

**Research Poster Presentation Proposal**  
**American Orff-Schulwerk Association National Conference**  
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**Children and Musical Play: An Ethnographic Case Study**

Early childhood educators, researchers, and scholars have long acknowledged the significant role of play in the education of young children and many have viewed play as the child's pathway to learning (Erikson, 1963; Fler, 1999; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). Although play is widely accepted as an essential teaching strategy in early childhood settings, it is traditionally not regarded or valued as a critical component of music instruction for young children. Instead, a large-group, teacher-centered approach is most frequently used to facilitate learning in early childhood music settings (Andress, 1998). Research indicates that both early childhood generalist teachers and music specialists commonly employ a teacher-directed and teacher-controlled instruction style for early childhood music classes (Morin, 2001; Smith & Montgomery, in press). Although singing games, an example of children's structured play, can be found in many early childhood music classrooms taught by generalists and specialists (Lew & Campbell, 2005), free musical play is rarely embedded within the overall curriculum structure (Smith, 2005). Even though the place of play in early childhood music education has been explored by a few researchers over the past decade (Berger & Cooper, 2003; Gluschankof, 2005; Jackson-Gough, 2003; Littleton, 1991; Nilsson, 2002; Smith, 2005; Smithrim, 1997; Stevens, 2003; Tarnowski & Leclerc, 1994; Young, 2003; 2004), musical play as a practice in early childhood education is still not commonly accepted or implemented.

The findings of the recent study *Children and musical play: An ethnographic case study* will be presented through this research poster. The purpose of the study was to observe, transcribe, and reflect upon the activities of young children as they participated in musical play and endeavor to answer the research question, "What do children do when they are given the opportunity to engage in musical play?" As noted earlier, music in early childhood settings is most often presented through whole group instruction and even though play is widely accepted and utilized as a teaching strategy in early childhood settings it is often not included as a strategy in early childhood music instruction. As Addison (1991) indicates, children are "crippled musically by being deprived of the opportunity to play with musical materials in the same way that they play with other play objects" (p. 212).

This qualitative study was conducted in one Canadian Junior Kindergarten setting and involved 18 four-year old children. The children had the opportunity to engage in musical play, once a week during a one-hour period over 9 weeks. The data for this observational study was collected through video-tape, transcribed observations, journal entries, and artifact collections. The findings emerged into two distinct layers. The first layer was composed of the children's clearly observable music and non-music activities: singing, playing instruments, moving, reading music, writing music, listening, dramatizing and other non-music behaviors. Once the first layer had been identified and analyzed a deeper look at the data revealed broad themes related to children's learning: music literacy, cognition, creativity, and social and emotional development. The study revealed that children taught themselves and each other about music while they were at play in an environment that included a variety of musical instruments and other equipment and resources. They challenged themselves and each other as they participated musically. They cooperated, assisted, discussed, and observed when they were at play. They appeared to appreciate and enjoy the freedom of choice to perform and participate musically both individually and with others. Musical play offered them this option, while traditional, large group music classes often insist that everyone in the group works and performs together.

Children took full advantage of the music play-time and often spent long periods of time focused on one activity, at the same time knowing that they had the option of exploring many aspects and activities associated with music. Once the music play-time began, the focus of the children was centered on their music making. The trusting environment in which the children participated resulted in purposeful musical exploration and enthusiastic participation. They treated each other, the instruments, and other equipment with respect.

The analysis of the data answered the research question in the following way. When children are given the opportunity to engage in musical play they actively explore the skills of music, they teach themselves and each other about many aspects of music, they engage in conversation about music, they use their time fully and responsibly with the exploration of sound during times of individual and group performance, and they treat music equipment as well as each other, with care and respect. The study demonstrated the joy with which children participate in musical activities during musical play.

Vygotsky (1978) described play as having a prominent place in children's learning and is noted for his frequently quoted remark: "Play creates a zone of proximal development in the

child. In play, the child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is in itself a major source of development” (1978, p. 102). Malaguzzi (1998 b) informs us that children have one hundred languages, one hundred thoughts and one hundred ways of thinking, playing, and speaking (p. 3). The children in this study show us the many ways they use the language of music to communicate, think, create, and socialize. Musical play creates a zone of proximal development and allows children to develop one of their hundred languages – that of music.

The implications for teaching that emerge from this study are important for early childhood music educators to consider. Teachers of early childhood music would be well advised to provide children with many opportunities for musical play. This study showed that children who are engaged in musical play can enter a zone of proximal development which demonstrates to the observant, informed teacher, both the interests of the children and the level to which they are ready to progress. Teachers can then be prepared to support and scaffold the musical learning of the children and organize the curriculum, materials, and learning environment to more effectively meet the learning needs and interests of the children.