

# Social Emotional Learning in the Elementary Music Classroom

by

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The following activities are wonderful ways to engage children in the classroom by integrating movement, music and language. The melodies, rhythm, and lyrics inspire the mind, body, and heart!



Lesson Title:	Mirroring” (4.3)
Suggested Grade Level(s):	K-2
Focus/Purpose:	Students will transition successfully to music class through recorded music and following visual cues, and they will gain skills in coordinating their breath and movement to various musical selections.
Standards:	NAfME: Connect #11, MU: Cn11 CASEL: Self-awareness: 1.1, Self-management: 2.1 & 2.2, Social-awareness: 3.2, Relationship skills: 4.2 ODE: Social belonging
Objectives:	Students will:

- Learn how to quickly focus their attention though following the movements and breath of the teacher without talking.
- Connect their breathing to the movement of their hands and whole body.
- Distinguish between various meters of music, (particularly the difference between duple and triple meters), and move appropriately to them through recorded selections.
- Tune into how they are feeling in their body while they are breathing and moving to the recorded music through teacher prompts.

Lesson Procedure:

- 1.) After pre-selecting a recorded musical selection for the entire week, have it playing as students enter the music classroom. 1 min. or less
- 2.) Begin a movement and have the class follow you (the teacher). 1 min.
- 3.) Continue the same movement with an audible inhale during the upward movement and an audible exhale with the downward movement. This can be done with the hands only, seated or while standing. Instruct the children to notice how they are feeling in their head, their belly, etc... while they are moving and breathing, 2 min.
- 4.) Pause the music briefly and demonstrate to the class the timing and counting of the song. This can be termed as the “meter”, or the way the beats of the song are arranged. In general, music is either in a duple or triple meter, with 2 & 4 being the most common for duple and 3 for triple. Duple metered songs are ones you could easily march or walk to, and music in triple meter is more akin to swaying or a waltz rhythm, 3 min.
- 5.) Continue again with the same or perhaps more rhythmic movements while purposely moving to the count of the music. The students can also count while they are moving, whether it’s up to 2, 3, 4, or 6. 3 min. (link to instructional video below) Another great option is to include movement that crosses the midline (i.e. right hand to left shoulder/left hand to right shoulder). This movement is good for the brain and accompanying that movement with the directive “Hug yourself!” makes for a sweet addition.

Lesson Philosophy & Extensions:

This mini-lesson/warmup is subtle, but powerful. One of the reasons for this is that much of it is non-verbal. Many strategies for instruction and classroom management include tips for getting students engaged quickly without much verbal direction from the teacher. This activity is a great

way for teachers to get children watching and listening quickly. For specialists such as the music teacher, classes are coming from various activities, whether it be lunch, the playground, another specials class, or their classroom. Children may not yet be in a ready-to-learn state. The movement and breath activity to music is a way to bring the class to a calm and focused state.

The choice of music is very important. In general, music without words that is fairly repetitive make the best choices. This kind of music tends to bring children into more of a focused and calm state because there is less interference in terms of melodic business and story through lyrics. Furthermore, “Mirroring” is an activity that also addresses needs for children who have experienced trauma, as it’s been shown that many of them benefit from patterned rhythmic activity, (Perry, 2014). Following patterned movement as a whole group may also stimulate “mirror neurons” and build a stronger foundation for empathy, and the corresponding breathing with the movement can stimulate the vagal nerve, thereby lowering stress responses such as “flight or fight” behaviors (Bergland, 2017).

### ~Song Suggestions for “Mirroring”~

The following are examples of two song recordings that I found to work well with this activity, along with suggested movements for each. Of course, there are many other songs that can work well.

**“One River”:** Wertheimer, B. & de Kadt, J. (2012). One River. On *One River* [CD]. Oregon, USA: Shantala Music.

**“Aerial Boundaries”:** Hedges, M. (1984). Aerial Boundaries. On *Aerial Boundaries* [CD]. USA: Allmusic.

*One River* is a beautiful meditative, yet energetic piece in triple meter. It features repetitive melodies including and pitched, steel percussion. It’s often played in settings such as yoga classes. There is no singing, thus no lyrics.

For this piece, I suggest first having the children follow your swaying movement to the meter of three, swaying on beat 1 of each measure. Don’t bring their conscious attention to the counts yet, however. Then, pause and guide them to “draw a heart” with you, putting pointer

fingers of each hand together in a lower position while pointing fingers out, then inhaling them up, staying together until they reach the top of the imaginary heart. Then exhale as fingers separate and move downward and out, tracing the sides of the heart until they reach the bottom to begin again and repeat the same movement. Most students will need reminders to keep breathing throughout the movement with the coordinated inhales and exhales. After this more meditative breath/movement, return to the swaying you began with, only adding the counting with the movement this time: “1, 2, 3...1, 2, 3...” switching direction on the 1’s. After this, do other movements with the counting such as bending and straightening the knees and conducting with pointer fingers.

*Aerial Boundaries* is a hypnotic and energetic guitar piece in a “loop like”, repetitive style with lots of harmonics-duple meter (counts of 4).

For this one, I suggest beginning with having students rise to a tall position while inhaling and lowering to a shorter stature while exhaling. It can be fun to use verbal prompts such as “tree branches” or “sky” for high/inhale and “tree trunks” or “earth” for the low/exhale. Do this beginning part at a slower tempo, taking maybe two measures for each position. Then, progress to more micro-movements, sitting down and patting/clapping while counting to four. One way to do this is to clap on the strongest beat of 1 and pat on beats 2, 3, and 4. This a great way to emphasize where the strong beats are: a fundamental part of music education and basic musicianship.

It can also be fun to discuss what the title means: “Aerial Boundaries” and practice moving hands up in the air, switching directions first on the strongest “1 beats”and then switching on beats 1 and 3, with 3 being the second strongest.

[Demo. Video](#)

Lesson Title:	“Fill in the Blanks” (1.2)
Suggested Grade Level(s):	2nd/3rd
Focus/Purpose:	Students will exercise creativity and choice by writing their own words into familiar melodies.
Standards:	NAfME: Creating, MU: Cr1 CASEL: Self-awareness: 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 & 1.4 Self-management: 2.4 & 2.6, Social awareness: 3.4, Relationship skills: 4.1, 4.2 & 4.4
Objectives:	Students will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sing familiar tunes with accuracy in pitch and rhythm</li> </ul>

- Understand “prosody” (how the syllables of the words fit into the rhythm of the song) by choosing words of the appropriate lengths
- Understand parts of speech (nouns, verbs and adjectives) by making good word choices
- Choose their own words in small groups to fit into teacher-chosen blanks and sing the new versions as a whole group

Lesson Procedure:

1.) Sing a familiar and well-loved song as a class. The song used for the purposes of this lesson is the traditional spiritual, “You Gotta Sing”, 2 min.

*(\*For a list of other song suggestions and lessons, see below.)*

2.) Tell the class that this song is about loving to sing! Have them discuss in small groups of 4-6 students other things that they love doing, 3-5 min.

3.) Present a version of the same song with some of the words omitted. (This activity is similar to “Mad Libs”):

You gotta \_\_\_\_\_ when your spirit says \_\_\_\_\_.

You gotta \_\_\_\_\_ when your spirit says \_\_\_\_\_.

When your spirit says \_\_\_\_\_ you gotta \_\_\_\_\_ right along.

You gotta \_\_\_\_\_ when your spirit says \_\_\_\_\_ . 1 min.

*(\*original lyrics to song located below)*

4.) Point out that the word “sing” and the many activities they talked about enjoying are all “verbs” or “action words”. Ask for volunteers to share what some of their verbs describing favorite activities are, 3-5 min.

5.) Begin to choose some of their answers and fill them into blanks on an overhead that all students can see. Explain that not all words are appropriate choices for this activity. For example, some words are too long to fit into the rhythm of the song. A blank is only a beat long, which is about a second. For instance, if a student’s favorite activity is “playing flag football with friends”, work with that student to shorten it so that it fits. Ways to do this include shortening it to “flag” or “play ball.” 5-8 min.

*(\*A chart on how musical beats relate to word syllables is located below).*

6.) Sing the new version(s) together as a class and repeat with other word choices or songs for the remaining class period.

Lesson Philosophy & Extensions:

This is a fun activity and often quite humorous! Challenges in language and rhythm will arise among many of the students, but if the pace is kept up and teacher assistance is given, these challenges will not interfere much with the lesson. It’s important to honor each child’s answer, even if it’s way too long or seems to be a poor choice for the song’s context. Often, children are

simply sharing things that are important to them and may not yet understand how these things will fit rhythmically into the song. It is the teacher’s choice to either find a way to fit the answer into the song or in some cases simply smile and thank the students for sharing. The activity is rich in opportunities for both music and language arts (parts of speech) and is a good introduction to “prosody”-how the syllables or rhythm of words fit. The activity can also serve as an introduction to songwriting.

For those of you with limited musical training, the following chart will give you an idea of how beats in music compare to syllables, along with a few word examples. There are many variations possible. For the purposes of this lesson, we will only deal with breaking down 1 beat, since this is what you will need to do for most songs (filling in a blank that is 1 beat long). For easy reference, think of a beat as having the length of one second.

The chart is to be read across, in rows:

1 beat:	1 syllable:	tree	sad	joy	friend
1 beat:	2 syllables:	a-pple	ha-ppy	joy-ful	friend-ship
1 beat:	3 syllables:	el-e-phant	fur-i-ous	boun-ti-ful	to-ge-ther
1 beat:	4 syllables:	el-e-va-tor	so-mer-sal-ting	ca-tter-pill-ar	cro-co-di-le

The following is a list of other great song choices for the activity with brief lesson ideas:

“Down by the Bay”

This is a well-loved, traditional children's song and can be pretty funny! The original words are easy to find and have been sung by well-known artists such as Raffi. The last half of each of the verses is a great place to have children create their own lyrics with a noun, verb, noun pattern:

Down by the bay (down by the bay), where the watermelons grow (where the watermelons grow)

Back to my home (back to my home), I dare not go (I dare not go)

For if I do (for if I do), my mother will say (my mother will say)

Did you ever see a \_\_\_\_\_ (noun-such as an animal) \_\_\_\_\_ (verb-ing) a  
\_\_\_\_\_ (new noun)? Down by the bay!

“If you're Happy and you Know it”

This is also a traditional children's song. This is a great one for connecting to various emotions and adding a movement to it. Children may need some guidance around which movements are more appropriate for the classroom and show respect for others.

If you're \_\_\_\_\_ (emotion) and you know it, \_\_\_\_\_ (action-two beat words)

“Mary had a Little Lamb”

For this one, it could be fun to insert various student's names in the blanks:

\_\_\_\_\_ (name of person in room) had a \_\_\_\_\_ (adjective) \_\_\_\_\_ (noun)

“Thank you for this Day”

This is from the “Native American Church”, adapted by Karen Drucker: “Thank you for this Day” (Drucker, 2001, track 1). The original words (1st verse) are as follows. Students can replace the words underlined with what they are personally grateful for. If it doesn’t feel appropriate to sing “spirit” in your classroom, you can change it to a word like “oh” or “yeah” and sing it as two syllables.

“Thank you for this day, spirit. Thank you for this day. Thank you for this day, spirit. Thank you for this day. This healing, this healing, this healing day...this healing, this healing, this healing day



Lesson Title:	“Acorn to Oak” (4.1)
Suggested Grade Level(s):	1st/2nd
Focus/Purpose:	Students will sing a fun song about an acorn growing into an oak tree while building rhythmic and intrapersonal skills.
Standards:	NAfME: Connect #11, MU: Cn11 CASEL: Self-awareness: 1.2, 1.3 & 1.5, Self-management: 2.1, 2.4 & 2.5 Social-awareness: 3.3, Relationship skills: 4.1 & 4.2, Responsible decision-making: 5.4 & 5.5 ODE: Growth mindset
Objectives:	Students will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Compare and contrast their current skill levels in</li> </ul>



	<p>various areas to the “acorn” and “oak tree” stages, with the acorn representing challenges with potential and the oak tree as areas of strength and maturation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Share answers and insights as a whole group discussion and in partners.</li> <li>● With teacher guidance, show understanding that challenges can turn into strengths with practice and patience.</li> <li>● Develop musical skills in rhythm and beat through patting and clapping accurately while singing the song.</li> </ul>
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Lesson Procedure:

- 1.) Teach class the “Acorn to Oak” song (*See below for more song information including audio recording, lyrics, and a supplemental poem*), 5-10 min.
- 2.) As a class, briefly summarize the literal meaning of the words and how a tiny acorn can grow into a magnificent oak tree, 2 min.
- 3.) Describe to the class how the acorn can be an analogy for something we feel “small” in or not good at yet, and that the oak tree can symbolize something we are more skilled in. Provide your own personal examples as a teacher, and remind the children that we all start off in life very small-as one cell, 3 min.
- 4.) In turn -and -talk fashion, assign partners and have students take turns sharing things they are an “acorn” in and areas that they are more like an “oak tree”, 2 minutes.
- 5.) Invite up to 3 students to share an example of each with whole class, 4 minutes.
- 6.) Sing song again-sitting during acorn verse and standing during oak tree verse, 2 min.
- 7.) Add rhythm sticks as accompaniment (specific rhythmic suggestions below), 5-10 min.

Lesson Philosophy & Extensions

Aside from this being a cute and fun song to sing and play, "Acorn to Oak" is rich in opportunity for teaching inter/intrapersonal skills, serving as a natural bridge to teaching growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). A visual extension to the lesson may include drawing a Venn diagram chart to compare/contrast strengths and weaknesses or another type of picture such as a small and large figure of a person or an acorn and an oak tree with words naming various skill areas of individual students on them. For example, I've drawn a large picture of a person with a smaller person inside of it, showing the inherent connection between the two figures. After all, an oak tree was once a tiny acorn, and that acorn always held the potential to be a mighty tree! Then, I asked for

student volunteers to name something they found difficult to do that I could write on the smaller figure and also something they felt they excel at that I could write on the larger figure. A wonderful bi-product of this lesson is that children get to see that everyone feels both competent and incompetent at times, and that rising and falling, succeeding and failing is a natural part of life's journey for everyone. It's valuable to the children when the teacher also gives his/her own personal examples. Remember, so much of the success of a teacher and his/her ability to inspire depends on their own inner life (Palmer, 1998).

**“Acorn to Oak” song information:**

I adapted the song, “I’m a Nut”, originally by Leroy Pullins (1966, B-side “Knee Deep”) into what I call “Acorn to Oak.” Many other artists have their own renditions of the song. I kept the same melody for the verses and created my own melody for the “B section”. I kept the words the same for the first verse and wrote my own for the second verse, which presents the same acorn as a full-grown oak tree, Below are words to the song, the link to an audio recording, and a poem to accompany the song and supplement the lesson.

I’m an acorn, small and round, lying on the cold, cold ground

Everyone walks over me. That is why I’m cracked, you see.

I’m a nut (click 2x), I’m a nut (click 2x), I’m a nut, I’m a nut, I’m a nut (click 2x

I’m an oak tree, big and strong, with broad leaves and branches long

Everyone walks under me, but I came from a single seed.

Just a seed (click 2x), Just a seed (click 2x), Just a seed, just a seed, just a seed (click 2x)

*B section:*

My mind and heart are made up of the same dust as stars

In whatever we start, there’s no tellin’ how far we’ll go!

## [Acorn to Oak song recording](#)

As for movement and rhythmic suggestions, I suggest you make up your own movement for the B section with or without class assistance and continue a rest-play (half note count for each) pattern with rhythm sticks, with the sticks going to a downward, parallel position on the rest and clicking together, forming a “t” for the playing note. Where it says “click 2x” above during the chorus, stop the rest-play half note pattern by resting on the words “I’m a nut” and then hitting the sticks together for two quarter note beats after the “nut” words.

I’ve also composed a poem that goes along nicely with the song. It makes for a nice performance addition, as you could assign a student per stanza to read it aloud:



Like the oak, we all start small  
And as we grow we get more tall

But no matter how tall, things can be hard  
Our limbs may shake from storms that start

As the winds of change grow wild and free, challenges come for you and me

But for every hard there is an easy  
And life can be so very pleasing!

For with every fall there is a rise, and joyfulness comes to those who try.

Lesson Philosophy & Extensions for poem: The lesson can become even richer by pointing out the opposites contained in the poem... for example, “hard and easy” and “small and tall”. After pointing out these contrasting pairs, reflect with the children in an age-appropriate way the paradoxical nature of life itself: “Life is everything, for everyone... hard and easy, happy and sad.” It’s also a good idea to point out the rhyming words in the poem, noting that like in many

stories and poems, a lot of songs have rhyming in them.

Heather Hutton is a public school teacher in the Rogue Valley of Southern Oregon. She has a wide range of teaching experience from over 23 years, including elementary music, secondary choral, and middle/high school social emotional and wellness classes. She has also been a private voice teacher for adults through her Unified Voice-Work, a way of teaching singing holistically as a personal growth path.

