contrasts with the higher singing voices being used by their peers. One reason for this habit may be that the child is being asked to sing outside of their comfortable singing range. For most young children, middle c is a dividing point between the speaking register (lower) and the singing register (higher). Therefore, especially for male teachers or for women who (like the author) would default to singing lower, we can pitch songs and singing activities slightly higher (above middle c) to help children to find and use their singing voices (Gouzouasis & Taggart, 1995). Male teachers may

wish to sing in “falsetto” to better represent the notes the children are meant to sing. The recordings on the “La musique pour tous” website pitch the songs and activities in a comfortable range for most young singers, to facilitate the use of their singing voice.

### **The Steady Beat**

The other major area of music development for young learners is steady beat. This is a very simple concept and one that can be easily developed without any elaborate activities or specialized knowledge. Simply drawing students’ attention to the steady beat, even before we name the concept as such, can accomplish the task (engaging in the extra step of naming the steady beat will however help students to combine their thinking with their kinaesthetic experience and further solidify their learning.) Encourage students to tap on their knees along to the steady beat of a song or poem. Hold hands and pulse the hands up and down along to the steady beat of a song while walking around in a circle. Even without engaging in specific rhythm activities to develop rhythm, classroom songs and poems can serve to help foster students’ sense of steady beat. Additionally, the “La musique pour tous” website contains recordings which invite students to recognize and play with the rhythmic elements of easy French poems.

Simple songs and music activities at the early primary level can be very effective. Even repeating a known song without the words, singing on an easy syllable like “pa pa pa” or “la la la” can help children to shift their focus away from the words of the song, and to concentrate more on using their singing voices to sing the correct notes (Gouzouasis, 1992). Classroom teachers who do not play an instrument need not feel that they are at a disadvantage; researchers have found that both accompanied and unaccompanied singing is educationally sound (Gouzou-

sis 1991). The accompaniment found on the website tracks may help those teachers who do not yet feel confident singing in tune when leading children in songs.

### **Music For All Students**

Teaching music is something we do for the benefit of all of our students. Our society seems to ascribe to an ill-founded myth that some children are simply “tone-deaf” or incapable of keeping a steady beat. The research shows that this is simply not the case. Even children with low musical aptitude - the innate ability to understand and create music explored by Edwin Gordon - can learn to sing in tune and to keep a steady beat (Levinowitz, 1992). What matters is that all children are given opportunities to practice using a singing voice and feeling the beat in the music they hear. As previously mentioned, these activities have the most impact when the children are younger than age nine and their music aptitude is still developing. After this age, music aptitude is fixed, but children may still use their potential to develop the ability to sing in tune and keep a steady beat. Research also demonstrates that tonal and rhythmic abilities are separate; that is, a child who cannot yet sing in key may be very proficient at keeping a steady beat, and vice versa (Gouzouasis, 1992). Too often we dismiss children as “non musical” or “tone-deaf” when in fact only one specific area of their musical development is lagging, or they have not yet had enough exposure and practice. In fact, even children with high natural music aptitude need exposure to music in order to help their innate abilities mature to the best of their potential (Gouzouasis & Taggart, 1995).

When many of us imagine music education, we picture xylophones and sheet music, and a large empty space in which children can move and dance. While music instruction is a varied field and of course does include these elements, beginning music learning centres on a few sim-

ple but very important skills that children need to learn in order to develop into confident and competent musicians. Reading (and writing) music can come later, as can transferring students' auidiating skills to instruments. What young students need most of all is a chance to develop their ability to "think musically," to find the steady beat, and to sing in tune. Classroom teachers can help students to develop these early foundational musical abilities, and the "La musique pour tous" website can help. By providing audio tracks as examples of how to "play" with easy melodies and short songs, offering suggestions for bringing attention to steady beat within the general classroom locale, and much more, this website is a rich resource for classroom teachers who wish to offer their students the tremendous gift of music education.

### **The Website - La musique pour tous**

What is included in the "La musique pour tous" website? ([www.musiquepourtous.weebly.com](http://www.musiquepourtous.weebly.com)) First, there is a welcome section ("accueil") which makes it clear that simple but effective music learning experiences are within the grasp of all classroom teachers.

Next is a rationale section ("pourquoi enseigner la musique?") which includes both this paper and a one-page summary in French and English of the secondary effects of music learning for young children, including references for credence and further reading. It is my hope that French Immersion primary classroom teachers will share this summary with other teachers, parents, and administrators, and in so-doing, take on an active role in not only music education but in music education advocacy as well.

After the rationale is a section explaining some big ideas for early primary music education ("les grandes idées de musique"). Here I explain in simple terms the concepts of auidiation, steady beat, and singing voice ("l'auidiation, la pulsation, et la voix à chanter.") I provide one or

two examples of how to highlight and develop these abilities, and I point the reader to lesson plans which further reinforce these skills. The explanations and lesson plans are all geared toward the classroom teacher without a background in music or music theory, and the lesson plans are supported by visuals and audio recordings and accompaniments to facilitate singing in key.

The next section provides ideas for teaching new songs to students (“apprendre des nouvelles chansons”) and includes both whole song and rote learning models. Here I tie the learning modes into Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligences, and suggest ways in which different approaches facilitate learning for a variety of learning styles (1983).

Next is an area offering suggestions for using music duotangs in the classroom. In this section, I include lyric sheets with some printed music and melody contouring, to support visual learners and help tie music into literacy learning as well. Further, I explain how the music duotang can become a powerful tool for sharing classroom repertoire with families, thereby involving families in both music learning and music education advocacy.

In the next section of the website are the lesson plans which provide teachers with simple and specific instructions to go beyond just learning songs and promote musical skill development.

The tab entitled “écoute” (listen) contains the audio recordings. Here there are several songs with both vocal and instrumental versions, to encourage children to carry the tunes themselves and hear themselves sing in order to promote self-awareness and if needed, self-correction. The recordings provide rich accompaniments including piano, guitar, podorythmie (French-Canadian foot percussion) and violin. There are also several recordings which model how to play with a song, for example singing a verse or chorus on a neutral syllable (pa pa or la la), or

singing tonal patterns for students to repeat. Finally, there are simple vocal versions of songs and poems included in the lessons, to facilitate teachers' learning of the songs.

It is my sincere hope that the "La musique pour tous" website will help to fill a gap in the resources available and used by French Immersion classroom teachers at the early primary level, and will begin to provide these teachers with the confidence and competence to include some music teaching in their practice. Music is clearly an important consideration in the education of young children, and inviting our students into a community of music is one of the greatest gifts we can give them.

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**Suggested websites for further research and resources:**

Charlotte Diamond [charlottediamond.com](http://charlottediamond.com) Charlotte Diamond is an award-winning bilingual Canadian children's musician whose website offers music teaching resources in French, including both recorded and print materials.

La musique pour tous [www.musiquepourtous.weebly.com](http://www.musiquepourtous.weebly.com) Music teaching resources for the French Immersion early primary classroom. This is the website discussed in this paper.

Music Together [www.musictogether.com](http://www.musictogether.com) Music Together is a research-based music learning program and their website contains links to research in many areas of childhood music development.

The Gordon Institute for Music Learning [www.giml.org](http://www.giml.org) This website is dedicated to advancing research in music education by Edwin Gordon (mentioned throughout this paper) and advancing music understanding through audiation.

Using manipulatives in the k-3 general music classroom [www.musicmanipulatives.weebly.com](http://www.musicmanipulatives.weebly.com) This website by Stephanie Olson offers straight-forward and thorough instructions for creating hands-on manipulatives to enrich your music teaching and reach kinaesthetic learners. The materials for pitch and for duration/rhythm help in developing these central concepts for kindergarten and grade one learners.

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