

Missteps, flaws and morphings in children's musical play: Snapshots from school playgrounds

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Abstract

This article, drawing upon fieldwork from a larger project investigating the nature of children's self-chosen musical play, explores instances of play that stumble and either morph into something else or are abandoned altogether. Four vignettes of musical play are described, documented during recess observations at several Canadian elementary school playgrounds. Each of the play episodes is analyzed in terms of how the play malfunctions musically and socially, from an adult observer's viewpoint. Self-determination theory is employed as a tool for analyzing these apparent gaps in proficiencies. Recognizing children as agentive and creative social actors, the author argues for the importance of protecting their free play time at school, where they are uniquely able to practice communicative (including musical) and social skills within a complex and constantly changing social setting. The separation of younger and older children on the playground is identified as one impediment to the apprenticeship learning system through which playground games have long been 'caught'. From the examination of instances of 'unsuccessful' musical play the author suggests implications for elementary music education pedagogy.

Keywords

children's musical play, children's play competences, jump-rope, playground play, self-determination theory

Introduction

I had long held an image of children's self-directed musical play as fluent and fully formed. I had never considered how the mastery of musical games happens, beyond recognizing the reality of apprenticeship learning from older peers (Harwood, 1998a; Marsh & Young, 2006). I read childlore specialists such as Fowke (1971, 1977, 1988), Knapp and Knapp (1976), Kenney (1974), and Opie and Opie (1985) with the practical attention of a music educator looking to acquire new repertoire. I imagined these folklorists happening upon perfectly executed versions of games, count-outs, hand claps and skipping rhymes and writing them down verbatim.

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I assumed that children involved in musical play were confident possessors of their oral culture or were learning to be so by shadowing competent peers. From the earliest collectors, such as Gomme (1894–1898/1964) and Newell (1963 [1883]) to such current scholars as Marsh (2008) and Roud (2010), the documentation of children's musical play – regardless of the stance of the collector – has relied on a mixture of eyewitness observations, follow-up interviews and informant recollections. Since the trajectory naturally begins with observing competent, confident players it stands to reason that 'unsuccessful' play does not attract attention. My current research into the nature and extent of children's musicking during self-chosen play involves non-participant observation of elementary schoolchildren during playground recesses. This work has caused me to rethink my assumption that musical playground games materialize as fully-formed entities. I do come upon chants and songs and games that seem to spring forth effortlessly and unselfconsciously, the players clearly masters of the play. Other times, though, I see and hear musical play that is flawed and inexpert. In some instances one player has some inkling of how the game should go but is unsuccessful in communicating it to the peer group. On other occasions the potential players may share a general notion of the desired formation and execution, but cannot get past some missing rule or understanding or physical skill deficit necessary for the game to work.

In this article I draw on fieldwork from a larger project investigating children's self-chosen musical play to explore instances of play that falter and either morph into something else or are abandoned altogether. The concept of music as a sociocultural practice grounds my understanding of children's musical play, and components of self-determination theory, an empirically established theory of human needs, aids my examination of four examples of flawed or thwarted play. I articulate ideas that music educators might take from the analysis of these everyday musical play episodes.

Music as a sociocultural practice

One of the most elegant and extended explorations of the idea that music's meanings are essentially sociocultural is offered by Christopher Small in *Musicking* (1998). Small coined the verb *to musick* to underscore that music-making is social participation, and he posits that through the gestural language of musicking we experience relationships created by the varied interactions of the sounds and the participants. More specifically, when we musick we *affirm* aspects of our identity ('this is who we are', p. 183), we *explore* the nature of human relationships (trying on identities 'to see who we think we are', p. 95), and we *celebrate* our relationships and shared understandings.

This understanding that musicking is an everyday activity that serves social life, a resource for enriching human interaction and subjectivity, is explored by such scholars as DeNora (2000), Keil and Feld (2005), Finnegan (2003) and Turino (2008). Marsh (2008) and Campbell (2010) are among the music education scholars who have demonstrated that musicking functions as social action for children too.

Children's musical play

Marsh and Young (2006) define musical play as 'everyday forms of musical activity ... that children initiate of their own accord and in which they may choose to play with others voluntarily' (p. 289). Musical play includes spontaneous, improvised 'utterances' (Campbell, 2001, p. 218), pre-existing songs, chants and games from both oral tradition and popular media sources and a wide range of improvised song/dance/chant expressions. Musical play is

multimodal (various combinations of rhythmic speech, movement, gesture, vocalization and song are kaleidoscopically intertwined), is fluid and often fragmentary, is re-designed or transformed rather than merely reiterated, and is an important resource for social interactions and self-definitions, inextricably intertwined (Bishop & Burn, 2013; Campbell, 2010; Marsh, 2008; Marsh & Young, 2006).

Implicit in this description of musical play is the recognition that children are agentic and creative social actors within their peer group culture. Susan Young (2009, 2012) effectively summarizes the sociological turn in childhood studies (see also Corsaro, 1997; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; J. Marsh & Richards, 2013; Prout, 2004), noting that childhood, rather than being a simple, biologically determined life stage, is 'something that is both individually and socially achieved by participating in the social, material and cultural practices that define childhood' (2009, p. 698). In my playground observations this image – of children as social actors developing varying degrees of social and personal proficiencies as they play – influences my interpretations of what I hear and see. I recognize that children's musical play occurs 'within webs of social and cultural values, all bound up with individual and collective identity' (McCarthy, 2010, p. 7) and that peer interaction is simultaneously motivating and demanding. Peer group culture, 'marked by conformity and individuality, equality and competition' (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998, p. 95), makes school playgrounds complex sites for children to negotiate.

Hughes (1999) illustrates the complexity children encounter in constructing games specifically, explaining that they utilize three different sets of rules or 'domains of meaning' (p. 95): children simultaneously negotiate the game itself, the social requirements of communal play and the specific demands presented by the particular peer group configuration that day, with its varying social status issues and minute-by-minute transformations.

Learning musical play. Children learn musical play from peers on the playground through close observation, modeling and practicing (Harwood, 1998a; Marsh, 2008). I have watched children shadowing the moves of game-savvy peers, sometimes lip synching, other times softly intoning the beginnings of lines, a nanosecond behind the expert players, while miming the general outline of the moves. This holistic approach to learning new song/movement games is described by Marsh and Young (2006) as 'aggregative "catching" of musical, textual and movement phrases within a musical whole' (p. 301). This catching of musical songs/games on the playground, which 'allows for multiple levels of competence to coexist and be incorporated into play activities and for children to learn at their own pace', relies on the presence of proficient peers. In the musical play vignettes I describe below, this apprenticeship learning system is often not activated, due to the absence of peers skilled in the games being attempted. In the case of physically skilled games like jump-rope the notion of multiple levels of competence is unworkable: skipping dexterity is essential, and an insufficiently-skilled child attempting to join a game is immediately obvious – and out.

Self-determination theory (SDT)

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan, Curren, & Deci, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2002) offers one analytical lens through which to examine children's successes and failures in musical play. SDT is a robust macrotheory concerning humans' motivations to satisfy their 'natural inclinations toward action, exploration, learning, psychological integration, and social connectedness' (Ryan, Curren, & Deci, 2013, p. 60). SDT suggests that our behaviors are driven by three psychological needs: competence, relatedness and

autonomy. SDT researchers describe *competence* as the ability to act effectively in the physical and social worlds, and to experience 'a felt sense of confidence and effectance in action' (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 7), *relatedness* as the need to feel connected to and be accepted and supported by others, and *autonomy* as the need to be in charge of one's own actions and to develop an integrated, coherent sense of self. These three psychological needs, 'essential for ongoing psychological growth, integrity, and well-being' (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 229), are interdependent and they motivate our behaviors throughout our life-span. SDT, established within the field of psychology, is congruent with the sociocultural understandings summarized above, which emphasize the relational, collective aspects of children's agency (I distinguish between agency and autonomy below). Interrelationships among the needs for competence, relatedness and agency/autonomy are significant and complex: we require, for example, some degree of social competence in order to achieve connection, and our experience of agency is enmeshed with our self-perceptions of both competence and social support.

Ideally we engage in an activity because we expect it to be interesting and pleasure-producing – we are intrinsically motivated – rather than because we calculate that the activity will fulfill our psychological needs. This is certainly the case with children's self-chosen play. When children experience sufficient competence in a play pursuit endorsed by their peers, a sense of choice in participating and a sense of connection and support, that play satisfies their basic psychological needs, for the duration of the play. Often, as illustrated in the examples below, the play cannot adequately address one or more of these needs. It may be an issue of competence: a child lacks a physical or social skill that prevents her from experiencing the pleasure that competent behavior brings. Or the child's need for relatedness may be thwarted by coercive or controlling behavior by one or more of his peers. Either or both of these situations can conflict with the need for agency, itself bound up with issues of social status.

Autonomy and agency. While the terms autonomy and agency are sometimes used interchangeably and even combined in the descriptor 'autonomous agent', the work of various theorists (Corsaro, 2005; Sokol, Chandler, & Jones, 2004; Valentine, 2011) reveals a differentiation. I use *agency* to mean the capacity to act independently, with intention, and with the ability to both exercise and resist control. I understand *autonomy* to necessitate additional capacities of self-reliance and self-reflection, qualities that help one to develop and act from an integrated sense of self, a concept akin to the *authentic self* in some philosophical traditions (Bonnett & Cuypers, 2003). This body of literature supports the argument that agency is an essential ingredient for and precursor to developing autonomy. It is children's agency that I consider in the snapshots of failed play. I recognize the social embeddedness of many enactments of children's agency, situated as they are within collective activities and shaped by differing prior experiences that confer varying, site-specific degrees of power and privilege. These are beyond the observer's purview to untangle.

Research method

The broader research project from which the data for this article is taken is an in-process study of children's self-chosen musical practices on Canadian elementary school playgrounds, for which I use what Campbell (2003, 2010) describes as an *ethnomusicological method*. I began my fieldwork with naturalistic non-participant observation of children as they played on school playgrounds during recesses and lunch breaks. I conducted 108 playground visits from October 2011 to June 2013 and two student RAs conducted an additional 69 visits, for a total of 177 playground observations. These observations ranged from 15 to 40 minutes in length and

occurred at nine different school sites. The schools, representing urban, suburban and rural settings, serve children from Kindergarten to Grade 6 (ages 5 to 12). Separate play spaces are usually designated for younger and older children, or recesses are staggered so that Kindergarten–Grade 3 and Grades 4–6 children are outside at different times.

The children populating these playgrounds are largely from white, Anglo backgrounds, with small percentages of children identifying as Acadian (French) and First Nations (Aboriginal peoples). Ten to fifteen percent of children belong to families who are recent immigrants to Canada.

As I walked the school playground I was sometimes approached by younger children, seeking help with minor injustices or injuries, confirming that children, if they noted my presence, assumed I was a duty teacher. When children asked what I was doing I answered truthfully, indicating my interest in the kinds of play that happen at recess.

I moved slowly about the playground and observed as unobtrusively as possible. Often I saw little clumps of children at the far corners of the playground, working on song/dance sequences, but I did not approach, recognizing that those were private rehearsals. I listened and watched for instances of spontaneous musical expression, examining the sounds, the ways the participants related to the sounds and the ways the sounds connected to the broader play culture. I took cryptic field notes, attending carefully to the metric and pitch qualities of all musical utterances. I was often aware that, in the few moments it took to capture a pitch set or rhythmic structure in shorthand notation, I was missing something else: such is the fragmentary and fluid nature of children's musical/linguistic/kinesthetic play. I transcribed my shorthand annotations into field notes immediately following each observation, while the sounds of the playground were still fresh in my ears.

I have permission, through university and school board ethics protocols, to engage children in conversation about their play, and, following procurement of parent-informed consent, to video-tape examples of play. I embrace the concept of research *with* children (J. Marsh, 2012; McCarthy, 2010) and am excited by what I am learning from a number of children in the larger project. This article, though, is based solely on non-participant observation because its focus is on instances of incomplete or thwarted play. I acknowledge that my outsider gaze can provide only a partial understanding of what is going on in each of the following vignettes. Further, when I apply such evaluative terms as 'incomplete', 'thwarted' or 'unsuccessful' to play episodes, I offer only my own, adult educator perspective. I agree with Richards (2011): what I can know about what these children are doing in these institutional social spaces is framed by my presence as an adult outsider. For this reason I do not overdraw the SDT analysis, recognizing that naturalistic research with children must necessarily offer, at best, 'informed speculation' (Burn & Richards, 2013, p. 234).

Snapshots of musical play

In describing these play episodes I risk conveying a linear, self-contained quality to the play that is inaccurate. These vignettes occurred within the swirl of playground life, where group membership was constantly evolving and often fleeting. The stories may imply a gendered nature to play, but often within the same recess these children played in both separate and mixed gender groups. Play was often so fluid that I could not detect the impetus for the termination or morphing of a game. I chose these particular snapshots because they represent instances where I was positioned, geographically and temporally, to see and hear relatively extended bits of play. In the first vignette, Red Rover, I was lucky to have happened along at the very beginning of the attempted game.

Red Rover. At Brookfield Elementary (all names are pseudonyms) I spotted a group of five 8-year-old girls. Fiona, a head taller than the others, was attempting to organize her peers into a game. She began singing



while simultaneously trying to arrange the girls into two opposing lines. They did not grasp this formation and instinctively joined hands to form a circle. 'No!' exclaimed Fiona, physically separating joined hands to re-establish two opposing lines while singing her *Red Rover* fragment again. By now two additional girls had joined the group, causing Fiona to adjust the formation. One of the original players announced 'I don't know this game'. 'I don't get it!' shouted another. Fiona attempted a verbal description of the game, during which time two more girls joined the group and needed to be placed in formation. Fiona sang again, drowning out the 'I don't understand' protests. When she got to 'I call Alexandra to come over' which she spoke, Alexandra walked to the other line, clearly confused as to what to do. 'Break through!' exhorted Fiona, but Alexandra exerted no force to break the chain of hands. Fiona clarified, with great conviction and authority, using a mixture of verbal explanation and physical pushing and pulling of bodies to communicate her play vision. This verbalized demonstration was truncated when one girl started singing the *Red Rover* fragment in a higher key. They tried again to get the game launched, over continued protests of 'I don't know this game!' from two of the girls. After a fourth attempt the group dispersed in several directions, as if by unarticulated mutual agreement.

Fiona, so confident in her sense of how her game should go, appeared to be the only one in the group with any notion of opposing line formation and of how a game of confrontation works. (Such games are not allowed on most school playgrounds because of risk factors and so it is possible that many children have never seen such a game played.) The *Red Rover* of my youth featured spoken text only: 'Red Rover, Red Rover, we call Peter over'. Here, the tonal fragment seemed unworkable: it did not merge into the spoken line with any artistry and so there was no rhythmic flow from the sung to the spoken text. Further, the two lines of players stood impossibly close together, so the whole goal of the game – to break through the opposing line – was impossible to envision. The game was doomed because the players had no shared vision of its formation or its intent.

While Fiona attempted to exercise personal agency in the leading of this line/confrontation game, her version of *Red Rover* lacked musical/artistic competence. It also lacked social competence, in that Fiona appeared unaware of or insensitive to her peers' gaps in skill and comprehension. All of the players addressed their need to belong, but this was complicated by the 'I don't get it' girls, who destabilized Fiona's leadership with efforts to satisfy their own agency – resisting control and absolving themselves from any responsibility for an ineffective game. In short, the children's needs for experiencing competence, relatedness and agency – except for the agency of the 'I don't get it' girls – were variously unmet in this encounter and its swift dissolution was inevitable.

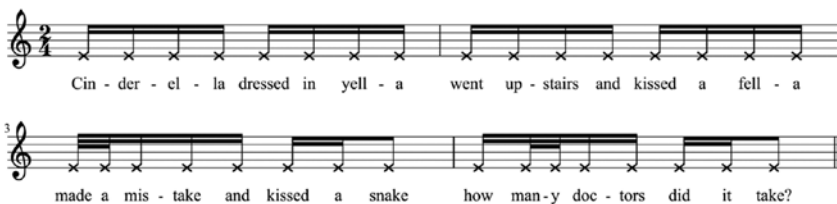
In the next snapshot, I was drawn to a particular corner of a large playground reserved for Grades 3–4 (ages 8–9) because I had spotted a girl carry a long jump-rope. What I saw and heard differed markedly from what I had anticipated.

Skipping without a rhyme. At Bristol Elementary I noticed Shayna, about eight years old, attempting to untangle a long skipping-rope. She was in bare legs and wearing summer shoes on this 3°C December morning. A friend soon joined her, helped to straighten the rope and they began to move it in what Roud (2010) refers to as 'a distinctive class of skipping game, where the rope is swayed back and forth for awhile, and then swung over into a normal skipping routine' (p. 167). As the turners swayed the rope back and forth along the pavement, a group of half a dozen girls quickly formed a line-up, ready to skip. Shayna chanted



while continuing to rock the rope back and forth on the tarmac, and the first skipper tried to jump in. The rope went over her head, she tripped and was out. Shayna repeated her rhythmic count-in as another girl jumped in and tripped. No other sound: the absence of any skipping chant, any dialogue, even any names, was striking, suggesting that this was not a group of friends who regularly played together. Shayna continued to intone her count-in with remarkable optimism, given that only a few skippers managed even a single successful skip. The line-up of skippers continued to attract between six and eight girls, with a revolving membership, despite the frustrating lack of skipping success. Finally it happened: Tanis jumped in and skipped up a storm, adding a fancy side to side motion once a rhythmic simpatico with the rope-turners was established. The recess buzzer sounded. As the several hundred children moved toward the school entrances I caught up with Tanis and initiated a hasty conversation.

- JC: Wow! I noticed your skipping – you were great. How did you do it? (Tanis shrugs with what I read as confusion. I sense that she has no conscious idea of how she was able to nail it. Rather, her skipping demonstrated unarticulated, embodied knowledge.)
- JC: Did you count?
- Tanis: Umm . . . sort of.
- JC: Out loud or to yourself?
- Tanis: Umm . . . to myself.
- JC: Did you use numbers?
- Tanis: (head to one side, pondering) Mmmm, no.
- JC: Words?
- Tanis: (head still to one side, still considering, and then a look of sudden realization) Yes!
- JC: Can you tell me?
- Tanis: (completely confident now) Sure.
She chanted, in heightened speech and with a strong accent on each beat, in the exact tempo of her skipping:



Skipping is, for Tanis, an embodied, socially executed, multimodal mix of physical skill, rhythmic chant and musical entrainment (interpersonal synchrony). She experiences skipping as a unified whole and had not needed to articulate its various components prior to this exchange. (Tanis was later a collaborator in the broader study, enabling me to record her virtuosic playing of many hand-clapping games and to chat with her at length.) A would-be skipper, walking with us and listening intently, asked Tanis to teach her the skipping chant.

Bishop and Curtis (2001) propose a playground game classification system with three broad categories: 'play with high verbal content, play with high imaginative content and play with high physical content' (p. 13). Skipping is a high physical content game. Presumably the Bristol girls who lined up to skip had mastered the individual skill of short-rope skipping, a prerequisite for joining a long-rope game. The lack of success that most girls experienced that day resulted from a lack of metric predictability. 'Ready and go' was unfailingly steady and clear, though only Shayna ever chanted it. If the skippers had all spoken this fragment they would have been better able to sense the precise moment when the turners switched from the on-the-ground move to the over-the-head move, helping to establish a group sense of beat that would synchronize turners and skippers. In SDT terms this play episode revealed most players' lack of competence in establishing and maintaining a collective sense of metric feel.

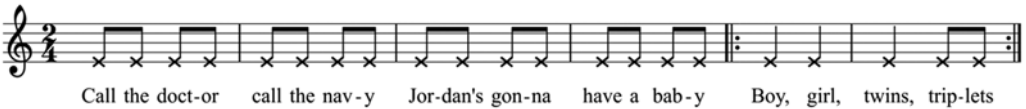
Verbal commentary from the peer group, Harwood (1998a) emphasizes, is an important factor in playground game learning. This 'stream of social commentary' (p. 56) – encouragement, compliments and critiques from master players, apprentice players and observers – was absent at Bristol that morning. While the long-rope game addressed the need for relatedness to some degree, these girls did not constitute a friendship group and so lacked social competence, or what Corsaro (2005) calls a 'collective agency' (p. 238) to enable them to move the game forward.

In terms of agency, which I defined earlier as 'the capacity to act independently, with intention, and with the ability to both exercise and resist control', rope-owner Shayna certainly displayed agency in initiating the game and in optimistically offering the 'ready and go' cue to each skipper. From my observation, it appeared that she did not have the ability to lead, to 'exercise control', which I surmise was tied up with social status.

In her analysis of teaching and learning on the playground Marsh (2008) notes that transmission of childlore frequently 'seems to be enacted by a process of direct coaching within a friendship group, combined with a parallel process of observation and subsequent practice by children outside the friendship group' (p. 144). I had seen no other groups of skippers at this playground on my several previous visits – in fact I documented no other instances of skipping at any of the nine playground sites until the following April. With this playground divided into three distinctly separate spaces for Grades K–2 (ages 5–7) and Grades 3–4 (ages 8–9) and Grades 5–6 (ages 10–12) I suggest that the apprenticeship learning model is weakened: younger children have less access to the modelling of older, accomplished skippers. Tanis's display of skipping competence may have provided an important catalyst for some players that day: at least one girl implored her for the secret to success.

The next episode describes a very short skipping encounter, illustrating a different kind of musical skill deficit from the previous vignette.

Call the doctor, call the navy. I spotted a skipping rope for the first time at Rolling Meadows Elementary School on a mid-April morning. Three girls and two boys, aged seven and eight, gathered on the tarmac. They began by chanting:



Two girls began turning the long rope at the second line of the chant: 'Boy, girl, twins, triplets', which was intended to accelerate on each repetition to increase the demands on the skipper. 'It' (Jordan) was expected to jump in on 'boy'. It seemed impossible that any skipper would achieve success because the rope turners moved the rope slightly later than the metric scheme of the rhyme demanded. All three would-be skippers missed due to this misalignment of chant and rope turn.

Meanwhile, just outside the perimeter created by the skippers another boy, Josh, performed a private break dance with clever backwards moves timed perfectly with the skipping chant, which he was silently mouthing. The skippers appeared oblivious to him and after several rounds of the rhyme Josh dashed off to other pursuits. On the second series of tries, Jordan voiced her frustration, protesting to the turners 'that's not fair!' 'No do-overs' snapped Kylie, the rope owner. After a few more attempts the group disbanded. It was impossible to pinpoint how this dissolution happened: there were no verbal exchanges or announcements of intent that I caught. I detected no overt irritation or disappointment as the players melted away in search of new play. In SDT terms the children's needs to experience competence, agency and connection were unmet by jump-rope that day. The lack of adequate long-rope skills prevented the possibility that any amalgam of social competence, personal agency and relatedness/support could be satisfied by *Call the Doctor*.

Musically, *Call the Doctor* floundered because the turners had not yet mastered coordinating the metric feel of the chant with the physically demanding job of rope-turning. A strong sense of anacrusis is needed in order to time the rope-turning so that the skipper can enter on the downbeat. At Bristol the use of two different rope-turning motions made the coordination task difficult, while here at Rolling Meadows it was the choice to defer rope-turning until the second line of the chant that prevented success. Also missing, in both instances, was the satisfyingly predictable sound of the rope hitting the pavement: inexperienced turners and poor-quality long ropes combined to deprive the skippers of the metric affirmation that the sound of a well-turned rope provides.

As at Bristol, there were no expert skippers available from whom these players could learn and no hype chorus of peers to provide social support and critique. The Rolling Meadows players did chant the first line of the skipping rhyme, when they weren't skipping. When the rope turning began, the skippers stopped chanting, leaving the turners to speak the words 'boy, girl, twins, triplets', which weakened the prospect of metric continuity.

Josh, the break dancer attracted to the rhythmic chant, demonstrated beautifully inventive and skilled movements. His joyful dance/chant, which lasted less than a minute, provided no inspiration to the skippers, but did satisfy Josh's needs for experiencing competence and agency for those 50 seconds – his natural, spontaneous behavior was clearly intrinsically motivated.

The final snapshot illustrates a range of successes and failures with rope play on a sunny spring day at Sandilands Elementary School. Construction work on the school playground necessitated that over 400 children play in a very confined tarmac area, which enabled me to see and hear a rich variety of jump-rope play.

A jump-rope miscellany. The temporary interruption to the recess routine at Sandilands influenced the nature of the play: instead of younger and older children playing in separate play

areas, the Kindergarten to Grade 6 children were all together, with much less space than they typically enjoyed. As the children ran out for playtime I noted that an unusually large number of children of all ages were carrying skipping ropes, both large and small. Over a quarter of the school population immediately involved themselves in some sort of rope play.

Many of the older children were absorbed with games of *Helicopter*, popular at this school since the snow melted in early April, and not in evidence at any of the other eight schools I regularly visited. In *Helicopter* 'it', standing in the centre of a circle of players, skims a long rope along the tarmac, around the players' feet, and each player jumps over the rope as it passes by. On this day I counted 11 different *Helicopter* groups, varying in size from about 8 to 18 children. Some were single gender groups, usually boys, while other groups involved both girls and boys. *Helicopter* requires players to space themselves perfectly so that they can synchronize their moves with split-second timing. One group of players, with about 18 girls and boys, ages 11–12, introduced each new 'it' with this sung-chanted rhyme.



Go, go, go Char-lie, go. Char-lie, do it now

The chant, repeated two or three times for each 'it', featured a fast tempo, tightly synchronized rhythmic organization, and a hearty vocal delivery in heightened speech style. Most of the players joined in the chanting. The variation on the more typical 'Let's go Charlie, Let's go', a cheer familiar in North American team sports, was perfectly maintained on each reiteration throughout 20 uninterrupted minutes of *Helicopter*. This particular group was a joy to watch: their laughter, cheering and total absorption indicated that they had found the sweet spot – akin to Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) 'flow' state – wherein the challenges, both physical and social, and the enjoyment were in optimal balance. In SDT language, the players possessed sufficient physical competence to play the game as well as a developing social competence to negotiate being part of a large mixed-gender group of peers. The goal for this group was a successful team execution: there was no emphasis on going 'out' but rather on collectively accomplishing a fast, rhythmically synchronized circle of jumpers. The need for belonging and social connection was clearly being met for these players on this day. *Helicopter* beautifully addressed the need for individual agency as well. The role of 'it' rotated around the circle, providing each child with a personalized cheer and then the opportunity to confront, in the spotlight, the physical challenges of the game.

I watched other groups of *Helicopter* players in close proximity to this flourishing group. Most of these groups were much less successful by comparison, as evidenced by continual stopping and starting, fluctuating membership and periodic arguments, usually dealing with whose fault it was when the game broke down. Physical proximity is important for game learning (Harwood, 1998a; Marsh & Young, 2006), but in the Sandilands setting the physical closeness was a temporary phenomenon, and there were many more unsuccessful than successful games of *Helicopter* in operation. The size of the groups also made learning by observation difficult, and the skills required, a sophisticated mix of physical and social competencies, further minimized the possibility of learning by observation alone. None of these other groups attempted any rhythmic chanting, a factor that helped the high functioning group create and maintain cohesion. *Helicopter* did not satisfy many players' needs for either physical or social competence because their abilities to execute the game were under-developed. Yet the motivation to imitate their older peers was, for many children, strong enough to keep them trying, and to provide some level of connection and support.

In addition to the many games of *Helicopter* there were a number of long-rope skipping games, some involving girls only and a few that included boys as well. There were several groups of highly skilled girls, ages 9–11, who were clearly relishing the sense of connection and support that their shared skipping competence fostered. Some used rhythmically-chanted counting, and several groups skipped to one of two traditional chants, both requiring the rhythmic intoning of the alphabet at the end of the couplet: 'it' must, if she trips, provide a boy's name for the letter on which she goes out.



On the peripheries of these thriving skipping games were other, mostly younger, children. One group experienced tiny bouts of success with a long rope, speak-singing this grammatically challenged variant, which required counting rather than alphabet-chanting:



Another group chanted the single word 'Lollipop', which worked for one or two skips. Some children intently watched their older peers, while a few pairs of girls, holding each other tightly, skipped with a short rope, imitating the rhymes and tempi of the long-rope skippers. In SDT terms, the children in each of these groups experienced enough improvement in physical competence bolstered by shared connection and support that they chose to stay with the activity for the entire recess.

Many others tried to solo skip in time with the long-rope skippers, often with minimal success. The manner in which they handled their skipping skill deficit varied. Some, despite getting tangled up on every attempt, kept trying, as if buoyed by being in the orbit of superb skippers. Other children created new games, which were quickly copied and varied. Particularly popular was *Giddy-up*, in which one child became a horse, with a short skipping-rope or two around his or her waist, forming the reins, 'driven' by a second child exhorting 'giddy-up'. Versions of this much easier game spread quickly, providing an energetic alternative for frustrated skippers. Several other pairs of children used the two ends of the short rope as telephones or walkie-talkies and developed various pretend games with this prop.

These adaptations of rope play illustrate children transforming their play to accommodate their skill levels. In each instance it was clear that children exercised their sense of agency in participating, that they had sufficient physical and social competence to play successfully, and that the play mattered because their peers embraced it. These conditions enabled the players to continue to address their needs for connection and support.

Implications for educational practice

SDT's contribution in identifying competence, relatedness and agency/autonomy as basic psychological needs provides a mechanism for scrutinizing instances of failure in musical play. The

snapshots of flawed play explored here illustrate that skill (physical, musical and social) and agency are interdependent and socially influenced, or as Bruner (1996) expresses it, 'skill is the instrument of agency acquired through collaboration' (p. 94).

The privilege of watching children play has heightened my respect for the rich and complex learning arena that school recess provides, taking the view that learning is, broadly, 'a process of self-re-creation' (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009, p. 184). The Vygotskian idea that through play children work out rules for social interaction and practice skills of self-regulation is widely accepted. Pellegrini and Holmes (2006) confirm that recess play can enhance children's needs for experiencing personal agency, communicative and social competence and relatedness. On the playground children must simultaneously negotiate among several layers of ambiguous, implicit and shifting rules that require them to put their sense of self and their sense of social belonging on the line. Play is multimodal: musicking, speech play, gaze, gesture and movement are several meaning-making and communicative modes children use, in unpredictable synchrony. Recognizing the complex learning situations that child-initiated play creates, educators must protect and champion children's free play time. Further, we should avoid an overly intrusive style of playground supervision, beyond keeping children safe, so that they are allowed the freedom to direct their play.

Segregated playgrounds

I noted earlier that, in most of the schools where I conducted observations, children were segregated by age in one of two ways: either by designating distinctly separate play areas, usually for Grades K–3 and Grades 4–6 children, or by staggering recess breaks so that younger and older children play outside at different times. These arrangements are designed to address children's safety. I suggest that this separation by age weakens the potential for 'catching' (musical) play. Younger children have less access to the modelling provided by older, more accomplished players and with it the potential to practice movement, music and text through holistic, mimetic repetition. With the decline of 'street play' the school playground is often the only site left for children to pick up childlore from older peers.

Classroom music practice

Music education scholars Campbell (2010), Marsh (2008, 2011), Harwood (1998a) and Harwood and Marsh (2012) each provide important recommendations for music education practice resulting from their analyses of children's musical play. From my observation and analysis of examples of musical play that proved unsuccessful I offer the following specific suggestions.

Create ongoing opportunities for children to develop fluency of rhythmic movement. The difference between musical chants, songs and games that 'work' and those that flounder is largely attributable to rhythm, as the four vignettes illustrate. Children's abilities to use complex rhythmic structures in their musical play are well-documented (Campbell, 2010; Gaunt, 2006; Harwood, 1998b; Marsh, 2008) – so it is not a question of ability, but rather one of practice. Turning a long rope, for example, requires the ability to anticipate rhythmically, to lift the rope on the anacrusis of the rhyme so that it hits the ground exactly on the downbeat. This skill requires that two rope-turners get together with a long rope and practice turning repeatedly, until the moves are fluent. Coordinating the kinesthetic and linguistic aspects of games and skipping rhymes likewise requires practice. As *Call the Doctor* and *Red Rover* illustrate, children needed

practice moving between sung and spoken speech or from chanting to skipping and chanting. While we probably will not practice rope-turning in music class we can create regular experiences for children to develop and refine their rhythmic independence, including musical activities using such props as balls, ropes and scarves. It is important to progress from having children imitate the teacher's rhythmic movements to providing children with regular opportunities to inaugurate their own rhythmic responses and to respond to the rhythmic movements of peers.

Provide regular opportunities for children to individually initiate music-making. Practice is required to develop the skills necessary to lead the count-in for chants and songs and to organize groups of peers into various game formations. Opportunities for more competent peers to display these skills will provide powerful modelling for their classmates. Music educators naturally tend to take responsibility for all the musical count-ins and game start-ups because that is what music leaders do, and it is very time-efficient. If we gradually hand this responsibility over to children we will lose some efficiency initially, but the contribution to children's musical independence will be significant.

Actively teach metacognitive skills. By regularly inviting children in music class to verbalize how group music-making works we can assist them in developing a conscious awareness of their own skills. Developing 'a reflective stance toward learning' (Darling-Hammond, 2008, p. 198) has been proven to be a critical aspect of teaching for understanding. By helping students determine what skills they have and what skills they need to acquire or strengthen in order to solve a musical problem we help students to become more independent music learners. Posing such questions as

- How are we able to start this rhyme together?
- What other ways could we get this song going?
- How can you tell where to place your drum beat?
- Why didn't that work?
- How do we know when to jump out (turn around, switch directions, etc.)?

will help children develop skills to take control of their musicking, whether in the classroom or in their independent music-making spaces.

Understanding children's self-chosen music-making as sociocultural activity or 'musical sociality' (Harrop-Allin, 2011, p. 162) heightens our awareness that children are already musicians, and that the adults with whom they share their lives are obliged to respect and enable children's self-initiated musicking. As Campbell (2010) notes, 'schoolyard music, while seemingly whimsical, can require skillful listeners, singers, and players to do it *right*' (p. 29). Music educators can be advocates for protecting free play time for children and for providing mixed-age play experiences. They can also, by means of specific pedagogical choices, contribute to the development and refinement of each child's independent musical fluency. These pedagogical moves will maximize children's chances of success at participating in and initiating musical play.

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