

It is what you do and it is the way you do it –

improvisation and why it is an essential ingredient in early years music and education
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The ideas and activities presented here are derived from my experience of making music. This includes performing, composing, arranging, recording, teaching and, most relevant here, a great deal of social music making with both adults and children. They form a part of on-going practice of music in EY settings and training for practitioners. There are two main strands to this. The first is providing a repertoire of material that enables children to form a mental map of their own world and connects them with the rest of society. The second is to value children's own spontaneous music making and encourage a creative attitude using improvisatory approach. We need to 'socialise' children without crushing their spirit.

What you do – repertoire

Creativity and imagination do not exist separately from knowledge, understanding and skill; they are interdependent. We do not create in a vacuum. The more a person is skilled and grounded in an understanding of music - or indeed gardening, engineering, cookery and so on - the more inventive they can be. Equally, the more innovative and open ended a person is then the more knowledge and skill they may acquire by trying new things and seeing a wider range of possibilities. It is a virtuous circle that applies for both children and adults. It is also one reason why it is valuable to have people who are "experts" (having knowledge, skills and experience in a range of fields) working in the early years. Including in this category are practitioners who bring their curiosity and passion for any activity and share it with the children.

Children need a repertoire of compelling, songs, rhymes, games and stories that provide a framework for music making, movement and invention that helps to develop a shared mental map of the world. This is important because one of the most valuable aspects of music making is that, while it is sometimes intensely personal and bound up with our sense of identity, it is also a shared activity and one of the ways in which we create community. As children grow during their early years the circle of shared engagement extends the "communicative musicality" (Trevvarthen and Malloch 2009, Trevvarthen 2017) of the relationship with the mother to a wider group. Language develops from communicative musicality, which involves synchronised gesture, movement, tone of voice, mirroring, turn taking and a general sensitivity to patterns.

For the most part the Early Years classics such as *Wheels on the Bus* and *If You're Happy and You Know It* live on because they are rich in fun, form and friendliness. They are a valuable resource not least in connecting the music making at home in families with that in settings. There is a need, however, to extend the repertoire partly to take account of how long children are now spending in various kinds of childcare. *Wheels on the Bus* is fine but if it is a staple for a full five years or more it might be getting a bit worn out. We need to introduce more high quality songs, remembering to include music from a range of cultures that immeasurably enriches the pot. It is also clearly important to have a range of material including different moods, genres etc.

Giving attention to the quality of the repertoire is essential. Some songs are better than others. One way we can develop a feel for spotting the good ones is by observing children's engagement with them and another is by having knowledge of different musics and musical elements to inform our choices.

There can be an over-emphasis on simply learning repertoire and performing it with attention given to accurate reproduction of, for instance, melody, lyrics rhythm and tempo with the idea that there is one right way of doing things. If we do this then children's own personal musicality and some of the joy will be lost. This brings us the other strand, which is how you do it.

How you do it - improvisation

An improvisatory approach favours children's autonomy, valuing their choices and responses. A deepening understanding of the material comes through immersion repetition and variation.

It starts by observing children's spontaneous musical activity to better understand what children's own music making entails - described here by Susan Young (2006).

Because music has been generally conceived to be a discrete activity, the ways in which musicality connects – interweaves with other forms of activity as one mode among many – and the processes of interconnection have tended to be overlooked. By observing the children while they were able to follow their own directions in self-guided play, the descriptions capture both their singing and how it is part of the children's play with things, their physical movements and use of space.

There is an artist in all of us that has a sense of what is true and what is beautiful. Life teaches us that this sense is fallible and has to be reconciled with all kinds of contradictory facts opinions and ways of understanding. Part of learning is to take all these things into account and to actively seek out evidence that challenges our preconceptions. At the same time we need that sense, the drive or pull towards our own vision, as a guide in our explorations and actions.

There is a personal aspect to our engagement with music that is intimately bound up with our sense of self and child-led practice takes account of this. There is a lot of good provision in settings that involves noticing, recording and valuing children's own music making, providing opportunities for free play with sound makers, listening to children and echoing their sounds and so on. (An excellent video on this topic can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCdh1XDsydA>) This article, however, is about how we can use the idea of improvisation to reconcile personal with social music making. The repertoire is seen as providing structures for improvisation. No particular response is required. Children are able to engage (or not) in all kinds of ways, particularly when sessions happen in the free flow part of the day. This can include “play with things, their physical movements and use of space” as described above.

A playful, improvisatory attitude to music making enables us to evoke the characteristics of effective learning :

- **Playing and exploring** – Children can engage with songs in all kinds of different ways.
- **Active learning** – we learn in many ways including by doing. The whole person is involved. Repetition is a natural part of any musical activity. By repeating catchy songs and rhymes over and again children absorb the patterns and learn the words and tunes quite naturally at their own pace.
- **Creating and thinking critically** – this includes variation: changing the words, adding actions, using funny voices, putting in stops and starts, speeding up and slowing down etc. Perhaps more importantly it involves developing the imagination: pretending, acting or more accurately inhabiting a role and exploring possibilities. There is a tendency to think of the imagination as a “soft” ability but nothing that we achieve happens without it coming into play. Improvisation provides the space to innovate, evaluate and re-innovate in real time without the need for coming out of “flow” to evaluate.

In addition to allowing a wide variety of individual responses working with a shared repertoire has the advantage of facilitating co-operation. An important aspect of this is learning about the sharing of attention, who gets listened to and who's choices are

taken up by the group. Given the chance, children are remarkably good at organising themselves.

Jamming in the playground

Here is an observation of some of the things children were doing in one outdoor jam (improvising) session in a nursery school. I was working there regularly and we had a shared repertoire of good jamming songs and rhymes. I was singing and playing the mandolin, giving a musical structure (pulse, rhythm and form) to the session :

- Most children spent some time dancing and singing.
- Children were using beaters (dowel sticks) to play a range of things including - the ground, a fence, the side of a shed, hand held percussion instruments, large wooden building blocks, a chair and plastic oil drums. Most were in some way relating to the common pulse. If things get absolutely out of time I might stop and do some synchronising. I will echo and expand on rhythmic or other innovations introduced by the children.
- One group built a structure with large wood blocks that was like a drum kit that they sat inside and played. They spent as much time organising and reorganising their setup and defending it against interlopers as they did playing.
- A group laid out some big blocks in a row and used it as a stage, standing on it using beaters as microphones.
- Each song was repeated over and over again so there was time for variation and for attractive innovations to be picked up by the group and incorporated in a shared version of the song.
- One extrovert performed extravagantly and a small group provided him with an audience.
- Some children went and found plastic tennis racquets and played along, guitar style.
- At one point a child, who is generally very noisy, put his hands over his ears and said it was too loud so we negotiated a halt to the shed playing and all performed a dramatically quiet version of Twinkle Twinkle.
- Children took it in turns to choose which songs we played.

In these very fluid situations children often respond in more indirect ways. Alvin, on a tricycle, screeches to a halt at the edge of the session, a trolley in tow. The minute the music starts he is off at about a hundred miles an hour. He returns and repeats the whole thing. We are providing a sort of sound track to his activity, a celebration. It is common for children to hover on the edge of the area, sometimes joining when invited but often just wanting to be in the general area observing and listening. Parents often say these children are singing the songs enthusiastically at home.

The creativity that is a part of these kinds of jamming sessions is very much a social thing involving, making each other laugh, copying, arguing over instruments and dancing.

The session described above depends upon the presence of a competent musician (this includes anyone who will sing and keep time confidently) who plays and or sings to provide a framework and who can respond in real time to children's ideas. This way of working is inspired and informed by adult music sessions, particularly in Ireland, where groups of musicians get together and play informally in social situations, often in a pub. These sessions provide a place relatively free from performance anxiety where people at different levels can play together; all improve, everyone has fun and they provide a kind of glue that holds the community together. I like the idea of music as a place where we go to put ourselves back together. It is notable that two of the most interesting groups in the acoustic music world, 'Imagined Village' and 'The Penguin Café Orchestra' conceived as places that foster community.

Early Years settings are not only places of education – at best they are hubs of the community where people go for contact and nourishment. Similarly music and

storytelling are not 'subjects' but essential aspects of what make us human. Doing them well, with all the different meanings of that phrase, matters.

The role of the adult can usefully be divided in three broad areas :

- Leading from the back – providing space and resources and sitting back to see what happens – this might be followed by echoing or extending as in other types of play
- Leading from the side – the musician/practitioner provides pulse, rhythm and form by singing and playing and children are able to join in as they wish as in the session described above
- Leading from the front – the adult tells a story or teaches a new song or way of performing (varying tempo, dynamics etc.)

Of course the boundaries between these three are fuzzy. A competent musician can do an enormous amount of subtle teaching in leading from the side mode. There is a good analogy with the way children acquire language by being in company with competent speakers. Most of the time the adult and child are just conversing – learning by doing - but just occasionally, when the time is right, the sensitive adult will repeat something the child has said in using for example “went” instead of “goed”.

All these three modes are available to the practitioner who is not a specialist musician which leads us to...

Training practitioners to improvise

Elements of this approach can and has been taught to practitioners who are not musically confident enabling them take a broader and more creative approach to music and story sessions (and enjoy themselves enormously in the process).

This has the advantage of connecting with what they are already doing making it more likely to be incorporated in their daily practice. In a situation where only a small proportion of children are benefitting from a music project or regular visits from a musician this is has to be seen as a good thing. Even when there is a visiting specialist practitioners who see children every day have a deeper relationship with them. That relationship can be improved by music making and this, in turn, improves the quality of the music making.

Many people have an idea of performing music in general and of improvisation in particular as very high level activities that are best left to professionals. These same people may be practitioners who are skilled at including children's names in well-known songs or altering the lyrics to fit a particular theme which is, of course, a type of improvisation. Improvisation is one of those words that has a very wide range of meanings. The definition I use to help practitioners use more improvisation is simply **“repetition with variation”**

We use songs that embody some of the basic elements of music. These provide a toolkit of simple options that we practise for making variations and rhythm accompaniments.

There is no pressure to do anything impressive but a focus on listening and trying different things.

Having simple techniques and ideas for finding rhythms and ways of varying contributions is a great aid for building confidence. Here are just a few:

- Use the lyrics to generate rhythms.
- Be aware of the form – a song such as *Happy and You Know It* for example has lovely gaps where you can put in a sound or action.
- Use different sounds or tone of voice

- Stop and listen - do nothing or just do something minimal that enables you to listen.
- Do something different – do something different – do something different!

Children have very strong preferences for particular songs and choosing is a very important part of a jam session. There is no better way of establishing rapport with some children than by playing the themes from their favourite television shows etc. and some, not all, of these are very good jamming material.

Armed with these ideas practitioners can enhance their music sessions with actions, dance, body percussion, percussion instruments and vocal variations. This approach can easily be applied to material they already know in addition to the new winner songs they take away from the session. Freed from a fixed idea of what should happen, they are free to sit back a little and take notice of what children are doing.

Improvising with Stories

The jamming approach can significantly enrich working with stories. The story, like the song is seen as providing a framework or starting point for a wide range of activities, responses and explorations. As with music the more the adults have a grounding in a repertoire of stories, their elements structures and resonances, then the more relaxed they can be about departing from the script. As with songs, some stories are better than others. Traditional stories that have stood the test of time are rich in meaningful patterns like *The Gingerbread Man*. They can embody metaphors for problem solving as in *Three Billy Goats Gruff* or teach us profound things about our psychology like the *Lion Who saw Himself in the Water*. They can reconcile two opposing but useful ideas like the story of *Odysseus and the Sirens*. Of course many of them need adapting to our own time to avoid stereotyping.

Children do not just listen to stories they inhabit them, mind and body. You can see a slideshow of children inhabiting stories to the accompaniment of a song telling the *Billy Goats Gruff* story at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y5U1aZw-jJ4>

Improvisation as an attitude to education and life

Setting the tone is an important part of what we do in any place of education and sharing an improvising attitude can be a valuable part of it. In his book "Do Improvise" which is about improvisation as an approach to life in general, Robert Poynton (2013) identifies three core attitudes that make for fruitful improvisations :

- **Notice more** – it is easy to see how this relates to the observations discussed in the previous issue of this journal.
- **Let go** – when we are narrowly focussed on a particular aspect of a situation or have a particular goal fixed in our minds we are limiting the possibilities available to us for all kinds of wonderful things such as, problem solving, enriching our experience of life, learning new things and simply enjoying the journey. Abandoning a fixed goal allows us to notice more and to explore a wide range of possibilities including those that interest the children we are working with.
- **Use everything** - using whatever is at hand. This refers partly to the meaning of 'improvisation' conveyed by a statement such as "She improvised a drum-kit using plastic buckets, metal pan lids and a pair of wooden chopsticks." It also can mean seeing problems as opportunities. If the train is late it's a chance to read that article or if the children are arguing over instruments it's a chance to pause and spend some time exploring the sounds made by objects in the space and so on.

Poynton emphasises how these three aspects feed each other. If we 'let go' of our original plan then we have spare attention to 'notice more' possibilities for making something of any given situation.

Try it – it works!

References

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