

Music and Play: Diverse Aspects of 4-6 Year Olds' Self-Initiated Musical Play

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Background

Music is present in preschools and kindergartens, both in the spontaneous expressions of children and in adult-directed activities. The latter are very common and easy to identify, as they are clearly defined and delimited. Some examples are: singing in 'circle time', dancing to recorded music, or accompanying the singing of birthday songs by playing small percussion instruments. Spontaneous musical expressions are very common as well, but are less easily noticed and identified as a musical episode, as they occur in various places, are sometimes unexpected, and are usually connected to other activities. Some descriptions of episodes identified by the author as musical expressions may clarify this point:

N, a five-year-old boy, sings while swinging on the playground swing, a 1950s-era song heard at his grandmother's house. The first sentence is sung louder than the rest; some of the words are not clearly pronounced.

Y, a four-year-old boy, claps his hands, then slaps both his thighs, repeating this pattern several times, while the kindergarten teacher is reading a story aloud.

S, a four-year-old girl, is playing by herself with dolls. She describes what the doll does as she moves it. S holds the doll up, then down, repeating the movement and the phrase (in Hebrew): "*Hop upward, hop downward, and we start from the beginning.*" This phrase is chanted and recalls a song taught by the kindergarten teacher.

Diverse ways of music-making are present in the episodes described above: singing an adult-composed song, improvising a rhythmic phrase, chanting an altered version of a poem written for children. Movement is an integral part of each of the instances. These are examples of '*musicking*', a term coined by Small (1998:9) meaning

"...to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composition), or by dancing."

The episodes described may have been 'lost' upon the adult who is not aware of the musical qualities inherent in them, and who does not value the children's *musicking* as a type differing from adults', especially that of adult professional musicians or amateur performers. Furthermore, young children's musical episodes are a unique mode of expression that is qualitatively different from that of adults (Moorhead and Pond, 1942; McPherson, 1998; Glover, 2000; Stadler Elmer, 2000).

This research study investigates the self-initiated play of four- to six-year-old children in music areas set up by the kindergarten teacher for the explicit purpose of promoting free play with music materials (mainly small percussion instruments), parallel to the 'building block area' that aims to promote constructive play and the 'homemaking center' that encourages socio-dramatic play. Music areas of the type mentioned are not very common. Four kindergartens in Israel were chosen for the study, each exhibiting a different combination of demographic characteristics (Jewish urban middle-upper class; Jewish in a *moshav* residential and agricultural cooperative village; Arab urban private run by the Catholic church) and organizational principles (free-flow, semi-structured, fully-structured). An ethnographic methodology was employed. The video data was collected by the researcher, who was familiar to the children either as their music teacher or as a regular visitor. Weekly taping sessions were conducted throughout one school year, with observation records written to provide additional information.

From the analysis of the data, categories emerged that reflected the researcher's interpretation of the footage. These categories were reviewed and compared to prior studies. Through this dialogue between the study and the literature, themes developed that are proposed as a possible way of viewing the complex picture of the self-initiated musical play of young children, who experience it holistically. Three aspects characterise the self-initiated musical play in music areas especially designed for this purpose: the sensory-motor, the cultural, and the social.

The Sensory-Motor Aspect

Music is sound, therefore it is perceived aurally. In the case of young children, this is not simply the case. Music making is a unified event, created and experienced through four sensory modalities: the aural, the tactile, the kinesthetic and the visual (Cohen, 1980; Young, 1995; Glover, 2000). Dramatic activity, the use of instruments, singing, and rhythmic movement are freely combined or alternated (Pillsbury Foundation Studies, 1978).

"The deep-rooted connection between moving and 'sounding' is of prime importance as a source of young children's musical expression. These parallel modes of time-based activity seem to be intrinsically connected." (Glover, 2000:42)

Therefore, the sensory-motor aspect includes the preferred music parameters, the idiosyncratic movements, and the relationships among them. This division is artificial and is made only for the sole purpose of analysing the young children's music-making.

The child's prime interest is in tone colour. The study reveals that in playing bar instruments, children do not seek particular pitches but rather the different timbres,

playing these in alternation or even simultaneously, sometimes combining the various timbres of different instruments (Pillsbury Foundation Studies, 1978; Swanwick & Tillman, 1986; Smithrin, 1994; Glover, 2000; Gluschankof, 2002; 2003). Cohen (1980:257) maintains that this attention paid to the sound is to the wholeness of it, "...*not separating it into its component parameters.*" The sound colour is mainly a factor of its timbre but includes the other parameters of intensity, accents, duration, and even pitch, especially if they are extreme (very loud/soft, very long/short, very high/low).

The interest in the timbre of the sound is related to the way children get acquainted with a percussion instrument. As with any new object, they explore its physical properties (e.g. size, shape, material, smell, etc.), the actions that can be performed with it (e.g. shake, pluck, strike, carry around, look through, etc.) and the consequences of the different actions (e.g. loud sounds, long sounds, light is reflected, etc.). Sometimes the interest resides in a particular physical property, and the action is a way of exploring this. Sometimes the focus moves from the sound itself to the action, and the sound is a byproduct of this interest. Sometimes the action develops into an instance of dramatic play.

The Cultural Aspect

Music is organised sound, produced by human beings. Therefore, it has to be considered as a sound experience that belongs to a specific culture (Blacking, 1967). What is the culture to which the young child's *musicking* belongs? Is it a culture specific to children? Is it that of the kindergarten? Of the larger community?

The impact and influence of the culture of the adult community is clearly revealed in the playing of *Q*, a four-and-a-half-year-old girl attending an Arab kindergarten in Nazareth. She plays the *darabuka*, a Middle Eastern drum, the way it is played within the Arab culture: with two hands, holding it under her arm. The rhythm played (*massmoudi khabir*) is a conventional one familiar from popular music.

A specific culture develops within the kindergarten that results from the latter's cultural matrix: the beliefs, values and principles, especially regarding education, of the adult staff and those of the children and their families. The adult-initiated music activities are based on the educational and instructional context set up by the adults (Kalekin-Fishman, 1986; Bresler, 1998), while the self-initiated children's *musicking* belongs to a child-generated cultural subcontext, of the sort "...*which most often remain invisible to adults but are most! visible and salient to children.*" (Corsaro, in Graue and Walsh, 1998:12). This style of musical expression is called "childlore" by Campbell (1998). The choreography to '*Shir la-Shalom*' [Hebrew: A Song for Peace], a widely popular song composed by and for adults, as developed by three five-year-old girls at an urban Israeli kindergarten, is a clear

example of that specific style: the girls watched the choreography developed by their peers a year earlier, adopted its basic ideas, and continued developing it over a period of six weeks. Their movements relate variously to the meaning of the words, the structure of the music (e.g. the song's refrain), and sometimes to specific musical motifs.

Within a specific kindergarten's culture, each child expresses herself and some of them develop their own musical style. This style is unique to each child and is embedded in the kindergarten's culture, which is itself nested in that of the larger community. M, a 5-year-old girl in a Jewish non-urban kindergarten, used to spend long periods of time (no less than fifteen minutes, usually thirty minutes) playing in the music area. She would organize different instruments in a row, then develop different musical phrases by playing the instruments in a succession of varying sequences. The manner in which she played the various instruments (e.g. chime bars, agogo bells, bongos) did not resemble the manner in which they are played in their original culture, but did resemble the way these instruments are played by other children in that kindergarten. The musical phrases do not resemble any song or musical piece introduced by the kindergarten teacher. M is the only girl who spends long periods playing by herself, each time picking up from where she had left off the previous time.

The Social Aspect

The social aspect can be seen in both the peer interaction of children and in the adult-child interaction. Among the forms, peer interaction, solitary playing, parallel playing and cooperative playing are found in the self-initiated play of children in the music area. Littleton (1991) found out that solitary playing is more common in the music area than at the 'homemaking center'. Parallel music playing is intriguing to the adults on the staff: children play side by side, sometimes rather loudly, in the noisy kindergarten environment. The noise and other sounds do not seem to distract them from, or interfere with, their own doings. It is possible that children make use of filters that allow them to screen out all external stimuli not related to their playing when such playing is generated by their own initiative and interest (Gluschankof, 2003). When there is cooperative play, instances of peer learning are more frequent and occur mainly through imitation (Smithrin, 1994). The model is usually the child who is perceived as the one with more original *musicking* ideas. This child may not be one who has original ideas in other fields or is a group leader. It is interesting to note that children identify and value originality and choose to imitate it. An original idea that is imitated may serve as a model even over several years (Gluschankof, 2003).

In all of the episodes of self-initiated music play described above, no adult is mentioned - but no episode would have occurred without the tacit acceptance of the adults. The design of the music area is done by the kindergarten teacher, and the time to play there

is set by the same adult. Q., one of the kindergarten teachers who had studied music formally, set up a music area. Initially, Q. felt that “*the children were just making noise*” there, and she was not able to value the free exploration of the instruments as a worthy activity. It did not sound like music to her. Q. was applying adult standards to the children’s *musicking*. Free play was accepted in other areas, but in the music area she felt that the children needed the guidance of an adult. This changed over time as a result of Q.’s professional development and reflective practice, and she came to see her role at the music area as “*being there for their sake and not for mine.*” She listened to the music of the children and showed her approval, sometimes just with a smile, sometimes by joining in their playing, and sometimes by writing down the words they dictated to her (Gluschankof, 2001).

Another kindergarten teacher, E. who likes music but never studied it formally, accepted the suggestion of the music teacher and set up a music area. E. was fascinated by the various ways the children played there, and especially by the original ideas displayed by some children who were not particularly original in the kindergarten’s other areas and activities. She would happen to hear a child playing something new, and say to him: “*Wow! That’s new and interesting! I’ve never heard that sound played in such an innovative way!*” She would then share these discoveries with the music teacher. It was E. who first listened to N. singing that old song in the swing.

All the teachers at the kindergartens in this study reported on self-initiated children’s *musicking*, not only within the music area, but in other areas as well. Was this a direct consequence of the self-initiated activity at the designated music area, or that self-initiated *musicking* had been present previously and the adults had not been able to recognize it before they came to value what was occurring in the music area? This is an issue that requires further research.

It is clear that the enabling of self-initiated play in the designated music area provides an opportunity for a quality learning experience that goes beyond what is possible in solely adult-directed music activities. Here the adult’s role is supportive, fostering the self-initiated play that achieves an enhanced quality in the educational experience.

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