



MEDIA RELEASE
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CHILDREN AT PLAY ARE A SIGNPOST TO TEACHING YOUNG MUSICIANS

How and what children do in the playground can guide how better to teach them music in the classroom, according to specialist music educator **Kathryn Marsh**.

Over a 15 year period of observing students in playgrounds in a range of countries, Marsh's internationally recognised research has involved analysis of more than 70 hours of field recordings covering 2,172 musical games across 333 different genres.

This comprehensive study, involving pupils aged from five to 13 in urban and rural settings in Australia, Norway, the US, UK and South Korea, revealed, among other things:

- Children are generally much more adept rhythmically than is reflected in classroom learning activities;
- The “play-like” characteristics of school children’s musical play diverge considerably from the assumptions of “play-likeness” that direct classroom music instruction;
- The high level of importance of popular culture learnt through the media in the lives of children in even geographically remote settings lends weight to its continued incorporation into classroom music education programs;
- Children draw on performative stimuli from their environment in order to both emulate them and to spontaneously improvise multiple variants of their own devising. They utilise models derived from their own and other traditions and from popular culture, in addition to songs learnt in the classroom;
- There is a broad divergence in game performance proficiency between children in different locations, thus supporting the argument for music education programs to be localised, rather than a universal “one size fits all” approach;
- Children’s ability to match pitches within a melody seems to be of secondary importance in playground performance; differences in vocal range in children’s games are also related to indoor versus outdoor performance and to levels of excitement, which cause the pitch of game performance to rise, often between phrases and within a single phrase;
- Such characteristics lead to a major difference between the tonality of children’s playground performances and songs that are taught in the classroom;
- Play involves constant improvisatory evolution, constant self-imposed challenge and constant resistance to adult-imposed norms.

Associate Professor Marsh, who is the Chair of Music Education at The Con, is the author of ***The Musical Playground—Global Tradition and Change in Children’s Songs and Games*** (Oxford University Press), released late last year.

In April, the book was the focus of presentations at the International Research in Music Education conference at Exeter University in England, and later at Cambridge University and the University of Sheffield, as well as the University of Stavanger (Norway).

Says Marsh: “The musical play of school-aged children encompasses a number of genres. These include singing games and chants which are associated with an ongoing oral tradition, such as clapping, jump-rope, counting out and ring games.

“Other forms of musical play derive from performance styles experienced by children within their environment, for example, sporting cheers and dance routines which accompany popular music.

“The ‘play-like’ features of children’s singing games and chants were first incorporated into education approaches in the first half of the 20th century and have since proliferated on a global scale.





“Although there have been changes to repertoire and teaching practices as these music education methods have been assimilated by teachers in different countries, the methodological tenets remain relatively stable.

“The assumed ‘play-like’ features include simplicity of form, rhythm and melody and use of movement as an expression of enjoyment and spontaneity.

“Translated into pedagogical equivalents, ‘play-likeness’ is equated with simple repetitive structures, materials with a restricted rhythmic and tonal palette, and use of movement to develop musical understanding.”

Marsh said her large data set has entailed a lengthy process of analysis, from which many themes have emerged.

“Perhaps one of the most important is found in children’s disposition to ‘play around with’ texts, movements, melodies and rhythms of games in a constant effort to create something new, to increase the level of amusement and to stamp their own imprimatur on the games they play,” she added.

“This improvisatory capacity is enacted in playgrounds in all field locations, resulting in multiple variants of some game genres both within and between playgrounds and across cultural boundaries. Children’s improvisation in their musical play involves a wide range of creative strategies.

“Children also deliberately produce challenges for themselves in their play, resulting in complex rhythms, complicated movement sequences and cumulative lyrics.

“A large number of games create a feeling of heightened expectation through the maintenance of a regular pattern of movements, cyclic rhythms and reiterated melodic phrases. This expectation is then interrupted.

“What is clear is that the musical outcomes of these characteristics negate notions of structural simplicity in children’s musical play.”

Marsh maintains that music education programs in school classrooms need to acknowledge children’s real levels of musical competence.

In particular, they need to incorporate opportunities to create music in more complex ways, using musical materials that reflect their multi-faceted musical environment.

The Dean and Principal of The Con, **Professor Kim Walker**, said: “Kathy’s work in this area is a signpost to continued development in the teaching and encouragement of young people’s natural aptitude for music making, and an ongoing source of pride for the Sydney Conservatorium of Music.”

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