

Música as a Cultural Tool for Enhancing the Development of Young Latin@ Children

Learn how to make music education more relevant for Latin@ children and their peers.

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Latin@: A New Way

In Spanish, nouns have been considered either masculine or feminine and adjectives were expected to match the gender of the noun, often denoted by the “o” or “a” at the end of the word. The “@” symbol is now being used as a push back to those rigid linguistic rules and can be universally used with either masculine or feminine nouns.

The population growth of young Latin@ children is of great interest to early childhood educators across the South as Latin@s are the largest and fastest growing ethnic minority group across the nation. Much of this growth has occurred in the southeastern United States, where significant Latin@ populations now exist in communities where they hardly resided 10 to 20 years ago.

All early childhood educators should be knowledgeable about the children they teach. Given the sharp increase of Latin@ preschool-age children in the southern states, we aim to provide all early childhood educators with an example of how to make music instruction more culturally efficacious (Flores, Clark, Claeys, & Villarreal, 2007) for Latin@ children and their peers. By creating and playing percussion instruments with their students, early childhood educators can develop high-quality culturally efficacious education environments that enhance young Latin@ children’s physical (e.g., motor skills), social-emotional, and cognitive development (Bergen & Coscia, 2001), as well as their cultural identity (Flores, Casebeer, & Riojas-Cortez, 2011; Riojas-Cortez &

Flores, 2009; Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2010). For this article we selected three percussion instruments from Latin America: maracas, claves, and the güiro (*Photo 1*).

It is common to visit a Latin@ home and hear music playing (Wortham & Contreras, 2002), so our suggestions here aim to provide early childhood educators with ideas of how to make the contexts of early childhood centers more culturally relevant for Latin@ children. We share how to develop active, stimulating learning environments with a focus on culturally relevant music for young Latin@ children. We provide a backdrop for this article by sharing the role of música (music) in our own lives as children, educators, and for one of us as an artist and the other as a parent of a now five-year-old. We also include brief cultural histories of three particular instruments, simple instructions on how to make them, and how to plan an activity that involves Latin@ families. Familiar music will help children make stronger connections in the classroom thus making the classroom culturally efficacious.

The Facts

The Hispanic school-age population (ages 5 through 17) in the new settlement areas of the South grew by 322% between 1990 and 2000. Over the same period, the corresponding white population grew by just 10% and the black population by 18%. The Hispanic population of preschool age (4 or younger) increased by 382 percent between 1990 and 2000, and the number of Hispanics added was far larger than the number of whites (110,000 vs. 43,000) (Kochhar, Suro, & Tafoya, 2005, p. iv).

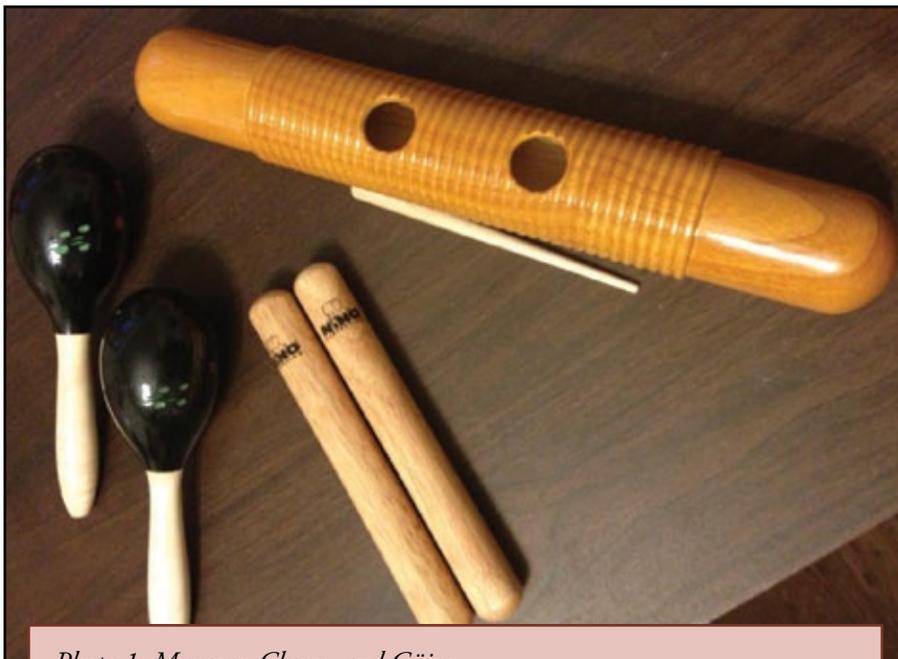


Photo provided by Dr. Marco Cervantes

Photo 1: Maracas, Claves, and Güiro.

Nuestras Vidas con Música/Our Lives with Music

For as long as I (Prieto) can remember, listening and singing along with music was a part of my upbringing, whether at home or working in the agricultural fields of California alongside my family. My father imparted upon us the cultural traditions of baladas, corridos, y rancheras mexicanas (romantic and folk ballads and the rural traditional folk music of Mexico). His singing helped the long workdays go by faster (Prieto, 2015). He recorded us singing with him or each other on cassette tapes. At the age of 11, I made my own cassette recording in secret with my then six-year-old brother that we later presented to our family as our Christmas gift to them. Now, as a mother of a five-year-old, I also expose my child to the music I grew up with, as well as Tejano music, since he was born in Texas. We sing and dance in the kitchen, and our car rides include singing along to Spanish children's

music by traditional Latin@ artists like José Luis Orozco or Suni Paz.

My (Cervantes) earliest memories of music were mornings at my abuelá's (grandmother's) house listening to a small General Electric transistor radio as we talked, sang, and danced to different types of Latin@ music such as cumbias, rancheras, and polkas by such artists as José José, Los Tigres Del Norte, Rigo Tovar, and Los Plebeyos. Music

has been a part of my life since the time of my birth when my abuela named me Marco Antonio, after Marco Antonio Vasquez, singer of boleros (a type of Spanish music and dance) such as "¡Y Ya!" (*That's it!*) and "Cielo Rojo" (*Red Sky*). She would sing these songs around the house often and today they bring back warm memories of her love and home. When returning to my parents' home, I listened to their vast collection of rock, R&B, soul, and disco LPs. On my own, I listened to R&B and rock radio stations and was deeply moved by the beats and rhymes of hip-hop. As I grew older and began performing as a hip-hop artist/musician, I found ways to fuse rancheras and cumbias with hip-hop music. Relocating these memories and musical forms through my research and performance helps me remain grounded to my Mexican and Latin@ musical roots and communicate the value of cultural expressions to students and audiences.

La Música

Bachata— An internationally celebrated genre of music from the countryside of the Dominican Republic, performed and popularized within Afro-Dominican rural neighborhoods.

Cumbia—A Colombian genre of Caribbean music existing in both rural and urban forms that became popular throughout Latin America's Pacific rim regions from Chile to Central America and Mexico.

Merengue—A music and dance genre from the Dominican Republic that has become a symbol of national identity and is one the most popular Latin American musical genres.

Son— A complex set of traditional Cuban styles of dance and music rooted in Afro-Cuban rhythms that have informed a wide range of Latin American music, including chachachá, mambo, and salsa.

Salsa— An Afro-Caribbean song and dance promoted and marketed by New York Latinos in the 1970's. Salsa comprises of genres including Cuban Son and Puerto Rican Bomba and Plena.

Música Enhancing Children's Development

Because we knew the importance that music played in our development as children, we decided to provide a música workshop to show children and their parents how to make and enjoy using maracas, claves, and güiros. These percussion instruments are not only common in Latin@ musical expression, but they also reflect the colonial contact between Europe, the Americas, and Africa. Thus, they present opportunities to explore the European, African and indigenous roots of Latin@ music, while also helping to develop Latin@ children's cultural identity and comfort in a new learning environment. In addition, these easy-to-replicate instruments represent ways for all young children to become engaged in the richness of Latin@ culture and raise their awareness of Latin America's historical contributions.

Affirm children's cultural backgrounds.

Historical Background of Instruments

Before describing the details of the workshop, we provide a brief description below of the instruments' history to help you in your preparation and planning of instruction.

Maracas

Maracas are percussion instruments developed by indigenous groups in both Africa and the



Music can build a bridge between cultures, children and families.

Photo by Subjects and Predicates

Americas. They are commonly used in Afro-Latino music such as Latin jazz, salsa, cumbia, and bachata (Olsen, 1998; Hernández, 2012). Many early maracas were made from such objects as gourds, with seeds that rattled inside. Over time, musicians developed methods of making maracas, using hardened leather, wood, and other materials that could be filled with seeds or pebbles (Latin Music USA, 2009).

Claves

Claves consists of two hardwood sticks used to keep time in rhythms characteristic of West African music (Latin Music USA, 2009). Claves were formally developed in 17th century Havana shipyards from the dowels used in shipbuilding (Peñalosa, 2009). By the 1940s, claves were an essential instrument of rumba and the popular style son from eastern Cuba. They are popular Afro-Cuban salsa, jazz, funk, and rock ensembles (Olsen, 1998). Fittingly, clave is a Spanish word meaning 'code' or 'key,' and can also refer to the name of the patterns played on claves.

The Güiro

The güiro is a percussion scraper, of Amerindian origin, providing usually stressed downbeats and rhythms varied according to the dance accompanied (Olsen, 1998). The güiro's origins can be traced to indigenous groups in the Caribbean, especially the Taíno tribes of Puerto Rico and Cuba (Latin Music USA, 2009). Other variations of the güiro can be found in Colombian vallenato and Dominican merengue music (Latin Music USA, 2009).

The Música Workshop: Making Maracas, Claves, and Güiros

Our workshop included the participation of children, parents, and grandparents who do not attend the same early childhood center; yet they quickly engaged with one another before, during, and after the workshop. Thus, taking part in the creation of these instruments also impacted the emotional experience and connections made to music and the children's abilities to create and enjoy music with others. By understanding

and sharing the cultural and historical meanings of the particular musical instruments highlighted in this article, early childhood educators draw attention to providing young Latin@ children with opportunities to celebrate and learn about their own cultural backgrounds.

According to scholars, such as Hoffman (1992), “Multisensory activities require more planning and more collection of materials and realia (real objects) on the part of the teacher than do standard textbook-based instructional approaches, but the motivation and memory advantages of these activities justify the extra effort”. (pp. 132-133) Thus, on the day of the workshop Cervantes brought real maracas, claves, and a güiro, allowing the children to see, touch, and listen to the actual instruments before constructing their own.

We recommend the following materials be used in the development of the maracas, claves, and güiros. (Table 1) Selecting items that serve as common staples throughout Latin America for the inside of the maracas, such as corn kernels, rice, and beans instead of colored beads is purposeful. We also sought items that would be easily handled by three- to six-year-old children, while developing their dexterity and eye-hand coordination. Lastly, when no longer in use, all items are either recyclable or biodegradable. Materials of different shapes and sizes can also be used for children requiring physical adaptations, such as incorporating the use of a funnel to facilitate the pouring of rice, beans, and maize into the plastic bottles or using larger plastic cups for an easier grip of the güiros.

Table 1

Materials		
Maracas	Güiros	Claves
Rice (various colors)	Empty 9-ounce plastic cups with ridges	Two 8-inch wooden dowels per child
Dried beans (various colors)	Plastic spoons	
Maize or corn kernels (various colors)		
Empty 8-ounce transparent water bottles with lids		

Instructions

If your classroom is carpeted, we suggest you lay a tarp on the floor for easier cleaning up. Otherwise, keeping a broom and dustpan on hand will suffice. To make the maracas, remove the label on each 8-ounce plastic bottle. Wash and dry the bottles, saving the lids for use later. Place the dried beans, rice, and maize kernels in bowls where the children can easily reach in and fill their maracas. Placing a tray in each student’s work area can also help catch spills. Carefully monitor children because sometimes they may place these ingredients in their mouths, nose, or ears or

those of their neighboring friends. We decided to begin with each dry ingredient in a different bowl in order to share with the children the name of each ingredient and their corresponding colors. However, once the children began to make their maracas, we allowed the ingredients to be mixed across bowls. Ideally, each child should have two plastic bottles and the accompanying lids, so they can make two maracas; however, during our música workshop, we found the children preferred making and using one maraca. This allowed them to fill, use, empty and refill the maracas. Some children may initially require assistance tightening the lids



Photo courtesy of University of Louisiana at Monroe Child Development Center

Musical instruments that allow for a wide variety of sounds and rhythms can be constructed with “found” materials.

on the bottles. The practice of filling the maracas and closing the lids also supports the development of fine motor skills.

The children were encouraged to hold a bottle in one hand and use their other hand to fill their maracas. We did not limit them to this method and indeed they varied in their preferences. At times they placed one bottle in a bowl and scooped the beans, rice, and kernels that way or scooped into one bottle first and used these contents to fill the other bottle. It is important to provide ample time for the children to explore the various contents and enjoy the process of filling and refilling their maracas. As the children enthusiastically filled their maracas, they giggled and shared with one another as well as with the adults present. As they did so, we reminded them of the name and color of the contents they were using, encouraged their levels of pleasure and play, and kept the music playing in the background. Once a child completed and successfully sealed the maraca, we asked them to shake the maraca for all to hear. Shaking the maracas allowed the children to distinguish the different sounds this type of instrument makes with different amounts and sizes of ingredients inside. For example, we asked, “*What do you hear?*” (¿Qué escuchas?) “*What does it sound like?*” (¿Cómo suena?) “*Does it sound the same as before?*” (¿Suena igual que antes?) Without prompting, the children danced, jumped, smiled, and showed off their creations.

The güiros and claves do not require assembly by the children. For the güiros, you must simply show them how to hold the cup in one hand and the spoon in the other. Then they scrape the ridges on the

cup with either end of the spoon to make music. If your nails are long enough, you can also demonstrate to the children the scraping process with your fingernails, thus avoiding the use of a spoon. For the claves, you can purchase wooden dowels at your local hardware store. Prieto purchased 48-inch long wooden dowels, one half-inch in diameter and sawed them into eight-inch long claves. We recommend sanding down both ends of the claves and sides to avoid splinters. To make music with the claves, the children hold one clave in one hand and strike downward with the clave in their other hand. Because no assembly is required, these instruments allow them to create music more readily while dancing. The children enjoyed dancing around the room, tapping their feet, and playing different instruments. For example, one child played the güiro while another child played the claves.

provide excellent examples. When practicing maracas, Celia Cruz’s *La Vida Es Un Carnaval* (2003) and Eddie Palmieri’s *Azúcar* (1965) provide fitting salsa rhythms with which to play along. Aniceto Molina’s *Cumbia Sampuesana* (2007) and Andres Landero y Su Conjunto’s *Mi Machete* (2006) provide applicable backing tracks for cumbia rhythms and güiro practice. While these songs can entail complex rhythmic structures, they also allow for preliminary percussive practice that young children can follow and enjoy.

We observed the importance of constructing appropriate curriculum which “involves teachers making decisions based not only on materials but also on a holistic view of the individual needs and capabilities of the children” (Miranda, 2004, p. 53) and demonstrated the value of engaging young children in authentic activities, such as the ones described here. Although in the U.S. we often purchase new items for use in making crafts, it is important for educators to model ingenuity such as the reuse of water bottles in making the maracas. In doing so, we also help to foster children’s imagination.

Although we conducted our workshop in one afternoon, we highly recommend taking time to explore and learn about these instruments across a number of days and coming back to them throughout the year. You can also build up to a community event where the children perform for their loved ones by focusing on a particular singer or musical style that is a family favorite. For example, many Latin@ enjoy the music of Celia Cruz. You can have the children dance to her award winning song *La Vida Es Un Carnaval* (2003). Remember to always be open to learning alongside the children

Music establishes connections for future learning.

Reflections

In the workshop, songs from the genres of salsa, merengue, son, cumbia, and more can be used to demonstrate the sound of these instruments. They also provide students with authentic rhythmic patterns to follow. To demonstrate claves playing, use son clave and son rumba rhythms; Don Azpiazu and His Havana Orchestra: Casino Orchestra’s *El Manisero (The Peanut Vendor)* (1930) and Compay Segundo’s *Guantanamera* (2013)

and their loved ones, providing an avenue to involve them in teaching dances to the students.

Engaging the Senses

As young children make and explore the use of maracas, claves, and güiros, they explore through their senses and establish connections for future learning. Lewin-Benham (2010) documents the significance of using materials that will encourage children to explore the world by engaging their senses. Children who are visually able will stimulate their sense of sight with the materials used to construct the instruments. As the instruments are assembled and used, young children are simultaneously stimulating their sense of touch and hearing as well.



Photo courtesy of United Way Center for Excellence, Miami, FL

Use materials that will encourage children to explore and create.

Arousing Interest

While Lewin-Benham (2010) writes that young children express joy in engaging in expressive work “that is creative, original, complex, competent, and joyful” (p. 5), she also describes them as “desperate for ways to stimulate their brain” (p. 58). During our workshop, the children required little prodding to participate. One child yelled, “¡Música!” (Music!) as soon as he saw the materials, and when we began to play music, they were quick to dance on their own.

Two great responsibilities of the early childhood educator, then, are development of the learning environment and modeling an engagement with learning. To create a purposeful learning environment, the early childhood educator will need to intrigue and capture that child’s interest. (Rushton, Juola-Rushton, & Larkin, 2010, p. 353) According to Kaufeldt (1999), “This arousal of emotions allows their attentional system to

zoom in and focus on the source. We know that attracting and holding attention is the key to learning and memory” (p. 86). As soon as the children heard the music playing and saw the materials, they were eager to begin.

Involving Families

Since we also recognize the importance of establishing collaborations between families and schools, we made certain to invite young children and their parents to participate in the música workshop. One child’s grandmother attended with him. Furthermore, by encouraging the use of Spanish with Latin American music and dance, we affirmed the children’s cultural backgrounds during the learning process as indicated by Riojas-Cortez and Flores (2009)...*knowing how to partner and work with families allows educators to understand children’s background,*

including their culture. Furthermore, understanding children’s background enhances educators’ facility for including children’s funds of knowledge and families’ cultural knowledge in their classrooms. Communication and collaboration is promoted when teachers value the input of parents and families and respect their culture. (p. 238)

In closing, we posit that early childhood educators who provide opportunities to engage with culturally relevant music, as described above, are supporting the development of physical, social-emotional, cultural, and cognitive knowledge of Latin@ children and thus promote collaboration and respect towards their families.

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