The Early Childhood Music Initiative: A Model for Partnerships Between Preschools and Universities

Rachel Whitcomb, Ed. D.
Assistant Professor of Music Education
Duquesne University
600 Forbes Avenue Pittsburgh, PA 15282
whitcombr@duq.edu (412) 396-2225

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD MUSIC INITIATIVE: A MODEL FOR PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN PRESCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES

The Early Childhood Music Initiative (ECMI) was designed to: (1) provide music instruction to underserved preschool children, (2) allow undergraduate music education students to gain real world teaching experiences, and (3) inform and educate preschool directors, teachers, and early childhood caregivers about ways to incorporate music into the daily lives of children using developmentally appropriate practices. Through ECMI, partnerships were formed between Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and seven area preschools. This paper will share project goals and design, implementation, and joys and challenges of the project, with special focus on ways in which the music education faculty member involved in ECMI has worked with preschool directors to implement structured music instruction within early childhood learning environments. Suggestions and implications for future partnerships will also be discussed.

Meaningful musical experiences in preschool allow young children to express creative ideas, develop musical skills, and understand music’s prevalent role in our society. Within the music education and early childhood education professions, there have been efforts to show the need for a comprehensive music curriculum for young children. In 1996, NAfME published the PreKindergarten Music Education Content Standards (1996) to assist music educators in creating developmentally appropriate musical activities for children. In addition, states have also included music within early learning standards documents.

In spite of ongoing support for the inclusion of music within early childhood settings, there is an inconsistency among preschools in the quality and nature of music instruction. Many preschools do not provide formal music instruction by trained music educators on a regular basis, mostly due to a lack of funding to hire such individuals. Therefore, preschool teachers find themselves including music only sparingly due to a lack of musical training and pedagogical guidance that in turn causes a non-sequential and developmentally inappropriate curriculum. Bresler (1994) found that elementary classroom teachers are reluctant to include music instruction because they “perceived music instructions [sic] as requiring special skills, special language, and pedagogical practices they did not have” (p.30). Nardo, Custodero, Persellin, and Fox (2006) found that two conditions exist regarding music practices within preschools across the United States. The authors state, “music education for young children is primarily delivered by classroom teachers and…those teachers feel ill-prepared to deliver meaningful instruction” (p. 289).

When considering the ways in which university-level music teacher education programs can assist in these types of collaborative efforts, further challenges exist. Some universities do not provide opportunities for undergraduate music education majors to complete field experiences in preschools because certain states have teacher certification focusing solely on K-12 level education. However, it is important that university faculty in music education consider expanding undergraduate field experiences to include preschools. These direct experiences in early childhood educational settings will provide pre-service music teachers with a background in developmentally appropriate music practices for young children that serve as a basis for curricular decisions for older students.

Given the varied set of challenges inherent in preschool music education, Nardo et al. (2006) state, “We believe this situation calls for a more assertive stance toward our collaborative
efforts, in an attempt to provide educational equity for every child” (p. 289). One such collaborative effort is the Early Childhood Music Initiative (ECMI). This paper will share project design, implementation, and joys and challenges of the project, with special focus on ways in which the music education faculty member involved in ECMI has worked with preschool directors to implement structured music instruction within early childhood learning environments. Suggestions and implications for future partnerships will also be discussed.

**Project Goals and Basic Design**

ECMI was a grant project that took place during the 2010-2011 academic year with the following three main goals: (1) to provide meaningful musical experiences for children in underserved preschools, (2) to allow undergraduate music education students to gain experience in teaching music to young children in real world settings, and (3) to inform and educate preschool directors, teachers, and early childhood caregivers about ways to incorporate music into the daily lives of children. A university music education faculty member specializing in early childhood and elementary general music served as the ECMI Project Director.

In the fall of 2010, the project began with the identification of and communication with participating preschools. Experts in the field of early childhood music education from various parts of the country contributed to a Lesson Collection that was compiled by the Project Director for use in preschools. Undergraduate music education majors were hired and trained to teach weekly music lessons in preschools in Pittsburgh. Instruments and teaching materials were purchased for use in preschool classrooms.

From January through May of 2011, undergraduate music education majors (referred to here as ECMI Teachers) taught weekly music lessons in seven participating preschools within Pittsburgh. Lessons were video-recorded, training sessions continued on the Duquesne University campus, and ongoing communication occurred between the Project Director and each ECMI Teacher throughout the spring semester. At the same time, preparations were made to present a Professional Development Conference to take place on campus in June. Well-known clinicians were hired to present hands-on workshops to preschool directors, preschool teachers, and early childhood caregivers, focusing on how to incorporate music in developmentally appropriate ways into daily preschool instruction. The Professional Development Conference served as the culminating event for ECMI, with 125 educators and preschool personnel in attendance.

**Implementation**

*Participating Preschools*

Trusted local experts in the field of early childhood education assisted in the process of selecting seven participating preschools for this yearlong project. For the purposes of ECMI, these preschools were considered underserved both due to the low-income communities in which they are located and the fact that there was no music instruction in any preschool in recent years. The Project Director held a meeting with all participating preschool directors in the fall of 2010. The goals of the project were shared, an explanation of the role and responsibilities of the undergraduate ECMI Teachers was given, and expectations for music instruction were described. The Project Director also collected information from the preschools, such as class schedules, class structure (ages of children, number of classes), background of the children and the school community, and the goals and expectations of preschool directors and teachers regarding the implementation of ECMI music lessons. This preliminary meeting assisted the Project Director
in planning training sessions for undergraduates that would be relevant to the participating preschools. For instance, directors indicated an interest in incorporating children’s literature into music instruction. Therefore, the Project Director carried out lesson demonstrations that included children’s books into ECMI Teacher training sessions, connections between music and literature were evident in the lessons included in the Lesson Collection, and children’s books were purchased for use in preschools throughout the semester.

**Participating Undergraduate Students**

Undergraduate music education students interested in becoming ECMI Teachers (paid positions) were sophomores or juniors who had successfully completed an early childhood music methods course with a grade of “B” or better, maintained good standing within the music education department, showed consistency in the demonstration of professional dispositions, completed a written application, and successfully carried out an interview with the Project Director. While the written application included questions regarding schedule availability, other commitments and leadership positions, and the availability of transportation to and from preschool sites, the majority of the application focused on the ability of each candidate to apply knowledge gained in methods classes and field experiences to preschool settings. Sample questions are listed below.

- **Describe one developmentally appropriate melodic activity, one developmentally appropriate rhythmic activity, and one additional activity you might teach to four year olds in a preschool setting. What will the teacher do and what will the students do? Why are your chosen activities appropriate for children at this age level? Be specific if using songs or rhymes (include titles).**
- **Why is it important to inform preschool teachers about the possibilities of including appropriate musical activities in their classrooms? Why do you think ECMI has a goal of educating preschool teachers to include music in their teaching? What will this accomplish? Why is this program particularly valuable for preschool aged children?**
- **If you had an opportunity to say two things to a preschool teacher who is willing to include music in his/her classroom but does not have previous training in music, what would you say? If you had an opportunity to do two things to show this same preschool teacher the value of music in preschool, what would you do?**

During the interview, applicants were asked to articulate their philosophical beliefs regarding early childhood music education, share knowledge of the PreKindergarten Music Education Content Standards, and describe a 30-minute preschool music lesson. Upon completion of the application and interview, seven ECMI Teachers were hired to participate in the project.

**Meet and Greet**

Once participating preschools were identified and ECMI Teachers were hired, the Project Director organized a *meet and greet* in order to introduce each preschool director to her ECMI undergraduate counterpart. The meeting took place in December of 2010 and provided an opportunity to schedule upcoming preschool visits, make decisions regarding weekly lesson times, share goals and expectations, and discuss the background of the children in each participating preschool. Discussions also centered on the musical needs and interests of the children enrolled in each school.
Preliminary Visits

The Project Director, accompanied by each ECMI Teacher, visited each participating preschool prior to the start of weekly music instruction. Each visit consisted of a meeting with the preschool director, a tour of the school, and a short observation of each classroom where music instruction was planned. Preliminary visits were vital to the collaboration between the university and preschool personnel because they provided a context for the Project Director and the undergraduate assigned to each preschool, allowing for informed lesson planning. With a working knowledge of the children within each preschool and the classroom settings where music instruction would take place, the Project Director was able to provide informed training and preparation for each undergraduate. Anticipated challenges within each preschool were also discussed, with each undergraduate preparing lesson plans with those challenges in mind. Preliminary visits provided confirmation to preschool directors and teachers that music instruction would occur regularly, allowed introductions to be made between preschool personnel and university participants, and allowed each ECMI Teacher to be introduced to the children.

First Lessons

For the purposes of providing undergraduates with a smooth transition into real world preschool music teaching, the Project Director either taught the first music lesson in each preschool (typically 30 minutes in length for each class) or heavily assisted each undergraduate in providing an initial lesson for the children. Post-lesson discussions occurred with every undergraduate upon completion of the first day of teaching, with the Project Director providing specific instructions for the next lesson (to be taught solely by the ECMI Teacher). By visiting each preschool for a second time, the Project Director continued to foster relationships with preschool directors and teachers and became more aware of the needs and daily activities occurring in each preschool.

Weekly Lessons

ECMI Teachers began teaching weekly group music lessons in January of 2011. Lessons consisted of a variety of developmentally appropriate musical activities such as vocal exploration, movement to the steady beat, and instrumental discovery. Each undergraduate submitted lesson plans (via Blackboard) by 9 a.m. on Monday morning, with written reflections describing the results of lessons submitted by 4 p.m. on Friday each week. ECMI Teachers also video-recorded each lesson and submitted memory cards to the Project Director approximately twice per month. The Project Director viewed video recordings and observed each preschool approximately once per month, with more frequent visits to specific schools based on the development of teaching skills and the inherent challenges within these schools.

Collaboration with Preschool Personnel

In order to maintain open communication with participating preschool personnel, the Project Director sent periodic emails, made occasional phone calls, and visited preschools frequently. Constant scheduling demands on the part of preschool directors often prevented timely response, but feedback from these individuals was consistently favorable. Communication with each ECMI Teacher, through emails or face-to-face discussions on campus, also helped to keep the Project Director informed about musical progress made within each preschool.
Perhaps the most successful effort to bring together the music education and early childhood education professions occurred during the Professional Development Conference in June of 2011. One hundred twenty five preschool teachers and directors attended this free event to participate in hands-on workshops designed to assist them in including music in their classrooms in developmentally appropriate ways. Experts in the field of early childhood music education served as clinicians, and participants received a copy of the Lesson Collection as well as manipulatives and other materials relating to conference sessions that could be used immediately in preschool classrooms. Eleven undergraduate music education majors also participated in this event, serving as session monitors, active participants, performers, and registration assistants. Many conference participants entered the university school of music for the first time during this event, which provided them with opportunities to become familiar with the facility, students, and faculty. Over 20 preschool directors indicated that they would like to participate in ECMI in the future by having an undergraduate music education major teach weekly music lessons to their children.

Joys and Challenges

To review, the three main goals of the Early Childhood Music Initiative were to provide meaningful musical experiences for preschool children, allow undergraduates to gain teaching experience within preschools, and educate preschool teachers on developmentally appropriate music practices for preschoolers. The first year of ECMI brought both joys and challenges when considering meaningful partnerships between preschools and universities. While the three main goals of the project were successfully achieved, challenges surfaced throughout the year that will help to shape future project offerings.

Regarding positive aspects of the program, parental feedback in most preschools was supportive. A number of parents in one participating preschool heard positive things about ECMI from their child and observed music class specifically to learn more about the activities in order to recreate them in the home. ECMI was also featured in local newspapers and campus publications. (Links to these articles will be made available here.)

Another positive aspect of ECMI was the fact that many preschool teachers participated in weekly music lessons and carried out musical activities at other times during the week. When observing, the Project Director noticed the assistance provided by these preschool teachers to the ECMI Teacher during music instruction, and their knowledge of the abilities of each child in the classroom assisted in developing musical skills. However, the lack of musical training on the part of preschool teachers remained challenging. For instance, many preschool teachers sang along to songs and games but did so in a vocal range much lower than what is developmentally appropriate for children. This challenge was difficult for ECMI Teachers to address due to their lack of teaching experience and the uncomfortable nature of confronting a sometimes-sensitive skill such as singing. One way to address this challenge in the future is to include offerings at the Professional Development Conference focusing on vocal range for preschool teachers who do not have experience or training in this area. Although proper singing was a challenge, credit should be given to preschool teachers willing to sing with their students. Since these individuals are often the primary caregivers of children during the day, their active and enthusiastic participation in musical endeavors is vital to the process; it serves as motivation for the children to understand that music is something that the people they love value and do in their lives. Unfortunately, there were also preschool teachers who did not participate in musical activities and viewed music class as a time to catch up on other classroom tasks. This aspect of the project
will be addressed in the future with the addition of professional development workshops throughout the semester within each preschool to allow teachers to learn songs and rhymes that will be used during music class. Workshops such as these will be a required element of ECMI; preschools wishing to participate in the program will agree to have all teachers attend workshops that will help them learn how best to actively participate during music instruction and carry out similar activities during daily instruction.

While preschool directors expressed their collective belief that music is important and should be included in the lives of young children, the Project Director received limited feedback from these individuals regarding the progress of the ECMI Teacher and the children. The overwhelming schedules and demands placed on preschool directors most likely prevented them from communicating regularly with the Project Director. When visiting to observe music lessons, interactions with directors and teachers were primarily positive, indicating that the program was well received. It is believed that the lack of feedback did not constitute a problem with the program. Instead, it appeared that “no news is good news.” One way to address this challenge in the future is to implement monthly progress reports that will be completed by each preschool director describing progress made in music class. With the high number of interested preschools wishing to participate in ECMI, it is feasible to implement benchmarks such as these to ensure the continued participation by both preschool directors and teachers.

Through participation in ECMI, undergraduate music education majors improved their teaching skills considerably in the areas of developmentally appropriate practice, lesson planning that included a variety of activities and concepts (e.g., melodic and rhythmic endeavors, movement, incorporation of children’s books, and the use of instruments), lesson pacing and sequencing, application of musicianship skills to teaching situations, comfort level in the presence of children, and classroom management techniques. Once weekly music lessons began, training sessions on campus became more relevant to ECMI Teachers as they engaged in honest discussions about teaching challenges and listened more intently regarding classroom management techniques!

Suggestions and Implications for Future Partnerships

Upon completion of a successful first year of ECMI, plans are underway for continued partnerships with preschools throughout Pittsburgh. Seven undergraduate music education majors gained experience teaching in preschools, 240 preschoolers actively participated in weekly music lessons, numerous preschool teachers from each school participated and/or observed developmentally appropriate music practices in classrooms, and 125 preschool teachers and early childhood caregivers attended the Professional Development Conference to learn specific ways to incorporate music in preschool instruction. Once additional funding is secured, the program will expand to 10 preschools, with one school serving as a training site to allow the Project Director to demonstrate musical activities to undergraduates with actual children. The training site will also allow ECMI Teachers to gain teaching experience with children before beginning work in their assigned preschools. Other aspects of the program will be analyzed to ensure the effectiveness of music instruction for children, training for undergraduates, and professional development opportunities for preschool personnel.

When considering ways to further develop musical knowledge, pedagogical skills, and active participation on the part of preschool teachers, it will be important to take into account the available time and resources of each preschool. Since participating preschools are underserved and because the services of ECMI have been requested by over 20 preschools, it will be
important to determine the best way to reach the largest number of children and preschool teachers while maintaining the integrity of the program and the quality of the music instruction provided by ECMI Teachers. One way to ensure that preschoolers are receiving music instruction from their preschool teachers on days when ECMI Teachers are not present is to require participating preschools to agree to monthly professional development workshops. Such workshops can be designed to allow the ECMI Teacher and the Project Director to share musical activities that will be included in music instruction in the near future, assist preschool teachers with musicianship skills, and reflect upon how the children have responded to music lessons thus far in the program. These workshops will also allow preschool teachers to develop their ideas for including music during daily instruction, discuss fears and challenges they face when including music in their classrooms, and share insight into the specific needs of the children they teach each day. Workshops will also address the challenge of actively engaging participating preschool teachers in music instruction. Since ECMI strives not only to provide music instruction to preschool children but also to educate preschool teachers on developmentally appropriate music practices, the involvement of preschool teachers is vital to the continued success of the program.

To understand further how preschool teachers perceive the role of music in early childhood education, the Project Director conducted a survey study focusing on the nature and extent to which music is occurring in area preschools, teacher attitudes toward music, factors assisting and inhibiting the inclusion of music in instruction, and the musical background of preschool teachers. Research results will assist in the further development of ECMI offerings. With a clearer understanding of the needs of teachers relating to music, the Project Director can work to strengthen the partnerships between the university and participating preschools by providing offerings that are most relevant to their needs while also providing necessary professional development opportunities for undergraduate music education students.

The Early Childhood Music Initiative can serve as a model for partnerships between preschools and universities. As previously discussed, preschools continue to face a number of challenges when attempting to include music in instruction. Similarly, undergraduate music education majors do not often have opportunities to teach music at the preschool level. Through thoughtful collaboration with preschools and a consistent desire to remain informed of the needs of preschool directors, teachers, and children, faculty and students within university music education programs can provide meaningful musical experiences for young children across the country and ensure that these types of experiences continue in the future.
References

