



My five year-old son, Frankie, has always loved

music. Since he was very little he sang and danced constantly, remembered songs he had only heard once or twice on the radio, and listened to opera and classical music in the car. A few months ago I bought him a boom box as a reward for his good behavior. His face lit when he opened the box and saw a system “just like daddy’s” (the cheapest Trutech did it). Since then he has spent hours listening to his favorite Disney movie soundtracks and Kidz Bop (what is that?). When we saw how much he enjoyed his new gift we decided to take the next step and visited the nearest Conservatory of Music to enroll him in its “Young Musicians” program.

Prior to his official registration we were offered a tour of the facilities, an explanation of the Conservatory’s approach to music instruction, and a peek into what would be Frankie’s class. We liked what

we saw and, at the conclusion of the class, went to the registration office to fill out the necessary paperwork. There were also two required fees, one for classroom instruction and another for materials. The latter, handed to us in a bag, included two overpriced classical music CDs, a few pictures of different instruments, and an 18-page Young Musicians’ parents handbook. The handbook, divided into six chapters and an appendix, spelled out the Conservatory’s philosophy on early childhood music education, the reasons for starting children early in music, and the role of the parents both in music class as well as at home.

The chapter on early childhood music explained that all children are born with musical aptitude despite the widespread belief that music is a special gift possessed by only a few. Subsequent pages debunked the myth that instrument study must begin in early child-

Music to Our Ears

Francisco Ramos finds the similarities between musical training and bilingual education

Art: Clarissa Butler

hood in order for a child to achieve musical success. According to the handbook, “research shows that the most significant way to strengthen a child’s innate musical intelligence and develop readiness for private instrument study is through continuous singing, listening, dancing, moving, and playing small percussion instruments.” A quote by Einstein was included to support this contention (“If you want your children to be brilliant, tell them fairy tales. If you want them to be very brilliant, tell them even more fairy tales”). Consequently, the Conservatory advocated postponing children’s private instrument study for a few years, focusing on their musical readiness instead. Mentioning Orff, Kodaly, and Dalcroze, the handbook encouraged parents to allow enough time for their children to internalize music and to understand and trust the Conservatory’s approach. Innate natural competence, coupled with the foundation and readiness received

in the program, would contribute to their children’s success. The Conservatory’s “knowledge and experience confirms that waiting yields better long-term results... Children who wait to begin lessons catch up quickly and stick with it longer than those who started earlier.” Finally, the handbook appendix included a few recommendations for parents. Among them, that children develop at different rates, that while some children are active participators others need time before joining in, and that children’s responses musically or behaviorally should not be compared to those of other children.

For the past six months Frankie has been attending his Saturday class at the Conservatory religiously and has learned songs, dances, and played some percussion instruments. As for us, we have trusted the Conservatory’s approach and its teachers’ expertise to provide our son with an enriching experience that continues to develop his

love for all things musically related.

Why this long, detailed explanation? Because while on Saturdays Frankie is a music learner, from Monday to Friday he is a different kind of learner. In fact, because of his limited English proficiency, he has been classified as an English Language Learner (ELL) in the public school system. This label, the result of a standardized English assessment, means that his command of English is not enough to place him in a mainstream classroom. Therefore, he has linguistic needs that must be addressed by his school.

The reason for his limited English proficiency is the result of our conscious decision to use our native language, Spanish, as our main vehicle of communication with him. This decision was based on our high levels of literacy in Spanish and our familiarity with research supporting the development of the minority language to facilitate the acquisition of English (as well as the promotion of bilingualism). Hence, we read, sang, and talked to Frankie only in Spanish, watched Spanish programs on satellite television with him and took him to Spain every summer. Needless to say, Frankie developed his Spanish skills, learned to read in Spanish, and communicated with our families in Spanish without difficulty. His exposure to English was limited to interactions with his English-speaking cousins, some television programs, and the basic English books he browsed through in order to compare their stories with those in the Spanish books. Not

surprisingly, a few weeks after entering kindergarten he was already ahead of the rest of his classmates (a majority of whom are native English speakers) in reading and reading comprehension, oral skills, and the content areas. For me, Frankie is a textbook example of the benefits of de facto bilingual education. In providing him with good skills in Spanish, we helped him develop the foundation he needed to make a smooth transition into English. Moreover, as an additional perk, he has also maintained our language.

This road, however, has not been easy. Actually, it has presented us with many more hurdles than that to music. Ever since we deliberately chose Spanish as our language of communication with Frankie, family members, friends, colleagues, and even absolutely unknowns warned us of the dangers looming ahead. According to them, not teaching him English was a mistake of epic proportions that would delay his transition to English. However, now that Frankie has succeeded in this process and can switch flawlessly between languages the doubts and hesitations have receded and even those who grilled us with "so, when are you going to start teaching him English?" are impressed with his biliteracy skills.

Looking back in retrospect I find it interesting that neither our background in the area of bilingualism nor our daily experiences working with language minority students were enough to grant us a minimum degree of authority when deciding the language of interac-

tion with our child. It did not matter that my wife has an M.A. in Speech Pathology and Audiology and has worked with language minority students for more than twenty years or that I have an M.A. in TESOL, a Ph.D. in Language, Literacy, and Learning, and have taught in elementary schools for eight years and at the university for five. Neither our degrees nor our experience nor our familiarity with the results of the research appeared to be enough to convince those who felt entitled to offer their opinion about the issue. Ironically, many of them were monolingual speakers of English or Spanish.

But even more puzzling for me was the fact that when we showed the Conservatory's handbook to our friends and family members they steadfastly agreed with its content. Furthermore, they encouraged us to follow its suggestions closely. However, when I used the handbook as a template to emphasize the similarities between the Conservatory's approach to music and ours to biliteracy with Frankie, their reaction was completely different. They did not believe that substituting "native language" for "musical readiness," and "singing, dancing, and listening" and "English" for "instruments" revealed two processes resembling each other.

Fortunately, the lack of trust in our decision of both relatives and acquaintances never weakened our conviction that we were doing what was right for Frankie. It has been (and continues to be) a tough battle, especially now that he is in kindergarten and we are witnessing

the extraordinary power of English on a daily basis. Despite his attempts at using English at home, we continue to enforce Spanish to communicate with him, we watch Spanish television, and read Spanish books in the foreign language section at Barnes and Noble. We will not relinquish our belief in bilingualism as an asset.

I would like to conclude with a quote by Thoreau, which is also included in the Conservatory's handbook. Our friends read it, liked it, and established the connection between its content and the Conservatory's approach to music. Yet, once again, they questioned its application to bilingual education. Notwithstanding, for me, it was clear from the very first line: "...the more slowly trees grow at first, the sounder they are at the core, and I think that the same is true of human beings. We do not wish to see children precocious, making great strides in their early years like sprouts, producing a soft and perishable timber, but better if they expand slowly at first, as if contending with difficulties, and so are solidified and perfected. Such trees continue to expand with nearly equal rapidity to extreme old age." ❧

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