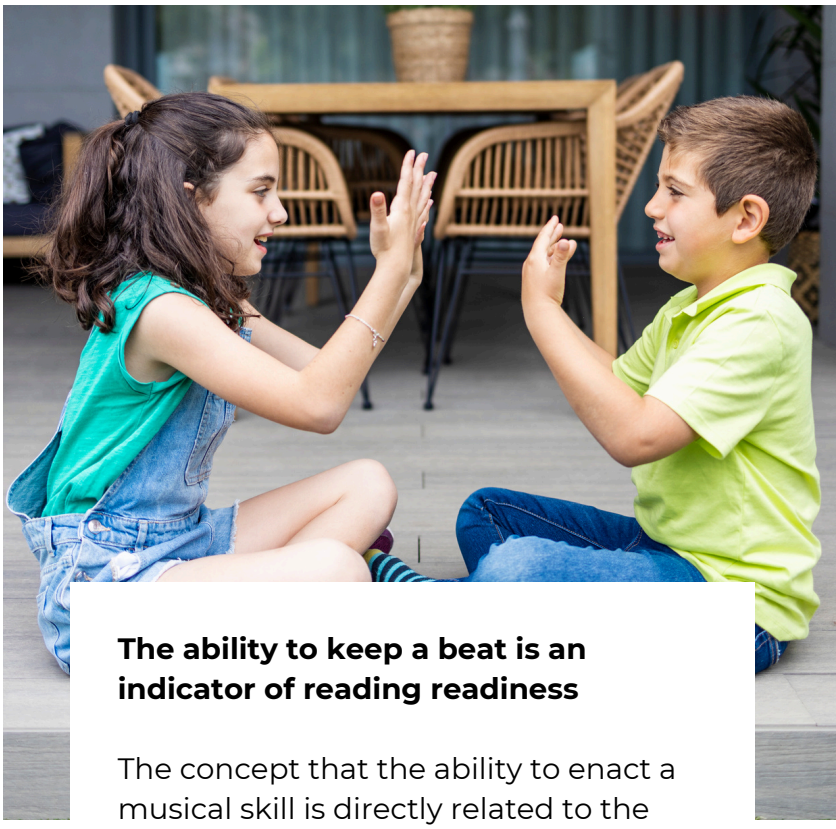
Music learning is the cheapest diagnostic tool you can find!



I heard one of the best stories of advocacy in action the other day. It taught me that if you give educators information, nurture them and let them use their teaching superpower, great things can happen.

Let me backtrack a bit. I have the great privilege to work in a program in Western Sydney called Wired for Sound.

In a nutshell, it is a training program that gives generalist primary classroom teachers the skills, knowledge, and resources to deliver 10 minutes of music learning at the start of every literacy block.

The idea behind the program is simple. In order to improve the students' language learning, we need to first prime the brain network which is most influential in language learning – the auditory processing network.

Music learning is the most effective way, both in terms of time and impact, to prime the brain for language learning.

The ability to keep a beat is an indicator of reading readiness

The concept that the ability to enact a musical skill is directly related to the ability to read words seems unreal.

We think that music learning happens in the music classroom and language learning happens in the language classroom.

But inside the brains of our students, the ability for a 3-4-year-old to clap a steady beat[1] is actually an indication that all the senses that need to be connected in their brain to start learning how to read are connected.

To put it another way, if a student can keep a steady beat at the age of 3-4 years, then this is an outward indication of an inward level of connectivity level which means they are ready to begin learning how to read language.

This research goes even further. Not only is keeping a steady beat a potential indicator of reading difficulties but there are several other behaviours that are attributed to low readers.

These behaviours include[1]

1. Difficulty repeating a rhythm back
2. Difficulty initiating a beat
3. Difficulty changing beat tempos
4. Difficulty maintaining a steady beat (getting faster or slower)
5. Difficulty identifying rhythm changes

The great thing about this research is that it can be applied directly to the real world.

Teachers can use beat-keeping activities to identify which students may be struggling with beats and compare that with their reading scores.

The even more brilliant aspect of this research is that beat-keeping interventions have been found to improve language learning significantly.

Music learning works both ways – the cheapest diagnostic tool available for reading and a powerful intervention tool for low readers.

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Teachers as Magicians: applying research directly into their classroom

So here is the Advocacy in Action that I was so impressed with. The K-2 teachers at a primary school were meeting the next class of kindergarten (5-year-old/first year of big school) for the following year.

This is often called ‘One Up Day’ or ‘Orientation Day’. The new students do lots of fun activities and explore the school space to make them feel more comfortable and welcome the following year when they start big school in earnest.

As part of the day’s program, the K-2 teachers did a beat-keeping activity with the students, just a regular music activity with a bit of singing, moving and keeping the beat.

Two teachers led the activity, and one teacher stood to the side with a list of the students’ names (they were wearing name tags so it was easy to identify the students).

As the music activity progressed the teacher with the list watched the students and recorded which students exhibited any of the beat-keeping behaviours above. Simple!

Advocacy in Action: Data-informed class allocation

Here is the brilliance! After the students had left for the day, the teachers worked with the school leadership to divide the students into classes. They took many things into account, previous association, known learning needs, and gender, but they also took into account the beat-keeping results.

ADVOCACY IN ACTION

They compared the class allocations and made sure that the potential low readers were divided equally across the classes.

This would allow the teachers to be aware before they started the year of the potential low readers, and it prevented the inadvertent placement of a lot of potential low readers in one class.

As much as possible, this divided the needs for learning support across the classes and gave the teachers knowledge of who to support right from the start, rather than spending weeks working to identify who needed support.

It also helped the school leaders to pre-plan for a year group that may have a significantly higher proportion of low readers or a high-performing group of readers who may need extension.

Now, one term into the year, the teaching team are comparing their diagnostic list with the students' reading performance so far, and I can't wait to see the results.

This type of application of research is innovative, exciting and above all, easy. Anything that gives teachers more information on their students so they can adjust and respond effectively in their teaching practice is a good thing in my books!

This approach helped the school leaders to pre-plan for a year group that may a) have a significantly higher proportion of low readers or b) a high performing group of readers who may need extension.

Citations

[1] Kraus, N., & Anderson, S. (2015). Beat-keeping ability relates to reading readiness. The Hearing Journal, 68(3), 54-56.

[1] Hallam, S. (2019). Can a rhythmic intervention support reading development in poor readers?. Psychology of Music, 47(5), 722-735.