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Communication in children's musical games. Reports from Greek school playgrounds

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VII. MEANINGFUL MUSIC TEACHER EDUCATION

Regina Saltari

Communication in Children's Musical Games

Reports from Greek School Playgrounds

Introduction

There has been growing research interest in the musical games that children play on their own initiative (Addo, 1995; Bishop, 2014; Bishop & Burn, 2013; Harrop-Allin, 2010; Harwood, 1998; Marsh, 2008; Saltari & Welch, 2022). These studies have been conducted in school playgrounds and other settings where children spend their free time under discreet adult supervision, such as school canteens and school buses. Researchers in the field of music education have moved their attention outside the music classroom so as to understand children's musical expression, behaviours and development within their friendship groups. The methods of investigating the multiple aspects of such musical play practices involve detailed observation and discussions with the participants.

Children's musical games are social as they are mostly played in pairs or groups. They include singing games, clapping games, chants and rhymes, and usually involve rhythm, melody, movement, and text as well as kinesthetic, rhythmical, or language challenges. The players in the games are usually required to collaborate and coordinate their speech, movements, and chant. Along with the players, participants in the musical games can also be children who stand on the periphery of the activity as observers, commentators, and supporters and who may become players if they are skilful enough to join the performance (Harwood, 1998).

Previous research, which was carried out by Marsh (2008, 2011), evidenced that participants draw on cultural influences from various sources to construct their own meanings. Children demonstrate cultural knowledge which they have obtained through exposure to family, peers, community members, media, school and other educational institutions, and which they have filtered through their personal understanding and experiences. Due to the

play element of the musical interactions, children are able to construct their conception of themselves and their powers, as well as of their surrounding world within a safe context.

Understanding how people are transformed in affiliation groups and how they contribute to the transformation of those groups entails close examination of what they do and in what circumstances. Researchers who sought to investigate children's musical games as meaningful cultural practices acknowledged the need to interpret these from a perspective that is not solely musicological, as this does not reveal the three-dimensional nature of the games. Three subsequent studies (Bishop & Burn, 2013; Harrop-Allin, 2010; Saltari & Welch, 2022) have applied a multimodal approach in the analysis of musical games so as to understand the multiple ways through which children shape and are shaped in their musical interactions.

The development of self-understanding, or "how we understand and define ourselves as individuals", and self-other understanding, or "how we understand, define and relate to others", is a process that occurs in interactions (Lamont, 2002, p. 1). Individuals develop their personal and social identity as they acquire an understanding of the others, and of themselves in relation to others. This process is shaped by both idiosyncratic elements and group behaviour. On this basis, participants in musical games reinforce their own identity, and explore new cultural elements and practices in the group.

Interaction in musical games entails exploration and negotiation of roles at individual and group levels (Saltari & Welch, 2022). Musical games are fluid practices and so children can easily accommodate differences in their partners-in-play and adapt to various contexts. In a related study on children's musical games in urban South Africa (Harrop-Allin, 2010), it was evidenced that participants exercised agency in musical games by switching among varied modes of communication to suit their needs and interests.

The focus of this chapter is on children's transmission of meanings in musical games through the use of multiple modes. The theoretical framework of the study draws from the sociocultural perspective according to which individuals develop as participants in cultural communities, such as family, media, school and other educational or recreational institutions (Rogoff, 2003). In this context, children's musical culture has been acknowledged "as a location of meaning-making and communication" (Barrett, 2005, p. 2). In their diverse communities of musical practice, children exercise agency, develop various ways of communication and negotiate meaning.

In musical games, children develop verbal and non-verbal practices to facilitate engagement and maintain interaction. This approach is in accordance with the view that all communication is multimodal (Kress, 2000) and therefore musical play is by definition multimodal in content (Harrop-Allin, 2017). However, communication and the production of meanings are not always straightforward processes, as the personal needs and interests might conflict with those of the group.

The shared practices of musical games are shaped by idiosyncratic elements, group behaviour and social-cultural circumstances. The aim of this study is to identify the how and the what of this process: the communicative modes which children use to construct and transmit their meanings. The results of this analysis provide considerable implications for the music classroom which are discussed in the last section of the chapter.

Methodology

This study draws from a larger ethnographic research project that investigated the cultures of children's musical games (cf. Saltari & Welch, 2022), which took place in nine primary school playgrounds in Greece across three different geographical areas. The focus of this current study is on the following two questions:

(1) How do children communicate in their musical games in the school playground?
(2) What is the meaning that children communicate in their musical games in the school playground?

The questions were explored through close investigation of three children's musical games. These were selected from multiple musical games that were recorded during a six-month observation in the school playgrounds. They were identified as performances or 'framed events' (Marsh, 2011, p. 94), which involve music, dance or dramatic action. Children's musical performances can also be distinguished from regular routine activities as they are defined by 'a set of cultural signals', such as players placing their hands in close proximity to initiate their first movement in the clapping game (Marsh, 2011). The musical games were video recorded. Also, semi-structured interviews and informal discussions with the child participants were held.

I have chosen to present these particular musical events as they reveal key issues with regard to children's musicking, socialising and developing outside the classroom. Also, participants used multiple modes to explore interpersonal and intrapersonal elements. Two of the musical events entailed similar musical games, as they were played in groups and had the same movements but different lyrics. The third game that is investigated in this study was played by a pair. All musical games were performed and video recorded at the school playgrounds during breaktime. The three musical events are presented below in the style of vignettes so as to provide the reader with a snapshot of the playground musical play.

The video recordings lasted from 42 seconds to two minutes and 35 seconds. Collectively, participants were 14 girls aged 10–12. All participant children signed the relevant ethical consent forms which informed them about the aims of the research, their right to

withdraw from the study at any time and the confidentiality of data. The child observers who, at times, were involved in the musical games were not participants in this study; however, they have been included in the vignettes presentation and data analysis when their presence affected the performances.

The three vignettes were analysed through a combination of methods. The notes which I collected during discussions with the children were analysed through the thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For the analysis of the video recordings, I drew on multimodality theory (Kress, 2000; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). After watching the videos multiple times and in slow motion, I identified similar categories to those suggested by Bishop and Burn (2013) and grouped them into the following modes: a) the visual mode, including players' and observers' visual contact and gaze; b) the kinaesthetic mode, including body posture, facial expressions, and gestures; c) the haptic mode, including distance between the players (proxemics), personal spaces and tension in touch; and d) the aural mode, including rhythm, melody or unpitched chant, text of the game and participants' speech.

This study aims to unpick children's musical actions when they are left to their own devices and allow their voices to be heard in the discussions with them. However, it is acknowledged that the findings presented here are from the perspective of an adult who, after having spent some time with the children, could possibly offer an "informed speculation" (Burn & Richards, 2014, p. 23).

Three Vignettes from Greek School Playgrounds

Three short vignettes from the Greek school playgrounds are presented below. Information on each musical event is provided first. This includes the name of the musical game, the context of the performance (place and time), the child participants, the duration of the performance, the lyrics of the game and the description of movements and rules of the game. The three vignettes are then discussed in light of the modes of communication, as these were detailed in the methodology section which the participants developed in their musical games, as well as the various meanings that they transmitted. In all three musical games, the players did not sing a melody but chanted the lyrics. Therefore, the aural mode was analysed in relation to participants' chant and speech during the musical event.

Vignette 1
Musical game: O mái
Place: Playground of School 2
Time: Breaktime
Participants: Six girl players and one boy observer, 11 years old
Duration: 1' 36"

Lyrics are nonsense syllables:

O mái mái makarónia tsikidái
O séko séko makarónia tsíkidái dái do

Description of movements and rules: The game is played in a circle and players place their fists in front of them. While all participants sing, one player taps each player's fists to the rhythm of the chant. When the chant finishes, the player's fist is linked with the fist of the player on whom the chant ended. The chant repeats as many times as necessary until there is a winner. Gradually, all tied hands shape a crown. In the last round, the players shift the crown from one to another to the beat of the chant. The winner of this game is the person who gets the crown as the chant ends.

The girls are playing the musical game in a circle. They are chanting the words and making the movements to the rhythm of the game. A boy comes in close proximity and attempts to observe. Two girl participants seem to be annoyed by the boy's presence. They are unwilling to allow him to participate even as an observer. They keep chanting and moving to the rhythm as they look at each other. They then close their circle tightly by bringing their bodies closer to each other sustaining the rhythm of the game. Eventually, the boy is excluded from the incident as the girls do not let him have visual contact with the game. The boy moves around the circle for a while and then goes away. The girls complete their performance with the winner of the game.

Vignette 2

Musical game: Ámbele fámbele
Place: Playground of School 4
Time: Breaktime
Participants: Six girl players, 8 years old
Duration: 2' 35"
Lyrics are nonsense syllables:

Ámbele fámbele samará se
touroútou tále tále tále
samára ríka se
mía plits plits plats

Description of movements and rules: Same as the game 'O mái mái'
The players are mostly synchronised verbally and kinaesthetically throughout the performance. However, sometimes there are rhythmic delays which are caused by some players talking to each other when they verbally instruct or correct each other. In three cases, three players also interfere kinaesthetically when they shift their partners' hands to place them in the right position. Two girls from the group are trying to take leadership of the

game – each for herself – by pulling their opponents' hands towards themselves at the expense of the rhythm of the game. They also try to lead the game by setting their own preferred pace. These incidents affect other players who do not claim leadership or are involved in any competition. For example, while a player is moving her body to the beat of the chant and seems to be enjoying the performance, she occasionally stops and waits for the interruptions to be resolved. Tension is created among most players, who purse their lips and exchange gazes of discomfort. As the chant is coming to an end, the two rival players pull their partners' hands strongly towards themselves, each to herself. One player says "it [the crown] was on me."

Vignette 3

Musical game: Kóka kóla
Place: Playground of school 1
Time: Breaktime
Participants: Two girl players and two observers, a girl and a boy, 11 years old
Duration: 31"
Lyrics are a combination of rhyming nonsense syllables and very few English words which, in the last two lines, rhyme with Greek words that mock the boys:

Kóka kóka kóla (line 1)
pépsi pépsi kóla (line 2)
angela mángela moutarthéla ángela mángela filipó (×2) (line 3)
taramás ke kimás (×2) (line 4)
zoom zoom (line 5)
zoom zoom zoom (line 6)
everybody sexy boom (line 7)
boys are staring at us [translated from Greek] (line 8)
and they give us a 'muah' [translated from Greek] (line 9)
and we give them a 'na' [translated from Greek] (line 10)

Description of movements and rules: Two players play the game facing each other. They perform clapping patterns while chanting the first four lines. Then, they turn around as they chant 'zoom' and repeat this once again. Next, the players perform a clapping pattern to the rhythm while they chant the sixth line, and tap their head, shoulder, knee and leg while chanting the seventh line. Next, they sing at each other with no accompanied movements, chanting the eighth line. Then, the players bring their palms to lips to depict a kiss as they chant 'muah' and then have their palms open at each other, performing the 'moutza', an insulting Greek gesture.

The two players dance to the rhythm and perform the movements vividly. One player (player A) is looking at their hands performing clapping patterns, while the other

player (player B) is looking around. A boy observer, who does not appear on the camera but his voice can be heard, is chanting along with the girl players for around half of the game. The players look at him but no change in proxemics or in the boy's singing is noticed. The game continues, while player B is looking at the other side of the musical event where a girl has been observing the game. Their gazing at each other triggers the girl observer to start chanting along the lyrics. She then moves away from the musical event but she comes back, also performing the clapping patterns to herself. The players are synchronised and the flow of the game is preserved throughout the performance. They often smile at each other and their smiling becomes more evident in the last two lines with the naughty lyrics and movement against the other sex. In the last line of the game, the two girls form their hands in the shape of moutza, the insulting Greek gesture, which they direct to the ground. When they finish, I ask them about another musical event in which the same girl players in an empty classroom had happily directed the insulting gesture at each other. I ask them why there were these two different endings and why this time they chose this one. They say that, if a teacher or a boy heard them and told the headteacher, they would be in serious trouble.

Results

For the data analysis, critical moments from the musical events, which manifest children's transmission of multiple meanings and notes from the discussions with the participants, are discussed below.

In Vignette 1, players' chants and movements were synchronised throughout the performance. They focused their gaze mainly on their hands and smiled at each other. Four girls noticed the boy who came close to their circle, while two of these girls used the visual mode to express their annoyance. They also used the haptic mode as they closed the circle to exclude the boy and defended the girl-only membership of their game. Towards the end, the performance slowed down slightly, perhaps because moving with all hands tied in the shape of a crown was challenging. However, the flow of the performance was not affected. All players seemed to participate equally in the game and no one claimed leadership. Their synchronisation in all modes (aural, visual, kinaesthetic and haptic), even when two of them wanted to exclude the boy observer, revealed that they had good relationships and a good knowledge of the game.

In Vignette 2, two rival players used mostly the aural and kinaesthetic modes to interfere in the game by instructing and correcting their partners. They also used these two modes to claim leadership of the game. Such incidents caused interruptions in the flow of the game and other players' kinesthetic expression. Competition and discomfort were the main feelings in the game. The players expressed these through the kinaesthetic mode, as

they pulled hands and pursed their lips, and the visual mode through their gazes. Also, the haptic mode was evidenced in the winner's tense touch. Collectively, all modes revealed the dynamics among the players and the ways they dealt with hierarchy and competitive behaviour.

In Vignette 3, the players achieved good collaboration and synchronisation using the kinaesthetic and aural modes. A player's gaze made the girl observer become an active participant in the musical event by chanting and moving while standing on the side. The boy observer communicated with the players using the aural mode as he was chanting along with them. The girl players used the kinaesthetic mode to change the ending of the game and create a variation which would not put them into trouble. From discussions with them, it seems that they showed flexibility and adapted to two contexts: the school playground and an empty classroom. On one occasion they sought safety, while on the other occasion they expressed girl identity.

Collectively, the participants used their gazes, body movements, change of proxemics, tension in touch, as well as speech to establish their communication and convey multiple meanings. They developed collaborative and competitive relationships, manifested power, established gender identity, defended female membership, claimed leadership and expressed their feelings, such as enjoyment, annoyance, and discomfort. It was evidenced that at times messages were exchanged, not only amongst players but also between the players and the observers.

During musical interaction, aspects of participants' identities were revealed. Players in Vignette 2 – who were more competitive than others – claimed leadership of the game by using body movements, gaze, and speech, which in turn affected the group dynamics and behaviour.

It was also evidenced that the players could be affected by the observers. Players in Vignette 1 defended their closed girl group by closing the circle tightly and excluding the boy observer. The girls established gender identity and defended female membership against the opposite sex on a couple of occasions, using speech and body.

Another finding in this study was that the performers adapted their performances depending on the context. The players in Vignette 3 did not risk being caught and told off by the adults for performing an insulting gesture. Girls' empowerment was expressed in an empty classroom but these same girls felt they were too exposed, and perhaps threatened, to do this gesture in the open-air school playground. The participants in the game communicated this without using any words but through the kinaesthetic mode only.

Discussion

This study posed questions regarding the how and the what of children's participation in musical games as communities of cultural practice (cf. Barrett, 2005; Rogoff, 2003). The research focus was on the communicative modes (Kress, 2000; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001) which children used to construct and transmit their meanings. The answers to these questions were sought through the analysis of three vignettes of children's musical games in Greek school playgrounds and discussions with the participants.

The analysis of the three short vignettes showed that children's musical interactions are multimodal. The participants interacted effectively through the use of the visual, kinaesthetic, haptic, and aural mode. In line with the findings of a related study which followed the multimodal method (Bishop & Burn, 2013), a movement in the game can convey many more messages than just producing a clapping sound. It can also be the means through which a player establishes herself as a leader or the winner of the game. In a similar vein, chanting is not just uttering the lyrics of the game but it can encourage an observer to participate more actively.

A key aspect of the musical games in this study was that the meaning was transformed with regard to three dimensions: what participants' personalities were like (e. g. competitive or happy to be led), who was observing (e. g. the opposite sex), and in what context the performance took place (e. g. empty classroom or the open playground). During their musical performances, children adapted the movement element in the game as well as their behaviour to suit the needs of the group and adapt to the context. However, on other occasions, they challenged partners' limits and so risked the group balance.

The interrelationship between personality, membership, and context have also been the focus of other studies on group practices. Lamont (2002) highlighted that the idiosyncratic elements of each participant's personality interrelate with the inter-group behaviour. As participants in the social-cultural practices of musical games, children develop their personal, social and musical identities in relation to others and their surrounding world.

It became evident that both players and observers in the musical games were the recipients of meanings. As relevant studies have shown (Burn & Bishop, 2013; Harrop-Allin, 2010; Harwood, 1998; Saltari & Welch, 2022), apart from the actual players, participants in musical games also include individuals who stand on the periphery of the activity as observers.

This study shows that messages were often successfully communicated without using words but only gaze, body, and touch. The multimodal content of the musical games implied that the players switched from mode to mode to achieve communication, which is in line with findings from a similar study (Harrop-Allin, 2010). The fluidity of the musical games – as well as their contextual character due to children's agency in performance – resonate with relevant studies (Bishop & Burn, 2013; Harrop-Allin, 2010; Marsh, 2008).

Children adapt their performances and often create new ones by changing the integral elements (i. e., words, movements, melody) to suit their needs and interests, or even to alleviate boredom (Bishop & Burn, 2013; Harrop-Allin, 2010; Marsh, 2008).

Implications for Music Education

This study revealed key issues with regard to children's musicking, socialising and developing outside the classroom and provides useful insights for practices inside the classroom.

It highlights children's need to express themselves multimodally and the necessity for incorporating this element in the music classroom. In human interactions, the communicative weight is not located centrally on talk or language but is distributed across multiple modes (Twiner, Littleton, Whitelock & Coffin, 2021). In this perspective, it is music educators' responsibility to provide the students with classroom opportunities in which they are able to establish their own ways of musical communication and negotiate multiple meanings. Students should be encouraged to use body movements, facial expressions, gaze, and gestures in music practices in the classroom so that communication becomes effective.

Observing children in informal social, musical encounters enlightens us about their behaviour. As such, musical games can be useful class resources provided that students are free to experiment with the musical elements and are encouraged to add, omit, or change the text, the melody, the rhythm, or the movements. In this way, they have the tools to explore their (musical) selves in relation to the group and the context. In line with the principles of critical pedagogy, activities in the music classroom should aim at triggering self-reflective questions, such as 'Who am I?' 'Who may I become?' and 'Who might we become together? (Abrahams, 2005).

Children's musical games, due to their sociocultural nature, can give educators and music educators a glimpse of children's "understanding of the world" (Harrop-Allin, 2010, p. 139). There are also social dimensions in the performative roles that children take up. By being the role model for a partner-in-play, the leader or the follower, children experiment with the social elements in the musical interactions and establish their own behaviours.

It is often the case that teachers and music teachers are keen to incorporate musical games into their music lessons. However, these are often used in the classroom as fixed, rigid material with specific melody, rhythm, movements and text. This clashes with the playground practices in which children adjust or experiment with the elements depending on their interests, the observers or the context. Experimentation with the music material would encourage students' involvement in practices that are meaningful for them. On top of focusing on rhythm, language skills and pitch, musical games can be used in the music classroom for the development of social skills, as well as skills related to movement and space (Addo, 1995).

There are lessons to be learnt from the school playground. Acknowledging children's "innate multimodal musicality" (Harrop-Allin, 2017) can be a step towards "bridging the two musical worlds; that of pupil's musical culture outside school and that of the classroom" (Green, 2005). A music class, rich in activities and experiences that allow for experimentation, makes it possible to endorse the development of students' musical identity and inspire self-awareness.

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