Background Classical Music in a First Grade Writer's Workshop

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Background Classical Music in a First Grade Writer's Workshop

By

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Background Classical Music in a First Grade Writer’s Workshop

by

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Chapter One: Introduction

Background

Can music in the classroom really make a difference? As my students entered into my classroom last year, I would play a CD by Glen Colton just loud enough to hear but soft enough for them to concentrate on their morning work. During the Christmas holiday, I would play a few Christmas records while they were working quietly on their assignments. Whenever music played in my classroom, the atmosphere changed. It was a positive change and created a sense of calmness, happiness, and created a different mood. Was this just my imagination or did the effects of music truly impact their learning?

In our school district, there has been a major emphasis placed on a well-balanced literacy program. My colleagues and I follow a well-balanced literacy program, which contains the following components: read aloud, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, shared writing, interactive writing, guided writing, and independent writing. The public school at which I have been employed as a first grade teacher has been implementing these components into the first grade curriculum. The first grade teachers have been participating in extensive on and off site training seminars and conferences for a number of years. We have found that the independent writing component is one of the most complex components to implement.

The most common difficulties expressed by the first grade teachers include high noise level, short attention span, too many children calling out for assistance and
students being off task. We were all eager to implement the balanced literacy program from the onset of the new school year; however, we were still quite uncertain as to how to deal with the high noise level and the children’s lack of on-task behaviors.

The independent writing component has three different parts which is based on Lucy Calkins’s (Calkins, 1986) research in teaching writing: 1. The mini-lesson. 2. The actual independent writing activity and 3. Sharing time. In the mini-lesson, the entire class gathers on the floor in a designated “meeting” area for a ten-minute lesson. The mini-lesson consists of either a review of the previous learned writing objectives or a new writing objective. When the students engage in independent writing, they take their seats and are instructed to write quietly for twenty minutes in their own personal monthly journals. The last piece is sharing time. The entire class gathers on the floor for the final ten minutes of the writing period. A few children are given the opportunity to share their writing with the class. These journals must “M.S.V” - Make sense, Sound right and Visually look right. They read their journals, answer questions about their entries or ask for help.

Rationale

In an attempt to determine my focus of my thesis, I was taken back to the uncertainties of my independent writing time. What did I want to study and research? How could I find a way to make independent writing more successful for my first graders? Music (especially slow tempo classical music) might be able to serve this
purpose of having a productive balanced literacy program. Could classical music really have that much of an impact on their writing and behavior?

Besides being calming and increasing attention span, certain types of classical music can be very powerful in the creative process. Colin Rose and Malcolm J. Nicholl, in their book “Accelerated Learning for the 21st Century,” tell how Albert Einstein and Charles Schultz have used music for inspiration (Rose & Nicholl, 1997).

Albert Einstein’s solution to his struggles with a complicated formula was to pick up the violin, an instrument he began playing at the age of six, and play Beethoven and Mozart sonatas. Einstein’s oldest son remembered that “Whenever he felt that he would come to the end of the road or into a difficult situation in his work, he would take refuge in music, and that would usually resolve all his difficulties” (Lawrence, 2001 p.2-3).

Cartoonist Charles Schultz credits music as the inspiration behind many of his insights that came to life through Charlie Brown, Lucy, and Snoopy, in one of the world’s most famous cartoon strips- Peanuts. Schultz described going to a concert and said “your mind begins to travel from one thing to another and all of a sudden you’re inspired by music by the emotion and from that I received some of my very best ideas” (Lawrence, 2001 p.3-4).

First grade students find it difficult to put their feelings and thoughts onto paper. Not only is it a challenge with spelling sight words, but also making the sentence structure fit into a particular model. This can be very frustrating to the
students who are emerging writers. Maybe being inspired by music, like Einstein and Schultz found, would inspire the students as well.

First grade students always seemed to look forward to going to music class (offered twice a week for 30 minutes). The students appeared to enjoy the class and de-stressed from their daily classroom assignments and lessons. They left their difficulties and challenges behind and focused on the way the music made them feel at that moment.

Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to study how listening to background classical music can impact students’ engagement, motivation and behavior during first grade writer’s workshop. Listening to classical music while writing should not only motivate them to do their best but also encourage them to become better writers. Music can also be very relaxing to improve physical coordination and lower frustration levels to allow manual tasks performed effectively and efficiently.

I also wanted to ask the questions; How does listening to slow tempo classical music during independent writing influence children’s on-task performance? Will the students be on task and be so focused that they might not want the session to end? Do they stay in their seats, and are bathroom breaks diminished?

I believed that performing this research in my classroom would help me refine my teaching abilities. This was a purposeful study to see if classical music truly had an impact on students’ performance and behavior. This was a successful means to enhance first grade writing and I am going to purchase numerous classical
music CD's and implement it into my curriculum. I can now provide a more productive and enjoyable atmosphere for all my students. I analyzed the data and shared my findings with my principal and colleagues.

Definition of Terms

Classic Music- Traditional genre of music. The word “classical” refers to works by composers such as Bach, Beethoven, or Mozart. Classical music has a complex musical structure. Young children can pick out that structure and even recognize classical music selections they have heard before (Bales, 1998).

Writer's Workshop- Designated period of time, which includes an interdisciplinary writing technique, which can build students’ fluency in writing through continuous, repeated exposure to the process of writing. Teachers can introduce elements of Writer's Workshop at any elementary grade level. Ideally, however, the process begins in Kindergarten. This can consist of a block of time that is dedicated to drafts, conferences, editing and publishing (Calkins, 1986).

Study Approach

My plan of action was to research the impact classical music had on a first grade Writer’s Workshop, focusing on students’ behavior, engagement and motivation. This study included a classical music CD by the composer Mozart and a group of first grade students. The music was played in the CD player located in the classroom while the students were engaged in Writer’s Workshop. My nineteen potential students, with their assent and parental consent, took part in this study. My
study was based on a five-week period, five days a week for 30-35 minutes. As the students were engaged in their writing journals, after a ten-minute instructional lesson, I observed and took field notes during this independent time. With a clipboard in hand, I walked around and collected the data throughout the study. Students also participated in a pre- and post-questionnaire, which helped me learn more about their views, opinions, and interest in classical music while writing in their journals. Once a week, I facilitated a class discussion with all students. This provided immediate feedback on the students’ perceptions of the background classical music.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

In this section, I will discuss studies that supply current research in the field of background classical music how it can impact students. The areas addressed include: 1) Music and brain development, 2) Background music and its impact, 3) Writing process and the developmental stages of beginning writing, 4) Linguistic intelligence in writing, and 5) Music in conjunction with writing. This literature review will provide evidence of the importance of background classical music in the classrooms.

Music and Brain Development

Exposing children to classical music in an educational setting is often a topic for debate. It has been researched numerous times in an effort to find out its actual positive and or negative effects on the overall learning process. Music is much more than just a diversion for a child. A lot of research shows that rhythm and melody help spark memory, imagination, language skills, reasoning ability, behavior, and motivation.

The phrase “the Mozart Effect” has been popularized by the media and is used to describe any situation in which music has a positive effect on comprehension or behavior. “The Mozart Effect” refers specifically to a 1993 research finding by Frances Rauscher, Gordon Shaw and Katherine Ky and published in the journal Nature. The scientists found that 36 college students who, after listening to 10 minutes of a musical piece from Mozart, performed higher on a spatial-temporal task than after they listened to relaxation instructions or silence. The media reported this
fascinating research as “Mozart makes you smarter” (pg. 611). The Mozart Effect was studied only in adults, lasted only for a few minutes and was found only for spatial temporal reasoning. However, the finding has since started an industry that includes books, CDs and websites claiming that listening to classical music can make children more intelligent, as well as having a positive impact on their behavior and motivation for the task at hand. The scientific debate (not to mention the popular confusion surrounding the Mozart Effect) has given rise to numerous misunderstanding for teachers and parents. We wonder: “Should my students (children) even bother listening to classical music starting at a young age?”

While the growth and development of young children has long been an interesting topic of study, the brain itself has been an object of fascination and speculation for several centuries (Mitchell, 2002). In recent years, we’ve learned a lot about how the brain develops. Babies are born with billions of brain cells. During the first years of life, those brain cells form connections with other brain cells. Over time, the connections we use regularly become stronger. Children who grow up listening to music develop strong music-related connections (Bales, 1998). Some of these music pathways actually affect the way we think. Technological advances in the last decade or so have allowed neuroscientists to study the living brain. This means we know much more about how children react to stimuli and what parts of the brain do the processing (Mitchell, 2002).

The human brain develops primarily in the first decade, with especially rapid increases in the first three years of life. Brain capacity (including the structure,
complexity and flexibility of the brain) is the basis for learning and is developed through responsive, nurturing human interactions (Mitchell, 2002). Every experience we encounter has the potential for influencing brain development.

One way to understand how music can impact students in different ways is to better understand how the brain responds to music. A clearer understanding of how music is visible in the electrical activity of the brain is an initial step in developing better instructional strategies for teachers who might use music in the classroom (Weinberger, 1998). Educators might benefit from the understanding of how Mozart and other music may affect the functioning of the human mind and the reactions to the music when it is played in the classroom.

When we listen to music and its sounds, electrical surges are sent through the brain through neuronal networks. The auditory process occurs by the inner ear, the brain stem (with at least four switch stations) and the thalamus (with its function of data transmission or suppression) to the primary auditory cortex (on the temporal lobe) as well as to the secondary cortices (arranged in a half circle around the primary cortex). Increasingly complex data analyses and parallel data handling processes take place simultaneously (Pape, 2005). Different brain regions handle the same data, with a higher involvement of left or right hemisphere respectively.

Classical Music is referred to as a traditional genre of music. The word “classical” refers to works by composers such as Mozart, Bach, or Beethoven. Classical music has a complex musical structure. Certain rhythms and beats stimulate particular responses within the brain. Classical music pieces have clarity, elegance,
and transparency. They can improve concentration, memory, and spatial perception (Campbell, 1997). Young children can pick out that structure and even recognize classical music selections they have heard before (Bales, 1998).

Research conducted by Savan (1999) supports the idea that using Mozart as background music promotes learning. The study showed that when students who had special educational needs, emotional problems, and behavioral difficulties listened to Mozart during a science lesson, there was a significant change in physiological boundaries and an increase in positive behavior. When all else fails with special needs children, perhaps the best thing to do is try a new creative approach; for example, listening to classical music during the school day.

Selecting a musical choice CD all depends on what the students are engaged in. If the students are learning, concentrating, and thinking, the music should be at 50-60 b.p.m. (beats per minute). If the students are relaxing and de-stressing, the music should be at 30-60 b.p.m. If the students are engaged in creative work and inspiration, the music is at 60-90 b.p.m. (Lawrence, 2001).

Certain movements in the classical musical compositions have a slow tempo of about 60 beats a minute, similar to the pace of the human heart at rest (Mulliken, 1985). It is thought that listening to this music reduces the heart rate and blood pressure, thereby eliminating student anxiety.

Playing any music at an excessive volume can be very distracting. Keeping the volume low will still allow the teacher the ability to speak at a conversational level without raising his or her voice. The music will be in the background creating a
filter for unwanted noise in the classroom. This creates the body at a relaxed, mind alert state (Lawrence, 2001).

Background Music and its Impact

Background music is any music played while the listener’s attention is focused on a task or activity. It is overly abundant in our everyday lives. It has been introduced in many of the places that we as Americans venture to—grocery stores, restaurants, and shopping malls. It is frequently playing in doctors’ offices to relax or calm patients. We have in turn become immune to the fact that it is happening. Music is an instrumental part of our everyday routine and although in some situations it may be thought of as a distraction, it does for the most part, provides a welcoming feeling when you hear it. Some students even claim that they are able to study and learn more effectively with music in the background (Radocy & Boyle, 1988).

Listening to background music helps build music-related pathways in the brain. Music can have positive effects on our moods that may make learning easier. It can also offer great opportunities for expression and communication for creativity and group cooperation. Music can enhance learning and intellectual development as well (Weinberger, 1998).

One study examined the effects of background music and relaxation on the reading performance of third-grade students (Carlson, 2004). The students sat in a vibroacoustic music chair (which allowed students to feel the vibrations of the music) while they completed the reading-based tasks. The results of the study showed a statistically significant positive impact for both sight-word recognition and reading
comprehension. The research also stated that all students who were reading below grade level at the beginning of the study improved their performance to grade level or higher.

In another study (Anderson, 2000), researchers investigated the effects of background music on spelling word retention of elementary school students. They found that spelling test scores and report card grades improved after listening to background music. They concluded that the music allowed the students to relax, concentrate and visualize the spelling words.

Hallman and Price (1998) researched the effect of background instrumental music on behavior and mathematics achievement of children with emotional and behavioral difficulties. All of the children in the study were between nine- and ten-years old and attended a school for children with emotional and behavioral difficulties. The researchers found that the music of a calming nature significantly improved math performance and significantly decreased rule-breaking behavior of the children. Additionally, the researchers found that the calming music had the greatest effect on children who had hyperactive behaviors.

Writing Process and the Developmental Stages of Beginning Writing

Children are born with the natural desire to communicate. In the early years, they label, mimic, experiment with spoken sentences, and engage in “verbal play”. As they develop and grow, there is a natural tendency for children to expand their love of language into written expression; first through random scribbles and symbols, and then with specific words and sentences.
When they enter school, they know a hand full of letters and they are writing earlier than we ever imagined (Calkins, 1986). They will notice the written language everywhere- in songs, calendars, stories, labels, and poems. Learning to write will begin with them knowing they are true writers.

Successful writing requires four key elements: 1. the desire to say something, 2. the vocabulary to say it, 3. the structure with which to write it, 4. and the ability to make words (Fitzpatrick, 1999). Current efforts to teach writing through the use of the writing process, journal writing, writing workshops, and individual writing conferences may be helpful for students already exposed to structured writing, but these methods can be highly frustrating for young students still struggling with the simple task of getting their writing to make sense.

As teachers, our overall goal for students and their writing is to assist them in becoming thoughtful, self-improving writers. Once young children know how to write a good, well-written sentence, they can easily expand those elements into a story. Through much exposure, engagement, and experience, students are able to organize, discover vocabulary, use structure, and strengthen their ability to make words.

May (1998) states that beginning writers progress through a variety of skills and abilities, using building blocks to help them advance and excel to the next level of learning. Students may not consistently move forward in their progress or finish on stage before moving on to the next. Stage 1: Pre-Emergent Writer (The student draws pictures to convey a message.) Stage 2: Emergent Writer (The student tries to
label pictures or writes a message using a few letters or known words. One or more letter(s) correspond to the sound(s). They write some letters of the alphabet.) Stage 3: Early Writer (The student expands sentences to express more complete thoughts. They combine and organize simple, related sentences to form a short paragraph.) Stage 4: Developing Writer (The student expands a story to include a character, a setting, an action, a time sequence, and a personal response. They describe story parts with greater detail and begin to experiment with different writing styles, including informational writing, descriptive stories, and simple narratives.) Stage 5: Established Writer (The student composes stories that have a clear beginning, middle, and end. They develop more structured paragraphs that include an introduction, body and a conclusion. It also includes a distinctive “voice” when writing stories and has a good sense of “audience”.)

Writing is a daily exercise in first grade, including journal writing and responses to stories. There are five major writing pieces, which is focused on the writing process. A personal narrative is a true story about something that happened to the writer. In descriptive writing, students create a picture using words that help the reader see, hear, smell and taste and feel what they are writing about. A story contains a beginning, middle and end. In a friendly letter, students tell a special friend about what they are doing, which incorporates the date, greeting, body and closing. The last writing piece is the research report. This type of writing tells facts about a topic in the writer’s own words (Culham, 2003).
These writing pieces take place throughout the school day, called Writer’s Workshop, and incorporate an interdisciplinary writing technique. At this time, students can build their fluency in writing through continuous, repeated exposure to the process of writing. These elements in Writer’s Workshop can be introduced at the Kindergarten level and then the writing process continues all the way through to high school. This block of time is usually dedicated to drafts, conferences, editing and publishing (Calkins, 1986).

Students work through each step of the writing process: prewriting or brainstorming, composing first drafts, engaging in peer and teacher conferences, editing and revising, illustrating, and publishing original writing pieces that express their ideas, feeling, hopes, and dreams (Morrow, 1997). All students are given the opportunity to discuss their work in progress and present their final writing piece.

Linguistic Intelligence in Writing

Given the fact that many students today are coming into schools with a head start in their early educational paths we must as educators build off of their foundation with a challenging and sequential approach. One of these theories on how to build their language into written words is Howard Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences. Dr. Gardner, a psychologist of neuroscience from Harvard University, developed the theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) in 1983. The theory challenged traditional beliefs in the fields of education and cognitive science and therefore is based on the ideas that people learn in separate areas of abilities, called Intelligences. Gardner argues that human beings have nine different kinds of intelligence that reflect
different ways of interacting with the world. Each person has a unique combination, or profile (Gardner, 1983). According to Gardner (1996) these intelligences are "learning capacities, which are exhibited by individuals in different ways" (p. 9).

"Intelligence" refers to the human ability to solve problems or to make something that is valued in one or more cultures (Gardner, 1983). There are nine intelligences identified this far. These nine intelligences can be used to teach, assess, and understand students. Not all students learn and respond to learning situations in the same way.

Bodily/kinesthetic is the ability to use the body skillfully. Interpersonal is the ability to understand people and relationships, and Intrapersonal intelligence, refers to having an understanding of yourself. Logical/mathematical deals with reasoning and recognizing patterns and orders. Musical intelligence is the capacity to think in music. Naturalist is the ability to solve problems in the natural environment. Visual/spatial intelligence is the ability to perceive the world accurately and to understand space. Existential intelligence is the ability and inclination to pose (and ponder) questions about life (Gardner, 1983).

The final intelligence that is used often when a person is ready to put thoughts and emotions onto paper is linguistic intelligence. This concept emphasizes the importance of finding just the right words that fit into a writing piece. Writers make many attempts and struggle with words to convey onto paper. Finding desirable choices of words and their meaning is important to the writer. As much as possible,
words must capture the emotions or images for the reader in order to excite, convince, stimulate, and convey information.

When a Maryland school introduced the theory of Multiple Intelligence, the reform improved children’s performance on state tests and created a school wide culture of achievement. After one year of implementation the students’ scores on the Maryland School Performance Assessment rose by 20 percent (Grenhawk, 1997). Students remembered information more accurately and were confident enough to use it to solve problems. They did well at completing graphs, worked easily with manipulatives, worked well in groups engaging in hands on experiments, and demonstrated a flexible approach to problem solving. “Most striking was the students’ confidence that they could do a good job on these tests; they were neither intimidated nor tense. They saw the tests as a chance to share their knowledge with others” (pg. 62). In this school, implementation of MI theory proved to be successful for the students and the teachers.

When using this theory in the classroom, specifically the linguistic intelligence, the teacher should have specific writing objectives and goals for the students. Teachers should also recognize that each student learns at a different pace and may be strong or weak in the linguistic intelligence.

Music in Conjunction with Writing

It is believed that music increases students’ mental imagery and should be used in combination with creative writing assignments (Cardelli, 1979). Music creates an artificial environment that can stimulate creative expression. It allows for
the development of desirable feelings and moods. It can quiet or calm children, or soothe hurt and troubled feelings.

Writing also creates those mentioned moods as well. It should be self-expressive, natural and spontaneous. Writing develops through inspiration and is individual and authentic. The writing process should come naturally (Solomon, 2007).

Summary

Behavior, motivation and engagement are essential qualities of writing that guide writers towards the writing process. Students may understand the mechanics of the writing process but without their focus and attention, the writing may not be as successful. Knowing how the brain processes information and how children begin their process of writing, may have insight to why behavior and motivation are so important. Music may also have a positive impact in the writing process.

Most educators would agree that the majority of students enjoy the musical experience, whether the students are listening to a pre-recorded CD throughout the day or during a “hands on” music class. Koppelman & Imig (1995) believe music can be used in most content areas. They also feel that music in one’s classroom may provide a more productive and enjoyable atmosphere for all.
Chapter Three: Applications and Evaluation

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to illustrate the impact background classical music had on first-graders during Writer's Workshop. The members of the target group of this action research project were first-grade students in an urban school district about thirty minutes west of Rochester, New York and thirty minutes east of Buffalo, New York. The most common industries within the community are schools, healthcare and food services. The majority of households earn annual salaries ranging from $20,000 - $29,000 (New York Home Town Locator, 2008). Data was collected through classroom field notes, teacher reflections and classroom discussions.

Questions

My project had two major objectives. This study was designed to answer the question “How can listening to background classical music impact students' engagement and motivation during first grade Writer's Workshop?” Another goal was based on how creating this mood and atmosphere influenced the students' behavior during Writer’s Workshop?

Participants

This research was conducted with first-grade students who attended a Kindergarten through Fifth Grade Elementary School. All of my nineteen students were participants and all of their parents gave informed consent. There were about 350 students in the school, which was one of three public schools and one parochial
elementary school in the city. The poverty rate in the school, demonstrated by the number of free and reduced lunches, was about seventy percent (School Matters, 2008). My classroom population closely reflected this percentage. There were three first grade classrooms in my elementary school, totally sixty-one students.

I conducted this research in my classroom, which consisted of nineteen students, eight girls and eleven boys. This was not an inclusive or blended classroom. However, students who were below grade level (and were not making any progress in a given period of time) or were behaviorally challenged, were recommended to our in-house IST (Instructional Support Team) where a group of staff members reviewed the student’s background, home life and weaknesses in the classroom. The team collaborated and made suggestions and recommendations in order for the student to be more successful.

As you take your first steps into my classroom, you would notice an atmosphere and arrangement that promotes the ultimate learning experience. A state of the art Promethean board serves as the focal point in the room, demonstrating our district’s commitment to technology and its concern for the students’ growth. The new board is surrounded by exemplars of all sorts of character driven messages and the remaining walls are covered with valuable messages of learning and vocabulary. In an effort to facilitate and guide instruction to my best ability, you would see the desks arranged in a cooperative learning approach and see my daily agenda and areas of focus listed neatly in our carpeted area.
Based on classroom writing assessments and writing conferences, students were divided into writing groups. Students' writing levels ranged from emergent writers, early writers, and developmental writers. Our DRA2 assessments also showed the students' abilities to write in a structured format. These three writing levels are identified in each of my nineteen first grade students. The emergent writers try to label pictures or write a message using a few letters of known words. One or more letters correspond to the sounds. The early writers expand sentences to express more complete thoughts. They combine and organize simple, related sentences to form a short paragraph. My other students were developmental writers who expanded their stories to include characters, a setting, an action, a time sequence and a personal response.

Instruments of Study

To administer this research, it was necessary to collect much data, consisting of classroom field notes, teacher reflections and classroom discussions. This data was collected every day after Writer's Workshop from the nineteen students, whose parents gave informal consent and from students who had given assent. This data was collected over a five-week period, which gave the students the opportunity to experience the impact of background classical music.

A pre- and post-questionnaire (see Appendix A and B) were given to all the students. These questions gave insight to their views, opinions, interest and their exposure to music. The pre-questionnaire was administered to the students at the beginning of the study and the post-questionnaire was given after the end of the five
weeks. These questionnaires were administered in the classroom while I was reading each question and the students wrote their responses.

Students’ writing journals were also instruments of study. These monthly writing journals were used everyday during Writer’s Workshop. They were written by the individual students and followed a daily writing prompt. Journals were collected over the study, copied and analyzed. Sentence mechanics, spelling and grammar were not evaluated in this study but the quantity of their writing was analyzed. There were a total of approximately fifteen to twenty different writing prompts in each student’s journal.

Classroom discussion questions were also administered as an instrument of study. These questions were asked to the students throughout the study and their responses were written on chart paper. They were saved and analyzed in order to compare their opinions and views of classical music from the beginning of the study and at the end of the study.

Procedures of Study

This study took place during the 2008-2009 school year, beginning after January 2009. It took place five days a week, 30-35 minutes a day during a five-week period. Daily writing instruction (based on the first grade curriculum) took place during the first five to ten minutes. The remaining time (approximately twenty minutes) was devoted to independent writing with students at their desks with their individual journals and pencils. Daily writing prompts were written on the board. Once they started to write, I played a Mozart CD with 50-60 b.p.m. (beats per minute)
during this individual writing time. The volume was low. I walked around with a clipboard with anecdotal notes and observed all my students. I took field notes in my journal where I recorded daily observations and reflection notes. I included brief phrases and descriptions of scenes of my classroom and events that took place. This allowed me to capture students' behaviors and their motivation for writing. Examples of what I watched during this time were behavioral patterns, their focus with the task at hand, the amount of sentences they wrote in their journals, talking to each other, getting out of their seats, using the classroom bathroom, and so on.

I gathered input from the students' pre- and post-questionnaires. These questionnaires were administered to assess the effectiveness of the classical music in Writer's Workshop. The first questionnaire was made up of six yes or no questions. It assessed the students' perception and views of music. I gave this questionnaire to the entire class and collected them when they finished. No feedback was given to the students regarding correct or incorrect answers. The last questionnaire, consisted of four questions, was given at the end of the study to the students. This was a short answer questionnaire where the teacher read the questions and the students wrote in their responses on the lines.

The students and I were also engaged in a class discussion after Writer's Workshop once a week. This discussion was held on the classroom rug, and focused on their perceptions of the music being played during their writing. I recorded the data on the flip chart and wrote their responses in a web form. These questions (see
Appendix C) were asked to the entire class but only a few students’ answers were recorded on the flip chart. These pages were kept and analyzed throughout the study.

Throughout the study, I also collected students’ journals. Once a week, I made photocopies of the students’ daily writing pieces and recorded the findings on the sides of their journals. Students’ names were deleted from their journals. Students were identified as “Student A, B, C” and so on. I had these copies locked in my filing cabinet in my classroom. These journals and the data being evaluated were shredded at the conclusion of the data analysis and writing of the Thesis.

My role as a teacher was a participant observer. I facilitated Writer’s Workshop, instruction and classroom discussions. I was the sole collector of data. I was the exclusive teacher grounded in daily work with students.

Limitations

A predictable factor, which could have affected the investigation, would be the students’ familiarity with the genre of classical music. If students already had listened to classical music at home or in the car, they were aware of the feelings and emotions it created. While playing the CD in my classroom, the students who had listened to this type of music might have tuned it out and therefore, the music possibly did not have an impact towards their writing. Also, this study was only five weeks long. More data and observations could have been gathered during a longer study.
Data Analysis

Several data analysis techniques were used in order to explore the impact of classical music in a first grade Writer’s Workshop. I identified and examined patterns in my data and across patterns and located a possible link between classical music and students’ engagement, motivation and behavior during writer’s workshop.

I used triangulation in my research, with the use of field notes, students’ journals, questionnaires and class discussions. This provided ample material for a well-documented study. By using multiple sources to support my findings, I built a strong case for what I discovered. Through triangulation, all data was compared and categorized, finding common themes that reoccurred. It was important to continually watch for new and unexpected behaviors that changed the direction of my study or require additional data (Hubbard & Power, 2003). These themes were present when interpreting data of each child, across children or across all forms of data collected. The categories were sorted and coded based on interpretations from the observations of behavior, motivation and engagement of the students during their writing and the responses from their classroom discussions and writing journals.

First, I administered the pre-questionnaires to all my participating students. I read all their responses and kept them for comparison with the post questionnaire. After the Writer’s Workshop lessons started, I took data on the students’ behavior, engagement and motivation and compared it to the baseline data taken prior to the study. I also reviewed data from my journal for changes in these behaviors after the
study began. I collected qualitative data using observations and feedback from the students during classroom discussions and their students’ writing journals.
Chapter Four: Results

The objective of this project was to examine the impact of background classical music on students and their writing during Writer’s Workshop. The research was conducted at an urban public elementary school in Western New York. The entire study took place in my own first-grade classroom. The participants in the study were nineteen first-grade students. This project was intended for me to reflect and modify my classroom atmosphere based on the results of playing background classical music during writing workshop. I wanted to know if classical music did make an impact on student’s motivation, behavior, and engagement, which in turn, I would play it during other subject areas in my classroom.

Participants

My nineteen first-grade students were writing on a daily basis in their writing journals. Many students had difficulty focusing and concentrating when they wrote independently. Many students would get up to get a drink, use the bathroom, get a pencil from the teacher’s desk, or play with things in their desks. They also liked to have conversations with their neighbors around them. During this writing workshop time, I was engaged in small guided reading groups therefore there were no teachers or teacher’s assistants supporting their writing and keeping them on-task.

I decided to observe all of my first-grade students in this study. Observing the entire class gave me a better opportunity to collect a greater range of information. I labeled each individual as a letter to monitor their progress and recorded their letter in my notes.
One student who caught my attention was “Student C”. This student was a very sweet and caring child. He was however, a very active student. Whether sitting at his desk or on the floor, he was constantly engaged with small objects in his hands and focused all his attention on what he was playing with. His ears were listening to the lessons being taught but his eyes were not focused on other things. During the year, his reading was on grade level but he struggled with writing. He wrote minimal amounts and had a difficult time with penmanship. He lacked motivation and focus on his schoolwork during the day. His mother and I had a daily journal regarding his day whether it was behavioral issues or his daily work habits. The school counselor, pediatrician, school psychologist and I monitored him and he will be tested further in the summer months before he begins second grade.

I observed him closely during my study and watched his behavior and his writing during the Writer’s Workshop. This particular student had a very difficult time writing and focusing. He would not write as much as the other students and he found other things to do instead of writing. He did mention during our classroom discussion that he found the music distracting and he couldn’t concentrate. He had difficulty writing even without the music. Writing was very challenging for him, penmanship was weak and he had no interest in sentence writing.

Research Question:

1. How does listening to background classical music impact students’ engagement, motivation and behavior during first grade writer’s workshop?
2. How does listening to slow tempo classical music during independent writing influence children’s on-task performance?

3. What other non-musical factors influence the students to be on task and be so focused that they might not want the session to end?

Instruments of Study

The independent Writer’s Workshop in my first grade classroom was set up and administered over a five-week period. Throughout this study, I was able to gather data and formulate results. These results were on a variety of topics, most of them having to do with how instrumental music in the classroom can have an impact on students’ behavior, motivation and engagement. I also wanted to ask the questions: How does listening to slow tempo classical music during independent writing influence children’s on-task performance? Do they stay in their seats, and are bathroom breaks diminished? Another area that arose was if any non-musical factors influenced the children. Classical music was the focus of my study but after administering and observing the students and their writing during the five weeks, I came to determine that with the classical music and the array of different writing prompts, the students were successful.

My students were very enthusiastic at the start of the study and they looked forward to the music in the classroom. This study was very different for them because their writing usually took place in their centers where small groups of students wrote independently for 15 minutes at a time while I was with other small groups administering guided reading.
A week before my study began; I closely observed my students' during Writer's Workshop, without the music being played. I noticed patterns that I continuously saw during my teaching career. The week before the music started, many students were having conversations with their neighbors instead of concentrating on their writing. Students were also ending their writing early (before the timer), many students were asking how to spell words, and getting up to use the bathroom. Many students were getting up out of their seats to get a pencil from my desk, get a drink or pick up dropped items from their desk. My field notes showed this throughout the first week. Students could not get started on their writing right away and showed little independence. One student was getting up to show me her journal in the middle of the workshop and one student was coloring in his journal. Noises surrounded the room- pencils tapping on desks, chairs and desks being moved, students' voices (reading their writing out loud, talking to each other), students sounding out words, and students helping each other spell words. It was complete chaos in the classroom and the atmosphere was not structured for success.

After the parent and student consent forms were all returned, I started my study with a pre-questionnaire (Appendix A) given to all nineteen students. This questionnaire gave me insight to their views, opinions, interest and background in music. Their answers were studied and analyzed to determine their awareness in music. More students had a positive experience with music and a surprising nineteen (out of nineteen) students wanted to listen to music in the classroom! This data
showed that they had a huge interest in this study and were excited about listening to music in the classroom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Do you listen to music?</th>
<th>Do you like music?</th>
<th>Have you ever listened to music without the words?</th>
<th>Can you listen to music while doing something?</th>
<th>Would you like to listen to music in the classroom?</th>
<th>How does music make you feel?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>YES</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Happy- 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NO</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Neither happy or sad- 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.1. Responses to Pre-Study Questionnaire

The data from the pre-questionnaire (Fig.4.1) showed that about half of the students never listened to instrumental music. Their perception of music made them feel happy.

After the questionnaire was given to all nineteen students, Writer’s Workshop began. Every day I gave the students a different writing prompt, written on the Promethean board. Once I finished reading the prompt, I turned on the Mozart CD (50-60 beats per minutes) with the volume low. I walked around with a clip board and observed all my students.

In the middle of the study, the students and I also engaged in a class discussion (Appendix C) after Writer’s Workshop. This discussion took place on the rug and focused on their perceptions of the music being played during their writing. I recorded the data on the flip chart and wrote their responses in a web form. Questions which were asked were- In what ways was it easier to concentrate on your
writing this week than weeks in the past with no music? How did you feel when the music was being played? Could you write more in your journal than you could in the past?

Students responded with ways that music impacted them by saying that music “made me think of happy times (like spring)”, “helped me think”, “made me feel good”, “helped me concentrate”, “the music was soft, peaceful and calm”, “their was less talking in the classroom”. In the middle of the study, 17 out of 19 students wanted to continue listening to the music. Seventeen students liked the music at that point and fifteen students thought it truly helped them become better writers. One student said that, “I wrote a lot today! I was impressed with myself!” The other two students thought the music was too distracting and couldn’t seem to write much in their journals.

At the end of my study, I administered a post-questionnaire (Appendix B) to all my students. This was a pencil-paper questionnaire and I read every question to the students while they wrote their answers. The majority of the students answered in a positive way and only a few students thought the music wasn’t helping them. This data was similar with the classroom discussion I had during the middle of the study. From the middle of the study to the end of the study, the same number of students still continued to enjoy the music and thought it was very beneficial to them as they wrote in their journals.
Themes

The following are themes that I discovered during my study. These themes were very common among the students. The majority of the class was impacted with the background classical music.

**Theme #1- Music appeared to have an influence on students’ classroom behaviors**

Based on my observations and field notes and students’ responses, background classical music had a major impact on classroom behaviors. The students were getting up out of their seats less, bathroom breaks diminished, talking to neighbors was at a minimum, and playing with items at their desks was limited. Walking around the classroom during this independent writing, I noticed there seemed to be more concentration and little frustration levels from the students to allow writing to take place. The students seemed calmer and more relaxed.

In the beginning of Writer’s Workshop, when there was no music being played, Student F showed no motivation in her writing. She would write one or two sentences and then close her journal and find something else to do. I would take field notes on her, observe her, and write down how many times she would get up out of her seat. During the first week of Writer’s Workshop she would get up to get a pencil from my desk, use the bathroom, and then get a drink three times. I recorded that she got up six times in one day during writing time to get her pencil she dropped on the floor! My field notes stated that she talked everyday for five days continuously to her neighbor while he was writing. Her desk was located directly in front of the listening center where I would play the classical background music. Once I began playing the
music during writing, I discovered that her behavior changed and I was noticing more concentration and longer time writing in her journal. It truly astounded my perception of her abilities!

Towards the end of the five weeks, she didn’t get up out of her chair at all! At times, I recorded that she only left her desk one time in the entire week. I couldn’t believe that she took the initiative to get a pencil before I started the music and used the bathroom after Writer’s Workshop finished.

Before the study began, she was slightly below grade level in her writing. She was at Stage 2 in her writing: Emergent Writer (May, F. 1998) where she would just write a short message using a few words to convey her picture she had drawn. But, over time, her journal entries became longer and her sentences started to expand to express more complete thoughts. She would write the entire time and talking with her neighbor diminished. At the end of the study, she became a Stage 3: Early Writer—she began writing paragraphs instead of one or two sentences. She was so proud of her journal that she asked if she could take it home to show her mom.

In her post-questionnaire given on the last day, she wrote many positive comments. On the first question (Why did you like listening to music while you were writing?) she responded by writing- “I liked it because it made me concentrate on my writing and made me think of my writing.” On question two (How did the music help you when you were writing?), she wrote- “It helped me lower my talking and I didn’t feel like doing anything but writing.” “Good inside” was her answer for the third question regarding how it made her feel. She even answered the last question with a
“yes”- she would still listen to classical music during the rest of the year because she wrote, “because I liked the music so much that I wrote so much!” Comparing Student F in the beginning of the study to the end of the study, showed a different kind of student. Her behavior changed dramatically over the course of the weeks. I was amazed to see it for the first time and experience how wonderful a simple thing (music) can create such wonderful results for the students!

Another student who proved to show a decrease in negative classroom behaviors was Student G. He was sitting right next to Student F, who made great improvements during the study as well. These two students liked to have conversations with one another and, at times, neglected their school work. He was an average student in all subject areas and enjoyed learning new things. He was very creative and wrote sentences in a very imaginative way. The one thing he lacked though was concentration. He loved to talk to anyone who would listen to him with discussions ranging in topic from cars, to bicycles, to trains. These passions became the subjects of a large body of his writings and although he was ignoring my daily writing prompts, I was still happy to see him expressing his thoughts in the written form. As the week started with no music being played, I noticed he spent a lot of time talking to his neighbor (which was not uncommon) during Writer’s Workshop. He would write a little then talk a while, following this pattern for the first week. Only two to three sentences were written on his paper.

Looking at his pre-questionnaire, I noticed that he circled “Yes” to answers about liking music and would like to listen to music in the classroom. What was so
interesting to me was his answer in question five- “Can you listen to music while doing something?”- he answered “Yes”. Knowing that this was a student who cannot seem to concentrate independently, I observed him very closely during the five weeks. I was very intrigued to watch him when the music was being played. Would he stop talking to his neighbors while the background classical music was on during independent writing?

The first day when the classical music finally began, I watched Student G closely. While observing the nineteen students as they were writing in their journals, I glanced over at him continuously. Something was different this time. He opened his journal, reached for his pencil and started to write. He wrote for three minutes straight, started talking to his neighbor for thirty seconds, then continued with his thoughts on paper. He stopped again after five minutes, and then talked a little more. He finally stopped talking and wrote the rest of the time until the end of the session. The following day, I noticed that he did not talk at all and spent the entire time writing in his journal. On this day, he was on task writing about an Oreo cookie. He concentrated on his work and chose not to initiate conversations with anyone around him. This pattern continued day after day, prompting me to record notes that Student G had made noticeable improvements with his talking. When I facilitated my classroom discussion during the middle of my study, Student G was surprisingly impressed with himself and stated out loud that this music helped him with his talking! I couldn’t believe it! Was this a miracle happening right before me or was I just dreaming?
After the Writer's Workshop ended, I collected all their journals and they all received a post-questionnaire sheet. Student G's journal was filled with numerous examples of quality sentences, pouring onto the second page most of the time. He became a self-improving writer, being able to organize and expand his sentences into a story. In his post-questionnaire paper, he wrote things like- "I liked listening to music because it helped me write a lot" and "It helped me write a lot because it helped me concentrate" and "It made me feel good inside." I don't know if he actually realized that he wasn't talking to anyone around him or maybe he was just too busy concentrating on his writing.

Two girls I was also observing closely were Student K and Student N. These two girls were very challenging when it came to inappropriate behaviors. These two students did everything but what they were supposed to be doing regarding their schoolwork. Student K would get up a lot during the day to get tissues constantly, get a drink from the classroom water fountain, and walk to my desk to get a pencil. Student N always seemed to get up out of her chair to walk aimlessly around the classroom, usually going to other classmates to talk or borrow something that she already had at her desk. These behaviors were very distracting to the other students who were trying to focus on the task at hand.

They were both Emergent Writers- writing short messages using only a few letters and unknown words and in February, they were both slightly below grade level in their writing. I was hoping that this study might help with their off-task behaviors and be more successful in their writing. I was right.
Before I began my study, I discussed with my students the importance of what I was going to do. It seemed like these two students were on board with the idea of playing music in the classroom. They both seemed happy and energetic about my plan of action. Student K and Student N both responded “Yes” in their pre-questionnaires about listening to music in the classroom and that they could listen to music while doing something else. They both liked listening to music but never listened to music without the words.

In my field notes, I wrote down that these two girls continued to show the same negative behavior during Writer’s Workshop (the first week before the music) as in the past. They would get up from their desks and get drinks, tissues, pencils, use the bathroom, play with things at their desks, etc. This was a common theme in the first week of independent writing. Not only did I see this type of behavior in these two students, but I observed it in many children as well.

As the weeks continued and the music was playing softly in the background, I saw small improvements in Student K and Student N’s behavior. It didn’t change completely but my notes showed a slight decrease in the amount of times these girls were getting up out of their seats. By the end of the five weeks, I noticed that there were just a few times I had written that they had gotten up out of their seats. Student K and Student N also showed an improvement in their writing. Their writing journals looked different from the start of writer’s workshop. Both of their journals went from Emergent Writers (Stage 2) to early Writers (Stage 3). Their sentences in their journals expressed more complete thoughts and they wrote a few short paragraphs.
Progress was made by both of these girls and it was truly amazing to see in such a short amount of time.

In their post-questionnaires, they both wrote many positive comments about the background music during independent writing. One student wrote, “I liked the music because it made me relax. It helped me concentrate.” The other student wrote, “It made me feel peaceful and I think we should listen to the music during the rest of the year.” These comments and the way these girls showed improvements in their classroom behaviors, are worth pushing the little play button on the CD player and listening to slow-tempo background classical music.

Theme #2- Music created a different atmosphere in the classroom and generated enthusiasm in the students

My field notes showed less noise in the classroom, and a limited amount of noise toward the end of the study. More students were focused and there was a sense of calmness in the classroom. It was a time unlike no other during the school day. When I had nineteen students working and enjoying it, it made me feel proud and excited for them.

One morning, the principal made his daily rounds and entered our classroom during Writer’s Workshop. He was so impressed when he walked into the quiet and working classroom and saw all the students writing. He noticed the music being played and remembered the study I was conducting in my classroom. As he walked around the classroom, the students were so excited to share some of their writing with
him. He told them what a great job they were doing and gave wishes to them for continuing the good work.

I thought I would get a real sense of success with the results of the background classical music from my classroom discussion. Observing the students and the way that the classroom seemed was all written down daily in my field notes, but I was very engrossed in what the students truly thought of this experience when we had an open conversation between the nineteen students and me. I made a web chart with the word MUSIC in the center of the flip chart. I asked the children what they thought of the music being played and their perception of how our classroom seemed during Writer’s Workshop time. Student O’s response was so astonishing because her answer was unlike any of the other students’ answers. She raised her hand and said that the classroom seemed so calm and so peaceful that the music made her think of happier times like springtime. I asked her to explain further and she had said that the way the room sounded and the beautiful music being played was like the way she listens when she’s outside listening only to the birds singing. She has always been a higher level thinker but truly answered the way she was feeling at the time. In her post-questionnaire, she wrote down that she liked the music because it was so soft and it was not a hard type of music (probably referring to heavy metal or rock and roll genres of music). She also wrote it reminded her of things (I assumed the springtime theme she referred to in our classroom discussion) and that the music made her feel like singing.
Student D also showed the same kind of enthusiasm for the music as Student O. He was an energetic student who loved to learn. Every lesson taught created a sense of importance for him. He was always eager to answer questions and get right to work on his assignments. In his pre-questionnaire, he circled “yes” to every question. He liked listening to music and could listen to the music and do something else at the same time. He also circled “yes” to listening to music in the classroom. His journal entries were always positive. One day, he wrote two pages about the music he was listening to. He wrote sentences like, “This music is pretty. I like it. I am so glad my teacher plays it in here. I hope she plays it all the time.” In my field notes, I wrote daily that Student D does not stop writing in his journal. He writes as soon as the music starts and continues during the entire time. One day, I noticed that he turned to a friend who was disrupting him and used a finger gesture to quiet him down and stop talking. In his post-questionnaire, he wrote that he liked the music because it made him happy and it made him feel good inside.

Student E also noticed a difference in the classroom, as I had observed during independent writing. He was a very observant kind of student who approached me daily to inform me when incidents were occurring in our classroom (students misbehaving or arguing, etc.). He enjoyed watching other students play and liked listening to other students talk to one another. During one of our classroom discussions on music and writing, he told me that the classroom became louder when I turned off the music. He wanted to know why his friends started talking just because the music was off. I told him that sometimes when listening to music, it
makes us feel different. We feel more relaxed and calm. Also, the students needed to be quiet in order to listen to the soft background music. He was amazed by the difference in the classroom- the room was so quiet during writing time and once it ended, the atmosphere changed to such a distraction in the classroom with students talking, walking around and increased off-task behavior. In my field notes, I observed Student E at times just sitting at his desk looking around and watching students write in their journals. He was quiet and did not bother anyone, but I could tell that he enjoyed the quietness of the classroom and the way the room felt at that time. He truly liked the music and the influence it was making with the students and the classroom.

Student C did not have such an enthusiastic attitude for the background music. He, along with Student A, were the two students who wrote many unenthused comments in the post-questionnaire. Student C wrote- “I did not like the music because it made me feel tired and I could not concentrate.” Student A stated that he did not like listening to music while he was writing because he could not write too much and he didn’t want to hear the music anymore. During our classroom discussions, they both stated that they did not enjoy the music and did not want to continue the music any longer. Both these students were observed during the five weeks and showed a continued pattern of uninterested and unfocused behavior while writing independently. Their writing journals showed the similar theme. They were messy, unorganized, and showed no progress in their writing.
I believe that for some people, background music can be distracting, and the music may have interfered with their ability to concentrate. The linguistic intelligence in these two students, putting thoughts and emotions onto paper, (Gardner, 1983) might have been “interfered” because the students might not have been able to find just the right words that fit into their writing piece while listening to music. As writers, they made many attempts to write and struggled with words to convey onto paper, and the background classical music did not seem to help with this writing process. In the linguistic intelligence, the writers’ words must capture the emotions or images for readers and for these two students; they just could not seem to do that.

Theme #3- The majority of the class liked the music and thought music helped them as they were writing

Most of the students truly enjoyed listening to the music during writer’s workshop. As the daily sessions came to an end and the music stopped, most of the students sighed and looked disappointed that they had to stop listening to the music and writing in their journals. They were so anxious to share what they had written. Because of time restraint, I had to choose only a few to share their writing pieces. They felt confident in their writing and proud to become better writers.

Student B was a student who was hard to please. He was a very pessimistic person and did not enjoy the school day. He was very anxious to go home at the end of the day. He started this study with a poor attitude and wasn’t very engrossed in what I was doing. In the pre-questionnaire he answered “yes” to every question yet
he was one of the three who answered the question regarding how the music makes you feel by circling neither happy nor sad. Over the course of the Writer’s Workshop, I noticed that he began showing an interest in this time of day. He came up to me one morning and asked me, “When is Writer’s Workshop going to start?” This took me by surprise because he rarely was interested in anything we were working on in the classroom. My field notes on Student B was filled with words like- “B is smiling today” and the next day I wrote, “B is so focused on writing and wants to share his writing piece with the class”.

During my classroom conversation, he raised his hand when I asked the students if they liked the music in the classroom and if they wanted to continue listening to it while they were writing. He even gave me a comment during our conversation, “The music helped me think!” This was extremely fascinating to me coming from a student who didn’t have a strong passion for school.

Student C (the student who had a more negative experience than a positive one) wrote these answers in the post-questionnaire, “I did not like the music because it made me tired”; which I also observed in my field notes. He would yawn numerous times during Writer’s Workshop and his head was on his desk most of the time. Another answer he gave was, “I could not concentrate and I would not like to listen to it during the rest of the year because it was so distracting”. Were these just excuses so he didn’t have to write, seeing that he had difficulty staying on-task even without the music? This student obviously did not like the music and truly did not think the
music was helpful in his own writing, however, he was the minority out of the nineteen students who participated in this study.

Student L was very opposite of Student C. She was a top reader and writer and loved being in school. She excelled in every subject area and was a very well mannered six-year old. In the beginning of the school year, I had told the students and their parents at my Open House about this study. Student L was so eager to begin that every day she asked me, “When are we going to start your study?” and “Is today the day you are going to play the music?”

She was an “Early Writer” at the time of my study (Stage 3- expanding sentences to express more complete thoughts to form short paragraphs). This was above grade level at this time in our New York State curriculum. But at the end of the study she had jumped two levels and finished at a Stage 5 “Established Writer” (she composed stories with a clear beginning, middle and end, and had an introduction, body and conclusion). This was assessed through her writing journals over the course of five weeks.

Each day I observed Student L and in my field notes I wrote, “L is concentrating, works diligently, looks cheerful, today she is in high spirits”. She never showed frustration or loss interest in her writing.

During our classroom discussions, she was one student to count on for answers and loved to share her feelings and thoughts. Her answers were as followed, “Listening to music made me happy.” and “I liked it so much because the music was so soft, peaceful and calm”. She also raised her hand when I asked if the students
liked the music in the classroom and if they wanted to continue listening to it while they were writing. I was so glad that she truly enjoyed this study and the classical music.

*Theme #4- An array of different topics of writing prompts influences students’ motivation for writing*

I also wanted to determine in my study if there were any other factors that influenced the students to be on task and be so focused that the students might not want to session to end. A non-musical related factor which seemed to impact them was the daily writing prompts that I chose for the students. Writing prompts are great tools to initiate learning at any given time. They do not however, account for each student’s unique individual learning patterns. While some students will always rise to the occasion and write on cue, others may need another source of inspiration to jump start the writing process. Perhaps the notion of giving these students a choice or say in their topics to write about might just spark those in need. Making them accountable can lead to their own personal growth as a writer.

After I taught a daily writing mini-lesson, I wrote a writing prompt on the board. The writing prompts were different every day and were based on the mini-lesson and what the students were experiencing at the time. Some examples of the writing prompts were: Write about your family, finding a hermit crab, being at a beach, Groundhog’s day, describe your eaten Oreo cookie, your bedroom, what you did over the weekend, things to do when it’s windy, and things to do in springtime.
The top three prompts where students wrote the most were: 1) Describe your bedroom, 2) Write about your weekend and 3) Describe your toys. These were three personal writing prompts and 90% of the students wrote the most on these days. When prompts were mostly about what they knew and what they liked, they wrote more. Writing about their field trip was also a prompt that they were very interested in. Many students wrote a page or two in their journals. The class went to Strong Museum of Play in Rochester, NY and their interest level was extremely high and they left with many experiences.

One writing prompt that was clearly evident that the students’ interest or passion diminished was writing about the previous day’s science lesson. They had to write about the three materials we learned (plastic, wood, and metals) and their properties. Many students were yawning during their writing. Not a lot of students were writing. There seemed to be a different atmosphere in the classroom. A few students got up to use the bathroom, there was more talking, and students were playing with their pencils and dropping them on the floor. It was clear that they did not enjoy this prompt and the music was not helping them.

Occasionally during the independent writing time, the students were able to choose their own topics. This was very easy for some children and very difficult for other children. Sometimes students did not have a topic in mind or I had too many suggestions for them. Based on my field notes and the students’ journals, I determined that if a specific writing prompt was not given, the writing became more challenging for the students. Students did not get started writing right away, their
sentences were limited to only one or two and more talking and interruptions occurred during independent writing. They even said in our classroom discussion that they preferred to have a prompt than think of one themselves.

A few of the writing prompts were based on writing a list. These lists were written in phrases only. The students did not have to write complete sentences in their journals. There were no capitals, periods, or even naming and action parts of a sentence. One day, we were celebrating the 100th day of school, so I asked the students to make a list of 100 activities they could do. As the writing time began, I noticed that all the nineteen students were writing as the music began to play. They were very focused and seemed to be very concentrated on writing many things in their journals. The classroom was very quiet. Only two students got up during their writing, one to get a drink at the classroom water fountain and the other student left her desk to get a tissue.

Summary

Overall I found that looking at data more than once and over a period of time, it enabled me to gain more insight to my students’ perception of music and the ways it influenced them during an independent activity. I was able to uncover themes and patterns by triangulating data from the study. Also, I was able to answer my main research questions. I answered these questions not only from the students’ writing journals, pre- and post-questionnaires, classroom discussions, but through my anecdotal observation notes during Writer’s Workshop. Through all of this data, I was able to see how background classical music impacted students during
independent writing time. Furthermore, my analysis helped me to understand that music has the power to keep students engaged and enthused, and reduce discipline problems.
Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The purpose of this project was to study the impact slow tempo background classical music had on students' writing. I wanted to determine if playing classical music would result in increased on-task behavior, engagement and motivation during writer's workshop in my first grade classroom. I also wanted to assess the students' attitudes toward the music and their learning. By analyzing the results of the students' journals, my observational data, and answers on the pre- and post-questionnaires and the classroom discussions, I have drawn some conclusions about the effectiveness of classical music in an educational setting and its role in the students' level of academic success.

When I analyzed the data, it was clear that most of the students in the classroom performed fairly well. Interestingly, they wrote more sentences throughout the study and the atmosphere in the classroom changed. This suggests that the music was effective in changing students' on-task behavior and motivation towards classroom work. These findings aligned well with the current research on classical music and the impact of background music. For example, in a study performed in a fifth grade classroom, Davidson and Powell (1986) found that background music significantly increased the amount of on-task performance in the classroom and later concluded, "that providing easy-listening background music in the classroom would be a plausible, yet inexpensive technique for increasing the amount of time in which students are actively engaged in learning" (p. 32).
seemed to allow students to feel productive as they eliminated environmental
distractions and focused on the task at hand.

In another study, Hallman and Price (1998) conducted a study of which the
findings were particularly pertinent to using music to minimize poor classroom
behaviors. They observed a classroom without background music and then they
observed the same classroom with background music. The results indicated that the
nine- and ten-year old students were the most productive when the background music
was playing and significantly decreased their inappropriate behaviors. Before the
introduction of background music, there were many occurrences of disruptive
behaviors, which included crying, tantrums, over-activity, verbal and physical
aggression. However, when the music was playing, the students became noticeably
more calm and cooperative. The researchers stated that, “when the music was playing
there were significant changes in body temperature, blood pressure, breathing rate,
and pulse rate. The body had a physiological response to the music which triggered
the students to calm down.” (p. 89).

My classroom discussion with my students also showed that the students truly
valued the background classical music while they were writing. Most of the students
who responded said they really liked the music while they were working. The
students thought it was a nice change in the classroom rather than being absolutely
quiet while writing. Many students also said that the music helped them become a
better writer. Overall, the students’ attitudes toward the classical music, integrated
into the classroom, were very positive.
Several interesting conclusions can be drawn by analyzing the pre- and post-questionnaires. When I looked at all of the statements from the students, it was evident that most of them enjoyed listening to the music. Interestingly, the statements, “I liked listening to the music, and it made me concentrate more,” were given more frequently than the students who did not care for the music. This suggests that the students who enjoyed it more had a more positive attitude toward music and had more motivation to write than the students who thought it was distracting and did not like it.

From my field notes, classroom discussions, and questionnaires, there were a few students who experienced a negative attitude from the music being played in the classroom. The statements, “I could not concentrate and focus” and “It was too distracting for me” were written. These students might not have heard this type of music or they needed reasons or excuses not to write. It is also possible that they did not feel competent enough to do two different things at the same time—listen to music and use their thought process to write. As supported by Gardner’s vast research on learning styles we understand and have experienced first hand that people have different capacities for learning. From his studies we now understand that what often works for some might be too far out of reach for others. Why do some people need quiet spaces to concentrate and others might be able to listen to the radio or TV when completing a task? Future research might be able to find ways and reasons why this process is different among people. What can teachers do when students need differentiation regarding learning styles? Do we isolate the students if they can not
concentrate with background music being played or should we have them wear headphones to block out the music? These questions definitely need further explorations and I will continue to research this for my future studies.

Recommendations

Throughout my teaching career, I have often wondered if the use of music played in the classroom was beneficial to my students while they completed schoolwork. I have played music before in the classroom and they have enjoyed listening to it, but I wanted to know if it truly influenced them. By reviewing the literature on classical music in the classroom, I found that there are many benefits for students when music is being played in the background. I also had the experience of seeing the benefits for myself. Throughout my study, I have learned that music, when incorporated effectively in the classroom during independent writing, can serve as an enrichment tool and provide many advantages for students and their learning. Music can aid teachers in managing their classrooms so that learning and working of the highest quality can take place. For example, by playing classical music, with the volume low, students can stay focused and less talking and more concentrating can occur. Students are less likely to get up and go to the bathroom or walk around to get things and more writing takes place. They can be actively engaged in their learning.

The music was something my students wanted to hear more often. Since the study, I have played the classical music during Writer’s Workshop and at different times of the day. I still continued to observe the same data and results as I did during the study. As a result, I will continue playing music in my classroom at appropriate
times. During the last writing assessment in June, I played the same background classical music I had played during the study. The students needed to draw a picture of their family and then write about their family. These writing pieces were very important and were being placed in their first-grade permanent folders. At the end of the assessment time, I had the same classroom discussion regarding the background classical music they heard during my study a few months ago. I asked them to give me some comments about the music while they were writing about their family. Some students raised their hands and said that they really liked it and it was peaceful and quiet in the classroom. One student said that the music helped her concentrate while she was writing. Another student commented about the quietness and calmness of the music rather than loud rock and roll kind of music. Most of the students said that I should continue playing the music next year for my first graders. Student C was not surprisingly different on his answer from the study I had conducted. He said it was distracting and he could not listen and write. His writing piece did not fit the rubric required and was lacking details, grammar, and punctuation. The rest of the students however, had wonderful pieces and received 3s and 4s (from a four point rubric) on their assessment. This truly, once again, gave me confidence in the validity of this study and gave me insight on the use of classical music and possibilities for other influences in the future.

During the summer, another colleague and I were working on our new writing curriculum in our first-grade classrooms. We had an unbelievable conversation at the end of the day! I was amazed and overjoyed by this discussion we
had and how this study made an impact not only on me, but my friend who was searching for help and ideas in this area. She started by saying, “Next year, I would like to play Bach and Beethoven background music during my writer’s workshop. I would like to play it when my students are quietly working on their writing. I am experiencing some problems in my classroom. My students just can not stay focused, they are always getting up out of their seats, going to the bathroom, talking instead of working, and not being very motivated and engaged during writer’s workshop. Would background music truly help?” I was so anxious to say, “Yes!” I showed her all my observations from my study and she seemed extremely intrigued with my findings. I shared my field notes and my classroom discussions with her. I told her, “Try playing slow-tempo background classical music and observe it for yourself. You’ll see the difference in the first week. Your students will become more motivated, engaged and focused in their writing. It will have an impact on their performance and behavior and it will provide a more productive and enjoyable atmosphere for you and your students. I guarantee it!”
References


Appendix A

First Grade Pre-Questionnaire

Please circle your answer after the teacher reads each question.

1. Do you listen to music?  YES  NO

2. Do you like music?  YES  NO

3. Have you ever listened to music without the words (just instruments)?  YES  NO

4. How does music make you feel?  Happy  Sad  Neither

5. Can you listen to music while doing something?  YES  NO

6. Would you like to listen to music in the classroom?  YES  NO
First Grade Post-Questionnaire

1. Why did you like listening to music while you were writing?

2. How did you think the music helped you when you were writing?

3. How did this music make you feel?

4. Would you still like to listen to classical music during the rest of the year? Why?
Appendix C

**Topic Questions for Classroom Discussions**

*(on flip chart in web or bullet form)*

1. In what ways was it easier to concentrate on your writing this week than weeks in the past with no music playing?

2. Did you find it more relaxing and enjoyable while the music was playing? Give reasons.

3. Could you write more on your topic this week? How many more (or less) sentences did you write this week?

4. Read your journals from this week. What were some details or adjective words you used?

5. Let’s talk about the music- Did you like this style of music? How was listening to the composer’s music impacting your writing process this week? What type of music would you like to listen to while writing?