

Music as Experience: from Dewey to Rogoff

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Abstract

Children are surrounded by sound and music. Educators have a responsibility to help children discover how to listen to the world around them in a conscious way and how to use sound and music as a means of expressing this understanding of the world. As Wylie suggests, music "has the power to inspire, to delight, to transform and to motivate" the child who has found how to hear, and has been given a wide range of musical opportunities (1996: 11). Pound and Harrison (2003) suggest that musicality is an attribute with which we are all equipped and many societies consider that everyone is naturally musical. In all societies music serves a vital function. Current practice in early childhood education concentrates on such concepts as play-based learning, problem-based learning and child-centered curriculum. Whilst, on the surface, the rhetoric of current practices such as these, sound benevolent and democratic, they may be seriously limited if music is no longer evident in the everyday play environment.

[Key Words] music, John Dewey, Barbara Rogoff

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with the role to which musical experiences have been relegated in many early childhood programs in recent years. Widespread use of pre-recorded instrumental music and singing used as a control mechanism has seen the language of music take a back seat to literature and the visual arts. Part of a larger project, this present study describes data that has been collected using a variety of observational methods of three year old children encountering music in a formal program. This formal program has been designed to introduce high quality musical experiences back into the children's educational environment. The context for the project involves a special physical space, a musician with a deep philosophical approach to her music and a group of children who attend an early learning centre together. This stage of the study has been sparked by an interest in the importance and role of content in the early childhood curriculum. Ideas about the content of experience (Dewey, 1944) are revisited and Rogoff's (2003) view of intent participation is explored. In some ways the paper should be called From Rogoff to Dewey.

In the 1920s John Dewey criticized the pedagogical interpretation of some educators in the progressive education movement for failing to engage children in a reciprocal relationship of growth and learning (Geiger, 1958). Agreeing with Dewey, Geiger further suggested that as children are cultural novices there is a danger they will become passive observers if left to decide curriculum content on their own. Dewey and Geiger did not advocate a non-interventionist mode of pedagogy. Dewey considered children's passing interests to be important as a motivating factor in early childhood education but inadequate as a means for providing a life-changing experience. This opinion from the 1920s would find resonance today with the ideas of Rogoff (2003). Rogoff has adopted the term "intent participation" and suggests that children:

...everywhere learn by observing and listening-in on activities of adults and other children Intent participation is a powerful form of fostering learning. It contributes to impressive learning such as that accomplished by young children learning their first language and continues in importance throughout life. (Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Correa-Chavez, & Angelillo, 2003, p. 176)