



Nicoletta Rosati

orcid.org/0000-0002-2458-9820

e-mail: n.rosati2@lumsa.it

LUMSA – Libera Università Maria ss. Assunta di Roma

Nursery Rhyme, Rhythm and Narrative Thinking in Early Childhood Education

Rymowanki, rytm i myślenie narracyjne w edukacji
wczesnodziecięcej

KEYWORDS

rhythm, music,
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ABSTRACT

The contribution focuses on the effectiveness of nursery rhymes, music, and storytelling in early childhood education. Various research studies carried out over the past twenty years have demonstrated the way in which the use of rhythm, music, and storytelling can facilitate the development of a child's overall personality. This study examines the impact of incorporating silent books into early childhood education to enhance a child's language skills, social interaction, and cognitive development. Over the course of one month, teachers assessed the progress of young children in various domains, including vocabulary acquisition, narrative fluency, and peer interaction. The results highlight the importance of providing diverse opportunities for play with stories, images, and music in supporting holistic development in young children. By integrating these rich experiences into early education practices, educators can effectively nurture linguistic, social, and emotional competencies, laying a solid foundation for lifelong learning and growth.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

rytm, muzyka,
opowiadanie
historyjek, myślenie
narracyjne, ciche
książki, wczesne
dzieciństwo

Niniejszy artykuł skupia się na skuteczności rymowanek, muzyki i opowiadań w edukacji wczesnodziecięcej. Badania prowadzone w ciągu ostatnich dwudziestu lat wykazały, że wykorzystanie rytmu, muzyki i historyjek może usprawnić ogólny rozwój dziecka. Badanie opisane w niniejszym tekście ukazuje wpływ stosowania tzw. cichych książek w edukacji wczesnodziecięcej w celu poprawy umiejętności językowych dziecka, a także jego interakcji społecznych i rozwoju poznawczego. W ciągu miesiąca nauczyciele oceniali postępy małych dzieci w różnych dziedzinach, w tym w przyswajaniu słownictwa, płynności narracji i interakcji z rówieśnikami. Wyniki tych obserwacji podkreślają znaczenie możliwości zabawy z opowieściami, obrazami i muzyką we wspieraniu holistycznego rozwoju małych dzieci. Włączając takie zajęcia do praktyki nauczania małych dzieci, nauczyciele mogą skutecznie wspierać kompetencje językowe, społeczne i emocjonalne swych podopiecznych, tworząc dla nich solidne podstawy do nauki i rozwoju trwającego przez całe życie.

Introduction

The attention given to a child's learning and the ways in which he/she acquires knowledge in the early years has grown significantly since the late 19th century. This interest has been fueled by various factors, including the development of childhood sciences, the evolution of psychological and pedagogical theories, and social changes that have led to a greater awareness of the importance of the early years in a child's development.

One of the key aspects of this focus has been the understanding of expressive forms and their role in the child's personality development and cognitive abilities. This has led to an increase in targeted investigations and research aimed at understanding how children explore the world, communicate, and express themselves. Artistic forms such as nursery rhymes, rhythms, songs, and storytelling have gained particular attention, offering children creative ways to express themselves and contributing to their holistic development. However, along with this growing interest, there has been a growing trend to idealize childhood, often linked to the decline of positivist thinking and a yearning for a more genuine and spontaneous understanding of what it means to be a child. These romanticized views have resulted in adults projecting their own needs and desires onto children, thereby shaping the way children's experiences and expressions are interpreted. This projection can obscure the true nature of childhood, leading to misunderstandings and misrepresentations of children's authentic selves.

Among the expressive forms that have received particular attention are artistic content such as nursery rhymes, rhythms, songs, and storytelling. These forms not only offer children a creative way to express themselves but can also play an important formative role in shaping the entire personality of children from 0 to 6 years of age. These activities can help the child to develop linguistic, cognitive, emotional, and social skills, as well as stimulate his/her imagination and creativity.

Furthermore, the use of artistic expression as an educational tool can promote more meaningful and engaging learning, encouraging children to actively participate in the exploration of the world around them. In this sense, nursery rhymes, rhythms, songs, and storytelling are not just forms of entertainment but also powerful tools for fostering a child's overall development and promoting his/her emotional and cognitive well-being.

Imagination and Creativity in Early Childhood and the Development of the Learning Process

Children enjoy listening to stories, nursery rhymes and chants at home or in the nursery and pre-primary school classroom. The use of storytelling and of music in nursery rhymes and chants facilitates the process of vocabulary building and language acquisition. Music and rhythm facilitate the ability to use language and support the development of expression and communication (Imberty, 2019). Stories stimulate a child's imagination while rhymes and chants activate his/her musicality.

When a child listens to a story, he/she is transported to an imaginary world where he/she can invent places in which characters of all kinds exist. Listening to a story such as "Little Red Riding Hood", for instance, can take hold of a child's imagination whereby the characters of the little girl, the mother, the grandmother, and the wolf become real in the child's mind. Many children are frightened by the mental image of the big, bad wolf interacting with the little girl and, more importantly, with the grandmother, a beloved figure for most children. This feeling of discomfort becomes apparent in the child's facial expressions and body language, at first relaxed then tense, as the story unfolds and reaches a dramatic climax.

According to Piaget (1964/2012), this type of reaction can occur only after the child has had a tangible experience of a child-mother-grandmother relationship along with an interactive experience with other children. Moreover, the child must be able to recognize the main elements of the story, such as the color red and the figure of the wolf or of an animal similar to a wolf.

In early childhood, there needs to be some connection to reality so that the child can create mental images and understand different kinds of situations. According to

Bachelard (1938/1995), the imagination, or the translation into images of wishes and “movements of the soul” for affectivity at the subconscious level, is a scope that precedes rationality. The imagination is expressed through three modalities in different spheres: that of day-dreaming, which interprets subjectivity perceived by the senses, that of poetry, which creates fantastic universes, and that of science, which has a similar analogizing function, producing subjective and pre-scientific awareness. Bachelard pursues a strong interest in art and literature, which forms the basis of several of his writings (Bachelard, 1960/1973, 1970/1987). While acknowledging the opposition between science and art, the French philosopher claims that the independence of any activity of the imagination is the basis for artistic production preceding the affirmation of rationality.

To develop the imagination, one can begin with educational activities connected to the arts. These may include songs, music for listening and movement, making up nursery rhymes, and engaging in handicrafts using modelling clay and modelling dough, to name just a few. Art, imagination, and rational thought are specific phenomena which share equal value. The imagination is a creative faculty which goes beyond the mere reproduction of perception. It produces a form of knowledge that transforms the object itself. The imagination does not need to adapt to reality, as it creates imaginary worlds made up of things not found in reality but may be superior to reality itself.

According to Melanie Klein, the type of knowledge produced by the imagination differs from that of rational thought, but these two forms of knowledge remain distinct traits in humans. Man/woman is constantly comparing himself/herself with reality, and at the same time, he/she continues to be a dreamer who creates unreal worlds. “Man is simultaneously a rationalist-creator and a dreamer-non-creator” (Klein, 1921/1986, p. 27).

According to Bruner, the two processes of imagination and rationality are closely connected. He makes a distinction between two types of thought: the paradigmatic (logical-scientific) and the narrative. Both types provide a special method of ordering experiences and constructing reality. These two ways of thinking, while being complementary, are distinct. Any attempt to attribute one to the other or to consider one over the other will inevitably lead us to overlook the richness and variety of thought (Bruner, 1986/2001, p 15). Each of these two ways of thinking possesses its own operating principles and its own validity criteria (Bruner, 1986/2001, p 15). The first type of cognitive function is typical of the narrative, whereas the second is typical of argumentation. While argumentation “convinces us of one’s truth” and “is subject to verification”, narratives convince us of one’s “verisimilitude” and do not establish the truth. Paradigmatic thought draws upon classification and conceptualization, and seeks the general causes of events. Narrative thought is able to contextualize without

a time frame those events common to all humanity. On the contrary, paradigmatic thought tends to transcend detail to reach an ever-higher level of abstraction (Bruner, 1986/2001, p. 8).

An important point in Bruner's dissertation is that both narrative and argumentation require the contribution of an intensely creative way of thinking, intended as the ability to construct worlds.

According to Bruner, creativity is a form of productive thought characterized by combinatorial activity and an organization of information from a new perspective. (Bruner, 1964/1968, p. 45). This productive thought consists of "not making useless combinations but rather making useful ones. Invention is discernment and choice" (Bruner, 1964/1968, p. 46). Listening to stories and acting them out through movement and interpretation encourages a child's creativity. Nursery school children, for example, can play the characters in the story, an activity that offers them an opportunity to imagine a reality different from their own and which is closer to their wishes and needs for self-assertion. On the other hand, listening to stories represents the main vehicle with which, stimulated by his curiosity, the child can experience the world of things and events. The intertwining of these elements reveals the child's inclination to engage, through playful activity, in two different types of thought. The first of these is aimed at the construction of imaginary worlds, while the second is directed at the knowledge of reality.

We need to ask whether or not and in what way we can stimulate a child's natural impulse for imagination, develop his/her attitude for play, and build his/her knowledge through educational initiatives. The goal is to foster the imaginative thinking process which forms the basis of both narrative and rational thought. A point of reference for this concept can be found in the educative experiences of Susan Isaacs, head of Malting House, a school which she founded in the 1920's. This experience was especially significant with Isaacs setting up a learning environment well-suited to developing the child's intelligence and imagination. Isaacs' vision sprung from an in-depth knowledge of the inner world of children and from her own unique way of viewing the world, along with her application of Dewey's idea of "learning by doing".

According to the British pedagogist, a child's natural resources do not develop independently but rather must be cultivated by providing a favorable environment and by adopting a specific attitude on the part of the adult who offers support, fostering, and encouragement. It is not a question of providing the child with knowledge by way of the direct transmission of ideas, but of fostering activities based on the child's natural interests and inclinations expressed during freely chosen play. These are the seeds of discovery and cognitive depth, which through step-by-step encouragement and without influencing the child, can lead to significant learning, attitudes, and competences.

According to Isaacs, there are essentially two motivations behind a child's behaviors: "on one hand, the enjoyment of stories and pretend play, singing, dancing, and all forms of self-assertion", and on the other hand, "the child's pleasure [...] in discovering and their direct and active interest in the things and events of the physical and human world" (Isaacs, 1930/1961, p. 24). The first motivation finds satisfaction in "creative imagination and its expression in literature and manual work, in music, theatre, and rhythmic movement" (ibid) and has its roots in the rich fantasy life of children; the second originates from the epistemophilic impulse and manifests itself "in forms of diligent investigation and a taste for the actual process of discovery, which are at least anticipations of true scientific spirit" (Isaacs, 1930/1961, p. 25). At the Malting House, the importance of imagination was recognized both in the form of imaginative play and in that of aesthetic expression and enjoyment: "Play is [...] the starting point not only for cognitive development but also for the creative intent which, when fully developed, distinguishes the artist, the novelist, the poet" (Isaacs, 1930/1961, pp. 133–134). However, the role of the adult is central: imagination must be nurtured to lead to expressive forms of value and significant aesthetic enjoyment, just as curiosity must be supported to become a source of observation and scientific investigation. But such promotion must occur "from within".

Playing With Rhymes and Music

The suggestion to have children play with their voices, searching for rhymes and stimulating the creation of nursery rhymes, constitutes an educational activity for children in nursery and kindergarten. The educator or teacher can "throw" a word (e.g., cake) and invite the children to repeat it several times, clapping their hands, scanning the syllables, pronouncing it aloud, then increasingly softly until silence. The children can then repeat the same word starting from silence, which the educator emphasizes by counting the numbers to cover the length of the pause (e.g., one, two, three), then start pronouncing the word first whispered and then gradually louder until shouting the word itself. The rhythmic scanning of the word can be accompanied by body movements such as turning around, bending down, reaching upward, depending on what the children "feel" while pronouncing, whispering, shouting the chosen word. This rhythmic game is an important exercise for auditory sensibility, for the development of creativity, and for executive functions. From rhythm, one can move on to melody and then "sing" the word. The word can become the stimulus to find other words that rhyme with that specific word, for example: cake, bake, lake, make, take. Children are invited to repeat a word but to pronounce it with different intensity and tone, in increasing or decreasing rhythm. This simple example of

rhythmic-timbral-melodic structuring creates particular emotions that evoke deep resonances. Rhythm, like music, the body, and musical instruments, can be “mediating objects” that release some of the tensions that daily life can accumulate even in children. Music is a rewarding non-verbal language. It offers multiple opportunities to stimulate encounter and cooperation among children: singing together, producing rhythms together, building simple instruments together (e.g., maracas made by putting rice in a plastic bottle; a tambourine made with paper plates, pierced at the edge and in whose holes the metal caps of bottles are inserted). These instruments can accompany the teacher using a piano or a guitar to guide the singing. You can pronounce and then sing the rhyming words previously searched. You can use rhyming words to compose short phrases with the children and build a nursery rhyme even without meaning like “nonsense”:

I take a cake
going to the lake.
I lost the cake and
called Jake:
“Make a cake
And come to the lake”.
“I’ll bake the cake
– said Jake –
And run to the lake
To eat the cake
With...

The nursery rhyme, sung or recited, while making a circle, can become a game in which the name of one child at a time is pronounced and the child that was called moves to the centre of the circle. All the children repeat the nursery rhyme and the child in the centre of the circle pronounces the name of another child who takes his place and the chant continues.

Music arises from history, lived experience, and relationships with others and with the environment. Composers, instrumentalists, and storytellers have honed the ability to give shape and expression through the language of music (Visioli, 2011, p. 18) to personal experiences or universal values in different spaces and times (Visioli, 2011, p. 18). Music has effects on the entire person. Changes in heart and respiratory rates have been recorded while listening to music of various kinds. Listening to music also influences blood pressure, digestion, and the muscular system. In the recording of an electroencephalogram, the transition from the lowest to the highest musical tone determines a desynchronization of alpha waves. Music also acts on the level of sensory stimulation and, due to its dynamic capabilities, reaches the unconscious.

The child can be considered a *homo musicus* (Visioli, 2011) who shows his musicality at every moment and on every occasion. If this natural tendency towards rhythm and music were always to be cultivated, the child would develop creativity and divergent thinking.

In music education, the child is involved in a process of sound sensitization in which he/she can invent musical nursery rhymes or compose sounds, melodies, and songs together with his/her peers. In doing so, the child draws from autobiographical storytelling and expresses emotions and experiences also through body miming and acting out simple dramas.

Rhythm enhances movement, making the body more sensitive and attentive to others, thus opening the way to dialogue (Regni, 1997). Rhythm and music activate attention and concentration, promote processes of analysis and synthesis, and facilitate the acquisition of fluid speech and correct pronunciation of accents and syllables (Cangià, 2011). They also stimulate the understanding of the text through a focus on keywords, mime, and gesturing.

Music often serves as a sonic backdrop for a story. By listening to music, children are encouraged to recount their own experiences through drawing, which is the primary narrative form of expression for young children.

Narrative Thinking and Storytelling

Narrative thinking refers to the cognitive process through which individuals organize and make sense of their experiences by constructing narratives or stories. It involves the ability to recognize, interpret, and create narratives, serving as frameworks for understanding the world around us and for communicating our thoughts and emotions.

Narrative thinking is fundamental to human cognition and plays a crucial role in the development of memory, identity, problem-solving skills, and social interaction. Through narratives, children construct meaning, establish connections between events, and become aware of their feelings. In addition, narrative thinking plays a central role in communication and social interaction. Overall, narrative thinking is a fundamental aspect of human cognition that shapes how we perceive and make sense of the world. By constructing narratives, we organize our experiences, communicate our thoughts and emotions, and create meaning in our lives.

One of the main tools to facilitate a child's development of narrative thinking at an early age is storytelling. From early childhood, children learn to structure their experiences into stories. Through storytelling, children share their experiences, beliefs, and values with others, fostering empathy, understanding, and connection. As they grow

older, they become more adept at constructing complex narratives that reflect their evolving understanding of themselves and of their environment.

Storytelling for young children is a rich and dynamic practice involving the oral narration of tales, fables, myths, and other stories tailored to engage and captivate a child's curiosity. Children are stimulated by storytelling to develop imagination, creativity, and critical thinking skills. Listening to stories helps children to develop language skills, including the use of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. Storytelling exposes children to a rich and diverse range of words and phrases, enhancing their linguistic competence and comprehension abilities.

Stories provide children with opportunities to explore and express their emotions in a safe and supportive environment. Characters in stories often face challenges, overcome obstacles, and experience a range of emotions, allowing children to empathize with them and develop their emotional intelligence.

When children engage in storytelling activities together, they learn to take turns, listen to others, and collaborate to create narratives, fostering positive social interaction and relationships.

Through stories, children learn about their own cultural heritage as well as the cultures of others. Folktales from different regions and ethnicities provide insights into diverse cultural traditions, values, and beliefs, promoting intercultural awareness and appreciation. Many of the most beloved fairy tales convey moral values and teach universal principles.

Furthermore, storytelling for children is a source of entertainment and enjoyment. Whether read aloud by a caregiver, teacher, or storyteller, or explored independently through audio recordings, or digital media, stories captivate a child's imagination and provide hours of delight and amusement. Storytelling plays a crucial role in a child's development, offering a rich and rewarding experience that stimulates his mind and his feelings, and facilitates socialization.

Analysing the most famous fairy tales from around the world highlights how these stories convey universal values of good triumphing over evil, the importance of friendship, family bonds, courage, honesty, etc. Characters often form strong alliances and support networks that help them overcome obstacles and achieve their goals. These relationships emphasize the importance of loyalty, compassion, and solidarity in navigating life's challenges. Fairy tales like "Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, and Sleeping Beauty" have been passed down through generations and across cultures, transcending geographical and temporal boundaries.

Storywriting: An Experience in Pre-Primary Schools

A qualitative study was conducted across ten preschools in the city and province of Teramo, Italy, to explore the impact of diverse linguistic and artistic practices on the holistic development of preschool children. The study aimed to assess the effectiveness of using narration, drawing, music, and singing in fostering cognitive, emotional, and social growth among young learners. The study involved thirty teachers and approximately 300 children.

Methodology

The educational intervention was inspired by Munari's concept of "books not-to-be read" (Munari, 1984/2011). These silent books comprised pages with various colors, geometric shapes, and illustrations forming a narrative without written words. Munari used to experiment with materials to make the book a tactile experience even before it became a reading experience, with the ultimate goal of introducing young children to the allure of the book as an object to touch, manipulate, and smell. This line of his artistic experiments includes the illegible books (*Illegible Book*, 1984) or the pre-books (*The Pre-books*, 1980), objects that have only the shape of a book but are mostly made without written words, using only different materials to assemble the pages (cardboard, tissue paper, wood, fabric, etc.). These objects suitable even for the very young children.

Munari's books not-to be-read- allowed the teachers to tell the story while the children listened and looked at the images that the teachers showed them from the silent book. Subsequently, the children could pick up the books and invent their own stories while looking at the drawn images. The teachers employed a series of qualitative tools to facilitate and evaluate the intervention:

1. **Storytelling with Silent Books:** Teachers narrated stories while children observed the images in the silent books. This method allowed children to engage with the visual content and create their own narratives based on the illustrations.
2. **Music Integration:** Children selected background music to accompany their storytelling. For five-year-olds, teachers segmented sentences into syllables, encouraging rhythmic clapping and singing of the narrated content. Then they tried to turn the short sentences of the oral narration into sung words.
3. **Observational Assessments:** Teachers maintained logbooks to document each child's progress. Observations reported in the logbooks focused on the different language skills, sentence structuring, vocabulary enrichment, story comprehension, and peer interactions. These items correspond to the checklist

specifically constructed to test children's spontaneous storytelling using silent books and their ability in rhythmic clapping and singing.
The checklist statements were the following:

Language Skills

- Oral Expression: Child expresses thoughts and ideas clearly during storytelling.
- Listening Skills: Child demonstrates active listening and comprehension during peer storytelling sessions.
- Grammar and Syntax: Child constructs grammatically correct sentences during spontaneous storytelling (according to the different children's ages)

Sentence Structuring

- Sentence Complexity: Child uses simple sentences with subjects and predicate.
- Sequencing: Child organizes sentences in a logical and coherent sequence to form a narrative.

Vocabulary Enrichment

- New Vocabulary Usage: Child incorporates newly learned words into their storytelling.
- Contextual Vocabulary: Child uses words appropriately based on the context of the story.

Story Comprehension

- Main Idea Identification: Child accurately explains the main idea of a story.
- Detail Retention: Child recalls and mentions specific details from the story during retelling.
- Character Understanding: Child describes characters' motivations and actions accurately (only for five-year-old children).

Peer Interactions

- Collaboration: Child works well with peers during group storytelling activities.
- Feedback Reception: Child listens to and incorporates feedback from peers into their storytelling.

Spontaneous Storytelling Using Silent Books

- Creativity: Child demonstrates creativity in interpreting and narrating silent books.
- Narrative Development: Child develops a coherent and engaging narrative based on the images in silent books.

Rhythmic Clapping and Singing

- Rhythm Accuracy: Child maintains a consistent rhythm during clapping activities.
- Coordination: Child coordinates clapping with singing accurately.
- Musical Expression: Child expresses musicality and engages enthusiastically in singing activities.
- These checklist statements can help systematically evaluate the children's progress and abilities in the specified areas.

Data Collection and Analysis

The teachers were asked to assess language skills and comprehension of the stories before using the silent books, and after a month's time, the children used these books with the teacher and independently. The teachers recorded in a logbook each child's ability to structure simple sentences, his/her vocabulary enrichment, his/her comprehension of the story told through images by the teacher, and his/her interaction with other children in sharing the play with the silent book.

The qualitative data included:

- Language Skills: Evaluation of children's ability to construct simple sentences and enrich their vocabulary through storytelling and interaction with silent books.

The investigated categories were "sentence construction" and "vocabulary enrichment".

- Narrative Fluency: Assessment of children's fluency in independent storytelling and comprehension of illustrated stories.

The investigated categories were independent storytelling and comprehension of silent stories.

- Social Interaction: Observations of peer interactions, including shared book reading, collaborative storytelling, and group singing activities.

The Categories about the above data were peer interaction, shared silent book reading, collaborative storytelling and active participation in singing activities.

Findings

The qualitative analysis revealed significant improvements across the domains of vocabulary acquisition, narrative skills, social interaction and cognitive and emotional development. After a month of systematic use of storytelling through the silent books, the teachers observed an increase in the children's knowledge of vocabulary related to the stories, greater fluency in independent storytelling while looking at the silent book images, increased interaction among older children in sharing books, narrating stories, and listening to pairs reading the images, spontaneous search for stories to listen to by looking at the images, and singing along with background music.

After several sessions with silent books, for examples, children started using more descriptive words during storytelling. For instance, instead of saying "big dog", four year-old children said "enormous dog" or, "fluffy dog". These children also described a character from a silent book as "feeling sad because he lost his toy" and used action words like "searching" and "finding", indicating an understanding of emotional vocabulary and actions.

Five-year-old children began to use words like "exploring" and "adventurous", "solitary" when narrating a story from a silent book depicting a journey through a forest. The same children who previously described a picture simply as "house" started using more detailed phrases like "a small, house with a red roof and a garden full of flowers".

Three-years-old children initially using single words to describe images, progressed to forming simple sentences like "The cat is jumping" or "The boy is happy", showing improved sentence construction and vocabulary use. Children increased their ability of narrative storytelling. Here are a few examples of children's narratives collected during the study: a four-years-old child looking at the Munari's book about shapes said: "The blue triangle is a mountain, and the red circle is the sun The yellow square is a house where a family lives. They are happy". Looking at the same book, a five-years-old child said: "The green and purple shapes are a magical forest. The animals are hiding, and the music makes them come out to dance".

This experience, albeit limited in duration, confirms the importance of providing young children with multiple opportunities for play with stories, images, and music to support their cognitive, emotional, and relational development, as well as their linguistic, aesthetic, and problem-solving skills.

Conclusion

This qualitative study highlights the importance of integrating diverse linguistic and artistic practices in early childhood education. The findings from this brief yet

insightful study underscore the significant role of exposing young children to diverse experiences involving storytelling, imagery, and music. Furthermore, the use of silent books, music, and storytelling fosters comprehensive development, supports cognitive, emotional, and social growth. The findings underscore the value of providing rich, multifaceted experiences to nurture linguistic, aesthetic, and problem-solving skills, laying a solid foundation for lifelong learning. By providing children with ample opportunities for imaginative play and exploration using language and music.

These results highlight the importance of incorporating rich and multifaceted experiences into early childhood education to support holistic development across cognitive, emotional, and relational domains. By providing children with ample opportunities for imaginative play and exploration using language and music, educators can foster not only linguistic and problem-solving skills but also aesthetic appreciation and emotional intelligence, laying a strong foundation for lifelong learning and growth.

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