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Hitting the right note



Musical notes: children demonstrate Junior Band exercises

By Christopher Middleton
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Christopher Middleton on how a new music-based learning system is working wonders

First thing on a Monday morning, and already the children of Fowey Primary School are using both sides of their brain.

They've come to the Eden Project, in Cornwall, to demonstrate a fascinating new music-based learning system that they and other schools in the area have been trying out for the past year. It's called Junior Band (JB for short) and, following its Cornish trials, it's now been released nationwide, in response both to the Government's music manifesto (more music in schools) and to the continual call for improved reading and writing skills.

The idea of JB is that it helps children improve their performance in academic (ie logical, right side of the brain) subjects such as Maths and English - through seemingly un-academic, left-brained activities such as tapping their feet, clicking their fingers and even performing rap songs.

It's clearly worked wonders for Fowey's Year Three, who have been having problems telling the time. "They can read their digital watches, but using a traditional clock is a real issue for them," says form teacher Elizabeth Penter. "However, since they've been doing Junior Band sessions, they've come on in leaps and bounds."

This is confirmed by their rendition of the Clock Blues, for which 12 of them line up in a row, each carrying a picture of a clock with a different hour number highlighted. The music starts up, the first in line sings: "When the clock says one, it's five past," and one lively, 12-bar blues later, the last in line wraps it all up with, "When the clock says 12, it's the hour." It's not just beat and rhythm that drive the lesson home, though - it's colours, too. The children's next song involves the five-times-table, learnt with the aid of blue, red and yellow. As with the clock song, they are all given something to hold up - in this case, cards showing numbers from one to 12. But rather than reciting their tables in a dreary monotone, they sing a song containing a number of chords, with each chord corresponding to a different colour.

And as well ears and eyes, you can add feet. Central to JB are the colour-coded, musical floorpads, connected to the keyboards. Step on the red one and it plays E minor, step on the yellow one and it plays A major (or whatever you have set it to play). So as well as keeping 12 children occupied holding up the numbers, you can also put three or four others on floorpad duty.

"We've got quite a few special-needs children in our group, and it's been amazing to see how much they've caught up with the others since they started these sessions," says Joe Monks, a teacher at St Cleer Primary School, near Bodmin. "Their memory capacity has improved enormously. For example, we've only done this song twice before, yet they've already learned it by heart, and were singing it as we came over here in the coach."

Using rap is not just a fashion choice, either, says St Cleer student teacher Sam Bowden. "Because the beat and the lyrics are so closely related in rap music, it's made our children look at words afresh," she says. "Instead of being intimidated by a long word, they now automatically break it down into more manageable syllables."

And then the children of Treverbyn Primary come up to perform a song about the importance of punctuation.

"The task here was very specific - to get across to the children that they must use full stops and capital letters," says Caroline Stephenson, the musician and writer who devised JB. "So we march around in time singing the Punctuation Rap, and every time the music stops, the person standing on the gym mat has to form their body into the shape of a capital letter."

Does it work? You've only got to look at the children's essays to see that it does.

So it seem that having subjects "drummed" in may be just what children need, albeit sometimes in small bursts. "It's amazing how revitalising a quick bit of music can be," says Joe Monks. "Five minutes of Junior Band in the middle of a maths lesson and suddenly the whole mood has changed."

For more information on Junior Band, see www.jbkidz.co.uk. You can get an activity pack (Young Person's Guide to Making A Junior Band) for £19.99, or have Caroline Stephenson come to your school for a JB Activity Day (£300).

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