The Power of Musical Play: The Value of Play-Based, Child-Centered Curriculum in Early Childhood Music Education

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Abstract
Young children learn through play. This has long been acknowledged in the writings of educational theorists dating back as far as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel and is strongly supported by current early childhood research. Play is at the heart of contemporary early childhood pedagogy, and this has led to a strong belief in the importance of an emergent, child-centered approach to curriculum. Although music educators commonly recognize the importance of making music enjoyable, music education pedagogy for young children is often teacher led and structured toward specific behavioral outcomes. Research has shown, however, that child-centered musical play can be a powerful medium for young children's exploration of many musical elements and concepts.

Keywords
early childhood; play; emergent curriculum; singing

Playing With Music

“Let’s go driving. Buckle up, start the car, and off we go. Where shall we drive today?” These are my words during a weekly early childhood music session as I give a laminated “steering wheel” to each child in preparation for the next song. Missie, age 3½, grabs her steering wheel enthusiastically and begins to sing “driving, driving, a car, shopping, shopping, a car.” She is only approximating the lyrics, but her sol–mi (falling minor third) is as perfectly in tune as any Kodály music educator could hope for. Missie’s mum and I are amazed, and we both compliment her on her beautiful singing.

This moment is particularly special because Missie has recently been assessed as having a moderate developmental delay. The music group that Missie and her mum attend caters specifically to children with disabilities and their families. Missie and her mother have been enthusiastic participants in the group for 9 months, and the driving song, composed by me after observing the strong interest in cars shown by several children in the group, has been sung every session. Each week when I get out the steering wheels, the children cluster enthusiastically around me, then “drive” off around the room, often vocalizing the sounds of engines and car horns. The children have gradually become familiar with the song’s structure, which involves stopping for red traffic lights and moving off when the (imaginary) green light appears. However, this is the first time a child in the group has actually sung along with the song, so it is a momentous occasion.

I began to share this song with the children as a foundational musical experience based on their interest in transport, rather than with any assessable musical outcomes in my program. My aim was for the children to respond actively to the song in playful ways according to their individual interests and capabilities. Their responses have been varied but always enthusiastic. Some have stood still or been held by parents while exploring the steering wheel for many sessions. Some have hovered on the sidelines, watching the other children intently. Others have moved energetically around the room, making vehicle sounds, absorbed in their pretend play. Over the weeks and months, children have experimented with “driving” in different directions, following friends, driving alongside their mums, or moving just ahead of mum, pretending that she is a passenger.

As the song has become familiar, a range of musical responses have also become evident. Most of the children

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have adapted the speed of their movements to the tempo of the song and their styles of movement to its beat and melodic structure. And today, the song has actually been sung by a child, with accurate pitch and rhythm. In short, through responding playfully to this song, the children have shown over time their developing awareness and skills in relation to beat, tempo, form, and pitch. They have created their own musical learning, using play to build their own curriculum.

Although the above vignette describes music making in an early intervention center, similar musical experiences can be observed in any early childhood setting. In my work over many years as an early childhood music educator and researcher, I have become firmly convinced that play is central to young children’s engagement with songs and musical experiences and that through play children can construct their own musical learning.

**Play and Learning in Early Childhood**

In considering the value of play in early childhood music education, it is useful to briefly define play and to consider its role in young children’s general learning and development. Play has been described as being “easy to recognize but very hard to define” (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999, p. 15). Although there are many different definitions of play, most theorists and educators agree that play involves free choice, enjoyment, self-motivation, and a focus on process rather than on product (Brock, Dodds, Jarvis & Olusoga, 2009; Frost, Wortham & Reifel, 2008). Interestingly, many of the commonly identified characteristics of play also characterize creative behavior (Duffy, 2006; Moyles, 1995), and playfulness is generally acknowledged as being a feature of the creative process throughout life (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Duffy, 2006).

When children play, they commonly imitate the behavior of others and then use their own ideas to develop their play further. This is one of the reasons why play is seen as being central to children’s learning. Children’s play also shows the developing use of imagination—the ability to think about things, events, people, or ideas that are not necessarily physically present. Therefore, play is regarded as being important in relation to children’s cognitive development, particularly their flexible thinking and problem-solving skills (Johnson et al., 1999).

**Musical Play**

Music is regularly a part of young children’s play. Spontaneous singing, sound exploration, and dance are often evident. Increasingly, researchers are recognizing the value of this musical play in the development of children’s musicality (Gluschankof, 2002; Littleton, 1998; Morin, 2001; Smithrim, 1997). Observation of young children’s free musical play has shown considerable evidence of skill development through exploration. For example, preschool children often use their head voices in vocal play even though they may not use them when singing composed songs. Studies of children’s invented song have shown use of tonal centers and clear tonal, melodic, and rhythmic structures (Davidson, 1994; Moog, 1976; Whiteman, 2001). Studies of children’s free musical play have shown that children will be more deeply engaged over long periods of time and show greater persistence than is often evident in teacher-led group music making (Littleton, 1998; Smithrim, 1997).

Littleton (1998) has recognized that young children may engage in many different styles of musical play. These include “co-operative music play,” in which children are involved in sociable, interactive musical exploration; “functional music play,” in which children are exploring the sound-making potential of a range of materials and are experimenting with techniques; “constructive musical play,” in which functional exploration is extended into creative improvisation and composition; “dramatic music play,” in which children integrate music making with dramatic or pretend play; “kinesthetic music play,” in which children focus on movement or dance as a playful response to music; and “games with rules,” in which children engage in group-oriented, structured musical games such as singing games or clapping games (Littleton, 1998, as cited in Morin, 2001, p. 25). This latter form of musical play is often part of early childhood music education curricula. However, I would contend that early childhood music educators should endeavor to encourage all types of music play as the basis of an emergent, child-centered curriculum.

As music educators, our aim has traditionally been to work toward developing children’s musical skills. However, many early childhood educators argue that it is important in this period of children’s lives to consider music as an integrated part both of life and of the educational curriculum (Campbell, 2002). Research is increasingly showing that humans are innately musical beings (Trehub, 2001), and therefore it is crucial that all children are given a musically enriched environment to bring out the musicality with which they were born. During early childhood, music is not just about nurturing talent; it is about a holistic approach to exploring the world in musical ways.

When children play, they use multiple ways of expressing their ideas as they move seamlessly from one mode of expression to another—dancing, dramatizing, singing, exploring sound, drawing, and making things. When music educators adopt a playful approach to music, they are valuing children’s music making in its wider context. Increasingly, early childhood music researchers
and practitioners are viewing young children’s musical explorations as being distinct from those of adults, rather than being a primitive imitation of “real” music making (Barrett, 2003; Young, 2002/2003).

In arts education, there has long been a philosophical debate about striking a balance between creativity and skill development (Abbs, 2003) and, hence, about the role and timing of skill teaching. This is a particularly relevant issue in relation to music education. The approach commonly taken to early childhood education in the visual arts involves children being encouraged to explore materials, tools, and media for an extended period (Kolbe, 2007). Skill instruction is introduced when needed, in context, and in an individualized manner. Researchers and educators recognize that not only do children need time to explore in order to develop their understanding of the potential uses of tools and materials, but they also need time to develop their thinking through art making (Kolbe, 2007).

Music education, on the other hand, can sometimes be skill based and decontextualized in its focus right from the beginning; for example, this is the way in which beginner instrumental students are often taught to read the musical staff. Traditional pedagogical approaches such as that of Kodály, which use singing games within the child’s social context as a foundation for contextual musical literacy, attempt to use play within a teacher-led curriculum. However, given current understandings of the characteristics of children’s play and of the role of play in learning and development, music educators can now encourage children to play with music in a broader sense than just through structured games. In this way, music educators can develop child-centered music curricula that support the natural learning and development of young children and that integrate music more fully into the wider curriculum and into children’s lives.

Young children engage with music in a range of ways. They engage physically as they move, dance, dramatize, or play instruments. They engage vocally as they sing, chant, or make vocal sound effects and socially as they observe, imitate, lead, engage in dialogue, and take turns with others. They engage cognitively as they interpret lyrics and emotionally as they show and interpret feelings and respond to aesthetic aspects of music. They engage creatively as they invent or adapt lyrics, movements, or instrumental sound patterns. All these forms of engagement, which are also forms of play, can lead children to developing musical understandings and skills.

**Developing a Play-Based, Child-Centered Music Curriculum**

A play-based, child-centered music curriculum in early childhood settings will be built around the selection of materials based on educators’ observations of and interactions with children, other early childhood staff members, and families. Such a curriculum will include songs that relate to children’s interests and allow for a range of playful responses. It will allow children to make choices, adaptations, and extensions to songs. It will provide opportunities for freely chosen musical play—exploration of sound, composition, improvised movement, and dramatic play—as well as for guided group musical experiences (Andress, 1998). A play-based, child-centered music curriculum may also be enhanced by the use of technology, such as audio and video recording, so that children have opportunities to revisit their musical explorations.

The voices of children are at the heart of a child-centered curriculum. We need to listen to children and converse with them so that their ideas and interests can guide our selection of songs, instruments, recordings, and other music-making resources. Observation is also an important tool in developing a child-centered music curriculum. Our observations should focus on both musical behaviors and play behaviors so that we note the children’s interests, comments, and social interactions. It can also be valuable to share our observations with other educators in the setting and to seek out their observations and insights. Talking to parents is a valuable way to learn more about children. By all these means of information gathering, we can build a deep understanding of the children we teach. In partnership with families and other early childhood practitioners, we can help to make music an integral part of the children’s lives.

Song selection is one aspect of a child-centered music curriculum. Songs that relate to children’s interests in the classroom can be a powerful educational tool, giving us information about what children care about, what they already know, and what they would like to know. If a song cannot be found for a particular topic of interest, a new one can always be created. Educators can work with children to create new lyrics to a favorite traditional melody or to compose a new melody as well.

A group of children in a day care center with which I worked pursued a passionate interest in whales over many months. They read, researched, drew, painted, and eventually made a two-dimensional model of a blue whale, the biggest of all whales, in their playground, using hundreds of clear plastic milk bottles filled with blue water. To add a musical dimension to their interest, I composed a whale song, using a call-and-response format and focusing mainly on the size of whales, an aspect that especially fascinated the children. Over time, I worked with a small group to create new verses, in which they contributed their knowledge about how whales eat, move, make sounds, and give birth. A few of the older children showed strong awareness of rhyme,
meter, and rhythm in the way they approached developing lyrics. Their level of analytical understanding of song structure amazed me. The children felt a strong sense of ownership of this song, and some would point out which ideas they had contributed to the lyrics. The line “bigger than a pirate ship and bigger than a slippery dip” was a source of particular pride to its lyricist! This song was sung on a daily basis for many months, and almost 2 years later has become firmly embedded in the center’s song culture.

In a child-centered music curriculum, children may be empowered to select and design musical materials such as illustrated song cards or books. They can decide which songs they would like on these cards, and they can illustrate them or take photos to go with their favorite songs. The children’s adaptations or extensions of lyrics can also be recorded on the song cards.

Learning stories (Carr, 2001) are often part of a play-based, child-centered curriculum in early childhood. Learning stories about songs and musical explorations can be made using digital video and/or audio recording, as well as written text, so that children can revisit, reflect on, and extend their learning. These learning stories describe and analyze learning in a holistic way so that the children’s musical development is recorded as part of their general educational development. This can strengthen recognition of music’s central role in early childhood curriculum. Relevant extracts from learning stories can be incorporated into the song cards or books described above.

The design and provisioning of music interest areas or learning centers can be done in consultation with children. Being involved in making decisions about musical materials, as well as about placement, noise, safety, and aesthetic issues, allows children to think about their musical interests and encourages them to consider logistical and social aspects of their learning environment. This involvement can also serve to highlight the integral place of music in the broader curriculum. Empowering children in planning processes can have implications for many aspects of children’s development.

Concluding Thoughts

In adopting a play-based, child-centered approach to early childhood music education, we may not necessarily change the fundamental aspects of our program, but we will change the way we approach them with children. We will still be singing, moving, and exploring sound. We will still be providing rich resources for children so that they experience a variety of musical elements and genres. The children will still be developing awareness and skills in singing and playing instruments. However, our pathways may be different in that we will structure our repertoire and music experiences in collaboration with the children according to our interactions with them and our observations of their responses. Hence, these pathways may also vary for each child. A play-based, child-centered early childhood music curriculum can nurture the innate musicality of young children so that they become and remain music makers throughout their lives.

References

