

**Teaching Using the Kodály Method in the Elementary Music Classroom**

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## Introduction

The Kodaly methodology has been one of the favorite methodologies for music teachers around the world. In this area of the U.S. it seems especially prevalent, being used in all kinds of school districts and offered as training at many higher level institutions. During my student teaching and praxis experiences, I was able to observe this methodology first hand. My cooperating teacher was trained in the Kodaly levels, and was an excellent model of how effective the Kodaly methodology is as a teaching guide. Not only did my cooperating teacher share much of her knowledge and resources with me, but she taught me how to think using the Kodaly structure. This made my lesson planning and teaching so smooth and easy to structure that I felt I could easily move from one activity to another, and be able to effectively plan ahead for future lessons. Because of my wonderful experience with this teacher, I became immensely interested in learning more about this methodology, if it works just as well for other teachers, and if this was something that I want to pursue as a teaching tool for my own future teaching.

Because of my interest in the Kodaly methodology, I decided to conduct a study on teachers who had gained their levels recently and how they have felt about applying it to their teaching. The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers adapt their Kodaly training to their classroom and teaching style. I found and contacted two participants, two elementary music teachers. My research questions are as follows:

1. To what extent have educators adapted the Kodaly practices presented in their summer professional development course?
2. How do educators perceive the benefits and potential pitfalls of these new practices?
3. In what ways might the Kodaly approach enhance or limit music educators' flexibility and facilitation of creativity in their instruction?

4. In what ways have early career music educators' practices transformed to become more aligned with child development and learning?

### **Methods**

For this study, I chose participants by emailing a list of contacts provided by Dr. Donna Gallo who had undergone Kodaly levels during this past summer. As I emailed them, I explained my research purpose and questions and what I would need them to do as participants. Each participant was asked to do a fifteen to forty-five minute interview, allow me to be in their classroom for one observation of one class, and contribute lesson plans that they created pre-Kodaly training, during Kodaly training, and post Kodaly training. With my first participant, I was able to observe her second grade general music class, and immediately afterward interview her. Her interview lasted about forty minutes. For my second participant, I first interviewed her during one day for about twenty minutes. On a separate day, I observed her first grade general music class. During each interview, I asked questions to help me answer my research questions, such as “How do you think your teaching as changed since obtaining your levels?” and “Has this training changed you as a teacher, or is it just another tool?”. For each observation, I specifically looked for the structure of the class, any specific Kodaly techniques they used, how the room was set up, and the actual activities and what I perceived to be the objectives of each activity. In gathering the lesson plans, I wanted to use them as a physical representation of how each teacher had changed their planning and teaching sequence, and how obtaining the methodology level had transformed their thinking.

To ensure trustworthiness in this study, I am using multiple methods of collecting data, such as interviewing, artifacts, and observation. As the observer, I kept detailed notes on the classroom, procedures, and structure of the lessons to be as non-biased as possible towards what

was actually happening during the class. My descriptions were detailed and as objective as possible. During interviews, I made sure my questions were not leading to any particular answer, and informed participants that they would have access to the transcript, recording, and final report of my findings. I have also been supervised by Dr. Janet Cape for this research study.

### **Literature Review**

When it comes to literature or studies conducted on this subject, there is surprisingly little literature to choose from. I attribute this to the fact that the Kodaly method is extremely effective, like many other methodologies, and if a teacher is looking for a specific way to teach certain concepts then it is not contested or questioned. Like any other methodology, Kodaly is effective if the teacher is looking for that specific tool.

Howell (2009), Heller (1978), and deVries (2001) all agree that teaching curriculum in the general music classroom is tricky no matter what age group you are teaching. Howell (2009) specifically talks about how time is such a constraint with general music. Teachers often see students once, maybe not even once, a week or in a six day cycle. This makes meeting curriculum difficult, especially for elementary general music. The Kodaly method helps in organizing curriculum, structure, and sequence to help teachers meet more curriculum goals in the classroom. deVries (2001) mentions how successful Kodaly programs can be in an elementary school music program. He specifically describes how children's pitch matching accuracy, rhythm, music literacy, and ability to perform complex musical tasks increases from year to year. deVries also mentions that "Kodaly-based music programs are used in many elementary schools throughout the world" because they are so successful (24). The Kodaly method has been seen to have benefits for children past the music classroom as well. deVries

(2001) states that as the Kodaly method has been used in schools, children have shown improvements in perceptual functioning, general intellect development, concept formation, motor skills, and even reading. Obviously the Kodaly method has many benefits in and outside of the general music classroom, and teachers who have decided to employ this methodology are greatly helping their students in more than just music.

As helpful as this methodology has proven to be, deVries (2001) and Howell (2009) have some qualms about the actual curriculum being covered in general music classrooms. deVries (2001) specifically mentions that as effective as the Kodaly method is, it is not the only teaching methodology and others should be examined to cover more concepts more thoroughly. Howell (2009) says that with most elementary school curriculum, smaller skills and activities that just aim for one-time skills sets don't allow students to retain the skills without repetition throughout grade levels. This is needed, and the Kodaly method often repeats songs and concepts to help with reinforcement of concepts. Howell (2009) and Heller (1978) both continue to reinforce that student success is essential, and repetition of opportunities to return to songs and activities to be successful as often as possible is important.

Another complaint of deVries (2001) is the focus on reading and singing in the Kodaly method. He talks about how recorder and body percussion, very effective music teaching tools, are not used in Kodaly. deVries (2001) also remembers his own music class experiences. His class had repetition to reinforce skills, but he didn't find it fun to be in music class. Instead deVries (2001) felt bored since "the focus was on specific skill development rather than allowing [him] to perform, compose, and listen critically" (25). That being said, in my observations of these Kodaly certified teachers I did see examples of exactly what deVries was missing in his classroom, not to mention other seasoned Kodaly trained teachers who have incorporated more

than just the Kodaly method into their classrooms. In deVries's (2001) article of reevaluating the Kodaly method, he also makes the point of saying that the teacher essentially decides how the methodology is to be used. It is the job of the teacher to take the tool of the Kodaly method and incorporate all musical skills in addition to other teaching tools to give students the best general music learning experience as possible.

### **Vignettes**

#### *Gina DiPalermo's Elementary General Music Classroom*

Walking into Ms. DiPalermo's classroom, the observer sees a colorful array of posters and teaching tools such as a solfege ladder and carpet squares. Instruments line the back side of the room, and a piano sits in the center. The room does not seem to have a front or back, giving the feeling of flexibility and movement occurring often in the room. The "plan of day" has been written on the board for students to see as they walk in. A smart board is up and ready with the day's visual materials ready to go. Looking closer and examining the walls, one can see the reward system prominently displayed by the door. Students walk in and greet Ms. DiPalermo, and class begins.

Ms. DiPalermo begins her class by singing "Everybody's Welcome", a song that the students have obviously been in the habit of singing in the beginning of every class. She then warms up their voice using a slide whistle and call and response techniques paired with individual vocal practice and group vocal practice, giving students a chance to show off and be a part of the group. As she teaches a new song, she carefully assesses them: "Don't speed up!". After she sings, she asks provoking questions about what they hear. To teach them to sing, she asks them to "Finish the song sentence" to learn each part of the simple song. The students eventually pair the song "Falling Leaves" with a movement game.

Ms. DiPalermo's review of "Peas Porridge Hot" helps students think back to the song and review the concept of a rest. She asks them, "What does it a rest look like with your hands?" to help them realize the significance of silence. As she reviews, she also begins to teach a hand jive that is done between partners. Her class ends with the beginning of a story that her students beg her to finish, yet the class period has ended.

*Sara Elmer's Elementary General Music Classroom*

As Sara Elmer's first grade students enter the room, they sit in their assigned seats on the outer edge of one section of the huge, spacious classroom. They sing the "Hello" song along with Ms. Elmer and prepare themselves for roll call. As Ms. Elmer sings "hello" to each person, that student replies by matching pitch and greeting her in the same manner.

One activity smoothly moves on to the next, as is exemplified in every transition of Ms. Elmer's classroom. Students choose a tape spot and know it is time to start the movement or game part of class. As students sing "All Around the Brickyard", they critically listen to the changes made in the song and match their body movements to what the song is portraying. As seen earlier, the next smooth transition leads students to sitting in front of the board for the next activity.

Ms. Elmer was very obviously encouraging critical listening with her students. After singing "See Saw", she asked her students to find the steady beat. Students then were asked to put the rhythm in their hands instead of the steady beat. As students figure out the rhythm of the song, they are then asked to think about groups of rhythms within the beats: "Hold up your fingers if you think this beat has one or two sounds". Ms. Elmer saw what students were thinking as a group and individually. Students were set up for success as they did this, and were easily able to put note heads and connect notes with stems after this process.

Ms. Elmer moved on to the story “Mortimer”. As students walked to instruments, they were asked to “Go through the door, sit on their knees, and put their hands on their shoulders”. Students dutifully finished each of Ms. Elmer’s sentences like a well-oiled machine, and were able to conduct themselves through the process of getting to an instrument. As the story was read, students played along, animating the actions happening using their instruments.

To end the class, Ms. Elmer directed her students back to their tape spots to learn the new song, “Little Leaves are Falling”. As she sang, she asked students questions about the song to help them listen to what was happening. When students learned the song, they used paper leaves to help them listen through the song to the end and to recognize that the end of the song went down as their leaves fell to the floor. Leaves were put back as students sang the song once more, leading to the last activity. Students immediately recognize the last game of the class, “Let’s Hide the Pumpkin”. Students sang their part when they were “it”, showing all the while their excitement to play the game and for the coming of Halloween!

### **Findings and Discussion**

When beginning this research study, I found that my research question(s) changed. I was initially concerned with how teachers adapted the Kodaly method to their classrooms. My research question then became this: “In what ways do elementary general music teachers change their teaching after receiving their Kodaly training?”. As I began creating my interview questions, I found that I was more interested in learning about the change in personal teaching rather than the change in the methodology being used in the classroom. This proved easier in the interview process, and also seemed to make more sense conceptually for my interviewees.

## *Changes in Teaching*

### *Sequencing*

In light of this shift in my research question, I would first like to address what these participants changed in their teaching. Both participants enthusiastically mentioned their changes in sequencing during their interviews. Ms. DiPalermo specifically mentioned her feelings from her first year of teaching compared to now.

“I guess my first year of actual teaching was a lot of...putting together small pieces. I think looking back to my first year I didn’t feel like I had a very good sequence to my lessons”. After she completed her training in Kodaly, she felt she had a much stronger “structure” and “strategy for attack” when it came to sequencing lessons.

Ms. Elmer mentioned similar feelings of relief over having a strategy for sequencing. After observing another teacher who had Kodaly training and seeing how this teacher’s sequencing worked, she felt even more motivated to get her training. She specifically mentions during her interview how she was observing this teacher’s lesson, and “[couldn’t] believe all of that happened in twenty minutes”. Within Sara’s lesson plans, there is a significant difference between her lesson written pre-Kodaly training and post-Kodaly training. In accordance with her claims, her sequencing is significantly more detailed. In her pre-Kodaly lesson plan, each activity is simply listed with little explanation of how to bring students to the point of assessment. In her post-Kodaly lesson plan, she goes into great detail for each step and how to lead students through the activity successfully and sequentially.

### *Adaptation*

Both of these teachers mentioned that they were already adapting their lesson plans to fit the needs of their students before their Kodaly training. Ms. DiPalermo mentioned in her

interview that she always liked having a beginning game or activity to read the room and “direct where you’re going”. Ms. Elmer’s lesson plans also exemplified that she was making sure that as many of her students as possible were successful at each activity by using multiple assessment tasks.

After their Kodaly training, both teachers were much more prepared to adapt their activities to their students’ needs. In Ms. DiPalermo’s post-Kodaly training lesson plan, she has a specific box at the top labelled “Modifications” that mentions modifications being made for students with IEPs. In her pre-Kodaly lesson plan, this is not a category in her planning nor is the planning for assessment nearly as detailed as in her post-Kodaly lesson plan.

### *Assessment*

Assessment is a key factor in the Kodaly methodology, and is evident when watching a Kodaly lesson plan in action. One aspect of this assessment is labelled “reinforcement”. In both teachers’ lesson plans from their Kodaly training, this element of reinforcement is present and was not so in their pre-Kodaly lesson plans. Reinforcement is an assessment step in this process because it usually entails the entire class reviewing the concept by doing it as a group instead of the teacher individually assessing. For example, when Ms. DiPalermo wrote her Kodaly lesson plan on “Bounce High, Bounce Low” students were trying to identify where the “mystery” note was in the song using four fingers at a time. During the reinforcement portion, the teacher pointed to the board and filled in the known sols and mis while students sang. As they went through the song, they hummed on the “mystery” note because they did not yet know the name.

As stated earlier, both teachers felt much more confident in their lesson planning due to the ease of sequencing. This was in part due to the amount and type of assessment. In their previous lesson plans, both teachers’ assessment was sparse and plans were more concerned with

the process. In the post-Kodaly lesson plans, both teachers included some form of assessment after every activity as opposed to maybe one form of assessment during each lesson plan before their Kodaly training.

### *Lesson Material*

The Kodaly method has hundreds of songs that are used to teach various concepts. This makes the methodology a wonderful resource for those who may need more teaching material. Ms. Elmer wrote one of her lesson plans from before her Kodaly training, and it contained very similar material to the lesson taught during her observation. Based on her lesson plans, Ms. Elmer already had some materials from the Kodaly methodology that she used in her classroom even though she had not yet taken her level training. However, Ms. DiPalermo's repertoire seemed to change based on her interview and lesson plans. She mentioned not feeling like she "had any groundwork" for repertoire or teaching techniques. After her training, she felt she had a much stronger foundation "because there's a strategy and there's a structure". Lesson planning became easier for her due to the amount of repertoire and its use.

### *Results of Changes*

Students are not always going to enjoy every activity that we do in the music classroom. However, Ms. DiPalermo found a way to explain to them why she uses a certain type of song in her classroom:

"...I tell them my job is not to teach you all that's on the radio. You listen to that, and that's wonderful, I listen to it too. In here we learn different songs, songs that you may not know, songs from different cultures, and from history past. And that's kind of where I leave it. Some kids don't pick up to it...and some of the kids do and they find that the games...[are] fun."

Not only has she learned to cope with teaching new repertoire, but she has taught her students to accept new music that may be culturally or aurally different to them. As exemplified by the scenario, Kodaly training has aided Ms. DiPalermo in bringing her students to more cultural acceptance.

The Kodaly method also provides students with ownership over their musical skills over time through sequencing and reinforcement. In Ms. Elmer's interview, she mentions how helpful the method is because it provides students with musical ownership through different recognition techniques. For example, performing a rhythm incorrectly or notating a rhythm incorrectly to allow students to fix the mistake. She likes how students are "more on their own" and the methodology provides a "step by step" process to bring them to the realization that they know how to fix musical problems.

The Kodaly methodology provides students with ownership over their musical skills, one of the most important being music literacy. In answer to my question of "What was the most helpful tool received from Kodaly?", Ms. DiPalermo states the "mindset for the purpose of literacy and assessment". Kodaly himself pushed for music literacy to be a focal point in music classrooms, and this has been reflected in his methodology today. Kodaly is based on sound-before-sight, or hearing the musical concept before labelling it or writing it. In both of these teachers' lesson plans, it is evident that they are interested in their students having ownership over their literacy and are providing stepping stones towards that goal. For example, Ms. Elmer's post-Kodaly lesson plan is labelling *tas* and *ti-tis*. Before the labelling occurs, students are counting one or two sounds on each beat. This provides them with a sound-before-sight experience to help them in their labelling process. As a result of their training, both teachers are now more concerned with thorough reading skills.

Because of the importance of sound-before-sight, listening skills are key in the Kodaly methodology. Both of these participants have increased their attention to listening skills in their students, which has already paid off in the short amount of time that they have been incorporating this methodology into their teaching.

“The kids realize things. I have this one student who...will be singing sol-la-mi song , and he starts singing another sol-la-mi song that we’ve learned...so they’ve started to identify those...relationships.”

Ms. DiPalermo has already learned that her students are developing better aural skills that have been noticeably improving. Ms. Elmer has also seen changes in her students. When she was preparing her pre-Kindergarten students for reading during the previous year, she tried having them begin by reading dos and do-days (quarter and eighth notes). She found that they were able to read earlier than most due to this step by step sequencing that she was using for her classes. Obviously the transfer of this methodology into her classroom has been very successful, and is for many other music teachers in regards to improving listening skills that precede reading skills.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

My inspiration for this study came from working with and observing teachers who are trained in the Kodaly method. The seemingly ease of their teaching and their students’ comprehension of concepts floors me, and I have always been curious as to how they feel about their teaching and what results come from being trained in this method. After watching multiple teachers in previous instances apart from this study, I felt that I just had to know their thoughts and feelings about teaching through this methodology and if it was as worthwhile to pursue training. This study has proven to me that the Kodaly method is exceedingly successful, even

without firsthand knowledge of the work that goes into obtaining certification and then putting the method into action. These participants have demonstrated and stated that it is certainly a valuable teaching tool, and transforms both teacher and student.

### References

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