

On the Beauty in the Teaching-Learning Process of “Do-Re-Mi” in *The Sound of Music*

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The educational stories in the American movie *The Sound of Music* are touching. This article tries to analyze the teaching-learning process of the song “Do-Re-Mi” in the movie, and appreciate the beauty in this process, which includes: Discipline and freedom can become a harmonious one; knowledge and life can be integrated; teaching, learning, and playing can hardly be divided apart; curriculum and living can be combined into one; teacher and students can love each other like family members and friends; so that students can learn in freedom and grow up in happiness.

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It is quite probable for those who have seen the American movie *The Sound of Music* to have deep impression on the songs in it, and on “Do-Re-Mi” in particular. This song became popular in China as soon as the movie was shown there. So, what makes the song so widely liked? Because it was well written or composed? Yes, it’s true that it was well written and composed. But we should also say that the plot of the movie was so well created that it impressed and caught the audience. From the perspective of educators, it was the education that Maria, the governess, exerted on the children that caused the children, Maria herself, and the von Trapp family as a whole to have been changing, growing up, and developing.

Now, let’s appreciate the beauty in the teaching-learning process of the song “Do-Re-Mi” in the movie *The Sound of Music*.

The Lyrics of the Song “Do-Re-Mi” (Wise, 1965)

“Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start. When you read you begin with—ABC. When you sing you begin with do re mi. Do re mi? Do re mi, the first three notes just happen to be. Do re mi. Do re mi! Do re mi fa so la ti ...”

“(Maria: Oh, let’s see if I can make it easier. Mmm ...) Doe—a deer, a female deer, ray—a drop of golden sun, me—a name I call myself, far—a long, long way to run, sew—a needle pulling thread, la—a note to follow sew, tea—a drink with jam and bread. And that will bring us back to [do], oh-oh-oh!”

“‘So do la fa mi do re’ (Maria: Can you do that?). So do la fa mi do re. So do la ti do re do. So do la ti do re do (Brigitta: But it doesn’t mean anything. Maria: So we put in words, one word for every note. Like this—).

When you know the notes to sing, you can sing most anything. When you know the notes to sing, you can sing most anything”.

The parts in the brackets in the lyrics are Maria’s monologues or the dialogues between her and the children in the teaching-learning process of the song.

The Teaching-Learning Process of “Do-Re-Mi”

In this part, all those in the quotation marks are quoted from the movie lines (Wise, 1965).

The whole teaching-learning process of the song “Do-Re-Mi” is not only a process in which Maria and the children, teacher and students, have discussed and cooperated in the teaching and learning together, and have completed the teaching-learning task together, but also a process in which the teacher and students have loved each other, lived happily and harmoniously together, and grown up in a healthy way. The teaching-learning process of the whole song consists of three parts:

The 1st part of the song was the 1st paragraph of the lyrics. The 2nd sentence in the 1st part, “When you read you begin with—A B C”, was done out of the collaboration of the teacher and students: Native English-speaking children all know that the English alphabet is the foundation for people to learn to read in English. So when Maria deliberately paused at “with—” while singing “When you read you begin with—”, and questioned the children through eye-contacts, Gretl, the youngest girl, who was only five years old, immediately responded without any difficulty: “(with)—A B C”. The children felt simple and funny, and curious as well: Where should we begin to learn to sing, then? In the next sentence, by using the same sentence structure, but replacing “read” and “ABC” in the previous sentence with “sing” and “do re mi” in the new one, Maria introduced and highlighted the new knowledge: “When you sing you begin with do re mi”. The children immediately followed questioningly, “do re mi”? Maria confirmed, “do re mi”, and further explained, “the first three notes just happen to be”. The children seemed to have understood, repeating “do re mi”. Maria further reinforced, “do re mi”, and continued to teach new knowledge, “do re mi fa so la ti ...”.

During the process of teaching and learning, Maria was attentively watching the children’s eyes and facial expressions to know how much they could follow. Here, while the seven basic notes were sung out together in one sentence for the first time, Maria noticed that the children looked puzzled, could not follow the singing, and thus became lower in spirit in learning. She reflected, “let’s see if I can make it easier”, and quickly found a solution to the problem—based on the children’s real life and actual level of knowledge, using metaphors to relate the abstract musical notes with the real things, events, or activities that the children were familiar with in their daily lives, which became the second part (or the second paragraph) of the song. Maria managed to teach the children to learn to sing the seven abstract basic musical notes in a flexible manner, by using analogies to connect the new knowledge with the things, events, or occasions familiar to the children according to the children’s actual situations.

This part was taught and learned for three times:

For the first time, it was Maria who sang and taught, while the children listened to Maria and tried to remember what she sang. In English, the homonym of the note “do” is the word “doe”, referring to a female deer; the homonym of the note “re” is the word “ray”, referring to “beam”, “sunshine”, and so on; the homonym of the note “mi” is the word “me”, referring to the accusative personal pronoun of “I”; the homonym

of the note “fa” is the word “far”, meaning “remote”, “a long way away”; the homonym of the note “so” is the word “sew”, meaning “a needle pulling thread”, “going between”; and the homonym of the note “ti” is the word “tea”, meaning “a drink with jam and bread”. These are the things, events, or activities that the children were extremely familiar with, and were used to using, doing, and experiencing every day in their daily lives. Thus, when Maria separated the seven notes and finished singing the first sentence with the metaphor to the first note—“doe, a deer, a female deer”, she noticed that the children immediately became higher in spirit; they all sat up, with glistening eyes and more and more attentive facial expressions, curiously waiting for the following content to come. Seeing such reactions from the children, Maria knew she had found the right starting point, and was applying the right approach to teaching the children now. Excitedly, she went on teaching with no more pause, by singing, “Ray—a drop of golden sun, me—a name I call myself, far—a long, long way to run, sew—a needle pulling thread, la—a note to follow ‘sew’, tea—a drink with jam and bread...” She only failed to find a homonym familiar to the children for the note “la”, but she swiftly found a flexible way to interpret it, “la—a note to follow ‘sew’”, and thus solved all the problems concerning the seven musical notes that were puzzling the children. While Maria was teaching by singing, each child was extremely attentive and immensely interested while listening intently to her. When she was singing the last sentence and coming to the end of the notes, the children have become so enjoyed and excited that they could hardly wait to try to sing by themselves!

The second time of teaching and learning this part was completed in the cooperation between Maria and the children, in which Maria let the children contribute as much as possible, offering help only when necessary. The form of the teaching and learning activities was like a solitaire or renewal game: when Gretl, the youngest girl, caught the chance to start singing the homonym of the first note “doe—”, Maria helped her by singing the left part of the sentence “—a deer, a female deer”; when Lisle went on by singing “ray—”, Maria continued “—a drop of golden sun”. At this moment, none of the children could bear to stay in silence any longer and all of them joined in the singing one after another: Kurt went on, singing “me—”, and Maria continued “—a name I call myself”. Brigita was lying on one of her sides, holding some fruit in one of her hands and eating lazily at the time. Now she knelt up, threw away the fruit in her hand, moved a few steps forward, and joined in the game, singing “far—”, and Maria continued once more “—a long, long way to run”. Now all the children knelt up and moved forward, singing together with Maria “sew—”, and Louisa, Fredrich, and Marta continued singing “—a needle pulling thread”; then all of them went on singing “la—”, and seeing the children having difficulty in going on, Maria timely offered her help by going on singing “—a note to follow ‘sew’”, and went on singing “tea—”, then the children continued singing together “—a drink with jam and bread”... After this round of learning and practicing, the children have learned to sing almost all the seven basic notes.

In such teaching-learning process, the teacher and students cooperated with each other: The children let Maria (their teacher) know where they were; on the teacher’s part, Maria listened to the children, managed to find the right place—the most basic things—for the children to start learning, and managed to apply suitable approaches to helping the children learn more easily—to learn in the surroundings as if they were playing games. The children were completely absorbed in the learning and have accomplished much. The accomplishment they have achieved and the fun they have enjoyed in the learning and playing made them feel trusted, appreciated, and respected, so that they became much happier, much more self-respect, and much more

self-confident than ever before, so much so that they got even more interested in learning and wanted to learn more!

The coming third time of the teaching and learning of this part is no longer teaching and learning to sing, but a table singing jointly performed by the children and Maria! The children could no longer sit still, they stood up, singing, dancing, running, jumping, frolicking, and racing ... Learning in such happy circumstances and mentality enabled the children to have achieved good learning outcomes, which paved the way and laid foundation for their further learning.

The third part of the song was a kind of review, reinforcement, application, and development of what was learned in the previous procedures. When Maria was sure that the children have mastered how to sing the seven basic musical notes, she said to them, “Children, do re mi fa so and so on are only the tools we use to build a song. Once you have these notes in your head, you can sing a million different tunes by mixing them up. Like this...”, and she randomly picked up some notes and sang, “so do la fa mi do re”. Seeing that the children were reluctant to follow, she asked, “Can you do that?” On the basis of what they have learned previously, the children had no difficulty repeating those notes, “so do la fa mi do re”. Maria then went on teaching them to sing, “so do la ti do re do”, and the children repeated, “so do la ti do re do”. However, the children were not satisfied with simply repeating meaningless combinations of the notes. Brigita, who was blunt and frank in speaking, questioned, “But it doesn’t mean anything”. Seeing the children’s rapid progress and their constant craving for new knowledge, very excited, Maria further expanded the content of teaching and learning in accordance with the children’s real need and basis in learning. She responded to Brigita’s question, “So we put in words, one word for every note. Like this—”, and she continued teaching by singing “When you know the notes to sing, you can sing most anything”. These two meaningful statements were so easy for the children that they quickly followed, without any difficulty, by singing, “When you know the notes to sing, you can sing most anything”.

In this way, after the whole teaching-learning process of the song “Do-Re-Mi”, thanks to Governess Maria’s flexibility and individualization in teaching, and thanks to her creation of relaxing, pleasant, and lively learning circumstances in which the children enjoyed their learning, all the children have learned how to sing the seven abstract basic musical notes, understood that the seven notes can be combined together flexibly to form pieces of music, and knew about the basic methods of combining the music and lyrics together to form a song. All these have laid a solid foundation for their further learning in the future.

In fact, within the limited time, a month or so, when Captain von Trapp was visiting in Vienna, because of Maria’s education, which was filled with the sense of others: appreciation, trust, love, care, respect, understanding, tolerance, consultation, encouragement, patience, and diversity, the children have not only learned to sing songs, and to create, organize, and perform puppet shows, but also were gradually growing up and have learned to behave themselves, to work and cooperate, to understand, and to care and love.

The Beauty in the Teaching-Learning Process of “Do-Re-Mi”

From the teaching-learning process of “Do-Re-Mi”, in which Maria taught and the children learned, we can see such beauty in education that discipline and freedom can be harmoniously unified; abstract rudimentary knowledge difficult to teach and learn can be interpreted as specific, vivid life events and situations; teaching, learning, and playing can hardly be divided apart; curriculum and living can be integrated with each other;

teacher and students can be so close to each other that they can get along like friends and family members...

Discipline and Freedom Can Be Unified in Harmony

In his *The Aims of Education*, the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead held

that the only discipline, important for its own sake, is self-discipline, and that this can only be acquired by a wide use of freedom. But yet—so many are the delicate points to be considered in education—it is necessary in life to have acquired the habit of cheerfully undertaking imposed tasks. The conditions can be satisfied if the tasks correspond to the natural cravings of the pupil at his stage of progress, if they keep his power at full stretch, and if they attain an obviously sensible result, and if reasonable freedom is allowed in the mode of execution. (Whitehead, 1929, p. 35)

The embarrassment that discipline has suffered in the movie:

In the movie *The Sound of Music*, the education with strict discipline Captain von Trapp implemented upon his children has suffered different types of embarrassment:

Before Maria came, Captain von Trapp governed his house and children according to strict military discipline. He called the children and gave them orders by whistling their signals. He demanded that the governesses strictly observe such discipline and management model. As a result, on the surface (in front of him), the children were obedient and his orders were obeyed without any exception, but under the quiet and orderly surface (behind him), there went the children’s silent but frequent and successful resistance: They played various mischievous tricks on the governesses behind him, so that none of the former 11 governesses chose to stay in the house and teach the children, which frequently put him in the trouble of finding a proper governess for them. But even so, Captain von Trapp did not think that there was anything wrong with his management concept—executing powerful control over the children with strict discipline. And because his children were quite obedient in front of him, he also did not think that there was anything wrong with them. He thought it was the governesses who were responsible for all the trouble, because “they were completely unable to maintain discipline”, and “without it, this house cannot be properly run” (Wise, 1965).

On Maria’s arrival, Captain von Trapp also made the same discipline requirement on her in an ordering tone, “Every morning you will drill the children in their studies. ... Each afternoon they will march about the grounds, breathing deeply. Bedtime is to be strictly observed, no exceptions. ... You will see to it that they conduct themselves at all time with the utmost orderliness and decorum. I’m placing you in command” (Wise, 1965). Of course, the children were also ready to “welcome” their new governess, the 12th governess of theirs, Maria. They have prepared unexpected “gifts” for her: At their first meeting, they secretly put a frog into a pocket of her dress, which scared her into jumping and screaming; at their second meeting (her first dinner with the whole family: the father and all the seven children), of course behind their father, they put a pinecone on her seat, which caused her to scream and jump up from the chair as soon as she sat down and which again put her in an awkward and embarrassing situation, especially in front of their father ...

The harmony coming with freedom:

In fact, “an over-vigorous discipline in education is so harmful. The habit of active thought, with freshness, can only be generated by adequate freedom” (Whitehead, 1929, p. 32).

Maria seemed to have received some hint from this viewpoint of Whitehead’s! She did not follow Captain von Trapp’s requirement to control the children with discipline, nor did she think of retaliating upon the children for their mischief; she even never spoke to the children in a harsh or blaming tone. Instead, following

her natural instinct and desire for freedom, she treated the children with sincere love and care, with open-mindedness, gentleness, wisdom, intelligence, kindness, understanding, patience, tolerance, forgiving, selflessness, talents in singing and dancing, innocence, and even childishness, which helped her successfully resolve the children’s mischief, eliminate their guard and resistance against her, change their rejecting and even hostile attitude towards her, and win their trust, acceptance, and friendship eventually.

During the time when their father was away from home, she tried every means and managed to set the children free from various discipline and restrictions and let them enjoy learning in freedom: Making use of the replaced old drapes, she made play clothes for the children, so that they could take off their uniforms, physically getting free from the restriction of the uniforms. They put on their play clothes and played outdoors, enjoying the happiness that freedom brought to them. Maria was always among them and played together with them: They could be seen frolicking, slapsticking, running, singing, and dancing...all over the small town of Salzburg: on the hills, by the river, on the trees, in the water, on the grass, in the courtyard, on the carriage, in the market, in the streets. ...

In such a free atmosphere, in the broad embrace of the nature, the children have been blooming with vitality. They felt how insignificant they were in the nature, and how inadequate they were in knowledge and ability. The desire for knowledge and thirst for learning burst forth from the bottom of their hearts... Maria timely seized one after another such educational opportunities to teach the children the necessary basic knowledge, basic skills, learning methods, and living wisdom by way of games and activities that the children would never become tired of, which enabled them to live, learn, advance, and grow up in freedom, harmony, and happiness physically and mentally ...

Because such pleasant learning activities were in line with the natural needs of the children’s development and could allow them to give full play to their abilities and achieve significant learning outcomes, and because the children have enjoyed necessary freedom in the process of learning, they have gradually developed the habit of being cheerful to learn the imposed knowledge and skills. Through the enjoyment of extensive freedom, they have become accustomed to self-restraint and self-discipline. Here, discipline and freedom were unified in harmony, and the many became one, and were increased by one (Whitehead, 1985, p. 21).

Knowledge and Life Can Be Integrated

By talking with the children, Maria soon got to know the children’s foundation in learning music—from zero, without any foundation; and quickly clarified in her mind the knowledge they had to grasp precisely—the seven most rudimentary musical notes. In addition, she was keen on observing phenomena, sensitive to discovering problems, and flexible in solving problems: Through careful observation in the teaching-learning process, she got to know the children’s difficulties in learning to sing songs—the seven musical notes were too abstract and unfamiliar for the children to understand and accept in learning. She was smart and flexible to have come up with a workable solution to the problem soon—to find a homonym or homophonic word in English for each of the seven notes that the children were familiar with, the meanings of which referring to the things, events, and activities that the children were extremely familiar with, and that they have got to use, participate in, or experience every day.

By means of such teaching and learning through association, the seven notes, abstract for the children, were turned into concrete things, events, and activities; the static knowledge were put in real situations in life; tedious rote memorization was replaced by interesting games and joyful play; idle mischievous tricks were developed into effective learning outcomes and meaningful creation. The children enjoyed such learning so much that they forgot themselves and lingered on in it.

Teaching, Learning, and Playing Can Mingle with Each Other

The whole teaching-learning process of the song “Do-Re-Mi” almost all took place outdoors. We could not see any tangible “classroom” in the whole movie, nor did we see Maria and the children experiencing the classic classroom teaching-learning situation in a certain room, in which “the teacher stands in the front of the room speaking, while the students sit at their desks listening to the teacher”. Instead, they played all over the small town of Salzburg and left their footprints, their beautiful sound of singing, and the noise of their joyful playfulness, frolicking, shouting, and laughing the town over: on the hillside, by the stream, in the bushes, on the trees, in the boats, and in the carriage. Everywhere could be regarded as their “classroom”, and they could be seen having their classes on the grass, in the streets, around the ponds, in the markets, over the bridge, in the garden... anywhere except in a given “classroom”. In this process, teaching, learning, and playing could hardly be divided apart!

Curriculum and Living Can Be Combined into One

In Maria’s vivid metaphors, in the rich teaching content available for her to pick up in life whenever needed while teaching, in her flexible ways and forms of teaching, the actual things, events, and activities in the children’s life were melted into the learning content; learning was involved in games and activities, and learning in game-playing became a part of their life... Learning, playing, taking part in activities, and living became an organic whole: They were interrelated and interwoven with each other, each becoming a part of the others and a part of the organic whole. Again, the many became one and were increased by one! (Whitehead, 1985, p. 21) This organic whole constituted a picture of the vivid and harmonious life of the children, in which they were free to play, to learn, to create, and to live a healthy life, physically and mentally... Here curriculum and life were combined into one!

Teacher and Students Can Love Each Other like Family Members and Friends

Like the children, Maria was natural in nature and longed for freedom. Out of her innocence, kindness, tolerance, open-mindedness, bravery, and honesty, she was not scared to escape by Captain von Trapp’s severeness or by the children’s rejection and hostility. Instead, she chose to face the challenges and difficulties, and manage to give positive responses to all these: She was not angry with the children for their malicious teases, rather, she took these as good educational opportunities for her to cultivate them: Intelligent and witty as she was, by way of generous praises at the dinner table in front of the father, she deliberately expressed her “thanks” to the children for the “gifts” they “sent” her, to lay their mischievous tricks bare, but at the same time help them cover up the truth (from their father). Her generous attempts and tolerance made the children feel guilty of their mischievous behaviors. Her sincere speech helped her to have eliminated their guard and resistance against her, and won their trust, friendship, and love eventually. Her passion, ecstasy, and childishness enabled her to play, frolic, and slapstick together with them, as one of their playmates. Her good

literacy and educational wisdom made her the children’s good teacher of knowledge and skills and reliable psychological, ideological, and emotional guide. Her sincere care and selfless love for each child made them become dependent on her in living and attached to her in emotion, so much so that they were actually devoted to a kind of parent-child love between them.

In such a pleasant atmosphere and process of teaching and learning, the children were learning happily and growing up healthily.

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