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Response to Edwin Gordon’s “Early Childhood Music Abuse: Misdeeds and Neglect”

By

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For more than forty years, Edwin Gordon has dedicated his professional life to studying how children learn music and how music educators can support children’s music learning optimally. With this in mind, it is not surprising that he has strong opinions about what should be occurring in early childhood music classrooms and is somewhat impatient with how slowly the results of his work are being implemented into practice. The purpose of this response is (a) to distill specific applications for early childhood music practitioners directly from the theories and ideas presented in his article, and (b) to begin to define a research agenda based on his ideas.

Implications for Early Childhood Music Practitioners

In his writing, Gordon focuses on the parallels between language learning and music learning and how these similar learning processes revolve around the sequential development of vocabularies and learning to use these vocabularies in context. For both language and music, children first develop learning vocabularies through listening and watching. Eventually they explore language and start communicating by speaking or, in the case of music, by singing, chanting, and moving vocabularies. Children learn to think using these vocabularies and eventually learn to read and write. Gordon’s concern lies in

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the fact that children's music environments are not as rich as their language environments. Children are surrounded much of the time by family members who are speaking to them and to one another, and their language development benefits from this rich language environment. However, children do not experience the same environmental richness musically. As a result, their music learning is not supported sufficiently during their first years of life, when learning can occur at a rapid rate. This upsets Gordon, as well as many other early childhood music educators.

Early childhood music educators are committed to supporting children's music learning, or they would not choose to teach young children on a regular basis. Yet, much of what Gordon has discovered through decades of research has not been put into practice in early childhood music classrooms. The following are suggestions for practice that flow out of Gordon's theories as expressed in his article.

1. Start early. Children can learn music at birth or even during the third trimester, when hearing becomes fully functional *in utero*. As a result, early childhood music educators should offer classes for children from birth or even before. As listening is the first vocabulary to develop, children should be exposed to music as early as possible, even though they may not respond visibly or by making sounds. This will help them develop a listening vocabulary that will lay the foundation for the development of all other vocabularies.

2. Enrich music environments. The quality of early exposure is central to music development. Language researchers have found that children develop better language skills when they come from homes in which parents use a large speaking vocabulary, and that the language skills of those children develop at an exponentially faster rate than the

skills of children who come from less rich language environments. Similarly, children need to be exposed to a rich music vocabulary to support their music development. Early childhood music educators should seek out repertoire in tonalities other than major and minor and meters other than duple and triple for inclusion in early childhood music learning environments so that the music vocabulary they provide to children is as rich as possible.

3. Support parent education. The better the parents' musical skills and the more they know about music learning, the more they can do for and with their children musically at home. Children spend perhaps 45 minutes a week in an early childhood music class, during which a trained music professional does all that he or she can to support the children's music learning. Yet, children spend much more time at home and with their parents. If parents have the skills and knowledge, they can support the music learning of their children on a daily basis. Early childhood music educators should include parents in their classes whenever possible and should view each class as an opportunity to model developmentally appropriate musical parenting and to inform parents about how they can meet the musical needs of their children. Parent orientation sessions and parent/teacher conferences can also serve as useful vehicles to convey important music learning information. Early childhood music educators should also consider providing additional materials that are related to class instruction for parents to read and use at home.

4. Include songs without words. Gordon makes a strong case for performing songs and chants using a neutral syllable rather than with text. He believes that the text of songs interferes with music learning, as the language vocabulary in song and chant texts is

much more familiar to children than the tonal and rhythmic vocabulary and distracts them from the musical content. Early childhood music teachers and parents should explore performing some of the class repertoire using a neutral syllable. As children get older, teachers and parents can introduce the text for those same songs.

5. Include improvisation. With language, children have the opportunity to express their own ideas through speech and eventually through writing. Yet, in music, children rarely have this opportunity. Rather, they sing songs that others have composed and imitate the sounds of the teacher. As students develop a singing, chanting, and moving vocabulary, they need to be given the opportunity to express their own musical ideas through improvisation. Early childhood music educators can and should engage children in conversations through singing, chanting, or moving that give children an opportunity to “converse” and think musically, just as they do with language.

6. Focus on informal guidance rather than on formal learning. Gordon believes that children need a rich exposure to music before they begin to learn about music formally. In this light, early childhood music educators should allow children to “play” with music in an informal setting and, only after they have developed extensive listening, singing, chanting, and moving vocabularies should teachers move on to more formal musical concepts such as solfege and music reading. Informal music experiences provide the foundation upon which all formal music learning will be built. The stronger the foundation of informal music experiences, the better the child’s formal music learning experiences will be.

Incorporation of these six ideas would represent a meaningful change in practice in many early childhood music classrooms, and all of these suggestions are grounded in

research. Perhaps if individual early childhood music educators explored several of these ideas in their own practice, more children would arrive to Kindergarten with the developmental readiness to engage in formal music learning.

Defining a Research Agenda

Gordon has succeeded at what few others have attempted. He has built and carried out a systematic, progressive research agenda that has direct implications for practice. Yet, his research in early childhood music learning, and the work of countless others, is only a beginning of the ongoing research that must continue related to early childhood music learning and teaching. The following are a few of many possible general suggestions for future directions of early childhood music research that are logical outgrowths of Gordon's ideas.

Longitudinal Studies. Unfortunately, few researchers have taken on longitudinal studies of the results of early childhood music instruction. The reasons for this are obvious: longitudinal work is difficult and can be expensive. Yet, it is through longitudinal research that researchers will be able to answer the most important questions about early childhood music learning and teaching. Researchers need to conduct large-scale quantitative studies to investigate the effects of early childhood music instruction on eventual music achievement, participation in music in and outside of school, enjoyment of music participation, and music aptitudes. In addition, case studies are needed to illuminate further the music learning processes from birth or before and how music learning differs among individuals.

Language Studies as a Model. If music learning processes are similar to those of language, studies of language acquisition might serve as useful models for those of music

acquisition. Language acquisition research is much further developed than music acquisition research, perhaps because language skills have been valued to a greater degree in academic settings. As a result, music researchers may be able to benefit from the research designs and questions that language researchers have posed in their studies. Have there been studies in the language domain that should be replicated in music? Pushing the similarities even further, is it possible that music and language learning are not differentiated in very young children?

Interdisciplinary Research. In recent years, music educators have relied to an increasing extent on the work of neurologists who have been studying brain growth, development, and functioning. Yet, few of these neurology studies involve early childhood music researchers as members of the research team. Early childhood music researchers need to collaborate with researchers in other disciplines who have access to and knowledge of how to use the technology required to answer many of the most compelling early childhood music research questions. For example, what types of musical activities result in the most brain stimulation in young children? Is it possible to observe differences in music aptitudes through looking at brain functioning and activity?

Conclusions

Gordon's ideas often are provocative, sometimes intentionally so, but are also founded on a lifetime of questioning, observation of children, and research. Early childhood music teachers can benefit from taking up Gordon's "call to arms," for it provides a wealth of ideas to contemplate, explore, and implement. For researchers, Gordon and others have provided a rich beginning upon which to build.

Author Biography

Cynthia Crump Taggart is Professor and Chair of Music Education at Michigan State University, where she directs and teaches in the Early Childhood Music Program. She has received teaching awards both at Case Western Reserve University and at Michigan State, and is the author of numerous research and curricular publications.