ISSN: 1968-2065

Examining Elementary General Music Teachers' Ratings of Musical Vignettes

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Abstract

The degree to which a teacher perceives a behavior as musical may impact their ability to support young children's musicking and musical development actively. The purpose of this study was to examine elementary general music teachers' perception of young children's music making. Elementary general music teachers (n = 125) completed a questionnaire, rating the extent to which they agreed children and teachers described in six vignettes were engaged in making music. Vignettes were given with different conditions (1, 2, or 5 kindergartners; 0 or 1 teachers). 2x3 factorial ANOVAs showed agreement ratings were statistically different for two vignettes, one each at the teacher level or student level. The number of teachers or students involved in a vignette made no difference for the vignettes the respondents most strongly agreed or disagreed were musical. Through open-ended responses, respondents shared how they know students were making or responding to music. Some used observation for aural and visual indications, but many also wrote about compliance with the music teacher's directions. Teachers' assumptions about music and compliance may impact their ability to recognize some behaviors as music making, limiting their ability to respond to and support such behaviors and therefore, young children's musical development.

Keywords: Perception of music, Early childhood music, Musical play, Musicking

Music weaves through the fabric of young children's lives. Young children infuse their play and work with music. For instance, during an extended work session for three- to six-year-olds, children engaged in musical behaviors alone or with others. One used a steady beat while exploring vertical lines through the medium of watercolors, preserving his tempo when the paint thickened by shortening the lines. A different child was sorting blocks. For each, she picked up a single block, brought it near her mouth, and sang to it before putting it in its special spot. Two children were seen to formulate the chant, "we could do yoga, yoga, yoga" and tossed the word "yoga" back and forth while they prepared yoga mats and cards with yoga poses (Falter, 2016).

A common goal of early childhood music education—whether from a music specialist, generalist educator, or other caregiver—is to create an environment in which children can develop their understanding of, interest in, and ability to produce music in ways that are meaningful to the child and perhaps also to support future music study. Berger and Cooper (2009) suggest that to support young children in their music making and musical development, adults should demonstrate that they value children's musical "utterances." A prerequisite to accomplishing Berger and Cooper's recommendation, however, is that adults must first be able to recognize a child's behavior as "musical." Instead of seeing the steady beat and tempo of the painter mentioned above, a teacher might only focus on his use of color and line on the paper. Instead of listening to the musical characteristics of the block-sorter's songs, a teacher might dismiss the musical component of these improvisations as merely being self-talk that supported the sorting activity. Instead of hearing the musicality in the yoga chant, a teacher might ask the children to quiet down while they prepared the materials.

Briefly: What is Music?

Christopher Small (1998) coined the term "musicking" to expand the definition of "music." He wrote that many who study *music* have—whether explicitly or through the implication of practice—defined the term as "works of music in the Western tradition" (p. 3). Instead, he argued that music is a verb, *to music*, and its gerund, *musicking*. Musicking encompasses a web of musical activity. The range of these activities includes (but is not limited to) composing, practicing, preparing a performance space, performing, and listening. The meaning of musicking, Small argues, lies in the set of relationships that form at the place musicking occurs, which goes beyond the Western tradition of resting meaning within a musical work.

To Elliott (1995), the act of making music—*musicing*—is one of four dimensions in the concept of *music*. Musicing might be done in the form of performing, improvising, composing, arranging, or conducting. The *musicer* (the person) is the doer, and the something that is done is the *music*. These three components—the musicer who is musicing to produce music—occur in a specific context, the fourth dimension. Similarly, Elliott describes music listening as occurring in a specific context, in which a listener (person) is listening (action) to a listenable (sounds to listen for). Together—and interlocking—the musicer is musicing music and the listener who listening to a listenable in context are *musical practice*.

Many musicians have been well-trained to listen to a listenable (i.e., experience a musical work as performed by others) in specific ways. Allsup (2016) credits such training with his personal need to "listen to an entire song, even the most annoying, to its very end" (p. 21). He describes this need as a means of illuminating an assumed "universal contract that is inherent between listener, composer, and object" (p. 21) or musical work. This defined relationship exalts

the form of the musical work, and it is certainly one way to perceive and experience musical works. However, many who are not trained in Western art music perceive and experience music differently, as evidenced by being able to listen to a song on repeat, skip through sections of it, or turn it off before its end. Even while recognizing different possibilities of perception of musical works, Allsup resists defining music, except to say that any definition "must be ambiguous and open" (p. 139). A definition of music must leave room for changing the perception of musical works and how music is created.

Note that Small (1998), Elliott (1995), and Allsup (2016) each resisted defining music by focusing solely on the something that is created. Each seems to indicate there are many possible actions one might undertake to be involved in making (or listening to) music. Music happens in different contexts, and a Western music work is not necessarily more worthy than a work, listenable, or practice from other musics.

Perception of Children's Musical Behaviors

Education scholars write about young children's learning as being facilitated through play (e.g., Gray, 2013; Elkind, 2007; Parten, 1933). Play is process- or action-in-the-moment-oriented instead of product-oriented, allowing for a corollary to musicking rather than musical works. Moreover, many specialists and researchers write that early childhood music education should be, at least in part, approached through musical play (e.g., Berger & Cooper, 2003; Valerio, Reynolds, Bolton, Taggart, & Gordon, 1998; Moorhead & Pond, 1978; Smithrim, 1997; Young, 2008). In other words, young children develop musically through musicking playfully.

The culture that children live in is influenced by, and yet unique from, the culture of the adults in their lives (Lew & Campbell, 2005), so the context of their musicking is different. The listenables of their musicking can be, and often are, different. Young (1995) noted that when an

adult listens to a young child make music, the listening role is not a passive but an active one. The adult creates a new version of the music, the listened-to version. Adults may approach listening with the intent of hearing what they think music should sound like, or they may approach with the intent to hear from the child's perspective. Young suggests that teachers engage a child who is making music by playfully and openly listening and responding to the music. She recommends that teachers also allow for times in which the child makes music without an adult listening.

In order to follow Berger and Cooper's (2003) recommendation that adults support children's musical play by demonstrating they value children's musical "utterances," or Young's (1995) recommendation to listen playfully and openly to young children's music, adults need to be able to recognize these listenables and actions as musical. Reese (2013) examined the impact of adult's educational background (musical and/or early childhood education) and parental status on the type and number of musical behaviors they noted in videos of young children. Participants pressed a button to note when they saw a behavior they deemed was musical. Early childhood music teachers recognized more vocalization behaviors as musical than did child development teachers or professional musicians, though all groups recognized similar beat-related behaviors. Parental status did not affect one's identification of musical behaviors.

Generalist preschool teachers may respond to children's listables based on more than the sound created. In a case study (Falter, 2016), teachers in a Montessori preschool classroom only seemed to encourage music making when they were part of it, perhaps attributing more value to or being more aware of musicking that included an adult. They seemed more likely to allow children's musicking (as opposed to extinguishing it) when the musicking involved more than

one child, perhaps indicating a different perception of listenables or musicking based on the number of children involved.

Researchers and music teacher educators recommend that adults who work with young children demonstrate they value the music behaviors and sounds of the children in order to support the children's musical development. A necessary first step to accomplishing this is to recognize behaviors as musical. This may be challenging because children's musical culture—and therefore the listenables produced—is different from the musical culture of adults, and young children may be more oriented toward process than product. Few have researched adults' ability to recognize young children's behavior as musical, finding that an adult's educational background may impact their ability to recognize some behaviors as musical (Reese, 2013) and that the social nature of the musicking may also impact their response to it (Falter, 2016). The purpose of this study was to examine elementary general music teachers' perception of young children's music making. The primary research question addressed the impact of musicking's social nature on adults' perception: Do music teachers rate a musical play vignette differently whether it includes one, two, or five kindergarteners and one or no adults? The supporting research question was: What characterizes music teachers' descriptions of how they know whether a child is engaging in music?

Methodology

Questionnaire Development

To maximize response rate while retaining a sufficient number of items to address the research questions, I designed a questionnaire so it would only take five minutes to complete. The questionnaire began with an open-ended prompt (How do you know if a child in your classroom is engaged in music-making?). Though this addressed the second research question, it

came first in order to avoid having the answer influenced by reading the rating-scale items that addressed the primary research question.

The central part of the questionnaire included six rating-scale items. Each item began with a short musical vignette, and respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement "that people in the… descriptions are engaged in making music." I chose vignettes over the use of video as a means for isolating the desired variables: number of adults and children. They were designed to elicit different ratings—some seeming more musical (i.e. performing "Hot Cross Buns" on glockenspiel) and some seeming less musical (i.e. reading a book about Mozart). Respondents randomly received a different version of the questionnaire. In their version, each of six conditions (1, 2, or 5 children x 0 or 1 adult) was represented in one vignette (see Table 1 for two of six versions of the questionnaire as examples). Taking this approach allowed for statistical comparison of ratings for the different vignettes, as well as based on three levels of children (1, 2, and 5) and two levels of adults (0, 1).

Table 1. *Vignettes from Questionnaire Versions 1 and 2*

Survey Version	Vignette Topic	Children (*n*)	Teachers (*n*)	Vignette
1	1	1	0	A kindergartener arranges stuffed animals around a small table. They sing "Happy Birthday" loudly and out of tune. At the end, they pick up a teddy bear to blow out pretend candles. "Did you make a wish?"
1	2	2	0	Two children sit in the reading nook of their kindergarten classroom. They share a book about Mozart, taking turns reading and turning pages.
1	3	5	0	Five kindergarteners march around the playground. They bang sand buckets and sing-shout, "Marching, Marching, Marching, Stop!" They pause before each repetition of their sing-shout.
1	4	1	1	A kindergartener and their teacher play "Hot Cross Buns" on glockenspiel. When they finish

				the song, they look up, smile, and the child says, "Again!"
1	5	2	1	Two children and their teacher look through a familiar picture book in their kindergarten classroom. They have a small array of hand-held percussion instruments, which they use to make different sound effects for different parts of the story.
1	6	5	1	Five kindergarteners and their teacher arrange a group of stuffed animals in rows for a concert. One child says, "You are in for a treat. We're going to sing with our pretty voice." Together, they sing—with a clear, in-tune head voice—a song they made up about unicorns.
2	1	2	0	Two kindergarteners arrange stuffed animals around a small table. They sing "Happy Birthday" loudly and out of tune. At the end, the first picks up a teddy bear to blow out pretend candles. The second asks, "Did you make a wish?"
2	2	5	0	A group of five children sit in the reading nook of their kindergarten classroom. They share a book about Mozart, taking turns reading and turning pages.
2	3	1	1	A kindergartener and their teacher march around the playground. They bang sand buckets and sing-shout, "Marching, Marching, Marching, Stop!" They pause before each repetition of their sing-shout.
2	4	2	1	Two kindergarteners and their teacher play "Hot Cross Buns" on glockenspiels. When they finish, they look up, smile, and one child says, "Again!"
2	5	5	1	Five children and their teacher look through a familiar picture book in their kindergarten classroom. They have a small array of hand-held percussion instruments, which they use to make different sound effects for different parts of the story.
2	6	1	0	A kindergartener arranges a group of stuffed animals in rows for a concert. They say, "You are in for a treat. I'm going to sing with my pretty voice." The child sings—with a clear, in-tune head voice—a song they made up about unicorns.

The last section of the questionnaire included mostly selection-type items through which respondents could share individual characteristics (e.g., education level, primary teaching area). Two experts in elementary general music and two in survey research design reviewed the questionaire. Edits were made for clarity and ease of completion.

Sampling and Survey Dissemination

I used a cluster sampling approach to identify potential respondents, first selecting eighty school districts in a Western state by random to serve as clusters. Within each cluster, I collected publicly available email addresses for all elementary general music teachers in the district. In February 2018, each teacher received an email invitation with an anonymous link, as well as one reminder email two weeks later. In all, 125 respondents completed questionnaires, resulting in a response rate of 25.4%.

Data Analysis

I ran descriptive statistics for individual difference items and agreement ratings. In addition, I examined agreement ratings for difference using a 2x3 factorial Analysis of Variance, based on the number of teachers (0, 1) and students (1, 2, 5) for each vignette. This increased a risk of a Type II error because all data failed to meet the assumption of normality and/or included extreme outliers, and cell sizes were small. Therefore, I ran the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis H test using 6 groups (i.e., Group 1 = 1 child and 0 teachers; Group 2 = 2 children and 0 teachers). No tests were significant. Results from the 2x3 ANOVA were interpreted because the test was more sensitive than the Kruskal-Wallis H test, and how data failed to meet assumptions of the test made significant results that suggest a difference less likely.

Results

Respondent Characteristics

The majority of respondents identified as a woman (78.9%), many as a man (20.3%), and one (0.8 %) marked they preferred to self-describe their gender but did not complete the short answer to share this description. Regarding their highest level of education, nearly half (48.0%) indicated a bachelor's degree; the remaining indicated a master's (30.9%), a master's plus 30 credits (20.3%), or doctorate (0.8%). Respondents had between 1 and 44 years of teaching experience (M = 12.26, SD = 9.20). Most of them primarily identified as general music teachers (89.4%) compared to band (7.3%), choir (3.3%), and orchestra (0.0%) teachers. They reported experience teaching different types of music education: general music (96.1%), choir (73.4%), band (48.4%), orchestra (15.6%), and music teacher education (4.7%). One in five (21.1%) had taught other forms of music education, such as modern band, handbell choir, theater, early childhood music, guitar, ukulele, music appreciation, and music theory.

Musical Ratings

Respondents Agreed to Strongly Agreed that in four of the six vignettes people were engaged in making music: singing an original composition with a "pretty voice," playing "Hot Cross Buns" on glockenspiel, using hand-held percussion instruments to add sound effects to a picture book, and banging sand buckets while sing-shouting. Respondents Somewhat Agreed that singing "Happy Birthday" out of tune was music making, and they Strongly Disagreed that reading a book about Mozart represented making music (see Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptives for Musical Rating by Vignette and Condition

Teachers (*n*)		0			1			Combined
Children (*n*)		1	2	5	1	2	5	
Sing composition for stuffed animals	*M*	5.81	5.71	5.71	5.68	5.89	5.76	5.76
	SD	0.40	0.46	0.56	0.48	0.32	0.44	0.45
"Hot Cross Buns" on glockenspiel	*M*	5.62	5.50	5.68	5.48	5.71	5.67	5.61
	SD	0.67	0.51	0.48	0.51	0.56	0.48	0.54
Picture book and hand-held percussion	*M*	5.52	5.57	5.50	5.32	5.48	5.38	5.46
	SD	0.75	0.68	0.60	0.82	0.60	0.86	0.71
"Marching, marching, marching, stop!"	*M*	4.82	5.53	5.29	4.90	5.38	4.92	5.14
	SD	1.10	0.70	0.72	0.89	0.59	0.97	0.87
"Happy Birthday" to a teddy bear	*M*	4.24	4.80	4.38	4.33	3.59	4.11	4.23
	SD	1.34	1.51	1.47	1.24	1.30	1.24	1.31
Read about Mozart	*M*	2.84	3.05	2.76	2.57	2.43	2.73	2.73
	SD	1.61	1.16	1.55	1.36	1.08	1.24	1.33

A 2x3 factorial Analysis of Variance was used to assess for the difference in agreement rating based on the number of teachers (0, 1) and students (1, 2, 5) for each vignette (see Table 3). No interactions were significant ($\alpha = .05$).

There was a significant difference between ratings for the “Marching, marching, marching, stop!” vignette at the student level (F (5, 124) = 5.034, p = .008). A Tukey post hoc test showed ratings were significantly (p = .006) higher for 2 students (M = 5.25, SD = 0.64) than 1 student (M = 4.86, SD = 0.99).

There was also a significant difference between ratings for the “Happy Birthday” vignette at the teacher level (F (5, 124) = 3.960, p = .049). Respondents were more likely to agree that people in this vignette were engaged in making music if there were no teachers present.

Table 3. Difference in Vignette Musical Rating Based on Condition

Item		*F*	*p*
Sing composition for stuffed animals[1,2]	# teachers	0.172	.679
	# students	0.265	.768
	interaction	1.221	.299
"Hot Cross Buns" on glockenspiel[1,2]	# teachers	0.034	.835
	# students	0.537	.565
	interaction	1.195	.306
Picture book and hand-held percussion [1]	# teachers	1.183	.279
	# students	0.241	.787
	interaction	0.069	.934
"Marching, marching, marching, stop!" [1,2]	# teachers	0.737	.392
	# students	5.034	.008
	interaction	0.651	.524
"Happy Birthday" to a teddy bear[1]	# teachers	3.960	0.49
	# students	0.051	.095
	interaction	2.821	.064
Read about Mozart[1]	# teachers	1.647	.202
	# students	0.009	.991
	interaction	0.510	.602

Note: For each factorial ANOVA, df1 = 5, df2 = 124.
[1]Data did not meet assumption of normality
[2]Data included extreme outliers

Descriptions of Engaging in Music

Almost all respondents (97.6%) completed an open-ended prompt, indicating how they know a child in their music classroom is engaged in making music. Generally, they used observation for aural and visual indications that students were making or responding to music. Many also chose to write about the quality of students' music making and the degree to which students demonstrated on-task behaviors.

Responses included that the students are making sounds: "It's noisy!" These sounds might be generated through singing, body percussion, playing instruments, or using a computer app. Respondents tended to state or imply that the students were recreating songs the teacher had

taught, but some also explicitly described students creating sound effects, exploring sounds, improvising, and composing. Additionally, respondents wrote that students could demonstrate being "engaged in music-making" by responding to music via asking questions, discussing the topic, and making suggestions.

Teachers also relied on what they can visually observe, such as body language, facial expressions, and movement. Students' facial expressions might denote joy, concentration, or focus—indicators of music-making in music class. Many specifically observed students' eyes, one writing they knew a student was engaged in music making when their "eyes show a sense of taking in what is going on." Others pointed to eyes being on the teacher or instrument. Teachers also observed students' movement—moving to the beat, dancing, doing prescribed movements to a song, playing a game, and manipulating objects such as bean bags and scarves.

Many respondents chose to add qualifiers regarding the skill with which students made music. For some, they wrote that they know a student is engaged in making music if they improve over time or can perform well on an assessment. Described assessments included playing a music game, performance-based assessments, composition, iconic choice assessments, and thumbs up/thumbs down self-assessments.

Lastly, teachers wrote about students "ability to follow directions" or raise their hand. Students were said to be making music if they followed directions on how to play an instrument and on when to start and stop sound production. Some responses used a negative format, suggesting that a teacher knew a student was engaged in music making if they were not talking with a neighbor, messing with their shoes, distracted by others, or aimlessly walking around the room.

Summary and Discussion

There were some vignettes which respondents agreed the described people were or were not making music. On the high end, these included singing with a "pretty voice," playing a known song on glockenspiel, and improvising on hand-held percussion instruments to create sound effects for a picture book. On the low end, respondents did not view reading about Mozart as a music making. For the two items in the middle, respondents were more likely to be influenced in their view of something as music making based on either the number of students involved (lower scores for 1 child than 2 when children were engaged in marching, chanting, and banging a bucket around the playground) or the number of teachers (lower scores for 1 teacher than 0 when the musical vignette described dramatic play with out-of-tune singing of “Happy Birthday”).

In the case of the "Happy Birthday" vignette, it may be that teachers were conflating the quality of the music making (intonation when singing) with whether or not the people in the vignette were making music. Respondents' music teacher preparations likely taught them to perform Western art music, to think of music as a "work," and to engage in an assumed "universal contract" (Allsup, 2016) when listening to a listenable (Elliott, 1995). Moreover, respondents seem to have indicated that their assumptions of music as a work performed at a minimal quality can be—at least in the “Happy Birthday” vignette—temporarily suspended if it is only children who are singing out of tune. Adults may not be given the same leniency in quality in order to be perceived as making music. Perhaps music teachers might expand upon Young’s (1995) suggestion of actively listening to children’s music from the child’s perspective and do the same with adults who may sing out of tune when engaging in imaginative musical play, with or without children. This could lead to more opportunities for young children to be

engaged in musical play, upon which experiences music teachers might be able to capitalize to further support young children's musical development.

Respondents demonstrated through open-ended responses that they may also conflate compliant behavior in music class with music making. They indicated musicing actions similar to those described by Elliott (1995)—performing, improvising, composing. Some respondents also indicated other, more-removed actions in line with Small's (1998) musicking, such as dancing and asking questions. However, many respondents seemed to narrow their definition of "making music" to "making the musical work as chosen and taught by the music teacher." Though a teacher may approach a musical work in a playful manner, play is often defined as requiring the choice of whether or not to participate and how to participate (e.g., Gray 2013). Restricting one's view of music making in music class to on-task, teacher-chosen behaviors with specific musical works may limit a teacher's ability to notice children's musical utterances (Berge & Cooper, 2003) and engage in active listening (Young, 1995) situated in the children's musical culture context (Lew & Campbell, 2005). This limits the teacher's ability to engage young children in musical development through play meaningfully.

Responses to the vignette with sing-shouting, "Marching, marching, marching, stop!" suggest that the social nature of an act may impact teachers' view of it as music making. Exploring this topic was an impetus for the study, as there were similar findings in a previous case study (Falter, 2016). Other vignettes were more consistently agreed upon to be (or not be) music making. Those that were agreed to be music making included activities and materials that elementary music teachers are likely familiar with using in their classrooms: hand-held percussion instruments, glockenspiel, picture books, singing, improvising, and performing a known song. Though sing-shouting may be a common part of some young children's musical

play culture, it may be less likely to be incorporated by music teachers. This may have allowed for some ambiguity in whether or not a sing-shout vignette represented music making. It may be that other music making behaviors that live in similar uncertainty would also be more susceptible to biases related to the social nature of play and music making.

Implications for Music Educators

For the sake of clarity, I am not suggesting there are no times in which a music teacher appropriately chooses a musical work and leads students through interacting with it in prescribed ways. However, music teachers may consider the findings from this study and reflect on their practice, attempting to isolate their preconceptions related to whether or not someone's activity constitutes music making. Instead of dismissing an act out of hand, the music teacher might reflect on whether they are judging the act itself or actually the quality of music being made. They may note examples of students engaging socially in music making and push themselves to recognize solo behaviors that are similar. When a music teacher observes a student engaging in off-task behavior, they may pause to consider whether there is a way to view that behavior—through the lens of the child's music culture—as some form of music making. Engaging in these forms of reflection may lead to new opportunities to recognize music making, placing teachers in a better position to actively recognize it and support musical development.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are many approaches researchers may take to consider and expand upon the research questions asked in this study. Music teachers could be asked about their education, teaching approaches, or comfort teaching young children as possible factors in the degree to which they agree behaviors are musical. Music teacher responses could be compared to generalist teacher responses. Researchers might ask participants to respond to a video instead

of written vignettes. This could allow for comparison in pitch accuracy or perceived differences among children such as perceived race, socioeconomic status, or ability, building on work by Dekaney (2016). Whether through video or written vignettes, musical play episodes could occur in different locations (e.g., music classroom, general classroom, playground). Interview or case studies might lead to a deeper understanding of the thinking process of a small number of music teachers.

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