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## An investigation of the music activity preferences of pre-school children

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*Life attitudes to, level of involvement with and success in musical learning are all tied to first musical experiences. Consequently an important objective in the planning of any musical programme for young children is to acknowledge their interests in and attitudes to different musical activities. The purpose of this investigation was to determine young children's attitudes to musical activities included in their pre-school musical programme. In particular it sought to discern if preferences exist for certain activities. What emerged from the investigation is that pre-school children generally appear to respond favourably towards involvement in all musical activities but that preferences do exist for moving and playing based activities.*

### **Introduction**

School musical experiences appear to leave a lasting influence on people's lives regardless of whether this influence is perceived in favourable or unfavourable terms (Temmerman, 1993: 59–65). Studies that have reported on student attitudes towards school musical experiences suggest that methods which actively involve the learner promote a positive attitude to class music and that as a result of active involvement, learning about music takes place. Such studies have found that regardless of gender, country of origin and socio-economic background, perceptions about preferred activities are remarkably similar. Findings from these studies indicate that practical classroom musical activities that promote student involvement are most preferred, and that playing instruments is regarded more favourably than any other activity (for example, Nolan, 1973; Forsythe, 1977; Murphy & Brown, 1986; Temmerman, 1995; Bowles, 1998).

Temmerman's study (1995), conducted with groups of school children aged between eight and ten years in both Australia and the United States, confirms these research findings. She found that:

music experiences that involve playing instruments impact most favourably on young children's perceptions towards music-making . . . The similarity of response . . . is particularly interesting given that each of the four schools included in the survey has a different profile in terms of socio-economic base, population, access to a music specialist, music space utilised for class music experiences, type of curriculum implemented, type of music resources and materials used, and apparent focus of class music activity namely, singing, playing games, listening to tapes, playing instruments, moving and integration with other curriculum areas. (Temmerman, 1995: 264–5)

Temmerman concluded that 'children benefit most musically through engagement in practical activity areas such as playing instruments, in a supportive teaching/learning environment that acknowledges their musical interests and includes their active involvement in music-making'. She advocates the establishment of a 'negotiative' teaching/learning environment 'in which the teacher in collaboration with the students decides what musical experiences will form part of the class music programme'. According to Temmerman this will go a long way to ensuring that children develop a positive attitude to music. More recently Bowles (1998), in her large-scale investigation conducted in Minnesota and Texas into the attitudes of school children (from Kindergarten through to fifth grade) towards class musical activities, also found that students nominated playing instruments as their preferred activity from among singing, dancing/movement, listening, composing, playing instruments and talking about music. She also found 'higher percentages of kindergarteners reported overall positive responses to most activities, and fifth graders reported lowest percentages for all activities compared to students at other levels' (Bowles, 1998: 198). This demonstrates a tendency for positive attitude towards class musical activities to decrease with advancing grade level.

This article is premised on three broad assumptions. First, that children's attitudes play an important role in the learning of music. Second, that if attitudes are negative, then continued involvement with and learning in music is less likely to occur. Third, that it is important for music educators to be both cognisant of and to utilise children's preferences for certain musical activities when developing, implementing and evaluating musical programmes if musical learning and a positive (life-long) interest in music is to occur. This article describes the attitudes of two separate groups of pre-school children (fifty-one children in total) towards musical activities conducted at pre-school. Specific attention is given to determining whether preferences exist for particular areas of activity, namely listening, singing, moving/dancing and/or playing instruments. The results demonstrate that although pre-school age children appear to respond favourably towards involvement in all musical activities – a trend which appears to decline with increasing year level – preferences do exist for specific types of activity (Vander Ark, Nolin & Newman, 1980; Bowles, 1998).

### **Context**

Music is seen as contributing to the total development of the child, including intellectual, emotional, physical, social and aesthetic. It is a natural part of children's lives and activities. Children enjoy singing, moving, dancing, playing instruments, and creating their own musical sounds. Music is connected to play, encountered through radio and television, and associated with special occasions. Young children's engagement with musical activities lays the foundations for learning (Bridges, 1994).

Music educators agree that the first five years are a critical period for children's development in music (Lindberg & Swedlow, 1976; Aronoff, 1979; Comte, 1982; Nye, 1983; Manins, 1990; Harle, 1990; Etzkorn, 1991; Sims, 1990; Bridges, 1994). As suggested by Sims (1990), young children have an amazing capacity to respond to music. However in order for this response and musical aptitude to develop, a nurturing environment is

needed, specifically one that provides opportunity for purposeful activity to take place (Gordon, 1987). Accordingly Sims (1990: 125) proposes that:

one of the teachers' primary goals in planning music activities and instruction for young children . . . is to provide a rich background of experience to serve as a foundation for future learning. Another important goal is to create an atmosphere which will be conducive to the development of positive attitudes towards music and to the enhancement of children's self-confidence about their own musical abilities.

The musical nurturing a child receives during the early years can have a marked impact on later success and level of involvement (Feierabend, 1990) and, as Temmerman (1993) found, future adult attitudes to music. In a survey she conducted with first-year primary-teacher trainees at the commencement of their university degree, Temmerman found that school musical experiences impact substantially on student teachers' current interest and participation in music. The findings indicate that 'with respect to respondents' perceived worst musical experiences . . . primary-school musical experiences received the highest response rate, closely followed by secondary school' (Temmerman, 1993: 62). Comments provided by respondents for their choice included reference to: the types of lessons encountered, which were described as boring and lacking in practical activities; the teacher, who was perceived on many occasions to present a negative attitude towards 'non-musical' students; and forced participation in performances, for example 'having to sing solo in front of the class' and 'having to play recorder at school assembly'.

The musical foundation established during the early years, therefore, needs to provide adequate support for future musical development and learning. Furthermore, if first experiences are enjoyable it often leads to a life-long interest in and positive attitudes towards music (Cass-Beggs, 1990).

Music educators would not refute that music in early childhood needs to be enjoyable. In fact according to Nye (1983), the major emphasis in music for young children should be placed on the satisfaction and enjoyment it brings them. It also needs to be rich in imagination and diversity (Manins, 1990). Research has shown that 'too early an emphasis on the minutiae of musical phenomena can hinder rather than enlighten the spontaneous reaction to, and eagerness to discover more about musical experiences *per se* by young children' (McMahon, 1990: 114). Musical instruction for young children should aim 'to provide a rich background of experience . . . children must participate in activities which maintain the delicate balance of being stimulating and challenging, yet not too difficult or frustrating' (Sims, 1990: 125).

In summary, according to the literature, the essential elements of a developmentally appropriate quality musical programme for young children appear to be to promote achievement in, satisfaction with and overall enjoyment of music, through active participation in a variety of stimulating and challenging music-making experiences based on and utilising a diverse repertoire of music.

## **Method**

For a substantial number of children their first encounter with formal musical education occurs prior to commencing primary school. This study sought to discover if children who

participate in musical experiences at pre-school level (i.e. the year directly prior to commencing primary school) have preferences for particular activities. An integrated interview-questionnaire which contained both closed- and open-ended response questions was developed to solicit information about 'likes' as well as 'dislikes' from each child. (A copy of the questionnaire is to be found at the end of this article.) The questionnaire comprised two sections. The first required some relevant background information about the respondent. Questions in this initial section were intended to be used as a means of determining if any discernible patterns emerged in children's attitudes about musical activities based on gender and/or whether participating in music classes outside pre-school influenced their perception. Both factors were found to be not significant. The second section consisted of a series of questions to determine children's attitudes about listening, singing, moving and playing activities. The closed-ended questions required children to provide either a 'yes' or 'no' response, while the open-ended questions asked children to express in their own words what they liked and did not like about musical activities. The survey was administered in April 1999 by the pre-school teachers with each child on an individual basis over a two-week period. Teachers involved in the implementation of the music programme were also asked to provide descriptive information about the programme, especially about the types of listening, singing, movement and playing activities included.

### **The survey population**

The children were selected from two local pre-schools. These pre-schools were chosen on the basis that both had 'formal' music programmes in place. Both pre-schools are located in a middle socio-economic area of a large industrial district in New South Wales in Australia and cater predominantly for Anglo and Celtic Australian children. All children surveyed are in their second year at the pre-school and so have had prior experience with the music programme. Pre-school 'A' included a group of twenty-nine children (seventeen female and twelve male), twenty-seven aged four years and two aged five, who attend pre-school two days per week. Section one of the questionnaire revealed that 31 per cent of the children participate in music and/or dance classes outside pre-school. All teachers in pre-school A contribute to the implementation of the programme although one teacher assumes greater responsibility for programme development based on her knowledge of and confidence in music-making. Music is conducted each morning for approximately one half-hour. Singing is also used extensively throughout the day as a management technique, for example transition times between activities. Music-making usually occurs in a large hall with ample space for movement. There are non-tuned percussion instruments available, principally rhythm sticks, bells, tambourines and triangles and a CD/tape deck.

Pre-school 'B' included a group of twenty-two children (fourteen female and eight male), eighteen aged four years and four aged five. Most children attend pre-school three days per week. Section one of the questionnaire revealed that 23 per cent of the children participate in music and/or dance classes outside pre-school. Again, all teachers contribute to the implementation of the programme as well as to its development. Formal music time occurs for approximately twenty minutes daily. Singing songs and listening, for example at craft time, is also used extensively throughout the day. Music-making usually occurs on a

carpeted area within the main teaching area and occasionally outside. The pre-school is quite well equipped with both non-tuned and a small array of tuned percussion instruments, namely two alto xylophones, one metallophone and chime bars, as well as a CD/tape deck.

### Results and commentary

All teachers were asked to provide details about typical activities experienced by the children. The music programmes implemented in the two pre-schools share many common characteristics. Both programmes appear to include what music educators agree are the essential elements of music-making that foster children's enjoyment of music.

For *listening* the most frequently occurring activity types are: for children to listen to music as a form of relaxation; to listen and move; and to listen for specific instruments/sounds in the music. A variety of musical types is used for listening including instrumental, folk, pop and children's music. The most frequently occurring *singing* activities are: singing games; echo singing; and whole-class singing. Action and nonsense songs are popularly used along with nursery rhymes, finger-play songs and songs associated with special occasions. Typical *moving* activities include: free expressive movement; moving with defined actions to convey the meanings of song lyrics; moving as a means of reinforcing musical concepts such as fast/slow, high/low; moving to the beat; and moving to develop non-music-specific learning skills such as moving with a partner (a social skill), body awareness and locomotor skills. The most frequently occurring *playing* activities are: to accompany singing by keeping the beat and/or the rhythmic pattern on a percussion instrument; and free experimentation with sounds as produced by different instruments.

The results of this study reinforce the fact that young children are naturally predisposed towards involvement in musical activities as a whole. Most of the fifty-one children (between 97 to 100 per cent) claimed to like all musical experiences they engaged in at pre-school. Even so, preferences for some activities were evident. As shown in Table 1, the most preferred activity is moving, followed by playing instruments. A much smaller number of children selected singing and listening as their most preferred musical activity. In other words preferences appear to exist for activities that tend to include active participation, rather than those which are generally more passive in nature.

Children were asked to qualify their response by commenting on what they liked 'best' about their preferred activity. For most children, participating in *moving* was a

Table 1. *Most preferred musical activity*

	Pre-school A No (N=29)	Pre-school B No (N=22)
Moving/dancing	14	10
Playing instruments	9	8
Singing	3	2
Listening	3	2

pleasurable experience. Common response types included 'I like to move because its good and fun' and 'I like to use my hands and my feet . . . it's nice shaking my whole body and going really fast all over the place'. Many children commented specifically on the types of movement they enjoyed doing, such as wriggling, floating, swaying, jumping, jiving, skipping, sliding, galloping, flapping and twirling. The majority of children also expressed a strong liking for moving activities that allowed them the opportunity to interpret music through movement in their own way, as opposed to more structured, teacher-directed activities. The following comment by a four-year-old boy summarises this view succinctly:

I like it best when I can experiment. Then I can be a galloping horse and sometimes go fast and crazy. One day I got tired and so I just moved some of my body slow, not all of it and I pretended to be a dinosaur. I like to make up dances.

Reasons given for *playing* instruments as the most preferred activity related principally to the sounds produced by the instruments. For example, one boy commented 'They make our songs sound lovely', while another said 'They can go loud and soft and that makes nice music'. The majority of children nominated a favourite instrument. Drums were nominated more than any other instrument, followed by the tambourine, bells and triangles, all three of which received more than five mentions. As was the case for moving activities, children again expressed a strong preference for free, unstructured playing activities that provided them with the opportunity to explore, investigate and produce their own sounds on different percussion instruments. For a smaller group, specific reference was made to enjoying the process of creating their own compositions. For example, according to one child, 'I like making sounds and listening to the sound and singing to the sound and dancing to my music'. Another spoke of having 'fun playing my loud and gentle sounds on the drum with my friend because I want to be in a band'. All responses indicate a positive attitude towards playing activities which provide children with the freedom to explore, create and perform their own sounds and/or 'compositions' on percussion instruments, along with a related sense of accomplishment, ownership and personal satisfaction.

For those who nominated *singing* as their preferred activity, the two most common reasons given were the enjoyment of singing with others, for example 'It makes nice music when we sing together'; and the repertoire of songs learnt. The most popular song types nominated by children were action songs and songs with 'funny words'. Some children matched singing and moving, for example 'Sometimes I just like to dance when we sing'; whilst others focused on accompanying their singing using the percussion instruments, for example 'It's really good when we sing and play. That's what I call interesting'.

Reasons provided for *listening* as a preferred activity, even though a much less preferred activity, included some of the most sophisticated responses. These included: 'I like listening to the music, it's so nice it makes my heart warm' (a four-year-old male); and 'It takes me to a nice, quiet place where I can relax' (a four-year-old female). Responses indicate that most children enjoy listening to 'slow', 'soft', 'gentle' music in rest time or while participating in 'non-musical' activities such as drawing, painting or while completing puzzles.

Some follow-up was conducted with both groups to attempt to discern what aspects of all activity types the children did not like. For *moving*, the least-enjoyed aspects principally

involved either a lack of space to move freely, as exemplified by this four-year-old's comment 'I don't like it when people bump me and we're all squashed up'; or physical exhaustion 'sometimes I get tired 'cause we move and move and move to very fast, crazy music'. In other words, dislikes related more to aspects of how moving experiences are organised and managed than to the actual activity of moving.

The least enjoyed aspects of *playing* instruments related to the level of sound produced where the volume was considered to be too loud. For example according to one five-year-old boy, 'Its too noisy and loud and gives me a headache and I can't concentrate'. Other reasons shared related to lack of opportunity to play particular instruments and repetitive playing, for example 'Sometimes I get bored because we just sit and play the same type of bells all day'. Overall, responses highlight that dislikes relate more to the playing of particular instruments and engaging in playing experiences which children consider lack variety and which involve uncomfortable sound intensity, rather than a dislike of playing instruments *per se*.

Comments given about least enjoyed *singing* activities predominantly made reference to the types of songs included in the programme. Whilst specific songs did receive a mention, most children reported their dislike of singing songs they considered to be too long and not interesting to them. In the words of one child 'I can't do all the songs that are too long', while another said 'I don't like it when we sing the same baby songs – its boring and I get sick of it'. Overall, the findings again point not so much to a dislike of the activity but rather the context in which singing activities are experienced, which appears to cater inadequately for children's interests and tastes. This is well demonstrated in the following comment 'Singing is not really bad, it's just not so exciting as dancing around the room'.

The least enjoyed aspects of *listening* to music principally related to the type of music listened to, for example 'loud', 'boring' music along with a lack of activity associated with listening, for example 'having to lie and sit still and only listen'. Another common response type is exemplified in the following comment 'We always have to listen every day and be quiet and sit, but I want to do something and dance and play the tambourine'. For one child who obviously enjoyed listening activities the most frustrating aspect of listening was 'noisy people who are loud and I can't hear the music'. The results once again demonstrate a firm relationship between attitude towards a musical activity and the context in which it has been experienced.

While this represents a small-scale study so findings should not necessarily be generalised to other pre-school settings, it would appear that children tend to have positive attitudes towards musical activities that provide opportunity to move freely to music; to experiment and explore sounds on percussion instruments, and to create and perform their own sounds on the percussion instruments; to engage in group singing and the singing of action and humorous songs; and to listen to music as a means of relaxation. In contrast children expressed negative reactions to activities that lacked variety, involved inaction, that were perceived to be (age) inappropriate and uninteresting, and where volume levels were unpleasant. Negative comments were also given about contextual constraints which impacted quite substantially on children's attitudes towards the various activities.



## Conclusions

Children learn more, and more quickly, in the first few years of life than at any other time. These early years represent a significant period for enhancing musical development, improving intellectual performance and establishing a base for future learning. Music education programmes for young children need to acknowledge these principles. They need to formulate aims, plan content and learning activities, use teaching strategies and set expectations that are age and developmentally appropriate, and lay the kind of musical foundation that permits the attainment of functional conceptual understandings and the achievement of life-long growth and benefits. Perhaps most importantly programmes need to build on the natural positive relationship young children have with music.

The results of this study with pre-school children confirm the findings of research conducted with older school-age children, namely that preference is given to involvement in musical learning that focuses on active participation of the learner in a variety of activities that are of interest to the learner. If, as this paper purports, children's attitudes to music are an important factor in ongoing learning and involvement in music, there are some implications for those planning and implementing children's music programmes. These include: the need to identify and monitor on an ongoing basis children's attitudes to musical activities; the need to build on young children's positive attitude to music generally and their preferences for certain activities specifically; the need to utilise children's preferred activity types as a means of introducing less preferred musical activities; and the need to address contextual aspects of programme management and environment as well as aspects of curriculum content which impact negatively on children's attitudes to involvement in music.

## Child questionnaire

### Background questions

- |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Age  | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. Sex  | M | F |   |
| 3. Do you go to music classes anywhere else besides pre-school  | Y | N |   |
| 4. If yes, where and what do you do (e.g. Conservatorium Early Childhood Music classes; Music Studio; piano, singing) |   |   |   |

### Questions

- |  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| 5. Do you like listening to music?                               | Y | N |
| 6. Do you like listening to music at pre-school?                 | Y | N |
| 7. What do you like best about listening to music at pre-school? |   |   |
| 8. What don't you like about listening to music at pre-school?   |   |   |
| 9. Do you like singing?  | Y | N |
| 10. Do you like singing the songs you learn at pre-school?       | Y | N |
| 11. What do you like best about singing at pre-school?           |   |   |
| 12. What don't you like about singing at pre-school?             |   |   |
| 13. Do you like dancing/moving?                                  | Y | N |
| 14. Do you like the dancing/moving you do at pre-school?         | Y | N |
| 15. What do you like best about dancing/moving at pre-school?    |   |   |

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16. What don't you like about dancing/moving at pre-school?
17. Do you like playing music instruments? Y N
18. Do you like playing music on the instruments at pre-school? Y N
19. What do you like best about playing the instruments at pre-school?
20. What don't you like about playing the instruments at pre-school?
- \*21. Look at the music activities shown in the pictures. Which activity would you like to do most?
22. Why would you like to do \_\_\_\_\_ the most?
23. Which activity shown in the pictures would you not want to do?
24. Why would you not like to do \_\_\_\_\_?

\*For Questions 21–4, the five picture cards are to be shown to the child. Card one – child listening to music, card two – child singing, card three – child dancing/moving, card four – children playing percussion instruments, card five – children working together with instruments, paper, pens making their own music.

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