

Musical Play in Early Years Education: Towards a Model of Autonomy through Adult Support

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1. OVERVIEW

The present study explored preschool children's musical play focusing on the role of the practitioner through the analysis of data collected by questionnaires and interviews with children and teachers in early childhood centres of Athens, Greece. Based on Froebel's notion of the importance of children's development through free play, the study aimed to investigate the teacher-learner interactions and the level and nature of teachers' input in children's play. Themes revealed and discussed include definitions of play, means of musical play, play routines, play companions and the role of the adult in children's play. Findings demonstrate a misunderstanding on behalf of the teachers of some basic aspects of play, like freedom, as well as contradictions between children's and teachers' understanding and practices. Although practitioners acknowledge in theory different issues related to play, they do not always encourage free play in practice and they usually adopt the role of an observer instead of a partner. Children's voice for more free play is reinforced, as well their need for a higher level of adult involvement in their play activities.

2. MUSICAL PLAY

Many educators have emphasised the importance of play for children's development and wellbeing from different perspectives: to facilitate educational goals by allowing children to apply their knowledge and examine their ideas (e.g. Froebel, 2005), or as a means of emotional and cognitive development (e.g. Vygotsky, 1933; Piaget, 1962). Froebel (2005) describes three types of play: i) 'imitations of life and of the phenomena of actual life', ii) 'spontaneous applications of what has been learned at school', and iii) 'spontaneous products of the mind' (p.303). Music has a place in all the above types. During the first years of life musical play mainly develops in various forms of vocalisations, singing and movement. Children incorporate a variety of music elements into their play: rhythm, melody, timbre, tempo, dynamics, as well as patterns of phrasing, repetition, opening and closure. Dramatic, role and pretend play, play a substantial role in children's development, and are widely adopted by early childhood curriculums (Fumoto & Robson, 2012).

3. MUSICAL PLAY AND CREATIVITY

Duffy (2006) discusses the common characteristics that creativity and play share, among them the ability 'to explore new ideas', 'to cope with uncertainty', to discover multiple solutions (divergent thinking), to create and recreate (pp. 24-25). In addition, play enhances skills essential for creativity, such as flexibility and problem-solving ability. Intrinsic motivation can promote creativity and flow experience (Csikszentmihályi, 1997, Custodero, 2011) and children's early attempts to be creative in music are process oriented. However, the flow experience can easily be affected by the adults' nature of intervention (Custodero, 1998). Play is by nature a creative process, especially when it develops within conditions that allow free expression and spontaneity.

4. THE ADULT'S ROLE IN MUSICAL PLAY

Self-initiated musical play can be promoted when children are allowed a free educational environment that offers plenty of stimuli. A school environment that encourages autonomy and flexibility can facilitate not only children's play processes but also the development of their creative thinking (Koutsoupidou, 2008; Koutsoupidou & Hargreaves, 2009), which is a major goal of education. According to Froebel, play allows children 'to think flexibly, to adopt what they know, try out different possibilities and reach abstract levels of functioning' (Bruce, 2004, p. 132). Froebel (2005) argues about the importance of children's development through free play acknowledging the child's 'desire to seek and find the new, to see and discover the hidden' (p. 105). A child's perception of the new and the interesting may well differ from that of an adult (Kangas, 2010). The adult-child interaction as component of play activities may have a positive effect on skill development in different cognitive domains. In a Vygotskian perspective (Vygotsky, 1978) based on the zone of proximal development, it becomes apparent that the practitioner needs to take an active role in the play and learning process to help children develop their full potential. Adults at school settings can promote creative play by ensuring a rich play environment in terms of stimuli, resources and materials (Tarnowski, 1999).

5. AIMS, METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

Littleton (1998), when discussing children's musical play, expressed her desire to ask young children about their own experiences and feelings regarding musical play. An attempt to investigate the children's perspective was more recently made by Marsh (2010), yet not particularly on musical play. In addition, there has been inadequate research exploring preschool teachers' perspectives regarding play in early years education and the different roles they can adopt as educators. To fill the gaps in the literature the present study addressed the following questions:

- a) What are early years practitioners' perceptions and practices regarding musical play?
- b) How do early years practitioners consider their own role and input within children's play?
- c) How do children (aged four to five) understand musical play and what do they believe about their teachers' role/s when playing?

The study consisted of three phases. Phase A (teacher survey) aimed to explore the nature of musical play in Greek early childhood settings through questionnaires addressed to preschool teachers (N=50). Phase B (interviews with teachers) served as a complimentary approach to the survey and focused on children's musical play during their stay at early childhood centres, as observed by teachers (N=8). Phase C (interviews with children) aimed to investigate children's understanding and practices of musical play within the school setting (N=11). Quantitative data of Phase A were coded and statistically analysed. Data of Phases B and C were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Defining play and musical play

Teachers seemed to generally acknowledge the value of play and incorporate a variety of

play activities in their daily school routines; however, it is not always clear whether they do understand the differences between the different types and contexts of play. Their definitions of play focused on entertainment and creativity, while freedom was hardly mentioned among its characteristics. Most of them defined play as means to transform knowledge and social/communication skills to children, which ascribes to play the qualities of an educational tool: musical play for pedagogy and not as pedagogy (Hargreaves, 2013). This recalls Froebel's notion of play being used in an adult-led environment to facilitate educational goals.

Within their effort to define musical play, teachers placed an emphasis on the links between musical play and different aspects of emotional and cognitive development. Musical play activities appear to be even more structured than general play activities with the adult predefining the context and the tools that are going to be used by the children. Teachers seemed to ignore the importance of free exploration as well as the ability of children to develop spontaneous musical play practices with no guidelines or relevant equipment (Gluschankof, 2005). Children reported play episodes that had taken place at home, but did not mention similar experiences linked to school based activities. The adult's input and the school framework seems to cause a critical effect on how children detach 'musical play' from 'play'. Children's conceptualisation of musical play is less based on freedom and more relied on instructions and limitations set by adults.

6.2 Means of musical play

Although teachers claimed that they do make use of different music tools, namely percussion instruments, songs, recorded music and body sounds, children expressed some different opinions: they reported that they are not usually allowed to use the musical instruments and that their teachers set rather strict rules regarding their use. Katerina, five-years-old, reports: 'I know [how the instruments sound] because the teacher of the younger children next door also has these [musical instruments] in their classroom... and when the doors are open I can listen to them. But the ones here in our classroom... I have never touched them!' Musical instruments are considered noisy and distracting by teachers; thus, they often choose to not use them: 'There are musical instruments at the music corner and the children go and play with them. But the outcome is not good... there is bad use of the instruments and too much noise around' (Penny, practitioner interviewee).

6.3 Play routines

Musical play takes place at various areas of the preschool classroom, indoors or outdoors, in designated or non-designated spaces. According to teachers, musical play mostly occurs at the so called 'music corner' of the classroom, possibly because the specific corner provides materials and various stimuli for playing with music. Free play again holds a very low ranking in teachers' selection of activities linked to musical play. Revealing a different perspective, all children participants enthusiastically expressed their preference to playing outdoors than in the classroom. However, the classroom reality, according to children, shows that play activities take place mainly indoors and occasionally at special designated areas of the classroom (the 'music corner'). Music activities vary according to children's age: teachers prefer music listening for the youngest ones, body movement for the middle group and use of instruments and structured musical games for the older ones. There was no indication though of free play or creativity in teachers' responses for any of the above age groups.

Most children stated that they prefer to play with their classmates / friends, usually of the same gender. The majority are also keen in playing with adult partners, teachers or parents.

6.4 The role of the practitioner

Teachers may adopt different roles when working with young children. A teacher-partner is a person actively involved in children's play. This teacher talks a lot with the children and adopts an equal role while they play together. Children described their experiences from their interactions with a teacher-partner vividly. In such experiences, teachers act as facilitators; they extend and motivate the child (Kemple et al., 2004). However, it should be noted that the nature of the adult-child interaction can affect the play experience of the child, either enhance or constrain it (Koops, 2012). The teacher-observer, on the contrary, is a person detached from the actual learning experience. Teacher participants reported approaches that are more typical of a teacher-observer. They provide guidance, stimuli and materials, but they regard play initiation only as providing a framework and guidelines. Children's responses imply that teachers often adopt a passive role in teaching and learning. They also generate questions about the reasons teachers choose an inactive role while children play. Would that be related to their own educational background - meaning lack of knowledge and experience of what to do (Koutsoupidou, 2010)? Alex, a teacher interviewee mentioned how 'puzzled' she feels when children initiate musical play because she has no special knowledge or education on the specific subject.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the present study showed that children's and teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards musical play may vary. Children are often forced to adopt notions of how play should be, according to the experiences they are exposed to. Teachers' definition of play as an activity not linked to freedom may imply that play in early childhood settings applies in adult centred or adult guided frameworks with a very low level of child initiative involved; this could eventually lead to the restricted development of skills like critical thinking, problem solving and creativity. Research on effective pedagogy in the early years confirms the effectiveness of a balance between adult-initiated group work and free play activities (Siraj-Blatchford & Silva, 2010).

Early years practitioners not only need to be well-educated and skilled to deal with musical play when entering the preschool classroom; they also need enabling learning and teaching environments. Small class sizes, availability of materials and resources and adequate play spaces are some of the factors that need to be ensured by educational leaders. Resources were found to be insufficient in most preschool settings in the present study, while in some cases they were present but not available for children to use. The latter may imply teachers' lack of appreciation for musical play, and hence raises the need for higher levels of formative guidance, supervision and assessment of early years practitioners. In addition, it should alert policy makers i) for the development of an improved early years curriculum, in which play, and musical play in particular, would be more appreciated and secured, and ii) for the provision of opportunities for practitioners' continuing professional development.

Hargreaves' notion of play for pedagogy (2013) demonstrates teachers' focus on transmitting knowledge to children in order for them to achieve certain learning outcomes and reach the expected milestones. This notion consists a shift from the genuine nature of

play, which is mainly related to the inner need of children to learn while playing and not only by playing. Autonomous learning may be better associated with the former notion of play, while the latter incorporates a higher level of adult control and input. The use of musical play as a vehicle for learning can become a valuable tool for the early years educator (Paquette & Rieg 2008); it should however not ignore children's need for self-expression and joy. It is important for adults to support children's musical play by 'setting up a situation that involves choice, allowing a child to take control of music making' (Koops, 2012, p. 25). Adults may promote children's development and learning in both an autonomous and a supportive manner by facilitating the formation of effective 'communities of [musical] learners' (Rogoff et al., 2001), being flexible, imaginative and creative.

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