

'You are my sunshine my only sunshine': current music activities in kindergarten classrooms in Queensland, Australia

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Abstract

Music in early years classrooms is an important learning area for young children. Young children need access to hear different genres of music, learn a variety of repertoire, engage in composing and play musical instruments. With the changing reform agenda in early childhood education however, little is known about the way music is positioned in the kindergarten classrooms. Little is known if music is still considered an important foundation for children's learning. This study provides a snapshot of music activities in two kindergartens in Queensland, Australia. At each of the case sites, music plays an important role in helping the children learn. Findings reveal that music is seen as a foundation for many of the daily routines and an important element of inquiry based-learning in the classroom. The kindergarten teachers are essential in developing the domain-intrinsic knowledge of the children. Findings show the importance of the teacher in helping children learn music in the early years.

Key words: early childhood, kindergarten, knowledge

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Introduction

Music is an important component of early years learning programs. Advocates for arts education have continuously argued the importance of the arts in the early childhood classroom (see Eisner, 2002). The arts offer very young children significant ways of knowing about themselves, others and the world (Wright, 2003). By hearing, playing and composing, children start to develop domain-intrinsic knowledge about music. With recent early years reform throughout Queensland and Australia however, little is known about the way music is positioned with the introduction of the *Queensland Kindergarten Learning Guideline* (Queensland Government, 2010) and the *Early Years Learning Framework* (Council of Australian Governments, 2009) in kindergarten

classrooms. While arts (which includes music) are an important learning area of young children and is mentioned in the *Early Years Learning Framework* (2009), literacy and numeracy are the only subjects mentioned in the *Queensland Kindergarten Learning Guideline* (2010).

This study provides a snapshot of music in two kindergartens in Queensland, Australia. Over the space of a week, observations were conducted in two kindergartens to investigate the amount and types of music activities occurring. Findings reveal that both kindergartens embedded a variety of music-making experiences for children throughout the week. Both kindergarten teachers were also interested in building the domain-intrinsic knowledge for music of the young children. Findings show the importance of the teacher in helping children learn music.

Literature

Music is seen as a natural part of children's lives and activities. Young children enjoy singing, moving, dancing, creating their own compositions and engaging with musical instruments. Music is connected to play, with musical activities laying the foundation for learning (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2006).

Music nurturing is important during the early years. The musical nurturing a child receives during the early years can have a marked impact on later success and level of involvement (Feierabend, 1990) and adult attitudes towards music (Temmerman, 1995).

Much research has explored the social issues on learning in music from different theoretical viewpoints. Within this viewpoint distinctions are made between 'vertical interaction' (between children/pupils and adult/teacher) and 'horizontal interaction' (among peers) (Olsson, 2007). One social theme centres on children as active participants in their learning in collaboration with adults and other children

(Holgersen, 2002). The concept of collaborative learning highlights the key impacts that peer groups, family, teachers and other children have upon a child's interest in and knowledge of music. Studies have also highlighted the importance of parental support in children's playing and musical activities (Davidson et al., 1996; Davidson, Howe & Sloboda 1997; Gembris & Davidson, 2002; McPherson, 2005; O'Neill, 2002a, 2002b; Temmerman, 2005).

The role of the early years teacher is to enhance the development of domain-intrinsic knowledge in young children (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2009). Teachers often introduce such tools through the terminology in which they phrase their questions to children (see Pramling & Wallerstedt, 2009). According to Pramling Samuelsson et al. (2009, p. 133) "these distinctions and concepts become the tools through which children develop their aesthetic perception".

Encouraging musical creativity is another important role of the early childhood teacher. Barrett (2006) has explored the area of music creativity in early childhood, exploring ways that children compose and record their compositions with invented notation. She suggests that it is important that "children's musical agency as song makers and the unique processes and practice of children's communities of musical practice are valued, celebrated and fostered in early childhood settings (Barrett, 2006, p. 218).

In recent years, there has been a considerable amount of research related to children's learning to play a musical instrument. Wright (1991) suggested that early childhood centres should have a wide variety of music instruments, including piano, guitar, banjo, violins and trumpet, and a range of multicultural percussion instruments. Wright (1991) highlighted that these instruments in a context of exploration and enjoyment for a 'child-centred approach' and suggested that children explore sound in a variety of ways including; (1) manipulating objects; (2) Imitating sounds, discriminating between sounds; (3) Classifying sounds; (4) Sequencing sounds; (5) improvising with instruments and (6) organizing sounds to communicate ideas and feelings (Wright, 1991).

The role of the early childhood teacher also extends to advising parents about suitable curricula activities for music. Olson and Hyson (2005, p. 67) stated "we should do a better job communicating our role as reliable credible sources of information and support". Early years teachers have the capacity to build strong links between school and home for the child's musical environment.

Early Years Reform in Australia

In recent years Australia has seen a trend towards an increased use of formal early childhood education and care settings. With so many children attending early childhood services, it is

important that there are consistent standards of quality. Federal and state/territory governments have responded with reform agendas designed to improve the quality of early childhood education and care. The agreed reform covers children from birth to eight years and aims to improve the health, safety, early learning and wellbeing of all children and better support disadvantaged children to reduce inequalities (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011).

Early childhood education and care has been a concern of many countries in recent times (OECD, 2006). Over the past decade and a half, a rapid growth in early childhood education and care provisions has occurred in Australia, with a higher level of Commonwealth Government commitment given after 2007 (Australian Government, 2009). A key initiative was the endorsement of the National Early Childhood Investment Strategy- Investing in the Early Years in 2009 by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). The strategy is “a collaborative effort between the Commonwealth and the state and territory governments to ensure that by 2020 all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation” (COAG, 2009). The Strategy proposed six priority areas for reform to be further developed for COAG in 2010, recognising the different starting points of states and territories and as resources allow (DEEWR, 2011):

- Strengthen universal maternal, child and family health services
- Support for vulnerable children
- Engaging parents and the community in understanding the importance of ECD
- Improve early childhood infrastructure
- Strengthen the workforce across ECD and family support services, and
- Build better information and a solid evidence base.

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) is part of the Council of Australian Government’s (COAG) reform agenda for early childhood education and care and is a key component of the Australian Government’s National Quality Framework for early childhood education and care. It underpins universal access to early childhood education and will be incorporated in the National Quality Standard. Universal access means all children.

The Early Years Learning Framework describes the principles, practice and outcomes essential to support and enhance young children’s learning from birth to five years of age. The Framework has a strong emphasis on play-based learning as the best vehicle for children’s learning and development. The Framework also recognizes the importance of communication and language and social and emotional development.

In October, 2008, the Queensland Government announced the plan *Toward Q2 Tomorrow’s Queensland: Delivering World Class Education- Starting Early* to ensure all Queensland children have access to a kindergarten program by 2014. This is part of the Council of Australian Governments agreement for universal access for all children to quality early childhood education and care prior to formal schooling. In Queensland this initiative includes the creation of an extra 240 kindergarten services, with 108 new services expected to open in 2012. The kindergarten services are scheduled to open in areas of need to cater for kindy-age children not currently accessing centre-based early childhood education and care services (around 12,000 children) (Queensland Government, 2008).

Focus on Literacy and Numeracy

In Queensland, there has been a strong focus on literacy and numeracy following the introduction of the National Assessment Plan for Literacy and Numeracy in 2008 and the Masters Report (2008) on ways to improve literacy and numeracy in Queensland schools. In the *Queensland Kindergarten Guideline* (2010) for children aged

3.5 years attending kindergartens, literacy and numeracy are the only subject areas given special mention for children's learning. Other subjects are positioned as a means for increasing children's awareness about the world but also a form of improving literacy and numeracy.

In Queensland, the early years of formal schooling are known as preparatory year, year one, year two and year three. During this time for literacy and numeracy children are to reach the standards presented in the *Year 1 Literacy and Numeracy Checkpoints Assessments*, *The Prep-Year 3 Literacy and Numeracy Indicators* and the *Essential Learnings and Standards for English and Maths*. For music there is only one document, *Essential Learnings and Standards for the Arts*. Since there is a greater focus on literacy and numeracy, little is known about current music practices in kindergarten settings in the year prior to formal schooling.

Focus of Study

This study focuses on the music practice that occurs in two kindergartens over a period of a day. It is designed to document and analyse current music activities (if any) that occur following the reforms in early years. The findings are focused on identifying examples of developing domain-intrinsic knowledge for music with young children in kindergartens.

Method

The theoretical framework for this study is developmental pedagogy (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson 2007, 2008) with the following specific features: meta-cognitive dialogues, learning act vs. learning object, discernment and variation. The act of learning (i.e., *how* children learn) does not stand in a simple relation to how children experience or perceive an object (i.e., *what* children learn). According to Pramling Samuelsson et al. (2009, p. 124) "to learn means to change from one way

of experiencing something to another way of experiencing the same thing". *Meta-cognitive dialogue* is a tool that the teacher can use to make children aware of something particular. In order to be able to focus on an object of learning, something specific needs to be *discerned* (Gibson & Gibson 1955) from something else. A necessary condition for discernment is *variation* (Marton, Runesson, & Tsui, 2004). If children are supposed to learn to move in relation to music, or follow the pulse of the music, pulse must be experienced *as pulse* by the children (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2009).

The developmental pedagogical approach has proven to be powerful in contributing to developing children's understanding of different aspects of their surrounding world. It has been applied to children's learning in different domains such as literacy, numeracy, nature and culture. In 2009, Pramling Samuelsson et al. applied the approach to the arts. Since then, few studies have used this approach. At a general level, the role of the teacher is to create opportunities, situations, tasks, etc. that challenge children's ways of experiencing or making sense of something (Pramling 1994; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2007). In this study developmental pedagogy will be used as a tool to analyse teacher practice.

Extensive data was collected in the form of observations and field notes over the period of a week in each kindergarten. Data was analysed trying to find the three specific features of developmental pedagogy; (1) meta-cognitive dialogues, (2) learning act vs. learning object, and (3) discernment and variation.

Findings

Representing music and teachers talk

Meta-cognitive dialogues are all about the communication and interaction the teacher and the children get involved in. In the observed kindergartens, it was assessing the meta-talk that

took place between the children and teacher in music. The meta-talk was an organic process and grew out of the children's interests. Every day the kindergarten teachers would provide examples of their meta-cognitive dialogues linked to the teaching of domain-intrinsic knowledge. This talk was either with individual children or in-group situations, such as mat time when all children were seated on the floor.

An example is given below, highlighting the way the teacher uses questioning to develop domain-intrinsic knowledge about music with the children.

Example 1 takes place during mat time. All the children are sitting around the mat facing the teacher. The teacher has already started the focused music time by asking the children to practice their song for tonight's Father's day concert. The children are singing 'You are my Sunshine'. At the point of the climax in the song the words are changed to "You never know Dad, how much I love you, so please don't take my sunshine away". The teacher asks groups of children to stand and sing the song before the entire class stand to sing the song. After the song finishes, the focused episode begins to extend the children's domain-intrinsic knowledge.

Sam (aged 3) raises his hand.

Sam: Miss K, I could feel my heart beat when singing.

Miss K: Sam what did it feel like?

Sam: It came from here (points to chest with thumb) and it went boom, boom boom.

Miss K: So it went boom, boom boom and kept going?

Sam: Yep it went boom!

Other children touch their chests and raise their hands.

Kelly: I feel it too Miss K. Your heart keeps you alive.

Miss K: Your heart does keep you alive.

Can everyone find their heart beat? (Miss K demonstrates and the children try and find their own heart beat).

Miss K: Do you think songs can have heart beats?

Max: Yeah because they got to start alive.

Miss K: And how can we feel the heart beat of the song?

Sam: Boom, boom, boom

Miss K: Can you show the class Sam?

Sam starts up patting his chest and saying 'boom, boom, boom'. The teacher takes over from Sam's directions and initiates the beat in the class.

Miss K: I'll sing the song by myself and you tell me if you can feel the heart beat of the song.

Miss K sings 'You are my sunshine' and the children continue to pat their chest and say 'boom, boom, boom'.

Miss K: What did you feel?

Kelly: I felt the song.

Bill: Me too.

Tom: Me three. I felt the heart beat of the song.

Miss K: So why did this song have a heart beat?

Max: To keep it living so it didn't die.

Sam: All songs live so they must have a beat.

In this example we can see the way the teacher asks questions to increase the young children's knowledge about the beat of the music. Building on from Sam's inquiry, the teacher was able to use the moment to teach all the children about their own heart beat and link that understanding to the beat of the music.

We can start to see the importance of the teacher in helping children develop their domain-intrinsic knowledge about music. This teacher's skill, in part, consists of being able to get children to express themselves and then to take the child's perspective, that is, to understand the child's sense-making (Doverborg & Pramling Samuelsson, 2000). Taking children's perspectives, getting them to express themselves and interpreting what they say are the dimensions of communication that are necessary for conducting metacognitive dialogues (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2009). In this example we can see the teacher working beside the children and interpreting what they are saying. The teacher with her questions of 'Do you think songs have heart beats?' and 'Can we feel the heart beat of the song?' helps guide the children's exploration as they explore the concepts of heart beats.

Variation with music

Both teachers used different techniques of variation with music to help the children by developing an awareness of various contrasting musical features. For example, tempo (fast-slow), pitch (high-low) and timbre (wood wind and violin instrument).

One example below shows the kindergarten teacher using tempo (fast-slow) for the transition song to morning tea. The children sang the song together ('Down by the station early in the morning') the first time before the teacher took out a spinner that read fast, normal and slow.

Miss P: What speed do you think we were singing at?

Thomas: Usual speed.

Miss P: Was it fast or slow?

Caitlin: No normal speed. It wasn't fast or slow.

Miss P: How many friends would you like in your train Caitlin?

Caitlin: Five friends.

Miss P taps five children on the head who line up behind Caitlin as the train arms

Miss P: And what speed will your train go today?

Caitlin taps the spinner and it lands on 'fast'.

Caitlin: Fast! We gotta go fast with the train song.

Miss P: But what is fast?

Caitlin: You got to sing quicker then you do. Like this.

Caitlin models the first line.

Miss P: So is all of Caitlin's train ready to go fast? (the children nod)

Miss P (sings): Ready off we go.. Down by the station early in the morning (with increased tempo)

The children move off to morning tea keeping in time with the fast speed of the music. The activity continues (with changes in the number of children in the train and the speed of the train) until all children are outside having their morning tea.

In this episode we can see the kindergarten teacher using variation to help children understand the different tempos in the song. The

kindergarten teacher had a visual prompt to help the children select what speed the train should go. She sang the song at the start and asked the children to establish what the normal speed of the song was. Train drivers were able to select their speed for the day's transition song to morning tea. The children would sing the variation in tempo and also demonstrate it with their movement as they modeled a train.

The Act and Object of Learning in Music

In developmental pedagogical theory, "to learn means to change from one way of experiencing something to another way of experiencing the same thing" (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2009). The object of learning is the understanding that teachers want to develop in children. The kindergarten teachers would often make it known to the parents and myself what the objects of learning were for the day (the kindergarten teachers called these knew knowledge and skills). In regard to music, the objects of learning moved beyond simple understanding of 'this is music' to understanding basic features about the music. Kindergarten teachers were very clear about their intentions for music in their classrooms. As one kindergarten teacher commented:

I want children to identify, analyse and respond to musical patterns, tones, colours, structures and expressive elements over the semester. We want them to develop skills to understand to express and communicate ideas and feelings by inventing music.

The kindergarten teachers used a variety of music activities throughout the week to achieve these outcomes. This included focused teaching segments, free musical play for the children (inventing songs and playing with musical instruments), routines, transitions, composing and also listening to parents and community members who volunteered to play musical

instruments in the classroom. The act and object of learning music featured throughout the daily planning with the children.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has shown that both kindergarten teachers see music learning as important for young children even after the significant focus on literacy and numeracy in the early years. At both of the kindergartens, music formed much of the activities throughout the day.

Both kindergarten teachers felt it was important that they take the time to teach the skills associated with music (known as domain-intrinsic knowledge) as they would with other learning areas such as literacy and numeracy that are noted in the *Kindergarten Learning Guideline* (Queensland Government, 2010). The skilled teachers did this through their use of meta-talk with the children, providing variation for learning and also acknowledging differences between the act and object of learning music. They knew how to ask questions and prompt the children in their thinking. The questions encouraged the children to develop and clarify their thinking about music.

Without the teachers' involvement in children's music learning, young children cannot be challenged in their understanding about music. The role of the kindergarten teacher is to challenge the young child in order to clarify and develop thought further. In the two examples above, children were challenged to think about the beat of the music and tempo variation.

It is also important for kindergarten teachers to have a working awareness of powerful tools to help support the learning of young children in each of the subject areas. This study identified elements from developmental pedagogy that enabled the kindergarten teachers to extend the children's understanding. All early years teachers need an in-depth knowledge of suitable pedagogy for children.

This study has shown that music played an important foundation in both of the

kindergartens. The young children developed their understanding about music by being challenged by the teacher. More research is needed into ways to support early years teachers to develop the skills necessary to support and develop children's understanding about music. Greater understanding is also needed as to why music is given equal footing in a kindergarten classroom but not in primary school classrooms across Australia. Why it is that the kindergarten teacher has the developed knowledge about how to teach music while many primary teachers do not? What happens to children's learning if their domain-intrinsic knowledge for music is not extended in the primary school classroom? What happens to the way children learn as the move from a meta-talk approach with the teacher to a formalized teaching style in music? While there is a strong awareness that music is important for young children and an integral part of life in a culture, more research is necessary into exploring the ways that teachers can develop musical knowledge and ideas for children.

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