Responsive Evaluation of a Musical Play for Pre-schoolers

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a musical play, entitled The Peter Piper Pickled Pepper Mystery, written by a drama educator and music educator for pre-school children. The paper provides the rationale for the play's development, an overview of the musical and dramatic content of the script, and a report on the performance evaluations and their implications for further development of the musical play.

Responsive evaluation, with its emphasis on activity assessment and usefulness of findings, provides the means for judging the perceived impact of the play's performance on its intended target audience. The evaluation process involved a number of evaluators, including arts educators, pre-school teachers and carers, final year teacher education students who were the performers, and the two writers of the play.

We are arts educators, working in tertiary drama and tertiary music education. This paper focuses on a musical play, entitled *The Peter Piper Pickled Pepper Mystery*, that we wrote for a pre-school audience, and a responsive evaluation of its performance to the target audience.

There is scant evidence about what lies behind the writing of creative works for pre-school aged children, which for the purpose of this study we have defined as children aged 3 to 5 years. We grounded our musical play in research findings about pre-school development in music and drama education, anticipating that this would improve the musical play's chances of success with this age group. To assess the play during a performance, a qualitative evaluation was conducted which focused on the play's perceived effectiveness from the perspective of the performers, the teachers and carers of audience members, other selected adults in the audience, and the writers of the musical (the two of us). Written assessments were augmented by a video record of the audience's response taken during performance.

The Musical Play: A Script Development and Performance Perspective

Several key concepts governed the script development. First is the knowledge that a children's play requires "a good storyline," within which there must be a "well-defined focus" (Wood, 1997, p. 28; Warren, 1993, p. 8). The storyline for *The Peter Piper Pickled Pepper Mystery* revolves around the question of who stole Peter's peppers. This central problem is set up early in the script as a crying Peter enters with an empty basket. His friend, Owl, tries to find out what is wrong:

Peter   Ohh, ohh, ohhhhhhhhhh.

Owl   Peter! What's wrong? *(Owl gives a hanky to Peter, who blows his nose loudly)* Let me guess.
       Is it because ... you're sick?

Peter   No!

Owl   Is it because ... you're hungry?

Peter   *(Crying)* No!

Owl   Whatever could it be then? *(To children)* Do you have any ideas? *(Accepts idea from audience
       and asks)* Is it because ... you're *(fill in idea)*

Peter   NO!

Owl   (To children) It's not that either! (Peter shows Owl empty basket)

        (gasps) Oh! I think I know. Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers; A peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked; If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers, where's the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked? Is that right?

Peter   (Nods) My peppers are gone. They've disappeared.

Owl   Someone's taken them? (Peter nods sadly) Who?

This dramatic presentation of the problem aims to arouse the children's curiosity and their willingness to help the two main characters, Peter and Owl, solve the mystery. This opening scene also provides an example of direct interaction with the children, a frequently used technique in the play. This strategy is based on the idea that "children enjoy being active participants rather than passive spectators" (Wood, 1997, p. 16). The types of participation in the script include direct questioning of the children, active involvement in actions for rhymes, and a stretch break where children exercised with Owl and Peter. It was anticipated that children would respond positively to Owl, as well as to animals in other scenes (e.g., the three little kittens; Incey Wincey, the Spider; and Little Boy Blue's cow and sheep).

Another characteristic of the play is its episodic structure which builds on research that children in the pre-operational stage of development respond to "cumulative" stories (Huck, 1993, p. 22). Constructed of self-contained scenes, the script segments can be enacted in any order, with the exception of the introduction that sets up the problem, and the conclusion which resolves it. Such flexible scripting offers the director with the option of having children choose at each stage what nursery rhyme sequence happens next.

Humour is often cited as a "vital ingredient" in children's plays (Wood, 1997, p. 39). In this play, humour comes mostly through characterisation. In the performance actors are encouraged to create their nursery rhyme characters in an exaggerated, larger than life way.

In summary then, the integration of short nursery rhymes into a more unified and developed plot-line served as the basis for the script. In performance, exaggerated characterisation, humour, overt action, and audience participation are used to bring the script to life.

The Musical Play: A Musical Perspective

Eight characters help Peter and Owl find the missing peppers. These characters are a rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, doctor, lawyer, merchant and chief, taken from the nursery rhyme "Tinker Tailor." The writers related each of these generic characters to another more specific nursery rhyme character (e.g., the doctor of "Tinker Tailor" is the grown-up Little Miss Muffet, and the chief is mother cat from "The Three Little Kittens" rhyme).

Some of the nursery rhymes selected for the play also can be sung using traditional melodies. When these tunes were known they were incorporated into the script. For those rhymes without existing melodies, tunes were composed. In keeping with the traditional songs, pitches used were generally restricted to the pentatonic scale, with much repetition. This repetition was seen as important, as pre-school aged children focus on repetition in songs after having learnt the words of a song (Davidson, McKernon, & Gardner, 1981).

Familiar nursery rhymes were used in the musical play because pre-schoolers know a wide repertoire of standard nursery rhymes and songs, and can perform recognition memory tasks better with familiar material than with that which is unfamiliar (Dowling, 1982). Since children will already know the words of many of the nursery rhymes, they can then be free to focus on other activities associated with the rhyme during the performance, such as singing, responding to the beat, or following along with the actions.

For children of pre-school age words are learned first in songs, followed by rhythm, contour, then intervals (Moog, 1976; Petzold, 1966; Updegraff, Heileger, & Learned, 1938). When they already know the words, rhythm is often the next focus area—particularly the beat. In a number of rhymes and songs in the musical play the audience are encouraged to "help out" by keeping the beat in different ways. Keeping a steady beat is emphasised because development of keeping the beat in time significantly develops in pre-school aged children (Davidson, McKernon, & Gardner, 1981; Rainbow, 1977; Thackray, 1972).

In line with Dunne-Sousa's (1990) finding that movement is more helpful in identifying and learning a song than speech rhythm or melody, most songs are taught to the audience phrase by phrase with movement and actions. Movement is also used to show melodic contour in songs.

Focus in the music is not restricted to rhythm and melody. Dynamic contrasts are highlighted in the performance of songs, as the sequential acquisition of musical cognition suggests dynamics precede rhythm, melody and form (McDonald & Simons, 1989). Shuter-Dyson (1981) indicates that discriminating between louder and softer is a significant musical development in children aged five to six years.

Concepts generally thought of as being "beyond" pre-schoolers are also introduced, such as singing a song in canon, and singing two songs together in the finale (i.e., as partner songs).

In summary, song melodies in the musical play are generally restricted to the pentatonic scale, with much repetition; traditional and newly composed songs are used. Movement is used to teach new songs and demonstrate melodic contour. Keeping a steady beat to music is emphasised, and simple dynamic contrasts are explored.

The Performance Context

Two performances of The Peter Piper Pickled Pepper Mystery, each lasting 55 minutes, were presented on April 21st and 22nd, 2000, in a drama theatre with a 75 person capacity. The pre-school audience were seated around the edges of a tri-level acting area consisting of a lowered square pit in front, backed by the higher floor level on which a portable platform was placed. Most children sat in front of the pit area with a direct front view of all levels. Only these acting areas were lit, lighting provided the main differentiation between the audience and the acting area. Live music and sound effects were provided for most songs using an electronic keyboard. Accompaniments were simple in keeping with the melodies.

Evaluation of the Musical Play: Proceedures

The performance assessment approach we used was based on Stake's responsive evaluation model (1975, 1983) which employs evaluators' observations and reactions as the basis for determining program usefulness (i.e.,"the responsive approach is an attempt to respond to the natural ways in which people assimilate information and arrive at understanding" [Stake, 1975, p. 23]). To accomplish this, evaluators with different perspectives (e.g., students, teachers, curriculum specialists) are asked to provide "expressions of worth" for a given program (Stake, 1975, pp. 14, 27). Multiple observations of the same phenomena provide insight into what is happening in the program (the description) and how it is being received (the judgement) become evident. These assessments are useful, both during (formative) and after (summative) the implementation of a program or project. Stake's emphasis on the immediate usefulness of evaluation, and the utilisation of a variety of stakeholders as evaluators, drew us to his model of evaluation.

The end result of responsive evaluation is a "useful discourse" which recognises the "complexity" and "multiple reality of an aesthetic education experience" as seen through the "diverse points of view" of its evaluators (Stake, 1975, p. 23). Those areas of strong coalesence and conflict provide a further focus for program development. The nature of responsive evaluation in which evaluators "construct rich experiential understandings" of a case (e.g., program, project) places it firmly within an "interpretivist" paradigm which recognises the "view of knowledge as contextualised meaning" (Greene, 1994, p. 538).

In our situation we used the concept of responsive evaluation as a means of reflecting on the perceived impact of our musical play on a pre-school audience. Although we had engaged in continual assessment and ongoing modification of the script and music from the beginning, the use of a number of evaluators for performance assessment provided a broader perspective on the musical play's effectiveness with its target audience. It is important to note that we made a conscious decision not to interview the pre-school children due to their young age.

In conducting the responsive evaluation, we used as evaluators the actors (final year teacher education students majoring in children's theatre); arts education academics; adult carers of the children attending; and the two of us. We regarded the performers and ourselves as insiders because we had been associated with the play through all its developmental stages. The other assessors, who saw the play for the first time on the day of its performance, we called outsiders.

We asked the evaluators to provide written responses to two main questions as they watched the performance: (1) In what specific ways did the children respond to this theatre performance (i.e., overall, and then with regard to the drama and the music)?, and (2) In what ways do you believe this performance meets the learning needs of the children? Through these questions we expected to gain both descriptive comments about the children's reactions and reflective thoughts about the usefulness and worth of this program for the children's learning.

The Evaluation of the Play: Outcomes

In response to the first question, In what specific ways did the children respond to this theatre performance?, all evaluators commented on the pre-school audience's positive response to the musical play overall (e.g., "their eyes sparkled, their faces directed toward the stage," "kids were rapt," and "kids loved it"). However, evaluators reported that the children's enthusiasm was most apparent at the beginning, with a number of them beginning to get restless midway through the performance (i.e., they "lost interest later," and "found it hard to sit still"). Both the play's length and the nature of the middle scenes, which were based on characters discussing events rather than on direct action, were given as reasons for this (e.g., "long dialogue without much movement" and "more action is needed and less talk about action"). The general implication here is that the play needs a trim and, in places, some judicious scene cutting or re-structuring. The evaluators' comments confirmed an unease we had during the rehearsal stage, namely that certain scenes were not working as well as the rest of the play.

In relation to the drama elements of the production, evaluators highlighted the positive interchanges between the performers and the audience (e.g., "interaction worked extremely well"). The children's responses were usually physical, what one evaluator described as "children thinking out loud," for example, "standing up" and "gesturing" at exciting spots, "laughing" at "silly humour," "calling out answers to questions," and "hiding faces when scared." The rapport was so well developed that during one performance a child felt comfortable to lie in the acting area as he watched the play take place around him.

Evaluators reported that children were very attentive to the story line (e.g., "they watched closely"), responding to the emotional states of the characters (e.g., "why is Peter crying?") and shouting out helpful hints to the actors (e.g., "Jack's the thief"). As one evaluator put it, "children want to be involved." This was particularly evident when characters directly questioned the audience. Not only did the children answer the questions built into the script, but they responded by airing opinions, offering solutions, asking questions of the actors, and "conversing with each other to clarify parts of the story." This interactive response was greater than any of us had anticipated. Evaluators highlight that this is an area that needs attention because actors were not always directly acknowledging the children's verbal interactions. As a result, some children became frustrated because their attempts to help were ignored. This point has direct implications for future rehearsal periods of the play where actors will need to become more aware of the ways in which children may respond to the action and how to integrate their suggestions more directly into the scene.

The use of animal characters and puppets was a feature that the evaluators felt increased the children's enjoyment of the play (e.g., "Spider really caught their attention," they were "very focused in the Three Little Kittens segment," and they "like the cow and sheep puppets"). The chase scenes were cited as "popular" with the audience (e.g., they "laughed at the chase scene"). As one evaluator put it, "children respond well to actions." Subsequent revisions of the play will need to capitalise on these action elements and de-emphasise what one evaluator called "long dialogue which slows the pace," resulting in children "switching off."

What the children found to be funny was directly related to the action, rather than to language or scripted jokes (e.g., "silly humour, not word humour"). For example, they laughed at Peter "blowing his nose" and the frenzied "chase scenes," but they did not find humourous Little Boy Blue thinking that the lost pepper (as in the pickled pepper) was the pepper in "salt and pepper." This point is worth remembering in the play's revision and re-staging. It is not so much that the "adult" humour needs to be dropped, but rather that opportunities need to be taken to accentuate the broad "visual" joke based on big physical action which the children seem to enjoy.

Evaluators made reference to the large number of characters in the play. This was identified as a particular problem (i.e., "overwhelming") in the opening musical sequence where each nursery rhyme character appears briefly prior to Peter's entrance. Short of cutting back the number of rhymes, which has implications for using the "Tinker Tailor" rhyme as an organising structure, this point is not easily addressed. However, in revising the play, it will be given serious consideration.

Concerning the music, all evaluators commented on the children's enjoyment of the songs (e.g.. "singing a song drew children in immediately") and noted the eagerness with which they joined in "spontaneously singing" (e.g.,"they sing along very happily"). In particular, children enjoyed singing the traditional songs they already knew (e.g., "they loved familiar songs").

Evaluators noted that most of the songs actively involved the children. They "clapped to the beat when asked to," "swayed to the songs" and "tried to sing songs even when not sure of them." Any reluctance to participate was soon overcome "if the instructions were clear."

The repetition of songs was seen as a positive element. For example, one evaluator commented that by the end of the show "most of the children could sing 'Who Has Taken Peter's Peppers'." This continuous repetition of a short verse between scenes provided a comfortable musical bridge which musically re-enforced the show's central question, "Who has taken Peter's Peppers?"

Some outsiders (the carers of the children, who knew the children) commented on the older children being more willing to sing than the younger ones, who sometimes just watched. Insiders, who knew the script well and were aware of the teaching emphasises within it, specifically mentioned the strategies used to teach musical concepts, such as the actors teaching new songs to the audience phrase by phrase (e.g., "children easily echo songs line by line") and the use of hand levels to show varying pitch levels in songs. Finally, the keyboard player, also a performer, was in a position to comment that more in-tune singing occurred when the keyboard played the melody with the singers.

A number of evaluators commented that the concept of the canon, which was introduced in the "Lucy Locket" scene, was "too complex" and beyond the children's level of musical understanding. This will need re-examination in the revision process.

Even though the outsiders tended to be more positive, and the insiders more critical (i.e., making more specific suggestions for script and staging revision), overall there was a high degree of consistency among the outsiders and the insiders with regard to the strengths of the musical play and the possible areas for improvement.

In response to the second question, In what ways did you believe this performance meets the learning needs of the children?, both inside and outside evaluators commented overall that imagination was fuelled, counting was encouraged, language was developed, and listening skills were reinforced. Insiders made two additional comments: moral teachings occurred (i.e., stealing is not right; forgiveness is positive), and social relationships were presented (i.e., friendships).

In relation to drama, the evaluators commented on the use of known rhymes and characters which involve the child in remembering and then integrating these familiar elements into a new unknown context (i.e., the play). The imagination was stimulated using the visual devices of costumes, puppets, and photographs as cues. The interactive nature of the performance re-enforced communication skills. Not surprisingly, insiders commented more in-depth in this area, mentioning that children were encouraged to predict (i.e., working out who stole Peter's peppers), and to empathise (i.e., relating to Peter's misfortune and trying to assist in solving his problem). Introducing children to the concept of a children's theatre performance also enriched their understanding of the elements of a theatrical production, such as: acting, staging, lighting, costumes, and sound effects.

In referring to music, the evaluators commented on the applicability for teaching young children of the simple melodies, the promotion of keeping the beat, and the use of repetition in songs. The fact that the music was so carefully integrated with the dramatic storyline was also seen as fostering a unified understanding of the musical play. The introduction of singing in canon was the only musical element regarded as being too complex for this age group.

Conclusion

The responsive evaluation carried out for the performance of *The Peter Piper Pickled Pepper Mystery* highlighted aspects which were effective as well as those needing attention. This balanced approach provides useful feedback for us in revising the script and in deciding the play's future direction.

Although at our local level this rich evaluation data will lead to specific modifications aimed at increasing the effectiveness of the musical play with its target group, the process used in evaluating this production also has

broader implications for others writing children's theatre works. Most importantly, we have indicated the usefulness of the responsive evaluation approach for assessing a theatrical production. Using a range of evaluators from different perspectives provides insight into how the production is being received. Each evaluator brings their own experience and background to the assessment resulting in a range of viewpoints, opinions, and suggestions being expressed. This is particularly true when there are evaluators who are insiders (those involved in the writing, rehearsal and performance of the musical play) and those who are outsiders (people from a variety of backgrounds who view the play for the first time during performance). Each group provides different insights which, when taken as a whole, give a more complete view of the production. In the areas where both insiders and outsiders agree in their evaluations considerable weight is given to the usefulness of that judgement. Where there is disagreement, it is useful to appreciate the different perspectives being represented.

In our own case, with the responsive evaluation now complete, we can return to our musical play using the combined judgements of the evaluators as a basis to make changes to improve the effectiveness of The Peter Piper Pickled Pepper Mystery with its pre-school audience.

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List of presenters and paper topics as at 31/8/02

Name	Title	Institution/Affiliation
Blyth, Andrew	Doing Grounded Theory Research	EdD student at Deakin University, Melbourne.
Burke, Harry	Title: Government Initiated Reforms to Music Education in America, the UK and Victoria, 1989-2000.	Monash University-Education Faculty. Master of Education
Daniel, Ryan	Alternative strategies for the tertiary teaching of piano	James Cook University Townsville Queensland 4811
Dunbar-Hall, Peter	Issues for consideration in the teaching of world musics: A re-assessment of music education practice	Peter Dunbar-Hall Sydney Conservatorium of Music
Ferris, Jill	Song and cultural hierarchy: an investigation of the song material available to Victorian primary school classrooms to support the 1934 music curriculum.	RMIT University, Bundoora, Victoria
Hao-Chun Lee, Angela	Elementary Music Teacher Education in Taiwan: The National Taipei Teacher Institution - A Case Study	Junior Honorary Research Associate, Monash University
Hartwig, Kay	Reflect! Have music teachers got time to reflect?	Education Qld & Griffith University
Jacquier, David	Assessing Musical Creativity: Secondary School Music Students' Compositions	PhD Student Elder School of Music University of Adelaide
Jeanneret, Neryl; Forrest, David; McPherson, Jay	Australian music: a unique approach in the NSW curriculum	University of Newcastle; RMIT; NSW Board of Studies

Jenkins, Louise	Ruby Davy-An atypical music teacher	Monash University - Clayton Campus
Joseph, Dawn	Umoja: Teaching African music to generalist teacher education students	Faculty of Education Deakin.University—Melbourne Campus
Koch, Elizabeth	Engaging instrumental students with technical studies: fact or fiction?	Elder School of Music University of Adelaide
Lierse, Anne	Technology and single-sex classes: Remedies for ineffective secondary level classroom music programs?	Melbourne High School
Mackay, Linda	Queensland's music outcomes: building pedagogical bridges	Curriculum, Education Queensland
Merrick, Bradley	Metacognition, Motivation And Computer Composition. How Can Music Technology Impact On Teaching and Learning in the Music Classroom?	Barker College, NSW PhD student - University of NSW School of Music and Music Education
Nettheim, Nigel	An enhanced score for expression.	MARCS Auditory Laboratories, University of Western Sydney
Nettheim, Nigel	A composer-specific conducting simulation	MARCS Auditory Laboratories, University of Western Sydney
Pietsch, Helen	Is the choral program of the South Australian Public Primary Schools' Music Festival music education?	PhD student, Elder School of Music University of Adelaide SA
Rosevear, Jenny	A preliminary snapshot of the academic achievement and self-concept of music and non-music school students	Elder School of Music University of Adelaide

Ross, Deb	Roma Taylor (1905-1978): a life in the arts in Warracknabeal.	Monash University
Russell-Bowie, Deirdre	Art smart or music smart: Comparing the background of teacher education students in Australia, South Africa, Namibia, USA and Ireland.	University of Western Sydney
Saffir, Ruth	The genesis of the Junior Strings Pilot Project, Elder School of Music, University of Adelaide	Elder School of Music, University of Adelaide
Smith, Rodney	Some considerations concerning current career prospects for newly credentialed private music teachers in the Australian context	Elder School of Music, University of Adelaide
Southcott, Jane and Smith, Rosalynd	Reflection and inspiration: Understanding music pedagogies through journal writing	Faculty of Education Monash University
Southcott, Jane	A tale of two brothers: E. Harold and H. Walford Davies	Faculty of Education Monash University
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Tan, Jessie	A model: The inclusion of world music in the classroom	Kent Ridge Secondary School Singapore
Temmerman, Nita	So what extra-musical benefits did your arts (music) education subject provide? The potential contribution of arts (music) education to the development of generic skills in undergraduate teacher education programs.	School of Social and Cultural Studies in Education Deakin University
Wan, Catherine & Huon, Gail	Performance Breakdowns Under Pressure: An Experimental Approach.	School of Psychology, University of New South Wales Position: Masters of Psychology (Organisational) student

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