

An Examination of Elementary General Music Students' Actions, Interactions, and Perceptions
of Learning Through Music Play

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Abstract

Researchers suggest that play helps children develop linguistically, socially, cognitively, emotionally, and physically (Bruner, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978; Stone, 1995). Despite the connection researchers emphasize between play and learning, play is often absent in formal educational settings. Similarly, researchers suggest that music play helps children develop their tonal and rhythm audiation and learn the syntax of music (Taggart, 2000; Valerio, 1997; Valerio et al., 2006). I noticed that play was absent in my own teaching. I set out to investigate what happens if I give unstructured learning opportunities to students.

I conducted this qualitative case study in my own elementary general music classroom in a suburb north of Boston, MA. I designed play stations based on tunes and chants from classroom activities. All students in my first- and fourth-grade classes participated in music play. I chose two individual participants to video record during play sessions and interview to understand their perceptions of learning during music play. Each play session lasted 10-15 minutes and data collection did not exceed five play sessions. Data included video recordings of play sessions, researcher reflections, participant interviews, and participant play journals.

With the intent to improve music education instructional practice, the purpose of this study was to describe the actions and interactions of elementary school students during guided free play music sessions in general music class. Research questions guiding this study were:

- 1) What is the musical nature of students' music play?
- 2) How does the music students make relate to teacher and district curricular goals?
- 3) How might the younger and older students differ in their music play? and
- 4) How might students perceive their play in terms of individual learning?

Five main themes emerged in the data: a) joyfulness, b) intrinsic motivation, c) focus, d) working with friends, and e) meaningful musical moments. During play, students seemed to be in a state of flow, they demonstrated all three elements of self-determination theory, and they worked in their zone of proximal development by receiving help from their more capable peers. Students began to bring meaning to the notation on the page as they developed music literacy and an understanding of music syntax.

More research is needed on the connection between music play and music learning. Variations on the play stations, including the repertoire, amount of structure, and time of play sessions could provide new insights and different findings. Finally, it would be beneficial to understand current administrator and teacher attitudes toward play.

Keywords: music play, learning, flow, zone of proximal development, self-determination theory, music literacy, music syntax

Applications to Teaching

- Giving students the chance to play at guided free play stations could enhance their music comprehension
- Allowing students the chance to view notation in informal settings can increase their music literacy skills
- When teachers give students the chance to have musical “conversations” (i.e. improvising in music) they may show signs of understanding musical syntax
- Sharing the benefits of free play sessions with administrators may make both teachers and administrators feel more comfortable with unstructured (or less structured) learning time in classrooms
- Giving students the chance to play with music may encourage them to let go of their fear and take musical risks, which in turn could enhance their learning