

Background music in the classroom

By Michael Griffin

Do teachers use background music in classrooms in your school?

Background music is used extensively throughout society, particularly in marketing, retail industry and medicine. It is used to reduce stress, create an illusion, manipulate perception, alter people's emotional state, and to enhance well-being.

There are two reasons teachers will experiment with using background music in classrooms.

1. To improve classroom behaviour and atmosphere
2. To improve the quality and/or quantity of work

Appropriately chosen music can address the demands of objective number 1, which in turn improves learning outcomes. As a general rule though, the more complex the learning task, the more distracting background music becomes.

Most students like having background music in the classroom. I have researched and spoken about this in many schools, and students report to me the following positive benefits of using background music:

- It shuts out distractions
- I get immersed in my own world and become more productive
- It puts me in a positive frame of mind and a better mood
- It gives me a general feeling of well being
- It calms me before a large task and I stay focused for longer
- It makes time go by fast
- It helps me work quicker
- It's good for repetitive homework tasks

- It helps me reflect
- It helps my creativity
- It makes studying more enjoyable

And let's not forget the associated benefits for the teacher.

Knowing when to turn the music on or off will come with teacher experience, but there are some fundamental principles that apply when selecting background music for general school classrooms.

1. Do not let the students select the music. This is not about entertainment, but about establishing an environment to improve learning arousal.
2. Use instrumental music only. There are some exceptions such as Latin text in Renaissance choral. Students listen and even sing with lyrics, detracting from their cognitive attention. My research, including a master's study found that **the most distracting background music is fast, familiar vocal music chosen and liked by the student.** I refer back to point 1.
3. The volume level must be low. Research shows that the physiological and psychological effects of music listening occur whether or not people are deliberately attentive to it. Volume preference is highly individualistic, but people are less tolerant of loud music rather than soft music. The louder the music, the more distracting it becomes.
4. The volume level must be consistent. Most playlist compilations source tracks from several sources, so there is discrepancy in volume levels. Most computer based mp3 players such as iTunes and Win-amp have built in devices or plug-ins designed to iron out and condense dynamic variation. In iTunes go to Edit/Preferences/Playback/Sound check and

a consistent volume level will be applied to a playlist. Furthermore, shuffle the playlist to keep it fresh.

5. Expect a settling in period. The introduction of background music in classes often requires a period of adjustment. Students might complain about the style of music, and also offer their preferences as a substitute. Most research on this subject has found an adjustment period of up to 2-weeks, so do not give in. Within this time frame grumblings will subside and listeners will be comfortable with this new addition to the environment. Then the positive effects of this music can work its magic in transforming your classroom.

How is music chosen to achieve different goals?

Listening to music is mainly a gestalt experience, but certain components have more effect on our mood and physiology than others. In particular, tonality, tempo, pitch and texture all play an important role in affecting our mood. For example music of a major tonality is recognised to be happier and more positive than minor music. Faster tempi raise the heartbeat and music with lyrics demand more cognitive processing resources. It is musical constituents such as these that should determine playlist selections.

The most important factor is the choice of music, and this is where I can help you get started. I have provided playlists for schools from Australia to Luxembourg, and I have compiled a new 8 hour playlist for the classroom. For this, contact me griffin@musiceducationworld.com. The product can be sent to you on a CD data disc, or downloaded as a zip file from a link. A fee applies. My selections will give you the confidence to occasionally 'top up', or in the fullness of time you can contact me again to request a booster pack.

If you would like to read my masters dissertation, you can download at http://www.musiceducationworld.com/files/MG_Masters_Background_Music_in_Education.pdf

I have presented workshops on the psychology of music listening in school classrooms and during homework in around 25 countries. Navigate to 'Study, Stress and Music' on this page:

<http://www.musiceducationworld.com/workshopsforstudents>

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Michael Griffin sharing a story with students in Qatar

If you always do what you've always done, you always get what you've always got.