

Fostering Literacy Skills Through Authentic Integration in K-8 Music Classrooms

Journal of General Music Education
2024, Vol. 38(1) 28–33
© National Association for
Music Education 2024
DOI: 10.1177/127527646241265674
journals.sagepub.com/home/gmt



Daniel C. Johnson¹, Kristin Harney²,
Amorette B. Languell-Pudelka³, and Caroline Kanzler⁴

Abstract

The natural rhythm and inflection of language offer multiple and authentic ways for music teachers to connect their curriculum with learning in English Language Arts (ELA). While still addressing the National Core Arts Standards, music teachers can connect with ELA skills such as reading, writing, and speaking-listening. In this article, we explore these interdisciplinary intersections and suggest ways in which music teachers can meaningfully and effectively design instruction for authentic integration throughout the K-8 grades. Our focus is to promote integrated music education as a form of professional learning for music teachers. By designing multimodal activities that focus on standards-based learning outcomes, they can also support student success across the curriculum.

Keywords

music education, elementary general music, secondary general music, language development

The rhythm and inflection of language are inherently musical and offer multiple authentic ways to connect with music standards. This article offers practical examples of how music teachers can make these connections with English Language Arts (ELA) standards while presenting their own music curricula. Specifically, they can address the three well-established skills of Reading, Writing, and Speaking-Listening through the four National Core Arts Standards (NCAS): Creating, Performing, Responding, and Connecting (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards [NCCAS], 2015).

Examining these interdisciplinary intersections provides ways in which music teachers can meaningfully and effectively design instruction that integrates literacy skills throughout the K-8 grades. The resulting contributions advance the Professional Learning and Growth Cornerstone of the 2022 Strategic Plan (National Association for Music Education [NAfME]) by promoting new interdisciplinary understandings and effective cross-curricular practices. This article also offers ways to increase teachers' comfort level for integrating music with other subject areas, which is often a barrier to successful integrated instruction (Johnson et al., 2021, 2022). In addition, this interdisciplinary exploration highlights the artistic process of connecting which is embedded and therefore often overlooked as part of the other three NCAS (Shuler et al., 2014).

Standards-Based Connections Between Music and ELA

Music classes do not exist to serve the language arts curriculum. Instead authentic interdisciplinary lessons support standards-based learning in each content area. In lessons integrating music and language arts, the NCAS (NCCAS, 2015) serve as guidelines for musical experiences and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for ELA (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) provide the foundation for language arts experiences. A cursory review of the two sets of standards does not reveal their deep connections. The NCAS framework divides musical skills and understandings according to four overarching processes: Creating, Performing, Responding, and Connecting and the CCSS for ELA categorize student learning according to three different principal themes:

¹University of North Carolina Wilmington, USA

²Montana State University, Bozeman, USA

³Northern Michigan University, Marquette, USA

⁴Belville Elementary School, Leland, NC, USA

Corresponding Author:

Daniel C. Johnson, Department of Music, University of North Carolina Wilmington, 601 S. College Road, Wilmington, NC 28403, USA.

Email: johnsond@uncw.edu

Reading, Writing, and Speaking-Listening. By more closely examining the standards, however, many rich intersections between concepts and processes become apparent.

Imagine students reading a text as they focus on key ideas and details (CCSS.ELA-Reading.R.1). They might search for central ideas, analyze how various themes develop, or explore interactions between characters. Now imagine those same students' excitement as they also analyze a song (NCAS.MUSIC-Responding.Re7). Students could examine ways that various elements of music contribute to the piece (melody, rhythm, harmony, dynamics, articulations, etc.); they could analyze how melodic themes develop or explore interactions between instruments. The ELA Reading standards call for students to interpret meaning and analyze word choice and structure within texts. These objectives exactly align with the music responding standards which invite students to interpret intent and meaning in musical works.

Some ELA standards offer obvious opportunities for music integration. For example, CCSS:ELA-Writing.W8 states that students will "gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources" CCSS:ELA-Speaking-Listening. SL2 and SL5 further elaborate that students will "integrate and evaluate" digital information and "use digital media to enhance understanding" when presenting. Audio and video recordings of musical performances directly fit these tasks. Within the ELA Writing standards, students work to convey complete ideas and information clearly, use well-chosen details, and write well-structured event sequences (CCSS.ELA-Writing.W4, W5, and W6). They utilize a process involving planning, revising, editing, and rewriting. Similarly, within the music Creating standards, students generate and conceptualize musical ideas, organize and write their ideas down, and work to refine and complete compositions and improvisations (NCAS.MUSIC-Creating.Cr.1; Cr.2; Cr.3).

Example Lesson Ideas and Activities

This section provides example lesson ideas that connect music with a range of literacy skills from K-8 ELA curricula. These ideas also incorporate elements of drama, technology, and creativity to increase student engagement. For example, teachers can engage students in ELA lessons through the use of musical elements that occur naturally in speech. The prosodic and expressive elements of language have the power to communicate emphasis and expression through melody, rhythm, beat, tempo, cadence, form, accent, and dynamics. From an elemental perspective, language provides ways to build rhythmic patterns and ostinati from building blocks found in the natural cadence of speech (Keetman, 1974). Rhymes, chants, poems, and riddles are all opportunities

for expressive speech that offers a foundation to develop concepts in melody and other musical elements (Frazee, 2006). More specifically, English is a stress-timed language; more important words last longer, at a louder volume, and/or at a higher pitch. All three ways to stress more important content words relate to the corresponding musical elements of rhythm, dynamics, and melody, respectively. In spoken and written language, function words have a supportive role and are unstressed. They therefore have shorter durations, are softer, and have lower pitches.

To practice the language skills of speaking and reading, for example, students could practice choral reading of poetry with a steady beat, accenting stressed syllables in rhythm. Another example activity is Reader's Theater, in which actors focus on reading the script dramatically. Instead of using costumes, props, or scenery, they rely on vocal inflections to express the meaning of the text. Rehearsing and performing or sharing the script allows for students to develop fluency, build vocabulary, and enhance comprehension. Theatrically, the students also may become the characters allowing them to understand the plot or storyline on an experiential level. In addition to the intrapersonal skill of becoming their character, students can also develop interpersonal intelligence by exploring the characters' interactions. As shown in Table 1, there are many opportunities for authentic, two-way connections between music and ELA that foster interdisciplinary skill development. Among the musical competencies that IAE lessons reinforce and enrich are creating and presenting musical ideas; performing with technical and expressive skill; the analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic patterns; and reinforcing understandings of musical works within their specific and varied contexts.

Grades K-2 Example Lesson: Goldilocks and the Three Bears

Standards:

- CCSS.ELA-Reading.R.3: Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text
- *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3 With prompting and support, identify characters, settings, and major events in a story.*
- \NCAS.MUSIC-Creating.Cr.2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work
- NCAS.MUSIC-Responding.Re.8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work

In this K-2 lesson, students make connections between characters from the story and the characteristic sounds of

Table 1. Authentic Standards-Based Connections.

Artistic processes	ELA skills	Example activities
Performing	Reading; speaking-listening	Students perform a poem together through choral reading, keeping a steady beat, accenting stressed syllables in rhythm, and maintaining a consistent tempo.
Creating; responding	Reading; writing	Students examine song lyrics as poetry, analyzing the text for structure, rhyme, and literary devices; next, students create new lyrics that express a personal position and align with the structure and rhyme scheme of the original song.
Performing	Speaking-listening	Students compare the way sounds come together to make words and pitches combine to make tunes; while speaking, students use vocal inflection, volume, and stress to effectively convey their intent; while singing, students incorporate varied dynamics, articulations, and registers.
Responding	Writing	Students journal to record their perceptions about music, writing descriptions of various musical excerpts to show their attention to specific musical elements (e.g., melody, rhythm, instrumentation, style, texture).
Responding; connecting; creating	Speaking-listening	Students show comprehension of action words (verbs) by demonstrating with expressive locomotor motions or improvising with nonlocomotor body percussion.
Creating; performing	Writing	Students work in collaborative groups to explore mood through songwriting, developing lyrics and creating a musical accompaniment to reflect a given setting or mood; they consider word choice, vocabulary, dynamics, tempo, and sound quality to create pieces using spoken word and “found sound” such as pencils tapped on a desk, or jangling keys.
Performing	Speaking-listening	Students read aloud while playing instruments to reinforce the rhythm of chants and poems.
Performing; responding	Speaking-listening	Students listen to the lyrics of an unfamiliar song, spoken as a poem. After analyzing meaning and identifying the storyteller’s point of view, students listen to a recording of the song, then describe how the recording changed their original perceptions of the lyrics.
Connecting; responding	Speaking-listening; writing	Students explore connections between pitch discrimination and the differentiation of sounds in speech to increase phonemic awareness; students reproduce pitches with singing voices and various sound effects such as buzzes, whispers, and clicks with speaking voices; in writing, students describe differences between various sounds utilizing descriptive vocabulary.
Connecting	Reading; speaking-listening	Students compare the experience of closely listening to music and completing a close reading of a text; following a close reading of a short story excerpt, students select a musical example that represents a “best fit” based on style, meaning, and context, then explain their choice.
Responding	Reading	Music and written texts can both serve as discussion prompts. Through the analysis of songs and stories, students explore common concepts such as climax and resolution, perspective, and theme; they explore how sounds combine to make words and pitches come together to make melodies.

musical instruments. First read, then discuss the story “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” Guide a review of the story, including the setting, characters, and sequence of major events. Next, lead students to connect musical instruments (e.g., xylophones, Boomwhackers, or drums) to characters in the story. Model playing each instrument and facilitate student exploration, then ask students to help analyze and arrange the instruments into four groups by sound and size (lowest/largest to highest/smallest). Direct students to assign one group of instruments to each character based on their size/sound and role in the story. A typical arrangement from lowest/largest to highest/

smallest is (a) Papa Bear; (b) Mama Bear; (c) Baby Bear; and (d) Goldilocks. Finally, students play instruments for the characters, improvising to show their character’s actions when the teacher reads the story aloud.

Grades 3-5 Example Lesson: Homophones and Drumming

Standards:

- CCSS.ELA-Reading.R.4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including

Pears or Pairs? A Traditional Riddle

Twelve pairs hang - ing high. Twelve knights rid - ing by.

5

Each knight took a pear and al - so left a doz - en there. How can this be?

Figure 1. Pears or pairs? A traditional riddle.

determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning and tone

- CCSS.ELA-Speaking-Listening.SL.2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally
- NCAS.MUSIC-Responding.Re.7: Perceive and analyze artistic work
- NCAS.MUSIC-Performing.Pr.6: Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work

In this grade 3–5 lesson, students solve a traditional riddle using the homophones “pears” and “pairs.”

Twelve pairs hanging high. Twelve knights riding by.

Each knight took a pear and also left a dozen there.

How can this be?

Figure 1 shows the rhythm of the words that students say rhythmically to reinforce steady beat and beat subdivision needed for successful choral reading and group drumming.

After solving the riddle, students list other homophones and discuss their meanings. Prepare the class to say the homophone riddle in rhythm by having the students echo phrase by phrase. Once students can say the whole riddle together as a class (a form of choral reading), present a drum accompaniment that follows exactly the rhythm of the text, with one tap of the drum for each syllable. Students first practice this rhythm with body percussion (patting on their laps, clapping, snapping their

fingers, and/or stomping their feet). Once successful, students take turns transferring the rhythm to conga drum, hand drums, or other available percussion (e.g., shakers, tambourines, or rhythm sticks) during the chanting of the riddle.

Grades 6–8 Example Lesson: Poetry and SoundTrap Composing

Standards:

- CCSS.ELA-Writing.W3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences
- CCSS.ELA-Writing.W4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience
- NCAS.MUSIC-Creating.Cr.3: Refine and complete artistic work
- NCAS.MUSIC-Connecting.Cn10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art

In this grade 6-8 unit, appropriate for two or three lessons, students write a short poem and compose music to accompany their work using SoundTrap (www.soundtrap.com). This free online recording studio offers a variety of composition options. Students and teachers can import audio files, create beat patterns, search through a free database of sound and beat loops, add individual instrument sounds, play keyboard melodies, and collaborate with others. With the teacher’s guidance, students follow

Table 2. IAE Resources.

Resource	Publisher/URL	Brief description
Barrett (2023) <i>Seeking connections: An interdisciplinary perspective on music teaching and learning</i>	Oxford University Press	Book with thoughtful principles, models, and instructional strategies inviting teachers and students to engage in expansive, interdisciplinary relationships with music
Barrett and Veblen (2018) <i>Meaningful connections in a comprehensive approach to the music curriculum</i>	Oxford University Press	A book chapter defining key terms and explaining conceptual foundations that support an interdisciplinary approach to teaching music
Harney (2020) <i>Integrating music across the elementary curriculum</i>	Oxford University Press	Book with detailed, practical ideas and examples, including full lesson plans and over 100 teaching ideas and strategies; addresses national standards with tables referencing specific standards for each lesson and activity
Institute for Arts Integration and STEAM (2024) <i>Free Resources</i>	https://artsintegration.com/	Accredited and research-based website offering online PD—free teacher resources (guidebooks, lesson plans, and masterclasses) and paid coursework, conferences, and certification as an arts integration specialist
Kennedy Center Digital Resources Library (2021) <i>Digital Resources Library</i>	https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/	Website with lesson plans and digital resources (videos, podcasts, performances, and articles) that incorporate best practices for the classroom and tools to infuse the arts across the curriculum and engage all learners
McDonald and Fisher (2006) <i>Teaching literacy through the arts</i>	Guilford Press	Book with resources, strategies, and activities to build student literacy skills (e.g., phonemic awareness, fluency, and written and oral expression).

directions to write an original poem with text or ideas that relate to sound (suggested formats are haiku, cinquain, limerick, and free verse). The teacher then leads students to create a soundscape for their poem by first exploring the prerecorded sound and beat loops in SoundTrap. Alternatively, students can import audio clips or record their own sounds and assemble a soundtrack to accompany their poem. Students share their musical compositions with the class and reflect on the ways their musical creations enhance the effect of the written word.

For further IAE resources, see Table 2. These include examples from print and electronic repositories.

Conclusion

Authentic integrated education involves multimodal activities that focus on standards and learning outcomes across multiple disciplines. At their core, both music and ELA emphasize human expression. Narratives, whether taking the form of a story, song, poem, or symphony, communicate information, and reveal emotions. Exploring musical content in conjunction with literary works encourages students to experience a wide variety of texts, express personal positions, and empathize with other points of view. In addition to advancing music teachers' professional learning (NAfME,

2022), integrated music education also fosters a range of benefits for K-8 students including: critical and abstract thinking skills, engagement and on-task behaviors, attitude, and attendance (Barrett et al., 1997; Harney, 2020; Noblit et al., 2009).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Daniel C. Johnson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9699-3112>

References

- Barrett, J. R. (2023). *Seeking connections: An interdisciplinary perspective on music teaching and learning*. Oxford University Press.
- Barrett, J., McCoy, C., & Veblen, K. (1997). *Sound ways of knowing: Music in the interdisciplinary classroom*. Schirmer.

- Barrett, J. R., & Veblen, K. K. (2018). Meaningful connections in a comprehensive approach to the music curriculum. In G. E. McPherson & G. F. Welch (Eds.), *Music and music education in people's lives: An Oxford handbook of music education* (vol. 2, pp. 141–159). Oxford University Press.
- Frazee, J. (2006). *Orff Schulwerk today: Nurturing musical expression and understanding*. Schott.
- Harney, K. (2020). *Integrating music across the elementary curriculum*. Oxford University Press.
- Institute for Arts Integration and STEAM. (2024). *Institute for Arts Integration and STEAM free resources*. <https://artsintegration.com/>
- Johnson, D. C., Harney, K., & Languell, A. B. (2021). Integrated music education in elementary classrooms: Music and grade-level teacher perspectives and practices. *Qualitative Research in Music Education*, 3(1), 99–145.
- Johnson, D. C., Harney, K., Languell, A. B., & Kanzler, C. (2022). Integrated music education perspectives and practices of middle school music, English, and science teachers. *Qualitative Research in Music Education*, 4(1), 105–145.
- Keetman, G. (1974). *Elementaria: First acquaintance with Orff-Schulwerk* (M. Murray, Trans.). Schott.
- Kennedy Center (2021). *Kennedy Center Education*. <https://www.kennedy-center.org/education>
- McDonald, N. L., & Fisher, D. (2006). *Teaching literacy through the arts*. Guilford Press.
- National Association for Music Education. (2022, September 27). *Strategic plan*. <https://nafme.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/NAfME-2022-Strategic-Plan.pdf>
- National Coalition for Core Arts Standards. (2015). *National Core Arts Standards*. State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education.
- National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010. *Common Core State Standards: English language arts*. Author.
- Noblit, G., Corbett, D., Wilson, B., & McKinney, M. (2009). *Creating and sustaining arts-based school reform: The A+ schools program*. Routledge.
- Shuler, S. C., Norgaard, M., & Blakeslee, M. J. (2014). The new national standards for music educators. *Music Educators Journal*, 101(1), 41–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432114540120>

Author Biographies

Daniel C. Johnson, PhD, is Professor and Music Education Coordinator at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. In addition to integrated arts education, his teaching and research interests include musical thinking and teachers' professional development.

Kristin Harney, DMA, is Music Education Coordinator and Associate Professor of Music Education at Montana State University. Her research interests include music integration in the elementary curriculum, teacher education, and professional development for teachers.

Amorette B. Languell-Pudelka, PhD, is Associate Professor and Coordinator of Music Education at Northern Michigan University. In addition to integrated music education for K-8 teachers, her teaching and research interests include preservice teacher preparation, music theory, and ear training.

Caroline Kanzler, MMEd, is a National Board-Certified Teacher with 19 years of experience teaching general music and chorus in grades K-8. She is currently teaching at Belville Elementary School in Leland, North Carolina.