Chapter 5

Understanding the Conditions of Learning in Early Childhood Music Education
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Abstract

Building on previous research, we explore a theoretical model of engagement focused on conditions of learning, which are strongly influenced by the socio-cultural context of music and musical opportunities, pedagogic-emotional context created by the parent/teacher, and the socio-psychological context of the child’s genetic and acquired characteristics. We then describe ways in which care-givers and teachers can develop the most positive conditions, setting goals based on categories established by our previous research including a focus on: musical expressivity, personal best effort, manipulable elements, performance-focused feedback, optimistic expectation, student-appropriate challenge, holistic approximation, equality of opportunity, collaborative environment, authentic music-making, social play, and a healthy childhood holism.

Introduction

Music and sound are part of every culture and children cannot escape sonic immersion. But do they choose to become engaged with music? And if they engage music do they learn? Or must we formalize their learning of music? We now increasingly understand that babies are inherently musical (Trehub, 2003; Bartel, 2006) and Weinberger (2000) suggests that “the womb appears to be the first concert hall.” Sometime between the later prenatal stage, when they become the percipients of a sound rich world, and schooling when they become participants in formal instruction, children undergo conditions that
have lasting effect on their musical engagement and enjoyment. In our opinion, “engagement” is the desired state for children’s interaction with the world (Cameron & Bartel, 2000). Intentional engagement – the choosing to do or attend and then “working” the playful learning involved – is the hope of educators. Music educators would like to see intentional engagement with sound and music. What are the conditions that influence a child’s development toward intentional engagement with music?

In this chapter we will explore first a theoretical model of engagement with music as it applies to the early years. We will then describe ways in which care-givers and teachers can develop the most positive conditions, drawing on the categories established by our research and explained in “From Dilemmas to Experience: Shaping the Conditions of Learning” (Bartel & Cameron, 2004).

The Conditions of Music Learning

The conditions within which a child is enculturated in music, “learns” music, and is “taught” music, are created by multiple influences or factors. In the most broad view, conditions of learning are strongly influenced by the socio-cultural context determining music and musical opportunities, pedagogic-emotional context created by the parent/teacher, and the socio-psychological context of the child’s genetic and acquired characteristics interacting in relationships and the immediate community in which the child lives.

Most fundamental is the socio-cultural level – or what the society and culture bring to the moments of musical encounter. These include the type of music the child encounters, but more subtly, the values and meanings (Bartel, 2002) that come with this music – how does music get made, why do we make music, who can make music, what do we do in connection with music, what is good music, and so on – and the values that come with how the music is learned or taught (Bowman, 2004)—formally, informally, alone, in groups, in a master-mentor relationship, and so on. Much of this is learned early through immersion and demonstration, and later through the covert “hidden curriculum”
dimensions of instruction. Formal music instruction takes place within a socio-cultural context, although the socio-cultural value set the teacher brings may be somewhat different from the experienced context in which the child lives (Buller Peters, 2004). Imagine a child’s context in a home where the main music experiences come from TV and a few kids cd’s. Another’s context in a home where the father is a commercial music composer with a studio in the basement creating film sound tracks, big band arrangements, and the occasional commercial. Or the child living with the symphony musician mom who teaches lessons at home.

But, more immediately important to the child than the socio-cultural dimensions is the pedagogic-emotional context created by the parent/teacher – in other words, what the parent/teacher brings to the moments of musical encounter and transactions with the child (Cameron and Carlisle, 2004). The nature of these encounters are essentially reciprocal…the teacher cares for the child, the child feels cared for, the teacher accepts the child and the child feels accepted. The pedagogic-emotional context is shaped by the parent’s or teacher’s motivations, attitudes, beliefs, personal enculturation and the pedagogical repertoire and strategies employed. The pedagogic-emotional context is determined by the nature of the relationships established by the teacher. How safe and caring is the learning environment?

What the child brings to the musical encounter is partially an accumulation of previous learning in relation to music, but also genetic and acquired characteristics of personality, physical aptitude, and patterns of behavior and learning that become quickly established through the relationships and immediate community in which the child lives—the socio-psychological context. This is manifested in dimensions of motivation, adaptability, and sociality, and inevitably affects musical and learning potentials. The interaction of these three dimensions, the socio-cultural, the socio-emotional and the socio-psychological contexts, determine the level of engagement a child will have with music not only in early childhood but throughout life.
What society and culture brings to the moments of musical encounter

Every child is born into a particular socio-cultural context determined by factors such as: geographic location, religion, ethnicity, economic level, political conditions, community values, parental values, and life-style. This socio-cultural context strongly influences the music to which the child will be exposed, the demonstrations of music-making, and participation opportunities the child will experience. The process, or means, by which a child is encultured is one of immersion in and demonstration of musical content.

Musical Content and Values. The immersion and demonstration of specific musical content brings with it a particular set of values that encourage or discourage particular responses or involvements. In the process of raising the child, parents, care-givers and teachers unconsciously communicate to the child musical involvement and response values. Is the involvement value focused on listening? On creating? On replicating melodies? On exploring sound? Is involvement in music as a communal activity valued where everyone joins in or is music valued as an exceptional, competitive, perfection-seeking pursuit that is to be singled out and applauded? Is active or passive involvement expected? Is music to be made only by the talented or is it something everyone can learn? What responses are valued and therefore modeled? Is the appropriate response to music moving and participating or is it being quiet and listening? Is the expected and encouraged response to music making a critical judgment (Bartel, 2000)? When we respond to music making efforts with “Good job!” or “that was wonderful” we are passing on one of our society’s deepest expectations and practices - that the first and best response to music making efforts is critical evaluation and judgment (Bartel, 2003). An alternative would be a response related to function and effect such as, “Your music making made me very happy” or “I liked dancing to the music you played.” The socio-cultural context of the child will determine the role and focus music will take on, the meaning music will have for the child.

We recently witnessed what we perceived as a socio-cultural effect in the behaviours of two children visiting our home. One weekend we were amazed to watch a 13 month old
who had barely learned to walk, mambo to music as if choreographed and practiced. He moved up and down in time with the music, wiggling and jiggling with hands up in the air waving meaningfully – this little guy heard the music – and responded with physical participation! He looked for possible instruments and added them to his performance. His dad is Puerto Rican and is a composer/musician, his mom is New England American and a professional modern dancer, his older sister dances, sings, acts, and performs constantly. The socio-cultural context within which this child was experiencing music valued participation, connected movement with music, had exposed him to Latin mambo music, recognized music as a manipulable and accessible play activity, and celebrated enthusiastic involvement. The music was turned on and away he went, not missing a beat. Although one might want to strongly attribute behaviour like this to Latin genetics, we believe it is the socio-cultural environment that largely shaped the response.

On a subsequent weekend we hosted another family. This child, similar in age, heard the same mambo music. He chose not to respond physically at all to the music invitation, even when an adult tried to inspire him to listen and move. His home is not without music. Rather it is a very different social-cultural context of music. His dad has been a producer of a radio jazz show for many years. The cd collection in the home is extensive. He has heard sophisticated jazz repertoire, although probably listened to when he was out of the way and uninvited to participate. This same little person’s media and social exposure has been carefully controlled and monitored by dutiful parents. This child has been exposed to carefully selected musical CD’s of “good” music. This child is being consciously and intentionally “educated” by well meaning parents intent on doing culturally the best for their child. The child experiences everything in controlled doses due to an attempt to educate excellence and limit the frivolous or “dangerous.” Music for this child is not an organic sensuous phenomenon to be entered into physically. Perhaps it is (or at least is meant to be and possibly will be) an intellectual pursuit – to be heard and considered – maybe to have descriptive knowledge about – but at 13 months he is too young to be able to show this.
Music matters in both these homes but is experienced by the young children very differently. Both sets of parents want their children to be “musically educated,” but understand that process of development and engagement differently. Perhaps as strong are the elements of culture that dominate the practices, values, and beliefs in these homes.

Music is a cultural phenomenon created from sound. Children are born as auditors of sound and very soon perceive patterns within intentional sound and learn to construct these as music. Since music is a constructed or learned perceptual ability, the more musical sound babies and children hear, the greater the possibility for them to develop capacity for music. The broader the range of sound, the broader the development. And, since style is a matter of the particularities of musical elements, the development of the fundamental perceptual abilities and cognitive structures to advance learning in a particular style requires early immersion in that style. This is somewhat like language development: development of competence in a language requires early immersion in all the sounds and structures of the language with opportunities to “babble” it. The type and amount of music a child experiences (is immersed in) influences the child’s potential for later learning. Conversely, a lack of immersion in musical sound and experimental music making inhibits potential for later learning and development.

Immersion. In our North American society today music is ubiquitous. It is inescapable on toys, television, radio, shopping malls, restaurants, offices, amusement parks, movies and videos, recordings, games, social events, and so on. By the time a child is age five, hundreds and possibly thousands of hours of music have been experienced in some form, usually unintentional. Contrast this with a child’s experience a 100 or even 50 years ago when music experience was infrequent and usually intentional. It may be possible that the frequency and unintentionality of the experience today reduces its power or effect. But, research on very young children show that musical enculturation has taken place despite intentional engagement (Trehub, 2000, 2001, 2003).

The context of musical immersion today for most children is that of a mixture of musical styles, a “musical mother-tongue,” that is quite different from what they may experience
as the much narrower, or even foreign, musical language of their first formal music instruction (Buller Peters, 2004). The musical style mixture may be accidental or at least appear to be so. But, in Fisher Price recordings for pre-school children the musical mandate is to include a variety of musical styles with the purpose of establishing sound templates in children’s minds for a range and variety of musical experiences.

Despite the variety of sound passively experienced through unintentional immersion, music intentionally selected, modeled, and demonstrated by parents has a unique place in the experience of the child. With immersion in the music of a particular culture a child develops the taste for, the feel of, the expectation for that music-- the rhythm, the cadence, the tonal recognition, the “language” and syntax of the music. When the child hears the music that is familiar, he or she understands it somehow. They can predict how to move to it. It is his or her music. They are “tones-for-us” (Elliott, 1995). They comprehend it, in a sense. They know what should come next and what does or does not “fit” (Trehub, 2003). When observing children listening to a world music CD album, it is delightful to see the response when they hear music they recognize. They become animated and responsive…ready to dance or sing. It is like hearing a familiar story or a familiar voice in a familiar language. Home! Mine! It is so important to provide listening and music making experiences for children that is culturally theirs, familiar. At the same time, exposing (immersing) them to a broad range of music and sound gives them a richer context on which to construct their understanding of music.

**Demonstration.** Demonstration occurs when there is intentionality and instruction, “scaffolding” using Vygotsky’s (1978) term. For example, if you draw attention to the music by inviting the child to march or clap to the music with you, you are demonstrating beat and maybe rhythm. If you invite the child to sing along with a CD, she will be tone matching, melody making, exploring affective response and expressivity as demonstrated in the recording. If you demonstrate how to play a scale on the xylophone going up and back down and then pass the mallets to the child, he will be exploring the sound of the notes, differentiating the progression of the notes up and down the scale, developing hand-eye coordination, feeling the vibration of sound, and making music!
Some parents are very strict about allowing children to watch movies and television thereby limiting exposure to the breadth of “commercial children’s music” (Bartel, 2006) and all the musical content of commercials and other shows. These parents may carefully select and monitor children’s listening to recorded music. This control may restrict musical content to particular types of music. Other parents exercise little selection control and children are subjected to an abundance of sound from a wide spectrum. The issue here is not too much sound or music but rather developing attention to those sounds so that recognition, cognition, and appreciation will develop. If we equate this to language perception and development, it is like a child who might hear lots of language but not have anyone talk to, talk with, and listen to the child. It is in those focused situations where the language is made meaningful in the context by the conversation partner (face to face or through some form of media) that the child attends and learns and practices language. It is taking the teachable moments with the child and deliberately providing input, feedback, reinforcement, consolidation and maybe a little practice. This is demonstration. To make demonstration meaningful, it is important to be working within the child’s zone of proximal development, “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). It is critical to be demonstrating or providing learning opportunities for the child that are within the child’s capacity to accomplish independently after the demonstration. This takes knowledge of what the child is currently capable of doing, what he or she has already accomplished, what he or she is interested in learning (motivation), and how much challenge and support he or she needs at the moment.

The key to this interface between demonstration and engagement within the zone of proximal development is problem solving. In music, problem solving at its best is found through the manipulation of musical materials (Wiggins, 2001). Too often in school-based music learning children are not allowed to explore and manipulate sounds and music, not invited to compose their soundscapes, not provided with “instruments” of
sound making, not allowed to make noise which evolves into music. In early childhood
pre-school contexts children may be allowed manipulation but rarely with any
expectation that this really constitutes musical problem solving, musical goal setting and
solution exploration, or thoughtful composing. Honouring children’s musical
manipulation attempts with engaged, scaffolding demonstrations by adults can result in
significant learning. We need to engage children in serious play with sound.

There is so much that musical play will inform about sound…loud, soft, high-low, nice-
ugly, tones, vibrations… Not only the beautiful. Not only with the goal of “tamed” and
“civilized” sound. But with opportunities for the wild sounds (Marsella, 2004), the
exciting noisy energetic sounds that match many kids temperament, who are often too
soon “cured” of noise (and therefore music). What happens when the option to combine
listening with responding to the music through movement, singing along, responding
with “instruments,” being rocked? What happens when a child is immersed in all sorts of
musical possibilities, a rich repertoire of experiences and has opportunities to develop
musical robust questions, intriguing musical problems, and someone to work alongside to
support and challenge her?

Perhaps numerous concerns about the current effect of the socio-cultural context are
evident. Two concern early childhood particularly. Recent new possibilities in the
interaction of immersion and demonstration have emerged in the form of musical and
sound making toys. The value and effect of these are not known and music educators
who have addressed the situation hold differing views (Campbell, 1998; Bartel, 2001).
We are concerned about what may in fact be learned from these “demonstrations” by
dogs, or frogs, or golliwogs. Does immersion in the music of Mutzart create the kinds of
memes most desirable in babies?

The other concern about the socio-cultural context is the push for early achievement,
excellence, and “higher” standards. There is public desire and pressure to make music
count intellectually and to satisfy the competitive edge. We see shelves of CD’s and
videos that promise to make your child smarter and to improve his chances to be
successful in the future. This culture has changed the focus of music education even for the youngest. We wonder about the effect of the “Mozart Effect” – not the reality of its efficacy, but the trademarked cultural phenomenon.

**What the teacher brings to the moments of musical encounter.**

**Control of the pedagogic emotional climate.** In considering what the teacher brings to musical encounters, we assume a care context other than the home: a nursery school, day care, or even music classes for the pre-school child. In a context like this various factors influence the pedagogic social and emotional climate (Cameron and Carlisle, 2004) but the teacher (or teachers) are the primary determinants of the emotional tone children will experience. The relationships between the teacher and the child, as well as between children, established and nurtured by the teacher are the key to learning at this stage and influential into the future. A positive emotional tone (Van Manen, 1986) created through child-focused thoughtfulness, mindfulness, and hope is the key to healthy development and learning. The emotional relationship between teacher and child is recognized as under-researched but potentially the most important variable in learning throughout childhood (Wang, Haertel, and Walberg, 1994).

Imagine an early childhood environment that has adults who love children and music and bring them together in a safe and caring, playful environment. Think of the possibilities of an environment that is full of musical possibilities: instruments – real and found, recordings, books about music, music books, listening devices, audio visual opportunities, time to explore, encouragement to experiment, celebrations of approximations, musical models, musical play, dance, movement, singing (lots of singing!). This sounds like a place that would stir the soul, develop the musical imagination, and find the musical heart of the child. Would the child not believe that he or she is a musician, a composer, a maestro, a disc jockey, a dancer? Research shows that one of the strongest factors associated with students’ choice of music in high school is how musical they believe they are. And one of the factors most strongly associated
with this belief in their own ability, this sense of self-efficacy, is the quality of the musical experiences as a child (Bartel, 1993).

The teacher has the responsibility to keep the child’s musical self-efficacy alive, stirring and enhancing, filling and celebrating, educating within the child’s zone of proximal development and keeping him or her in “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). The teacher can provide “roots and wings” or conversely can silence and destroy the potential and power of the music for a child. In the context of early childhood care, the teacher can be a primary force in shaping the experience of the child with music just as in later schooling years the music teacher has this power.

**Self-efficacy.** The personal psychological character of the teacher including disposition, personality, mental well-being, confidence, motivation, and self-efficacy strongly interacts with the emotional climate created on a day-to-day basis. Ideally professionalism and pedagogic repertoire cover and compensate for the vagaries of emotional life. Perhaps overt behaviours and activities are not subject to psychological health and character, but in reality the emotional tone of the class can very quickly be affected. We will not examine every psychological factor, but with music, self-efficacy is a highly important one because it affects teacher motivation and decisions about what to do with music even with the very youngest.

Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1997) is the self-perception of competence and the attendant self-confidence to succeed at a particular task or type of tasks. For many teachers at all levels self-efficacy for music is particularly low (Bartel and Cameron, 2002; Cameron, Bartel, Wiggins, and Wiggins, 2002). This lack of confidence in many cases stems from the experiences these individuals themselves have had with music (Smithrim and Upitis, 2004). The teacher may have adequate knowledge and ability to create and guide musical experiences with children, but it is not the **knowledge** the teacher has, rather the **feelings** he or she has about music and musical ability that will influence the interactions with and experiences of the child. In a study of elementary teachers in one large board of education, we found that generalist teachers revealed a gap between
their perception of their ability and their self-confidence: they had considerably less self-confidence than ability, and therefore low self-efficacy for music (Bartel, and Cameron, 2002). The energy of a love for music and music making jumps from one person to another. The angst of perfectionism or criticism passes over as well. Joy, fear, love of, anger about, mistrust, lack of confidence all affect the teaching learning process. If, for example, the teacher/parent only likes one kind of music and is prejudiced against others, it follows that the immersion and demonstrations, the experiences a child in his or her care, will be affected. The residue of the teacher’s experience with music, even from childhood, will be reflected in the musical opportunities for the learner.

The urgent need in all levels of education, and particularly in the education of early childhood care-givers, are multiple positive experiences with music and a self-efficacy altering process of realistic reflection on musical values and purposes. Specifically for early childhood workers professional development opportunities need to be provided so that they can regain a healthier musical identity and see where they can find their music to share. Early childhood educators currently have few opportunities for professional development and in most jurisdictions have very limited funds to support arts focused initiatives. In a study of ECE teacher education programs in Ontario (Cameron, Bartel, Bezaire, 2006), we found that music was only granted incidental place in the teacher training curriculum.

Pedagogic and Emotional Strategies

The early childhood “teacher” brings teacherly knowledge and ability to the child’s musical encounter. Although subject to the personal characteristics and psychological attributes as explained above, the teacher is to have an acquired knowledge base and skill set that is employed strategically in the service of the child’s development and education. This knowledge base and skill set can be understood as a repertoire of pedagogic and emotional strategies. The goal in early childhood is a social emotional environment that is free of negative criticism, abusive put downs, silencing behaviours, and non-attention. The musical encounter has to be in a safe and caring space! Children will want more, do
more, try more, play more, music more, and learn more when they are having fun and feeling good about themselves. It is a life gift when an early childhood educator or parent inspires an early love for music and music making. We suggest that early childhood educators can give a lifetime gift of music. But, the means to this is through intentional pedagogic and emotional strategies that invite and involve every child.

**Issues of power, control, and responsibility.** At first glance this heading may seem to imply that we are discussing here imperatives or strategies for teachers to exercise power and control and how to act responsibly in loco parentis. Common societal myths of the hyperactive, terrorizing, rug-rats who must be subdued “Kindergarten Cop” style, assume teachers must first and foremost take and keep control of kids’ every action and interaction, activity and encounter, schedule and agenda. That is not what we mean. Teachers and parents need to find ways to empower kids to exercise control and responsibility related to their own learning. Kids need to have choice in what they do, listen to, respond with. Ownership of their music matters even to the youngest. Teachers need to use their control of the class to provide lots of freedom of choice to the child - selection in instruments or in the making of their own instruments from found objects; discovery of their own ways of responding to sounds and music; manipulation of musical materials. Freedom of choice develops responsibility. Responsibility invites setting new goals for oneself and allows for growth and development.

**Expectation.** Along with the pedagogic strategy of developing responsibility for learning in the child is the inevitable emotional communication of expectation. If the child perceives that she is expected to fail, she probably will fail, if he is expected to mis-behave he probably will misbehave, if she is expected to create she creates. Much of our interaction with children communicates our expectations – and they usually live up to them. Unfortunately this is often unconscious, in the sigh, or the rolled eyes, the smile, the laugh or the quick angry retort. That means that parents’ or teachers’ attitudes and expectations must be examined through reflection – and may need to be adjusted.
**Modeling and approximation.** Expectation is implemented by modeling behaviours. When the teacher demonstrates something and says “try to do it this way” she implicitly communicates, “I think you can do this.” The child’s attempt in response will probably fall short of the model. The teacher then has a choice – point out what was wrong with what the child did, or point out what was right with it and model it again to try to get the next attempt closer to the model. This process which we use intuitively as a young child learns to speak, is not so natural for teachers, especially traditional music teachers. Some methods of music instruction for very young children intend to make this process of modeling and approximation the central pedagogic feature. This “nurturing with love” approach (Suzuki, 1983) allows the child to succeed in small steps – each of which is recognized and reinforced.

**Use.** Opportunities to use newly learned abilities in real and meaningful ways is another strong factor in a child’s engagement with music. The key here is “to use in real and meaningful ways.” Think of the end of year performance for the assembled parents: The child performs, parents shoot the video, clap and cheer enthusiastically, and in the end tell the child what a good job she did. After all it is a step forward along the great journey of accomplishment toward the goal of excellence and ultimate perfection or at least reputation-building recognition by those considered important. Is it a real and meaningful performance? Why does music get made in our society? Do we make music so that we can demonstrate our achievement and people attend so that they can witness the achievement and cheer on the performer to greater achievement? Unfortunately that is often the case. And the language that has grown up around this is always an evaluative one – we tell the person how well they did. But why do we make music in our society? How do we use music? Is it not for simple enjoyment of the music? Is the proper response then not, I enjoyed your music, or your music moved me, or your music helped me remember an important friend, etc? We also make music for purposes of the rites and rituals of society. Music facilitates worship. Music energizes sport fans. Music makes us dance. When music making serves the fundamental purposes of music in society it is a real and meaningful music making opportunity. And, when a child gets to use his music in such a real context, and realizes it by the authentic responses of the participants, he
finds a great boost to his musical engagement. This requires a change in our habituated vocabulary of response, but it also has strong implication for when and where we give our children opportunities to share their music.

For little children, formal public performance is not a necessary component of the music program...at least not a public performance that makes everyone stressed and mean-acting. One of the most important “real and meaningful” functions of music in society is one often extinct in our urban post-modern culture but that children often exemplify – music as a means of relating with each other, of community making, and one of simply pleasurable play. Little children are quite content “just” making their music informally with other children, “just” playing their song at group time, “just” being in the rhythm band as they march around the room, “just” playing one or two notes on the xylophone that has had the keys removed to form a pentatonic scale. They love having their compositions played by someone more competent, to hear how their musical ideas might sound. Children like to feel that their music is as real as the Velveteen Rabbit. Not fancy, not formal, not rehearsed until it is painful...just made! and celebrated! with opportunities to make more. Acknowledged that it is indeed music. It is like reading and writing and painting and dancing in the early developmental stages...approximations that get closer and closer to the real thing by doing it.

**Feedback.** The response by the care-giver or teacher to a child’s attempt will either serve to motivate or discourage. If it is genuine, related to what the child has done or not done, or could do, and if it is delivered in a caring way, then it will work to motivate. We must always remember to refer to the activity and effort and not criticize the essence of the child...to suggest that the child is not good enough, or stupid, or inadequate is damaging and often has long-term deleterious effect. Feedback is not just about negative criticism, but rather about noting what the child has learned, has demonstrated, has got right along with where there might be something that could be improved or tried or experimented with. Saying “good work” when it really wasn’t, does not do any good. Telling the child what you liked about his or her “work”... “I liked the way you sang that song, I could hear every word!” or “What an interesting melody you composed, it
reminds me of the sunshine!” or, “maybe if you played the cymbals a little less often and used the triangle sometimes, the music would make more sense to me and not hurt my ears!” “Have you thought about composing some music that would describe how happy you are rather than that sad, slow music you often make up? Maybe you could listen to this happy music to see what the composer does to make it feel happy.”

Another aspect of feedback that is important to the long-term motivation of the child is the attribution you make in your feedback – in your praise. Research (Bronson, 2007) now indicates that to make a global, child-directed attribution of achievement like “You’re so talented,” or “You are the best” or “You’re great!” can serve to de-motivate the child, making them less ready to risk making a mistake. A better focus for praise is the effort and specific skill exercised by the child. So rather than saying, “You must be smart at this” it is better to say, “You must have worked really hard.”

Feedback related to music learning can make or break one’s desire to learn. Linda had a music teacher when she was very little that hit her fingers with a stick because she did not approve of her hand positioning. The teacher then brought the plants over to be watered by her tears of pain and discouragement telling Linda that she was a silly little thing and that she would never be able to play the piano. The teacher also reminded her that everyone else her age read the notes instead of playing by ear and making things up, suggesting that she was a failure. If only the teacher had celebrated Linda’s strong musical ear and had not focused on finger positions, she might be a wonderful pianist today. How many children who were tapped on the head and told to mouth the words want to sing when they get older? How many children who were not chosen for the choir think they can sing today? How many little children who were forced beyond their age and development to do things that made little sense to them, want to keep trying? What if no one noticed or cared about the songs they made up, treating them as trivial and worthless? Would they keep making music?
A vignette

Picture a kitchen where there are pots and pans, spoons and towels, boxes of all sorts with various ingredients, elastic bands and the playful invitation to compose a “symphony”...child and parent have listened to symphonies before together. The dyad could start exploring sounds together and then the real fun begins as he chooses what to use. He listens carefully to the sounds and finds the ones he likes. He shakes and taps, rattles and bangs, listening, thinking, reordering, listening again and composing. The parent or teacher might be invited to collaborate or the child can continue to explore and combine sounds to make his “kitchen suite.” The adult scaffolds by offering some ideas, prepared of course for rejection. A recording device can make the invitation more real and provide the opportunity for reflection and reviewing. I can hear the child requesting to hear the recording of what he has created so far...so that he can improve and go on. Editing, adjusting, figuring it out and listening some more. And of course, the resulting product can be celebrated with a replaying to interested significant others for the important supportive feedback. When the child has composed a symphony of his own, he is more likely to care to listen attentively to one someone else composed...because he is also a composer with opinions and experience. In this vignette we see an example of motivation, responsibility, expectation, use, feedback, positive relationship and support. We do not hear the parent telling the child that he does not have it right or that he has to develop an ABA pattern or do it in a particular way. Approximation is what grows skill and fosters motivation. If a child can explore sound, instruments, compositions, questions, musical ideas, without adjudication...can try and even make mistakes that are considered learning opportunities...he will be motivated to keep trying and learning and getting better. The teacher’s role in approximation is celebrating what the child has got right, has learned and not pointing out what is wrong. Effective teachers celebrate each approximation and scaffold to the next level...that means providing support, a little idea, a nudge to try something, some new tools, a strategy that might help or just a nod and smile.
**What the child brings to the musical encounter**

The child’s musical encounter is situated in a strong socio-cultural context and is facilitated and affected by a mediating adult. To this already potent mix the child brings an accumulation of previous learning in relation to music, genetic and acquired characteristics of personality, physical aptitude, and patterns of behavior and learning that become quickly established through the relationships and immediate community in which the child lives—the **socio-psychological context**. This is manifested in dimensions of motivation, adaptability, and sociality and inevitably affects musical and learning potentials.

But there is another way to look at this. What does the **child** bring to encounters with music? It isn’t talent. It isn’t magic. It isn’t discipline. It isn’t aptitude that the child brings to the musical encounter. It is the **whole** child that encounters the music! They can hear it, feel it, learn to need it and love it, they can make it, move to it, and know it. Certainly the receptors, connectors and preceptors help when they are functioning well but we do not know any child who does not respond to music naturally. Children come ready to learn music—they are built for it (Weinberger, 2001). Hopefully, they come with musical experiences galore and a positive attitude that has been fostered through these experiences. They come with ideas! Eleanor Duckworth (1996) suggests that intelligence is the having of wonderful ideas. Musical intelligence is the having of wonderful musical ideas that foster questions, interest, willingness to explore, things they want to sing or dance to, songs they want to compose, melodies that are exploding in their minds, sounds they want to make. Willingness to learn is something that children are born with and as long as that willingness is there and not thwarted by experience or overload, nasty experiences or mistrust, kids will develop musically.

Musical ears are a great asset. If kids come with ears that have been opened to sounds of all sorts and musical variety, they are advantaged. Voice is also important. It is natural for children to sing and talk and make vocalizations of all sorts as they play, think, work and lull themselves to sleep. If that voice has been responded to, it is more likely to be used.
Silencing is dangerous. Musical bodies are instruments in themselves. Wiggling, jiggling, bouncing, dancing, swaying, clapping, tapping, playing an instrument all are part of the skills a child brings to the musical encounter. If they can feel the music…that is such magic! and is another kind of knowing.

We recently watched a documentary about children in Africa. It was like watching a musical. The children sang and danced as they played, with music their most audible and visible language. They expressed feelings and communicated meaning through bodies and voices. It is what they have experienced in their community but they have found music in themselves as a first language.

We know that children bring a desire to make music that is quite inherent. It is our job to hold onto that, to encourage it, to make the desire increase.
Conditions of Music Learning Model

- Teacher motivation
- Expectation
- Feedback
- Relationships
- Emotional strategies
- Self-efficacy
- Motivation
- Sociality
- Sense of community
- Teacher
- Pedagogic-Emotional Context
- Psycho-Social Context
- Social Context
- Engagement
- Content
- Values
We want to look more specifically at what we can do to establish positive conditions of learning for music, conditions that lead to inspired engagement that lasts, to a positive musical self-efficacy, to motivation that leads to lots of learning, and to inspired musical experiences and aspirations. Bennett Reimer (1999) reminds us, “teaching and learning music, then, have been understood to be valuable because they improve people’s abilities to gain meaningful, gratifying musical experiences.” Francine Morin (2001) suggests that “Music educators need to be inspired to take on new roles and prepare their classrooms so that children learn about music, at least in part, within playful contexts that allow for active exploration, social interaction, creative thinking, sharing, and finding meaning in their activities.”

As a result of a research study we entitled *Face the Music*, we identified a set of dilemmas or instructional binaries faced by teachers and students in the context of advanced music education (Bartel and Cameron, 2004).

| Musical Expressivity | — | Technical Proficiency |
| Relative standards | — | Objective standards |
| Personal Best effort | — | Musical perfection |
| Learner focused | — | Art focused |
| Culturally-familiar repertoire | — | Artistic exemplars |
| Manipulable Elements | — | Replicable Prescription |
| Encouraging Teacher | — | Pushing Teacher |
| Desire to achieve | — | Lack of ability to self-motivate |
| Performance-focused feedback | — | Person-directed feedback |
| Optimistic expectation | — | Pessimistic expectation |
| Student-appropriate challenge | — | Teacher-stimulating challenge |
| Holistic Approximation | — | Fine Grained Perfection |
| Equality of opportunity | — | Merit-based assignment |
| Collaborative environment | — | Competitive environment |
Authentic music-making — Contrived performance
Student-responsibility — Teacher-responsibility
Social Play — Secluded Practice
Healthy Childhood Holism — Singular Focus for Peak Achievement
Musical–soulful reward — Ego–Achievement reward
Love the music — Hate the cost

At the early childhood level these dilemmas of instruction are probably not yet evident, but they are instructive nonetheless as to the choices to be made, especially for people who have been subjected to advanced music education and who have been inducted into a model of learning that can often be destructive to engagement and motivation. Even at advanced levels where there may appear to be a choice of balance or dilemma, in most cases the left side choice is the positive one. It is the dominance of the right side that leads to discouragement, de-motivation, and a discontinuation of music involvement. For the early childhood context, the left side provides the goals leading to engagement.

**Musical Expressivity**
From the earliest days after birth the child expresses its feelings and desires with sound. We probably do not count them as musical sounds but they are expressive. And so it is natural for the child to see music as expressive. Fortunately, in most cases, technical proficiency is not the focus of early childhood education. Children are invited to sing, dance, move, and make music and not to get it perfectly correct. But “musicians” do sometimes forget that the expression of feeling is the primary purpose and content of music (John, 2004). There are cases of programs where children must stand in a certain ways, sing only in a particular range, hold their hands perfectly folded in front and get it right or else. Competitions are reaching the very young and adjudication is geared to technical proficiency. Formal instruction is starting at younger and younger ages as the angst of hyper-parenting forces many to strive for excellence and achievement. But generally, early childhood educators allow children to play with music, to enjoy it, and to grow into musical understanding and enjoyment.
Donna Brink Fox (1991) warns us that “identifying a two-year old as a ‘musician’ should not be based on expectations of adult musical behaviours. We need a definition of musical ability and musical development along the age spectrum—a definition that accepts children’s perceptions and production of musical sounds at a level appropriate to their overall development.” Although children often “play” with (produce) musical sounds for the sheer joy of experimental manipulation through which they come to know, the employment of sound for expressive reasons is important and always takes precedence over the development of technical facility.

**Relative Standards and Personal Best Effort**

We assume that early childhood educators would value personal best effort and offer praise and encouragement to children based on relative age-sensitive standards. We would assume that early childhood educators would not have expectations for young children based on objective standards of musical perfection. However, with the pressures of the times of “no child left behind” and the constant push towards greater excellence, teachers/parents might find themselves comparing their child, fearing that they are missing something, wanting the child to be better, faster, more outstanding. Parents today unfortunately are measuring their own worth and virtue by the achievement of their children (Coakley, 2000). Alfie Kohn in an interview in Maclean's Magazine (Whyte, 2006) warns against “…trying to create little resumes on legs.” David Elkind (2001) begs us not to hurry our children. An early childhood educator must consider the child’s needs, interests, abilities, energy, experiences, development, aptitude, and style to guide the teaching learning process. “The ability to appraise experience rather than outcomes in children’s music-making seems not only desirable, but necessary if teaching strategies are to honor the child’s emergent understanding as well as her/his own agency in the learning process” (St John, 2006, p.239)
**Learner Focused**

In early childhood education, music and the arts are about developing the many artistic possibilities and interests of the child. We teach children first. Curriculum and the demands of the art are second and must be adapted to what the child wants and needs. This flies in the face of those who would “shape and mold” the child into a cultural “performer” of a pre-determined type – training the child to replicate songs or pieces from a repertoire in a manner that pleases the adults’ cultural expectation and serves the “proud parent,” the “cute factor,” and possibly gains the admiration of those with less “competent” children. We advocate for a learner-focused approach that introduces children to various media and modes of expression. We let them experiment and play. We provide lots of opportunities to find the music that they enjoy and to experience it. We help them work within their zone of proximal development which involves physical motor control, listening abilities, interest levels, attention, hand eye coordination, auditory acuity and discrimination, and so on. We see what they can do and help them work from there. It is about the child and introducing him or her to many musical possibilities. We keep in mind the children’s cultural context and their prior experiences so that we can build on them. We fan the flames that are already there. It is our job to facilitate the music maker they might become and cherish the one they are today.

**Culturally-familiar repertoire**

Ahhh, children love what they know (and so do we!) Comfortable, warm, familiar, “sing-it-again,” routine, repeated, “our” songs are the repertoire of choice. Whether it is the nightly lullaby accompanied with a boost of heart beat and rocking cradles or the grace sung at meal times, the routine good morning song at day care, the singing rhymes that help children learn the alphabet or where the little piggies go…all are the music of early childhood. Although they are not artistic exemplars, they do give voice to the child.

The dilemma from our research, the choice between using culturally familiar repertoire or artistic exemplars, is a real dilemma for school age children and older. They are quite thoroughly “educated” in music of a particular sort by that time – and the choice must be to recognize the power of using the music in the mind of the child. But in the early
childhood pre-school years, this “culturally familiar repertoire” is being created. The challenge at this level then is to determine what the child’s mind will hold as musical stylistic templates. The challenge is to make this as wide and open as possible.

In recent years more children have been exposed to classical music than for many years before, this as a result of the alleged “Mozart Effect.” The claims that classical music increases brain growth has created a glut of products and dramatic increases in sales of classical music for babies. In the video Baby Genius: Mozart and Friends, a little boy suggests, “Certain types of classical music have been proven to help a baby’s brain develop faster. It’s a scientific fact. Music can make your baby smarter.” Whether it is literally true or not, the Mozart Effect has had a significant effect in our culture – more babies have been hearing classical music. In response to the demand for classical music we even created a CD called Baby Classics (Fisher Price) but twisted the notion of playing classical music for babies to arranging traditional children’s songs like B-I-N-G-O, The Farmer in the Dell, Pop Goes the Weasel in “classical” style with full pops orchestration using real instruments. We believe that classical music does have an effect but not necessarily the one purported on the liner notes of most CDs. It is exciting, interesting, full of surprises, opens the ears to a broad range of sounds, it is immersion in the full spectrum of musical possibilities involved in the western classical music tradition. But, we do not expect that children be assaulted with flash cards with the faces of composers for visual identification or that they should be forced to recognize composer’s work in preschool.

Despite the emphasis on classical music and its undisputed value for the development of children’s perceptual templates, it is our opinion that equally important is the exposure to musics of many types – world musics, jazz, country, rock, pop, reggae, and so on. One of our strong recommendations to the Fisher Price music series is that the recordings represent a variety of musical styles. Children need to become aware, and take for granted, that the musical materials of rhythm, melody, timbre, and harmony can come in many forms.
We question the social justice of presenting Western classical music as the privileged music, as the music that has the most highly valued inspiration and worth, as the only “classic” music. Who are the children we are educating? What are the musics that are valued in their culture defined in the broadest terms? What musical styles might we immerse the children in? What musical languages can we offer them? What musical values are we imposing and are they honouring the child’s world?

**Manipulable Elements**

Children need time to manipulate and play with sound, instruments of all sorts, their own voices, their body as musical instrument. They need music that they can enjoy and master easily. They need to have fun. Formal music lessons can wait. Children are composers of stories and songs. Music is part of their play. It is one of the hundred languages of children (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 1998). Let’s develop that language by giving them voice.

Beyond creating sound, which can easily become subverted by a teacher’s cultural understanding and desire to show off achievement into merely “learning songs,” children need to learn that the elements of music themselves can be manipulated, that it is permissible to manipulate these dimensions of music. Replication of prescriptions with accuracy, the mere learning of songs and music as prescribed by someone before, may be an important part of culture, but when this becomes the only focus of early education the memes of the child are formed to limit music and musical expressions. When the child learns that pitches can be freely strung together to form melodies, that existing melodies can be altered, that the rhythms of melodies can be reorganized, that sounds can be found in many places and employed with known songs or new sound collages, the child learns to understand music at a deeper level that mere replication, and begins to develop the expressive and communicative potential with sound that encourages ongoing engagement.

One of the persistent concerns of music educators of all types at higher levels is music reading. Very many children never learn to read music. But also very many children
never learn to “compose” their own musical “stories.” Research in language learning (Cameron, 1989) shows that when children learn to write their own stories they are more likely to learn to read at the same time. Encouraging children to compose their own music is a crucial part of their learning to replicate and “read” music.

Might we suggest that early childhood teachers need to open creative possibilities for the young child. Early childhood education is not about learning how to perform a song one correct way but rather to take a song and vary it, to compose and create something like it using the musical materials at hand. A priority in early childhood is to develop musical questions. Not simple questions like “who composed it?” but rather questions like, “how can you make music that sounds like bells ringing?” or “what do children sing in Sri Lanka?” or “how could we play a comb?” or “what pictures can you hear in this music?” or what moves does this sound like? Or what sounds do these moves suggest.” It could be about the obvious - composing and recording a song. It could also be about acting “air band” style to a favorite song, or rapping the classroom rules, musically illustrating a story, or exploring the sound of glass bottles with varying amounts of water in them (obviously with adult supervision! not intrusion!).

The collaborative research project called, How to catch a moonbeam and pin it down (Young, 2005), sought to identify factors which support or hinder artists working in early childhood settings and to explore aspects of young children’s creativity. They found that integration of the arts was imperative and that “young children’s imaginative experience is syncretic and slips easily across mode to mode” (p. 296). All the artists involved in the project, irrespective of their art discipline, “gravitated towards improvised activity in sound and movement.” The “unifying experience of arts-based activity for very young children is its dynamic temporal structure.” “Movement in space is made dynamic and affect-rich through variations of energy input” (Young, 2005). Imaginative improvisations that are allowed to evolve are the stuff of play. Ideas that can change, morph, expand, split are the magic. Young (2005) recommends that “music should move toward versions which allow them to engage creatively with generic time-based, multimodal improvisations that expand into playful game-like or narrative-like forms” (p.300).
**Encouraging Teacher**

Early childhood educators typically do not feel pressure to have students pass exams, reach a certain level, have polished performances and so do not tend to push their students. Testing has not hit preschool yet. Characteristically people who choose to work in Early Childhood Education are caring people who love children and their priority agenda is to work with kids, not to teach a particular subject. What matters is whether the child is happy, healthy, having fun, learning to get along with others…developing “normally.”

There are some schools or centers, however, that do have performance expectations that force children to be and do activities that are beyond what little ones should be asked to do. Our recent national study of parents’ perceptions of children’s homework (Cameron and Bartel, 2007) is revealing that homework is now finding a place in kindergarten. This striving for perfection, for skill acquisition, and for learning that pushes or hurries children has the effect often of discouraging, lowering self-efficacy and developing stress. Imagine failing at this fragile age. It would have a much more deleterious effect than going without the schooling.

Little children need time to play. And, they need a teacher who will act as play partner to encourage, inspire, celebrate, cajole, challenge with adequate support, facilitate, nurture and care about each one of them. Encouragement is active and persuasive, it is working alongside, it is provoking ideas and questions while supporting a child’s search for understanding, it is providing rich experiences that inspire and inform. It is not “pushy,” aggressive, and negative.

We do not learn or think readily if we are stressed and pressured. Our best work happens when we are in a safe and caring environment (it bears repeating!). Some music teachers have argued that you need someone who is strict and demanding for progress to be made. We would suggest that that is only one teaching strategy (too often seen as a necessary
one for music justified by “music teaches discipline”) and one that has more negative repercussions than is necessary (Cameron & Bartel, 2000).

“People are important in the music-making experiences of children” (Fox, 1991, p.45). She cites a number of studies that point to the importance of caring supportive teachers in the musical development of children. For example, she reports that John Sloboda’s interviewees remembered experiences that were informal, relaxed, supported by loved ones, and without evaluation or competition, as the most meaningful. In another study, exceptionally talented concert pianists identified as most significant the warm personal relationships they had with a first teacher in early childhood and with a positive role model who cared for them first as a person and secondly as a musician. Supportive adults “who nurtured the musical behaviours all along the age spectrum of development” were the key (Fox, 1991).

**Desire to achieve**

Little ones want to learn. It has not yet been “whipped out of them.” They don’t complain about boredom when the learning environment is exciting and enticing. Self-motivation is there. The challenge in ECE is to provide the opportunities, the tools, the time, the short interesting demonstrations, the feedback and the fun, and they will take off. Genuine celebration of children’s work is so important to fostering motivation. Little ones seem to live in “flow” (Czsikzentmihalyi).

This motivation, curiosity, and desire assumes, of course, a healthy and well adjusted child coming from a home that is stable. It is amazing how many very little children today are unhealthy, lacking in energy, stressed, scarred, and scared. Music for them may need to be therapy – to soothe their souls and comfort them. But, what many music teachers do not recognize is that the phenomenon imputed to older students, that they have the desire to achieve but lack the ability to self-motivate, probably has its roots in teacher controlling, replicative, perfection-seeking pedagogy of early and middle childhood. The motivation of the older student becomes sabotaged by the “voices” of criticism and control experienced many years before.
Performance-focused feedback

We discussed feedback as a general concern in the model of the conditions of learning above, so we merely reiterate the central ideas. Evaluation needs to focus on what the child has done rather than on the child, whether positive or negative criticism. For example, you might say, “I enjoyed the song that you just sang at the water table. Did you compose it yourself? Where did the idea come from?” Here you are commenting on what the child did. In contrast you might have said, “You are a good girl for making such a nice song.” Person-directed feedback is most dangerous when the child is attacked personally for a poor performance. “You are bad!” “You can’t sing!” “You never pay attention!” This is a tricky thing to remember in the moment but it matters.

Optimistic expectation

Again, we have already raised this point earlier. The teacher inevitably communicates an expectation of potential and achievement to the child – this expectation needs to be optimistic. Max Van Manen (1986) calls for a pedagogy of hope – an approach with children that offers the expectation for positive possibility. Optimism boosts energy, pessimism saps it. This is where a child’s self-efficacy is affected—the realistic understanding of what you can or can’t do. It is also where the pivot point between challenge and support matters. To be in “flow,” one needs to be working at something that is within the “construction zone”...something attainable with effort. Setting goals together with the child that are within his or her zone of proximal development and helping the child believe that it is attainable, is important.

Little ones sometimes believe that they are doing something beyond what is possible. They scribble-write long stories, pretend that they are giants and stomp about the room believing that they are all powerful, and they imagine that they can fly. This optimism is about the power and potential of the imagination and we must remember to believe with them in their pretend play. Why can’t they conduct the symphony or be an opera singer? Early childhood educators need to be good at moving between reality and fantasy.
Let little ones try on musical personas. Let them believe that they are musicians. Let them consider their compositions, performances, and explorations of sound real. Believe with them that they can and they will!

**Student-appropriate challenge**

A problem in the context of more advanced education is the possibility that the music making of the students under the direction of the teacher becomes musically rewarding for the teacher, and the teacher begins making musical decisions related to what and how music is made to stimulate and satisfy the teacher’s musical and psychological needs. This is rarely if ever a significant issue with teachers of very young children. However, zealous teachers, especially music specialists who work with many levels and “drop in” on the kindergarten group only periodically, may need to remember to keep the musical invitations and demonstrations developmentally appropriate. Give the children choice and ownership. We talk about student-centred active learning as being a positive condition for learning that is engaging. Teacher centred, top-down classrooms are not nearly as exciting, engaging or motivating.

The advantage that little children have is that they have the courage to walk away from things that are not real, meaningful, or relevant to them. They are not inhibited about letting the teacher know what they want to do or not. They ignore bad ideas put forth by over zealous teachers who want to deliver curriculum. When do we lose that courage to be ourselves and do what we want?

Custodero (1998, 2003, 2005) found that children are able to adjust the level of challenge to match what they know and how skilled they believe they are. They seem to know how to help themselves, who can help them and what to seek out to facilitate that learning. Let’s be ready.

**Holistic Approximation**

The concept of approximation comes from language learning theory. We naturally model language for the infant and the child’s first language attempts are approximations of the
fully articulated word. Typically when the child approximates “mama” no matter who distantly, we accept the attempt – no, we rejoice in the attempt—and more vociferously model the intended word. This is very different from “instruction.” Think of the first piano lessons many children receive – reading and technique based verbal instruction with a bit of modeling followed by the requirement of repetitive practice to get it right. When the expectation of fine-grained perfection in that technique sets in, you have the making of discouragement and discontinuation. Typically we have had little place for modeling and holistic approximation of the musical model.

This is easier in the earliest parts of childhood because the expectations are more holistic. Programs like Suzuki that are premised on the nurture by love philosophy ideally teach the parent who models the behaviours for the child and the child learns the music through a process of approximation similar to language—it is the mother-tongue approach to music education. Although the method originally had a focus on making music enjoyable and accessible for young children, current competitive parenting, and teachers personally educated traditionally can easily become focused or even obsessed on getting it right without making technical mistakes. We recently heard of a child was hounded by an overzealous parent to stand right, hold the bow right, bow properly, look in the right direction as the parent hovered anxiously and cringed at every mistake, and then over congratulated in relief when the child was done. What is this mother really modeling in relation to music? What does this do to the young child. She wants to quit and the mother wonders why?! In every musical encounter we need to be aware of what we a re really modeling. We may be saying one thing or showing something but modeling a very different thing. What really matters in early childhood music?

**Equality of opportunity**

The dilemma connected to this goal becomes troublesome when performance excellence must be balanced with giving all kids a chance to participate. In early childhood situations music performance is typically not competitive… hopefully. However, teachers do have the motivation to present “excellence” when there is public performance. There may even be the temptation to “hand the drum” to the child you know has a more
advanced sense of beat than others so that the activity will be more pleasant. In the early years we must be put equity of opportunity ahead of apparent ability or performance excellence.

Another perspective on this, however, raises a different issue. Children develop rapidly in the first few years of life and the nature and quality of the immersion and demonstration quickly create ability and potential disparity among children. This may be a cultural or socio-economic issue. Some children have instruments in their homes. Some have musical family members. Some have music in their lives from all sorts of sources…..but there are some that do not. This may well be an issue of social justice.

Early childhood educators have the opportunity to help make up for what is missing in the child’s early home experiences. We cannot assume that a child’s life is empty of musical experience if he or she is from another culture, socio economic group, or has some developmental difference. It might mean providing some take home CD’s, a lending library, arranging some concert experiences or special performances at school. It does mean celebrating what the child brings.

Some early learning centres have music specialists, musical tools and music as part of the program. There are too many that are lacking. We all need to advocate for music in early childhood education! However, let’s be careful what we are fighting for.

**Collaborative environment**

Because music is “noisy” teachers at all levels tend to prefer whole group music activities with the teacher firmly in control. This model of teaching corresponds closely with traditional models of teacher-student relations. It also, in music, emulates the role of conductor and ensemble which, traditionally and still in too many places, becomes a small scale reenactment of the tyrannical practices within which the role of musical conductor developed in the 19th century. The dilemma in music education as a whole is how to balance the problems of “noise” with the current practices of student collaboration.
One of the main purposes of ECE from its inception is for children to learn to play together, to share, to get along, to develop appropriate communication skills—to collaborate. Although this is difficult for the young ego centric child, teachers set up classrooms to encourage or require small groups of children to build blocks together, prepare dinner in the housekeeping center together, measure and spill at the water table, create paleontology digs in the sand, and march in the rhythm band. Children move from large group times to small group times, working in pairs, playing side by side, and sometimes finding a quiet corner by themselves. Marks are not posted. Children are not tested. Grades are not given. Direct child-to-child comparison is avoided.

Fortunately ego boosting, relationship destroying competition is not the norm for early childhood education. When competition is introduced, stress, pressure and all sorts of uncomfortable behaviours emerge in the teaching/learning process. Many argue for its merit, many against its because of its negative affects. The main reason given for its worth is that the world is competitive and one needs to be able to survive in that condition. It seems that if one cannot learn to collaborate, communicate, and cooperate, life would be difficult.

St. John (2006) suggests that “Through exploration and manipulation, expansion and invention, collaborative efforts among the child music-makers lead to ownership and transformation of the music content as it unfolds.” When kids work together, great things happen leading to new modes of interaction and enhanced musical experiences. “Ideas traveled around the community of learners culminating in a rich quality of experience that was the result of many contributed efforts” (St. John, 2006, p.253). So despite the inherent difficulties very young children have with true collaboration, it must be an intentionally created dimension with music as well as the sand table.

**Authentic music-making**

In the discussion of the conditions of learning model above, “use” in authentic situations was examined. Because a child learns in a condition of play and imagination, “authentic
use” occurs in many varied contexts. Little ones enjoy making music first and foremost because they love making music on the spot, day and night, everywhere. It is natural to make music while participating in the rights and rituals of society: singing in church, humming lullabies, singing grace, singing carols. It is not about standing on a stage with a song that has been practiced and practiced – although even that can be imagination-infused play of sorts.

Children sing as they walk, play, think, work, lie in their beds, and when they wonder. Sometimes when asked to perform a known song, they stubbornly refuse but later the song bursts out without intention. They dance and love to play instruments. Children are musicians! The most popular children’s CDs are sing-alongs. Music should be fostered as a community activity. We must guard against elevating the stage performance as more important that this spontaneous music, lest we devalue it and thereby quench it. In fact we must encourage and celebrate the spontaneous and activity-imbedded “performances.”

Early childhood “performances” are wonderful because they are genuine, generally without inhibitions. No one can make the children perform perfectly every time—they do it their way and that is the magic. Recitals are typically designed to show off achievement; however, when little children are marched onto the stage to sing in a group, what matters is seeing their enlivened faces and their waving hands while they do their best (if they sing at all!).

Performance can play havoc with engagement and enjoyment when it is contrived. It can create incredible stress, accentuate negative aspects of pride, increase chances of failure in the moment, and develop fear and anxiety related to music which should be a natural form of play and expression. The performers who shine still suffer. “Practice makes perfect” is part of the contrived performance process and will not work in early childhood education.
**Student-responsibility**

For all learners, having choice and ownership increases engagement and enjoyment. Teacher-directed, preconceived and structured curriculum that allows little room for the pursuit or children’s individual and spontaneous interests can crush engagement and motivation very quickly. It is our job as educators to immerse children in lots of musical possibilities and to invite children to bring their music to school or daycare. A wide range of possibilities and opportunities to choose will enrich the musical life of the child.

**Social Play**

This is a “given” in Early Childhood Education. Private lessons and long, lonely, secluded practice sessions are not yet part of children’s life – although the possibility for a motivated parent to start a child in violin lessons at age three exists with the attendant danger of requiring the child to practice increasingly longer periods of time. Music is generally community based in ECE. Patricia St. John (2006) states: “Community is at the heart of creative collaboration. The community provides the enabling foundation from which collaborative efforts emerge: growth in relationship leads to the evolution of thoughts, ideas, and projects” (p.238). St. John goes on to cite Csikszentmihalyi (1990), Dissanyake (2000), and Trevarthen (2002) in her claim that a community of learners where one feels a sense of belonging is “encouraging, expanding, and extending contributions within a community of learners, especially in early childhood.”

**Healthy Childhood Holism**

A concern mentioned earlier is that parents today feel the pressure to have their children learn more earlier and pass that onto their children. They sign mere babies up for many programs. Products are purchased to foster particular learning: toys, videos, computer programs, CD’s. Parents feel incredible guilt if their children are not in music, dance, sports, a second language, or are not attending the best nursery school. Expectations have been raised in all sorts of areas of learning. Music programs have emerged to buy into this market. Beware! There are long term costs to starting children too young on the road to Carnegie Hall and expecting too much. Burnout, anxiety, boredom, frustration all are results.
A very important consideration for parents and care-givers today is not just what the child is doing, but what the child is not doing because of all the structured activities they are expected to do. Where is the play, the imagination, the time to internalize experience, the opportunity to create? Does the child really have the opportunity for a healthy holistic childhood? Parents, it seems, are the most guilty of pushing peak achievement in early childhood through incessant structured activity motivated partially by the imperative of risk reduction. We would be wise countering this in music education, advising parents to let the children enjoy musical experiences while they are young.

Musical–soulful reward
Why do we make music? As already discussed in relation to authentic music making, there are musical and social reasons to make music – most of which related to the inner life, the soul. Even for the very young music is the voice of the soul. Children can express their deepest feelings through their songs: their joy, sadness, delight, hurt, fear, anger, peacefulness. A few verses of *If you’re happy and you know it* cheers even the bleakest heart. We have heard children singing very sad renderings as they ponder, soulful pieces emerging from deep within. Then there are the playground songs. Music is for the soul and from the soul in childhood. There is little room for striving for ego enhancing achievement. But, contrived performance – performance that is designed as an educative experience rather than an authentic experience, performance designed to demonstrate a child’s achievement – provides the reward of an ego boost. Music education that makes this the central focus can sustain effort in some children for a long time – even into advanced levels of study. These musicians do music because it is a showcase to demonstrate their ability, their achievement, not because they love music in an authentic socially referenced manner.

Love the music
Our ultimate goal, to which all the goals above are in direct service, is to development in a child a deep and honest love of music.
References


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