

# Maintaining Playground Relationships Through Music During a Pandemic: An Action Research Inquiry

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic's restrictions for schools and playgrounds threatened children's social and emotional wellbeing. In response, Grade 4/5 students created music-based activities through action research to sustain playground interactions. This study explored the crucial yet fragile playground relationships and the children's determination to maintain them. Findings indicate that the student-initiated projects were not only a medium for self-expression and maintaining friendships, but also served as an important tool for reinforcing the inherent social fabric of the playground setting. Notably, this study underscores the significance of collaborative learning, interpersonal skill development, and intrinsic motivation in fostering social skills and enhancing self-confidence.

## Introduction

As students progress through elementary school, they engage in diverse and meaningful interactions. Each year brings new learning experiences with specific teachers and classmates, weaving a blend of new and old connections. Relationships in the classroom profoundly impact learning, yet those formed during unstructured times, like recess, are equally important (Pellegrini, 2006; Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000).<sup>1</sup> A culture exists on school playgrounds, just as it does in the classroom. Here, children develop social skills and foster relationships that contribute significantly to collaborative socialization, learning conflict management, and nurturing intimacy and commitment (Blatchford et al., 2003). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, interactions beyond the classroom were restricted, which marginalized informal learning opportunities. With unstructured time limited to peers from the same class, issues arose regarding how students would maintain their playground relationships.

The words of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, "he who sings in grief, procures relief," (1907, p. 169), resonate with the essence of elementary school music education in these challenging times. The pandemic significantly altered the landscape of music-making for both students and educators. Singing was only permitted with adequate ventilation, spacing, and masks, while musical instruments necessitated rigorous sanitization. Such restrictions prompted many music educators, myself included, to explore alternative learning approaches, allocating more time to creative exploration with music-making materials. The effects of these changes rippled beyond the music classroom, evident in the discernible decline of my students' socioemotional wellbeing, which could be indirectly linked to limitations on classroom interactions and adjusted playground regulations.

In response to these challenges, a class of Grade 4/5 students found their voice. They were driven to design music-based activities that reflected the dynamics of the playground, with the objective of sustaining and reviving peer connections. Through a mixed methodological framework of autoethnography and action research, this study aims to uncover how music nurtured playground relationships despite the challenges imposed by the pandemic. The study explores how music education can support peer relations under restrictive measures by encouraging students to explore creative possibilities with various materials, instruments, and cultural constructs in a redesigned music classroom. It also aims to illuminate how these constraints affect aspects of children's peer relations—positivity, openness, and shared experiences—as well as their socioemotional health and self-identity. Moreover, it seeks to examine the capacity of children to maintain these relations during distressing times.

## Relevant Literature

People have a profound need to belong, and forming meaningful connections with others facilitates a sense of relatedness, connectedness, and belonging (Baumeister & Robson, 2021). In middle childhood (6 to 12 years old), interpersonal relationships with peers become increasingly important for development, providing opportunities for children to engage in ways that differ from interactions with adults (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Hartup, 1983). During this period, time spent socially with peers expands, tightly knit cliques develop, and aspects of peer relations become more stable (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). These peer relations also play a role in developing essential interaction skills, such as communication, empathy, and conflict resolution (Hartup, 1983).

Close relationships within the school environment, particularly friendships, serve as crucial developmental contexts for students (Ladd, 1990). These connections offer substantial social support, opportunities for social interactions, and are linked to mental wellbeing (Baumeister & Robson, 2021), reduced social loneliness (Binder et al., 2012), and enhanced academic performance (Ladd, 1990; Rubin et al., 2011; Tepordei et al., 2023). In the current inquiry, students' close relationships extend beyond formal education to include the freedom of choice and shared experiences on the playground. Here, they actively choose which peers to engage with and what activities to pursue, underscoring the significance of autonomy and interpersonal connections in shaping their social dynamics and wellbeing.

Furthermore, the relationships of children in the classroom and on the playground exhibit distinct rules and dynamics that influence both learning and social development (Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000; Stanton-Chapman & Schmidt, 2021). During recess, students play and collaboratively establish rules for their interactions. These rules form the basis for broader patterns of peer interaction, which can extend into adulthood (Pellegrini, 2006). This aligns with Maxwell's (1990) assertion that "The peer group provides arguably the most efficient and highly motivating context for the learning and development of social skills which will ultimately enable children to live effectively as a member of adult society" (p. 171). Unfortunately, challenges in meeting outside of schools have made the school playground a vital space for children to initiate and foster friendships (Blatchford & Baines, 2006). Notably, a significant portion of 8- to 10-year-olds have never played with friends without adult supervision (Blatchford & Baines, 2010), and nearly a third of 8- to 15-year-olds seldom meet friends beyond school settings (Blatchford et al., 2003).

Given the playground's critical role in friendship and social skill development, understanding how children maintain these relationships during unsettling times holds considerable value.

Positive peer relations, characterized by mutual respect, support, and cooperation (Buhs & Ladd, 2001), play a pivotal role in fostering social and emotional development, nurturing a sense of belonging, acceptance, and emotional wellbeing (Wentzel et al., 2012). These relationships offer invaluable opportunities for children to develop essential social skills such as communication, empathy, and conflict resolution, which are vital for navigating social interactions throughout their lives (Ladd, 1990; Tepordei et al., 2023). Recognizing the importance of positive peer relations in the current study is crucial. Not only do these relationships enhance students' social development, but they also positively impact their school experience, leading to increased academic engagement, motivation, and achievement (Wentzel, 2009). Furthermore, positive peer relations act as a protective shield against various psychosocial challenges such as loneliness, social exclusion, and bullying (Buhs & Ladd, 2001). Thus, fostering positive peer relations in both classroom and playground environments can be necessary for promoting students' overall wellbeing and academic success.

While relationships are important for wellbeing and academic success, challenges can arise that require maintenance behaviors. Maintenance behaviors are proactive actions aimed at resolving challenges and nurturing loyalty within relationships (Oswald & Clark, 2006). These behaviors are integral for children to effectively problem-solve, and play a fundamental role in sustaining and strengthening interpersonal connections. They significantly enhance psychological wellbeing and are associated with overall happiness (Demir et al., 2011). Given the disruptive effects of the pandemic on students' social connections, prioritizing maintenance behaviors becomes essential for preserving and nurturing these connections within the current inquiry. Without adequate support for maintenance behaviors, relationships may be at risk of breaking down, potentially leading to negative impacts on students' social and emotional wellbeing. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate how students develop and use maintenance behaviors, particularly within the creative context of music, to strengthen their social connections and enhance their resilience in the face of adversity.

## Storying Action Research

Action research, a collaborative and democratic approach, is utilized to support inquiries that question unjust systems and conventions. In the current inquiry, where restrictions limit students' ability to play with friends on the playground, the children themselves are integral participants and active researchers, seeking ways to connect with their peers. In this cyclical process of planning, development, and reflection, students actively contribute to the research partnership instead of merely being subjects, while I, their music teacher, provide supportive assistance. Action research guides research in music education, addressing topics such as student-centered learning (Mackworth-Young, 1990), positive learning spaces (Black, 1989), self-expression (Miller, 2004), and creative music pedagogies (Auh, 2005; Laidlaw, 2022).

Autoethnography, as a methodological approach, entails a nuanced exploration of personal experiences to unveil deeper understandings of cultural dynamics. Autoethnographers embark on a reflective journey,

weaving individual narratives with broader socio-cultural contexts, thus facilitating profound insights at the intersection of personal and societal realms. Through this approach, I delve into various facets of my experiences, understanding, and interpretations of my students' interactions, particularly their efforts to sustain connections during a pandemic. Concurrently, in action research inquiries, participants gather empirical evidence to capture unfolding situations, aiming to provide detailed descriptions and interpret events as they occur (McNiff, 2013). In this regard, I employ a contemporary autoethnographic storytelling approach to enable the emergence of creative non-fictional vignettes that depict the unfolding action research inquiry (Ellis, 2004).

While the autoethnographic vignettes reflect my experiences as the teacher, it is important to recognize that my students' experiences are also valuable and important. Thus, as I write and (re)write my experiences, the vignettes are composed in active interplay and dialogue with the students. To maintain anonymity, all identifying characteristics of children have been removed, and pseudonyms have been used in place of actual student names, adhering to the common practice in autoethnography.<sup>2</sup> While autoethnographic research has been widely used to investigate and portray school experiences (i.e., Yanko, 2019; Yanko & Gouzouasis, 2020; Yanko & Yap, 2020), a void exists in the context of music education. However, a mixed-method approach of autoethnography and action research has been successfully employed in general education research (i.e., Filipovic, 2019; Vang et al., 2022), highlighting its applicability to the current study.

This action research inquiry centers on a Grade 4/5 class of 28 students within a suburban public school. Spanning four months, the study begins with three objectives: to weave creativity into the curriculum, navigate the new realities posed by the pandemic, and cultivate new social dynamics based on playground interactions. This inquiry unfolds in an elementary school's music atelier, a learning space inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach and enriched by maker-movement principles, where students autonomously shape their learning paths through exploratory music making (Yanko & Gouzouasis, 2020). Here, the teacher's role as a facilitator empowers students to take ownership of their learning, fostering agency and character development through the negotiation and harmonization of ideas.

Within the elementary school music atelier, various instruments, everyday objects, and natural materials blend effortlessly, enriching students' understanding and creativity. As the action research inquiry progresses, a collection of projects, notes, and dialogues emerge, forming the foundation for three contemporary autoethnographic vignettes. These vignettes provide empirical insights into students' musical engagements and interactions, narrating the inquiry's dynamic progression and capturing the development of their projects, peer feedback, and reflective discussions. This vivid depiction celebrates the students' spirited exploration and innovative approaches to maintaining and fostering new relationships.

## **Vignette One: Inventing Playground-Inspired Activities Through Music**

Over the past month, the Grade 4/5 students have drafted action plans, tested their projects, and compiled instructions for others to discover and enjoy. The clink and clatter of cardboard being cut fills the room, accompanied by the scent of hot glue wafting in the air. I tidy up scattered cardboard remnants and muse over the transformation of my music classroom into a vibrant, student-centered space, echoing the principles of the action research inquiry. While setting aside a stack of cardboard, my ears pick up an animated discussion, prompting me to inquire about their progress.

“How is your musical marble run coming along?” I ask.

The sound of tinkering stops and Stan replies, “We’re strengthening it because parts keep breaking off.”

“Did you receive any feedback on the post-it notes from your playground friends?” I question, glancing at the colorful array of notes like a mosaic of input.

“Yeah, Brandon’s drawing shows an arrow pointing at a broken part,” Stan indicates a yellow post-it note, “and Jake wrote about a place where marbles get stuck. Fixing both of these is next on our to-do list.”

Mark interjects, “Oh! A kid named Simon also suggested placing a basket at the end so we don’t have to chase marbles across the room. That was clever.”

I nod in acknowledgment, leaving them to their improvements and meander to the rhythmic thump-thump-thump of a game in full swing.

“How is your game coming along?”

Max beams, “Take a pump of sanitizer, then grab a Boomwhacker tube to join in.”

I comply. The cool, lemony gel evaporates from my hands and I grasp the large, smooth, orange Boomwhacker.

He commands, “Simon says du-de du,” and I strike the wooden stump, the impact resonating with the chosen notes back at me.

“Simon says du-da-di, du-da-di, du, du,” his voice keeping tempo, as I follow suit.

I whack the correct answer again.

“Du, du, du, du,” he tests.

Caught, I tap out the rhythm, the wood sounding a staccato reminder of my eagerness.

“Simon didn’t say that,” Max grins. “You’ve got to listen for his name—how do you like our game?”

“I like the idea of playing the game Simon Says. It ties in nicely with recess. Did any of your playground friends leave feedback?”

“We were hoping for some notes, but no one left us anything.”

“How does that make you feel?”

“A bit sad because we don’t know if anyone likes it, or what to do to make it better.”

“You should come up with instructions and leave a stack of post-it notes and pencils for comments,” I suggest.

I leave the boys and approach Suzie, engrossed in her game of toss, the air filled with the swish of objects in flight.

“How is the game shaping up?”

“Not bad. I am changing it to make it harder for my friends. They said it was too easy. You know how we play different notes at the same time when we play xylophone music—like how I play music on the glockenspiel and the bass xylophones play different notes? Well, this game is like that.”

“That’s exciting. How does the xylophone music fit in?”

“There are no xylophones. It’s just the idea behind that type of teamwork.”

“Aren’t there games that you play at recess that are like that as well, games that involve teamwork?”

“So many games, and this brings a bit of that to life. You see, the game is to be played at the same time by two people, playing beats with the egg shaker and jingle bells,” she explains and points to the bottom row of cards. “I chose the egg shaker because it has a nice, soft sound that keeps on going. Like in a pandemic when times get hard, you just keep on going. I also picked the jingle bells because COVID started in December. That part has fewer notes in it because if it’s too busy, you won’t hear the egg shake at the same time. Do you want to try it together?”

We test out the game. Then, I head to some boys huddled around an iPad.

“How is your soundscape composition progressing?”

Marco presses play, and the familiar sounds of the pandemic echo—sanitizer squirts, muffled voices through masks, the schhhh of handwashing. Abruptly, the school bell rings, cutting off Marco mid-sentence. The class hustles to clean up and head outside to their self-contained recess area.



Fig. 1 Musical marble run.

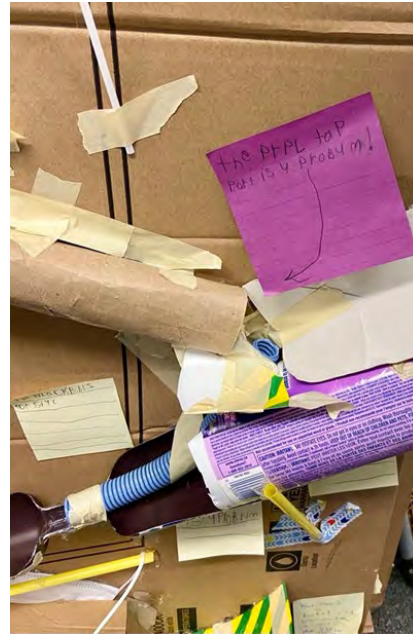


Fig. 2: Feedback from playground friends illustrating issues with a joint in the marble run.

## Vignette Two: Let's Play

As students persist in creating songs, games, and activities, the ongoing action research inquiry reveals itself through iterative cycles of planning, formulating, reflecting, and evaluating. This process not only enhances their creations but also nurtures evolving playground relationships, underscoring the participatory nature of action research.

Today, a class of Grade 6 students eagerly test out the students' projects. I meander around the room, observing interactions and reading feedback. As I sift through post-it notes, a detailed one at the musical marble run catches my eye, bursting with suggestions to expand the project.

Jason joins me, his expression clouding as he discards one of the notes. "This one says it sucks. Kids shouldn't write mean things like that," he frowns, the paper crinkling in his grip. "Stan and his friends have put a lot of work into their project and would feel sad if they read that."

Prompted by this, I lead a class discussion about the music atelier as a safe space for exploration and creativity. After, the students resume playing and I join a group listening to the soundscape compositions. I'm greeted by the vibrant energy of the music as I join them huddled around the speakers.

Maya shares, "The first song has a great beat with fun energy. That has to be Emily's touch 'cuz the notes leap through the air and makes me think of her dancing."

"How can you tell?" I inquire.

"It's so Emily. The way the rhythm hops and skips—it's her for sure. I'll leave a note to ask if she crafted that part."

Sophie adds, "The other song has a good beat as well, but it's too loud. I can barely hear the mixture of sounds."

Jasmine chimes in, “Yeah, but the loud siren part sounds cool. It makes me think of an ambulance coming to save them.”

I leave the group and head over to Michael sitting at a piano.

“How is the piano song?” I prod.

He answers, “I’ve mastered the right-hand notes for Demon Slayer.”

“And how does it sound?” I encourage.

He beams with a mix of pride and challenge. “It’s got that epic video game vibe. Leo’s instructions say to master the left hand next, then put the two together.”

I leave him to practice and make my way over to students playing the whacking and tossing games. I inquire about their experiences.

Candace explains, “They are both a bit confusing. We sort of get what they are saying, but it’s hard to figure out their instructions. At recess, we just figure out the rules of the games. We go along and change them as needed.”

Jeffrey adds, “Yeah, we just do it and learn from one another. It’s hard with these games because the kids aren’t here to show us how to play.”

The students explore the various projects for the rest of their music class. When class is over, the Grade 4/5 students eagerly head in to see their feedback and read about their experiences, illustrating the ongoing action research inquiry led by the students.



Fig. 3 Music version of Simon Says game.  
A Boomwhacker game.



Fig. 4: Rhythm tossing game using egg shakers and jingle bells.



### Vignette Three: Musings on Maintaining Playground Relationships

As the action research inquiry nears completion, we engage in discourse regarding the process and outcomes of their playground-inspired activities and games.

“Did you notice consistent feedback from the same kids week to week?” I prompt, receiving a variety of responses.

Suzie recalls, “Yeah, my friends always left their thoughts on the notes.”

Marco attentively shares, “It was a mix. Sometimes friends wrote comments and other times kids I didn’t know left them.”

The dialogue deepens, exploring the nuances of feedback and its challenges.

Max joins in, “Feedback only started coming when we made the rules for our game. It’s not like recess where we all just kinda know what to do without talking.” The room echoes with nods of agreement, everyone understanding exactly what he means.

Stan adds, “More comments are better because they show you what to fix.”

Janine points out, “Sometimes it was hard to understand the feedback on the notes. When we are on the playground, it’s easier to figure things out.”

As the class engages in lively conversation, they explore various challenges. These range from figuring out digital compositions to solving the puzzle of marbles trapped in cardboard mazes, and mastering the skill of creating clear instructions.

In a moment of vulnerability, Suzie shares, “Janet suggested that I add singing to my tossing game. I couldn’t see that idea working. I didn’t want to judge my friends’ singing. Besides, how would I know if someone sounds good enough to win the game and toss the egg—”

Kevin interrupts, “We’re not supposed to be singing right now because of the pandemic, so it’s a good thing you didn’t add that.”

Despite these challenges, the students express pride in their collaborative efforts to develop their songs and games. Curious about peer feedback, I direct the conversation towards the significance of comments from playground peers.

Stan comments, “I like reading all the nice feedback.”

Janine shares, “Jasmine’s suggestion of a siren sound led us to create a cool ending for our song.”

Marco mentions, “A kid asked us to add more sneezing into our song. We tried, but it made our song too long.”

After discussing the feedback, it’s clear that the students value friendships and tried out their friends’ suggestions, highlighting the importance of their ideas.

Moving on, I ask, “The goal of your action research inquiry was to create activities for playground friends. Did any games remind you of recess?”

Max says, “Suzie’s tossing game and our whacking game are similar to ones kids could play at recess.”

The discussion progresses, and many students mention the variety of recess activities beyond sports, with Michael saying, “I am not sure my piano song is the ideal recess activity.”

Stan adds, “Sometimes kids do quiet activities at recess. Recess isn’t just about sports. Some kids like to draw and be creative, so your piano game is good for them.”

“What about friendship? Did you feel you maintained playground connections, even though you couldn’t play together in the same way?”

Many nod, and Mark reflects, “Jack’s post-it notes show me he likes my game. Getting his advice as it developed helped us stay connected. It was like we were playing, but not together. It’s hard to explain.”

Suzie remarks, “My friends and I don’t always agree, but we still play and figure things out. The way the game developed reminded me of that.”

Max adds, “I made new friends. I can’t wait to play with them and my old friends at recess again.”

With these musings, the students engage with each other’s activities, laughter and chatter filling the space—embodying the essence of their collective experience and drawing a harmonious close to their action research journey.

## Insights and Implications

Understanding the intricate dynamics of peer relations is paramount within the complexities of contemporary education, particularly under the unique challenges of a pandemic. The following discussion delves into insights from the action research inquiry, specifically focusing on sustaining positive peer relations, nurturing close relationships, and understanding the dynamics of playground interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Positive Peer Relations and Close Relationships

The inquiry highlighted the profound impact of peer relations on students’ educational development, especially in fostering social competence and personal growth. Through projects like the musical marble run, soundscape compositions, and the Boomwhacker game, students experienced significant social connections. These projects served as important openings for personal development, particularly during challenging times. The engagement of students in these collaborative efforts mirrors findings in existing research, highlighting the significant role that peer interactions play in shaping self-concept and emotional resilience. Studies by Bukowski and Hoza (1989), Markus and Nurius (1984), and Rubin et al. (2011) have shown positive correlations between peer relationships and self-esteem. Building on this, aligning students’ personal interests with educational activities enriches peer interactions and extends the learning landscape. For instance, Suzie’s tossing game, which integrated elements from her playground experiences, exemplifies how personalization of educational tasks can elevate engagement and motivation. This approach aligns with Krapp’s (2002) insights on the transformative power of interest-driven engagement in education. Such personalized educational strategies bridge the gap

between formal and informal learning, enabling students to apply their diverse skills in meaningful contexts and thus significantly enhancing their educational outcomes.

Throughout the pandemic, students have exemplified resilience and adaptability, transforming everyday classroom projects into essential tools for maintaining social connections and emotional wellbeing. Projects like the musical marble run and the tossing game, initially simple pastimes, transformed into vital components of social engagement within the constraints of the pandemic environment. The students demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability, along with strong emotional intelligence, which are crucial for maintaining healthy peer relationships. For instance, when Suzie evaluated and subsequently disregarded feedback that conflicted with her vision, it showcased her ability to navigate differing perspectives effectively, a skill crucial for sustaining relationships. Moreover, the vignettes illustrate how initiatives like Stan and Max's marble run address the challenges of social distancing while promoting ongoing engagement and sparking shared creativity. These projects exemplify how empathy and teamwork can not only persist but thrive even in periods of isolation, thereby reinforcing the theme of resilience.

Furthermore, the significance of positive peer relations became increasingly apparent as the skills cultivated through student-centered projects started to impact the learning that was unfolding. Projects such as the musical marble run and the tossing game encouraged spontaneous cooperation, constructive feedback, and the resolution of disagreements. As the students immersed themselves in such activities, they were able to practice important social skills like empathetic understanding, effective communication, and collaborative teamwork towards common objectives. This pattern of interaction, reinforced by positive peer relationships, aligns with the educational research by Malcolm (2021) along with Smith and Lim (2020), who both emphasize the significance of such dynamics in education.

This inquiry also revealed significant autonomy in students' choice of learning activities, reflecting dynamics akin to those in playground interactions. For instance, the way Max, Stan, and Janine integrated diverse viewpoints into their educational projects illustrates how autonomy within the educational setting can emulate the freedom and spontaneity of playground social exchanges. This self-directed learning, and the empowerment it provided, were not only pivotal for fostering individual creativity, but also essential for cultivating and sustaining close relationships among students. Such autonomy allows students to make friends based on their strengths and interests, thereby enhancing their social competencies and emotional wellbeing. Moreover, these instances of autonomy align with the findings of Erdley et al. (2001), Kingery et al. (2011), and Berndt (2002), which underscore the vital role of self-directed, positive interactions in the psychological and social development of children. By encouraging autonomy, the educational environment fosters deeper interpersonal connections, resembling the vibrant, multifaceted dynamics of playground relationships. This not only encourages social resilience but also instills a profound sense of community and mutual respect, which are crucial for development and long-term interpersonal success.

## Rules and Dynamics of the Playground

The rules and dynamics of the playground significantly influenced the learning experiences in the elementary school music atelier during the action research inquiry. Students like Max, Stan, and Jake engaged in forms of playground self-monitoring by practicing self-regulation and peer critique, similar to policing each other's contributions. Through this process, they learned essential skills such as compromise, negotiation, and developing their communication skills, crucial for mediating differences and fostering social and emotional growth (Pellegrini, 2006; Yanko & Yap, 2020). Specifically, when Jake added a basket to the end of the marble run to address the issue of chasing marbles, he demonstrated his capacity to incorporate practical feedback into the project's development.

Students encounter the complex challenge of translating the fluid dynamics of play from the playground into concrete classroom instructions. As reflected in their project adjustments, like the addition of nonverbal cues suggested by their peers, the students endeavored to integrate playground rules into the classroom setting. Jeffrey's reflection captured this challenge: "We just do it and learn from one another. It's hard with these games because the kids aren't here to show us how to play." This statement emphasizes the essence of meta-communication—communication that goes beyond words and is rooted in shared experiences and spontaneous interactions (Bateson, 1979). It showcases the challenges in capturing the subtle, often nonverbal cues that govern playground activities, highlighting the significance of meta-communication in facilitating meaning-making in music and social learning (Yanko & Yap, 2020).

Furthermore, the continuity from the playground extended into the classroom, where children like Suzie demonstrated a comparable dedication to their selected activities. This dedication is illuminated in how the students collaborated to create meaningful musical pieces and games, akin to how they routinely reunited to play soccer and other activities during recess. Their joint endeavors reflect the playground's culture of repetitive engagement with favored games and peers, which are essential for nurturing a sense of stability and belonging among children. This process, illustrative of collective meaning-making within a supportive learning network, empowers the development of individual voices among peers (Yanko, 2019).

## Maintenance Behaviors

In navigating relationship challenges, children often employ maintenance behaviors to sustain and guide their relationships through difficult times (Rubin et al., 2011). Oswald et al. (2004) identify four primary behaviors crucial for sustaining relationships: positivity, supportiveness, openness, and shared interactions. Positivity was exemplified by Suzie, who, despite encountering challenges with her tossing game, shared it with enthusiasm and maintained an uplifting demeanor throughout the project. Supportiveness was seen when peers, like Max and Jake, provided constructive feedback on each other's projects, such as suggesting practical improvements to the marble run, thereby reinforcing their connection through collaboration. Openness was evident among students, like Stan, who openly shared their thoughts and accepted feedback on their ideas, fostering a transparent environment that enhanced their collective problem-solving efforts. Interaction was highlighted by Suzie and Max, who, despite the physical constraints imposed by the classroom setting, found innovative ways to communicate and coordinate on their projects.

Proactive maintenance behaviors were instrumental in building resilience within the students' evolving friendships, fostering loyalty and confronting challenges. However, questions arise regarding the longevity and evolution of these bonds beyond the structured classroom, within less constrained playground settings. This concern is especially significant in the context of Larivière-Bastien et al. (2022), whose research reveals that virtual interactions during the pandemic failed to replicate the intrinsic qualities inherent in face-to-face interactions essential for forming and maintaining friendships among children.

### **Resilient Connections in Action**

At the outset of the action research inquiry, students set goals that guided their progress. They aimed to infuse creativity into everyday tasks, adapt to the challenges posed by the pandemic, and enhance the quality of their interactions during recess. This research journey vividly demonstrates the power of music to build resilience and deepen friendships, particularly in times of adversity. Yehudi Menuhin insightfully notes, "Rhythm imposes unanimity upon the divergent, melody imposes continuity upon the disjointed, and harmony imposes compatibility upon the incongruous" (1972, p. 14). Similarly, in the dynamic and exploratory environment of the elementary school music atelier, students autonomously shape their learning experiences, fostering agency, creativity, and collaboration.

Building upon these insights, music educators can refine their teaching practices and pedagogies. Firstly, educators should foster collaborative learning environments, akin to the group projects undertaken by students, by providing ample opportunities for collective work and creativity. Encouraging students to collaborate towards shared goals can cultivate teamwork skills and foster a sense of community in the classroom. Secondly, incorporating activities that promote empathy, communication, and conflict resolution skills, similar to the interpersonal interactions observed during the inquiry, can create a supportive and inclusive classroom environment conducive to learning. Lastly, leveraging students' interests in music-making, as demonstrated through the creation of songs and games, serves as a powerful motivator for engagement and participation. By tapping into students' intrinsic motivation and providing opportunities for creative expression, educators can enhance student learning experiences and promote a deeper appreciation for music.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the crucial need for maintaining peer relationships between children on the playground and in the classroom, especially during times of crisis. As McNiff (2013) aptly states, "Doing action research means you consciously hope that something is going to change" (p. 96). Through the lens of action research, I have witnessed firsthand how students' engagement in collaborative music projects not only nurtures their academic growth but also provides a vital outlet for connection during uncertain times. This underscores the need for educators to prioritize student interaction and engagement, recognizing its significant impact on their overall wellbeing and learning outcomes. By acknowledging the value of playground friendships and the resilience of children in maintaining them, there is hope that these connections will endure beyond challenging times, fostering the emergence of new relationships rooted in shared experiences and mutual support.

## Notes

1. In some countries, the term *breaktime* is used to represent informal playtime outside of structured instructional time. However, the term *recess* is preferred in Canada and the United States.
2. Consent has been provided for use of audio clips, written observations, and photos. This research was conducted in accordance with research guidelines set by the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board (and autoethnographic works approved in provisos H13-01168, H13-03210, H16-01244, and H18-02451).

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