

Crescent moon and star: Working towards intercultural approaches in early childhood music education

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Abstract

There is an increasing need for music education pedagogies that are sensitive to and serve the needs of multi-ethnic and multi-religious populations. This article reports on a project that sought to develop intercultural approaches in early childhood music provided for multi-ethnic Muslim mothers and their young children. The project adopted a critical viewpoint and through action research sought to revise approaches to practice. Although this article reports on a project focusing on early years music education in England, the orientating principles, working processes and key ideas that emerged from this work will be relevant and adaptable to music education across wider age phases and in other countries.

Key terms

early childhood, equality, intercultural, Muslim, music education

Introduction

This article reports on a project that sought to develop intercultural approaches to music sessions provided for multi-ethnic mothers and their young children in children's centres serving majority Muslim communities in four different cities in England. Despite the growing multi-ethnic and multi-faith nature of urban areas in the UK (Modood, 2007) there is insufficient knowledge about diversity in family musical values and practices across ethno-religious groups and little consideration of how early childhood music education practice should adapt to serve diverse populations. This project sought to address this shortfall of knowledge. For this purpose the project had two main strands:

- one strand invited information via structured interviews from multi-ethnic Muslim mothers about their family musical activities, including beliefs and values;

- a second strand explored intercultural approaches to music practice by involving the four practitioners working with those same groups of mothers in action research.

Although this article reports on a project focusing on early years music education in England, the orientating principles, working processes and key ideas that emerged from this work will be relevant and adaptable to music education across wider age phases and in other countries.

The project team adopted the term ‘intercultural’ rather than the more usual ‘multicultural’, preferring its emphasis towards the interrelationship between cultures in contrast to the juxtaposition or separate presence of several cultures within a society conveyed by the term ‘multicultural’ (Clay & George, 2000). Intercultural therefore implies approaches based not simply on acknowledgement of, appreciation and respect for diversity, but on finding ways that cultures can connect, negotiate across differences and integrate.

Early years music education in the UK has become a substantial field in its own right (Young, 2007). It has, in recent years, expanded rapidly in keeping with an increase of emphasis on early childhood in central policy agendas from the 1990s onwards (Moss & Pence, 1994). There is a general consensus in policy about overall goals: to give children a ‘good start’ and to offer quality early interventions. Similarly among the many providers of musical experiences for children (educational providers, music education services and arts organisations), early childhood has moved up their policy agendas¹. Within both UK central policies and the policies of

¹ For example, Youth Music, a leading charity in England which allocates considerable funding to music projects for children and young people gives priority to early childhood projects and requires projects to demonstrate they reach ‘disadvantaged children’. www.youthmusic.org.uk

organizations there is often an espousal of broad goals of inclusivity, diversity and equality but no suggestion of how these are to be achieved in practice.

The establishment of children's centres is a recent national initiative in England². Children's centres offer a multi-agency service and have a broad aim to support families with young children within their catchment area. Music is typically part of their provision, with parent and child music groups offered as one of a range of supporting and enriching activities. Children's centres are prioritized in areas where families are considered to have greater needs. Since economic and social disadvantage tends to be higher among minority ethnic communities, mother³ and child music groups are now regularly provided in children's centres serving multi-ethnic and multi-religious neighbourhoods. There is pressing need therefore to ensure that this often costly music provision best serves the children and families it is provided for.

However, early childhood music education is based on a model of practice that is broadly uniform; a 'one-size-fits-all' model irrespective of the families and children participating. This conventional model of practice has been arrived at over time through processes of gradual consensus and validation, with the result that it is taken for granted and rarely contested. In practice, the model consists of a group session led by a strong, often animated, leader who introduces children's songs and rhythmic movement or percussion-based activities, mostly game-like in form. It is based on widely accepted norms of infant and early childhood development and what is

² For more information about children's in the UK visit www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Preschooldevelopmentandlearning

³ While many now prefer to refer to 'parent and child' as being gender inclusive and avoids the assumption that parenting is always the responsibility of the mother, I deliberately refer to 'mother and child'. Among the Muslim community parenting is still for the most part a gender segregated activity and it is the mother who attends preschool mother and child sessions.

assumed to be sound pedagogical practice. The sets of foundational principles underpinning this common approach are considered to be neutral and unproblematic and therefore are applicable to all.

When unpicked in more detail, these developmental norms encompass music integrated with closely related areas such as communication and language, social skills, physical coordination and creativity. Thus conventional early childhood music further validates its practices through claims that it contributes to the overall cognitive and social development of young children.

In mother and child groups the presence of the mother will assume that she will adopt an attached, interactive and supporting, didactic role in her child's participation and learning. This too is underpinned by a psychodynamic, relationship model of parenting which emphasizes attachment; a conception which is based on dominant, white, middle class ideals of the 'good parent'. Far from being neutral, however, these developmental and psychodynamic theories carry within them deeply embedded assumptions about the nature of early childhood, children's behaviour, of parenting, of music and of learning. They are not necessarily appropriate to majority world, culturally diverse populations of mothers with children. More seriously they can unwittingly serve to uphold the interests of certain dominant groups in society at the expense of others.

To many early childhood music education professionals to suggest that their widely validated and familiar practices contain inequalities that can potentially oppress would seem exaggerated, even ludicrous. Pedagogical practice in early years music is assumed to be politically neutral and benign, the focus being on content and activities and avoiding, as Bowman writes, 'theory, complexity and controversy'

[Bowman, 2007; also Bowman, 2005]. The choices and decisions that underlie and shape practice are assumed to be untroubled by political-social-cultural influences, issues and concerns. Teaching early years music is considered so simple, so straightforward that training needs are minimal. Many practitioners are self-taught; learning from activity books and shadowing others. Bowman criticizes a 'what works' mentality which is markedly 'technical and means driven' [p.35] with little attention to or concern for deeper issues of power and social justice. To compound this situation, early childhood music education is increasingly becoming a commercial enterprise, with the establishment of franchised and small company 'branded' approaches. Commercial motives further distort the principles on which practice is based. 'What works' translates in to 'what sells' to increase profits.

This is not to imply a lack of concern for equality among those who practise in early childhood music. But a concern for equality tends to translate in to what Vandebroek terms 'colour blindness' (2007), meaning that all will be welcomed in participating but any ethnic or religious difference is denied. Moreover there will be an implicit expectation that all will adapt as soon as possible to what is usual, familiar and 'normal'. Such an approach relies on the denial of difference, very often out of an honest concern to treat everyone equally (Vandebroek, 2007). An alternative to 'colour blindness' is the tokenistic approach where songs or music, perhaps linked with celebrations, special instruments, clothing, food and other artefacts, considered to be representative of the cultural heritage of those participating are included (Pascal, 2006). As Pascal has emphasized such superficial approaches risk being patronizing and stereotypical and fail to tackle the deeper cultural and power differences. They tend to treat cultures as static and fixed, as essentialist, thereby denying the dynamic

and agentic nature of children's own day-to-day experiencing of their cultural heritage in interaction with their contemporary cultural worlds.

However, in attempting to develop intercultural approaches based on an ethics of equality educators face a number of dilemmas. Brooker sets out such dilemmas (Brooker, 2005). She writes that it is wrong to 'attempt to colonize ethnic minority families . . . to bring them into conformity with white middle-class perspectives' (Brooker, 2005: 126/127). This she says is cultural imperialism. Nor, however, is it appropriate to wait for the gradual and incremental accommodation to the norms embodied within educational practice that takes place with time; for this leaves young children in a cultural time lag and attempting to negotiate the discontinuity between home and educational provision as best they can. Equally, however, to abandon approaches that conform to educational values central to English culture would be to compromise what is valued by those of us, myself included, who represent the white, non-Muslim population. These values include the importance accorded to music, creativity and playful arts-based activity in young children's lives, the value of mothers playing with and encouraging young children within family life and a belief in gender equality. Instead Brooker (2005:127) advocates careful interrogation of the underlying beliefs and values and from this process arrive at approaches that are 'diverse and multi-faceted', that 'do not contain entrenched expectations for practice'. The conventional model of early childhood music education certainly contains entrenched expectations.

There is evidence of the risks to educational and other forms of achievement for young children if models of practice are not revised to be more appropriate to multi-ethnic and multi-religious families. The theory of cultural discontinuity (Au, 1993) focuses on the mismatch between the culture of the school and the culture of

the home. Studies have provided evidence that discontinuities between young children's cultural experiences in the home and educational contexts may be linked with poor academic performance (Bradley & McKelvey, 2007; Abbas, 2002), feelings of disorientation and insecurity (Fuligni & Fuligni, 2007), and poor social skills (Harrison & Ungerer, 1997). These studies were looking at educational experiences in general and not music specifically, but taken collectively they suggest that the ability to tailor musical activities to the cultural individuality of children will have important consequences their experiences of music. They will help determine whether those musical experiences have a positive or negative influence on the child, not only in their experiences of music but also possibly contributing to their wider experience of early childhood education.

The search for theoretical tools to assist in the process of subjecting early childhood music education practice to critique and imagining how it could change can look to scholars from the general field of early childhood education who have been exploring notions of cultural diversity and their implications for practice (e.g. Brooker, 2002; Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Gupta, 2006; MacNaughton, 2006; Yelland, 2005). They seek to raise awareness through the application of critical theory (drawing heavily on post-structural feminism and post-colonialism) to how difference operates in imperceptible and unwitting ways to privilege some groups over others. In particular, educators in Australia (e.g. Mac Naughton, 2006; Yelland, 2005), informed by conceptual repertoires drawn largely from postmodern philosophical traditions, are developing new positions from which to analyze notions of 'difference' in early childhood education. Although these theoretical ideas are now fairly well established in general early childhood scholarship, early childhood music education has still to embrace them. Theoretical ideas, however, can remain inert unless they

evolve with and from practice. Just as with policy edicts, their application to practice requires the challenging work of translating ideals and aspirations in to real world actions. This project aimed not only to critique, complicate and theorize but also to imagine and explore alternative approaches to practice. Action research therefore provided a method suitable for applying this aim.

Having introduced the context and rationale for this project from several different viewpoints, I continue by explaining the project and its main outcomes.

The project

Supported by a grant from a UK government department⁴ the aim of the project as presented in its title was to develop ‘interculturally sensitive approaches to creative play in children’s centres serving majority Muslim communities’. The term ‘creative play’ was chosen as a ‘catch-all’ to avoid a narrow focus on music and to expand in to a range of arts and play based approaches. There was another strategic reason. The term ‘creative play’ also served to side-step any anxieties that might have arisen from funders or hosts in relation to a project proposing to focus on music - given that there can be some reservations around music among Muslims who follow certain doctrines conservatively.

The backbone of the project was the work of four practitioners (two musicians, one theatre worker and one music and play practitioner) in four children’s (one practitioner per centre) in four different cities located in Central and Southern England. The populations at these four children’s centres consisted of a cross-section of Muslim ethnic groups from South Asia (mainly Pakistan and Bangladesh), Somalia and the Arab countries of the Middle East. We quickly learnt, with some guilt that we

⁴ The department in 2008-09 was titled the Department for Children, Schools and Families. It has now been renamed the Department for Education

had not realized this in advance, that the label ‘Muslim’ was too blunt by far. It risked essentialism by exaggerating similarities between the four children’s centre groups and ignoring important differences (Modood, 2007). There were variations not only of ethnicity, but also in the length of time families had spent in the UK, the families’ original reasons for migrating and their current social and economic circumstances (Landsford, Deater-Deckard & Bornstein, 2007). We needed to appreciate the complex and multiple experiences of the members of each group, focusing on individuals rather than subsuming them to broad, group identities.

Each practitioner visited their children’s centre once a week during a period of approximately eight months. The extended period was designed to provide ample time for settling, building relationships and exploring approaches to work without pressure of short timescales⁵. To be able to imagine how practice might be different, practitioners needed time to explore, to take risks, to encounter problems and backtrack. Real change is small-scale and slow. Each practitioner worked for the equivalent of one day per week and was required to work with only one group in one context during that time. The generous time allowance enabled practitioners to spend time in talking, and in listening, helping with other tasks in the centre, joining staff meetings, planning and writing in their reflective logs. All these other dimensions of the role contribute to better integration, time to reflect and consider, time to listen to mothers and hear their stories.

Two of the practitioners worked primarily in music, and two introduced a range of approaches to creative play which included story, song, movement and play

⁵ Typically in the UK, music project work is designed in packages of a fixed number of sessions: six or ten sessions being typical. Funders in the UK often request that work reaches high numbers of children and this encourages project designers to spread work thinly among many.

with materials such as clay, paint, paper and fabrics integrated in to these activities. This range of what might be broadly termed performance arts was also useful in enabling the exploration of a range of approaches and expanding ideas about what might constitute intercultural practice in music.

Action research

The four project team members kept logbooks. In these they kept their descriptions and reflections of practice. Full team, whole day meetings were held at regular intervals during the life of the project in order to review, analyze and plan ahead (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009). At these meetings the practitioner team of four were joined by the two researchers; also early years music educator-academics. Through this process, understandings and ideas were tentatively and gradually formed. Articles or book chapters that might provide theoretical insights were also brought to these meetings and distributed for discussion and debate.

The two project researchers also visited sessions to observe (approximately four visits to each location) and collected field notes with photos and video recordings. All the discussions from the seminar days were recorded in note form and assembled together with any formal inputs made by team members. The full body of data therefore consisted of logbooks, field notes with photos and video recordings, seminar notes and semi-formal seminar presentations made by team members. The data was collated and reviewed repeatedly by the lead project researcher. Many of the themes and key ideas began to take shape during the seminar discussions and by the final seminar a set of emergent themes were presented to the team to be debated and further refined.

Structured interviews

Since an important aim of the project was to develop an understanding of the mothers' current practices in music and values in relation to music, play, creativity and the upbringing of their children, the project included another more formal strand of research. Structured interviews were carried out with mothers in all four of the settings at the start of the project. A total of 86 interviews were carried out which were subject to both quantitative analysis of the single response, factual questions concerned with demographic detail and educational background and qualitative analysis of the more extended responses. The interviews were undertaken by same-culture interviewers in the interviewees' preferred language, either carrying out the interview directly or translating on behalf of an English language interviewer. In these cases, translations had to be made, usually instantly, by the interviewer if they were writing responses on the questionnaire in English. The interviews enquired about cultural and religious values in relation to play and music and the mothers' hopes and expectations for their children on entering preschool education. The findings from the interviews were fed in to the project in its early stages in order to provide more information for the practitioners. This article will not report formally on the questionnaire data⁶, but will blend the questionnaire responses in to the general findings of the project, indicating where a particular point is supported by the questionnaire responses.

Project findings

The project developed across three broad dimensions. These were:

⁶ Much of the data collected from the questionnaire-interviews was concerned with identifying the cultural, religious, social and economic characteristics of the families we were working with in order to learn more about the participating families and also to verify that the project was working with the families who had been identified in the project proposal, necessary to justify the grant.

- 1 The team's expanding self-awareness of their own beliefs, values and assumptions;
- 2 The team's expanding understanding of the parents' cultural beliefs, practices and values;
- 3 The team's expanding knowledge of culturally sensitive pedagogical content and approaches, together with an expanding skill-base to enable these approaches in practice.

1 Self-awareness

For all the project team the work moved us in to new territory, destabilizing what was familiar in terms of music, young children's learning, educational practice and so on. We needed to learn to adopt a critical viewpoint, to be able to identify points of discomfort or disjuncture experienced in practice on an individual, personal level. These points of disjuncture might then indicate something important that we needed to deconstruct and analyze. Thus self-awareness was a mechanism by which we could project small, personal experiences on to processes operating at an institutional, social, cultural and political level and thereby gain insights.

Raising self-awareness often resulted, however, in anxiety: anxiety about inadvertently revealing some prejudiced or stereotypical ideas or attitudes that we held deep-down and unawares and that might be (unwittingly) offensive. We were nervous of showing our ignorance of issues and ideas that we felt (hoping to be able to affirm and then project our self identity as enlightened, liberal-minded people) we ought to know about. The project repeatedly heightened our self-awareness of our own identity: the ethnicities of team members (English, Irish, Pakistani), our color, our faith or secularism, our female gender, our generation and class and our musical

identities. It sent us back to question even the most fundamental values which underpinned what we were doing or what we wanted to achieve. The personal learning was, for all of us, difficult and sometimes stressful. We felt at times de-skilled and inept. Gradually, in the group seminars, we discovered blind spots, biases and started to question the very bedrock of our own practice. The written reflections of one practitioner, working in a setting with a high number of recent migrant families, suggested that these feelings of displacement, of being in ‘new territory’, must be similar to those of the mothers and children who are newly arrived. Thus to experience a form of displacement could be seen as a way of empathizing.

The process of raising self-awareness turned attention to the taken-for-granted conventions of practice. Early childhood educational practice suffused with developmental psychology unquestioningly centres ‘the child’. In mother and child sessions the child focus slips automatically to the mother-with-child dyad; the mother subsumed within this relationship. Theoretical underpinnings from developmental psychology expand to include psychodynamic, relationship theories, thus pinning the mother to a ready-made model of parenting. These theories put the locus of attention on micro-interactions that happen only within the session and avoid wider ‘macro’ issues of class, race or religion. In our discussions, through awareness-raising and deconstruction approaches, we increasingly found the need to reverse our attention, to start from issues of class, race, religion and from political, social and cultural situations and only then, gradually, to look again at how these mediated the mothers’ participation in the early childhood music sessions.

This turn-about in viewpoint from micro to macro arose directly from the greater opportunities we created in the project for the practitioners to develop meaningful conversations with mothers. Listening to a story of escape from

Afghanistan or of civil war experiences from Somalia, soon allowed us to see early childhood practice as presented to these mothers with new eyes. What did newly arrived women make of the activities, songs, instruments and playthings they were offered? Here is a simple example that came up in conversation between one project musician and a recently arrived Afghanistani woman. When sweeping dry, sandy soil out of her former house in a rural village was a daily chore, why did a typical playroom environment offer children a sand tray and encourage play that frequently resulted in sand spilling on to the floor? Such were the small points of disjuncture which served to cleave open deeper layers of understanding when brought to the seminar discussions. We wondered what else might strike the mothers as similarly nonsensical? Ideas about music content, activities and pedagogy thus started to reform through the process of trying to see with new eyes.

2 Culture specific knowledge

The project aim was to translate policy and theory-derived aspirations for an intercultural approach to practice in to musical activities that might be appropriate and engaging to the mothers and children participating in the project. Following from a point made earlier in this article, we were mindful not to fall in to tokenism, but the simple reality was that the practitioners were visiting the centres once a week to develop musical activity. Philosophy and theory was not enough; they needed approaches and activities. In order to build knowledge from which a repertoire of appropriate approaches could be evolved, two methods were adopted. Firstly the questionnaires enquired from the mothers about their musical activities at home and tried to elicit their underlying beliefs and attitudes. We also asked how their Muslim faith impacted on musical activity for their children. Secondly we encouraged an

exploratory approach to practice in which sessions were not rigidly pre-planned but consisted of choices for resources and options for activities.

We were aware from previous researchers' work (Harris, 2006; Wright, 2006) that some fundamentalist Islamic doctrines restrict participation in musical activities. Only a small number of questionnaire responses mentioned some forms of limitation on their young children's participation in performing music. There were a small number of mothers (six from the sample of 86) who followed fundamental religious beliefs and these tended, not surprisingly, to present the most doctrinaire positions. However by far the majority of mothers were flexible and liberal in their views. Interestingly, some mothers reported that restrictions (at least from our point of view we interpreted these as restrictions) are likely to increase as children age and that for the most part it was girls who were to be subject to future restrictions. For the younger children who were taking part in this project they were minimal. These responses present a contrast to Harris's research at secondary level in schools serving majority Muslim populations where religious reservations concerning participation in musical activity, particularly singing, had apparently become more restrictive than we found from our enquiries with younger children (Harris, 2006). Most mothers, however, were concerned about the lyrics of songs; that they were not associated with other religions or contained words about 'love'. Some explained that the mention of Jesus, a prophet in Islam, is acceptable but songs making specific reference to Christian religious festivals, Christmas in particular, were less acceptable.

A wide variety of musical instruments were taken to sessions to explore. We discovered some positive cultural resonances around certain instruments which could then be extended in follow-up sessions. The dholak, a barrel shaped drum which can be struck at both ends, is typically played by South Asian women at celebrations and

for their own entertainment. This instrument carries positive connotations. Practitioners incorporated dholak playing and also dholak making in to their activities. Zingar, wooden instruments with small jingles, were also introduced in one setting by chance, and were taken up and played by women with dance-style movements that were familiar to them.

These instruments represented some of the ‘bridging points’ that the project sought. Their introduction in to the programme might seem very close to the tokenism of which I was critical but for an essential difference. The taking up of the instruments and the activities that evolved from them had been indicated and led by the participating mothers; they were not imposed upon them by pre-determined session plans.

The mothers’ own participation in music and dancing activities varied. While we understood that Muslim customs tend to consider dancing as associated with ‘loose morals’, there were nevertheless individual instances of women dancing vividly to live accordion music played by one of the practitioners. Clad in abaya one mother energetically led an Arabic-style traditional dance to the accordion player’s quick-minded selection of an Irish folk tune, part of her own cultural heritage. A small incident, but one which seemed to encapsulate our search for an intercultural pedagogy. Notably, the musician was flexible and able to instantly adapt to whatever seemed to evolve creatively in the sessions.

We learnt, increasingly, that there are no hard and fast rules that we could call up, that while some may be reticent to participate in the varied forms of musical activity such as singing, playing and dancing, many others were not. In the single-gender company of other women and among small children, the women appeared to

be able to relax. It goes without saying, therefore, that all our practitioners were women and no men were ever present at sessions. Also, sometimes, we perceived a contradiction between what was said and what was acted. We surmised that this may be a consequence of the women managing many competing demands as they move between the multi-faceted expectations of Western education and childcare services, children, husbands, extended family and religion. All we learnt and could say to other educators with confidence is that we found it important to be alert to the possibility of Muslim women having certain reservations about participating in certain activities. Indeed, one practitioner, as the project progressed and she developed a relationship with the mothers, increasingly adopted quite the opposite approach of encouraging active singing and movement to songs among mothers and their children, to motivate them to join in collectively. An over-cautious, over-correct approach that anticipates religious differences could in itself be perceived as stereotypical and not conveying generous expectations of flexibility and integration.

3 Culturally sensitive pedagogy

This section is best illustrated via the described example of practice which forms the next major portion of this article. The example of practice was captured on video recording allowing for repeated reviewing and analytical discussion with the project team.

An Example of practice with discussion

Nuzhat sits on the floor in the center of a circle of thirteen South Asian women. I term the group loosely ‘South Asian’ but while Bangladeshi and Pakistani women number the most, two women are from Tunisia, one from Palestine via a spell in Jordan and another from the Yemen. The loose term also elides the circumstances that resulted in

them all coming together, as British by birth, as recently arrived, often through marriage to a UK resident, or as asylum seekers and possibly transient.

Nuzhat plays a dholak, positioned on the floor in front of her, and the group are singing a range of songs; some traditional South Asian and some children's songs from various countries. Although they sing a mixed repertoire of songs, many from the standard repertoire of English children's songs, all the songs acquire a South Asian 'feel' from the distinctive timbre and rhythms of the dholak. The women clap hands and all join in with the singing, sitting comfortably on the floor in a quite close-knit circle. The scene is animated, warm and sociable. A few women have babies in arms and clap while holding. A couple of toddlers stand and look or sit in the middle of the ring. Other slightly older children are standing to watch or playing elsewhere in the room. The room is a meeting room in a children's centre equipped with resources for stay and play groups, and so there are toys and a playhouse set out to invite play.

While received wisdom in working in early childhood music education with groups of mothers is that they are generally reluctant to sing and that approaches need to employ a range of strategies to coax and support mothers in singing, there is no such reticence with this group. I learn from talking with them that singing collectively, as women together, is a familiar activity. Singing is part of celebrations and seems, from the unselfconscious manner in which it is done, to carry positive resonances of women coming together, of fun and laughter. The group centres the women's singing for its own sake rather than, as is usually the case in mother and child groups, mothers singing on behalf of and for the children who are present. The inclusion of English children's songs represents a hybrid shift between women's collective, celebratory singing and a conventional mother and preschool child music session.

What was also noticeable was that there was no expectation, as would normally be the case in mother and preschool music groups, that the children would be joining in or that they should be drawn in to participate. The children were present, but rarely sitting with their mothers, except for the very youngest, and even these were not being expected to participate in any way. Increasingly, (as mentioned earlier in this article) parent and child musical activity is being provided and promoted, to support adult-child interaction based on a Euro-American middle class model of parenting. Should we have interpreted the mothers' behaviours as neglect of their children's need for stimulation and interaction or have these needs been exaggerated by child development experts who mistake an ethnocentric ideology of mother-infant interaction as the universal requirement for all (LeVine, 2004:158)? According to this model, adults and children participate as playful equals in musical activity, adults support their children's engagement with scaffolding interactions and positive praise and model enthusiastic, animated, child-like engagement. In this way a parenting and education model elevates as expected, normal and desirable what has come to be termed 'intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996). Lareau (2003) contrasts this with the 'accomplishment of natural growth' based on alternative values and priorities. This group of mothers, for example, were allowing their children freedom of choice to participate or not and did not see their role to actively manage their participation; a less intensive parenting akin to Lareau's conception of 'natural growth'. They may not have been acting in an intensive, didactic role, but the mothers were positively modelling being musical as adults. This too would have learning benefits.

Nsamenang (2005a) identifies two basic forms in how societies organize learning: a didactic or instructional perspective and a participatory model. Western models of education are essentially didactic, where children learn in contrived

contexts remote from everyday activities of adults. In contrast learning in majority world family traditions requires children to engage in ongoing cultural activities as participants (Rogoff, 2003). The music group seemed to align more with a participatory model of learning.

The rationales behind music for mother and child groups, serving the policy aims of children's centres, are typically, however, to encourage musical interactions. Mothers in the attached, psychodynamic view are conceptualized as ever-giving, effaced by the needs of their children. Mothers who do not actively engage with their children, for whatever reason, are often criticized. Intensive one-to-one interaction resonate with the strong belief in the sanctity of the mother-infant bond, a culturally specific view but one which seems to be receiving renewed emphasis. The weakening of the feminist position in recent years allows this dominant version of motherhood to proceed with less challenge than might have been the case if feminist arguments upholding the rights and needs of women as individuals were more persistent. The intensive interaction between mother and baby or very young child is taken to be a developmental norm at the heart of 'good' parenting practice. The work of cultural psychologists interested in diverse models of parenting revealed by anthropological studies have shown this to be a minority world conception (e.g. Rogoff & Chavajay, 1995; Tudge, 2008). Among music educators the currently influential theory of communicative musicality has added considerable weight to mother-child interaction rationales (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2008). This theory likens adult-infant interaction to a form of pre-musical activity in which the mother engages in music-like dialogue with her child. While these theoretical ideas have proved to be fruitful for early childhood music education, there are dangers in description becoming prescription. The concomitant ideas of music-based interactions and their

assumed impacts on childhood development need to be viewed cautiously. Theories of communicative musicality have been derived from studies of American and English middle class mothers who hold certain beliefs about how children should be parented. Anthropological studies of infant care and mothering are starting to reveal that culturally defined variations are plentiful; indeed, to the point that intensive, mothering in face-to-face interactions should slip from being a norm, to just one of many possible variations.

However, the dilemma is that outlined by Brooker, Lareau and many others, that through intensive parenting, white, middle class mothers provide their children with a smooth continuity in to didactic educational experiences that embody the same expectations and interactive styles; thus imparting an educational advantage to their children. How could we design approaches to early childhood music that advantaged the children by being culturally continuous and yet, at the same time, incorporated the values and expectations of the English early education system?

The project team discovered another dilemma, noticing that gender differentiated upbringing was more marked than might be the case in some other communities. It was noticeable that the older boys (four-year-olds) were free to roam and play, often quite noisily around the outer margins of the circle. The boisterous freedoms often accorded to sons contrasted with the emphasis on modesty and shyness encouraged among daughters. We found that ideas of active participation as generated from animated musical games and interpersonal exchanges, particularly using talk, needed to be revised when working with young girls who were enculturated in to behaviours of bodily self-restraint and silence (see also Basit, 1997). This sent us to re-reading theories of gender-differentiated practice (MacNaughton, 2000). Understanding and acknowledging diverse practices does not

presuppose that they need to be accepted without challenge. When a trusting group ethos had been established, in later sessions Nuzhat raised this issue of the differentiated expectations for girls and boys, asking the mothers to consider their differences in attitude and generating a discussion between Islamic and non-Islamic beliefs about raising girls and boys.

Nuzhat's sessions, in my view, contained processes that suggest how music education practice might be done differently. As well as singing with parents, she engaged them in two-way dialogue asking: what do you do at home in music; what do we want for our children in education; how do we parent our children to remain true to what we believe are important traditions and cultural ways but at the same time enable them to connect with and take best advantage of what schooling has to offer? She often posed some simple, direct questions for practice. Which songs shall we sing, the traditional songs we remember, or English children's songs? Shall we sing songs in English and encourage our children to join in, or should they be in the mixed languages we all bring here? Should we ask the children to join in with us? Should they sit with us and learn the songs too? What instruments shall I bring? How could they join in? And the group context also started to raise wider questions such as, how do we manage our children's behavior, what will they need to learn to prepare them for primary school, how do our religious views impact on music for our children, do we raise our boys and girls differently, what do I want for my children musically in the longer term? These may appear at first to be completely outside the usual remit for any parents and child music education class, but they are not if the purpose of a class is to expand the intercultural competences of all who are present. It draws in and shares these wider questions, embracing the social-political-cultural-religious dilemmas, that are part of pedagogical decisions about what to include and exclude.

It deliberately complicates and contests the received, conventional version of practice and what is assumed to be normal and desirable, but at the same time seeks new, 'third ways' to approach practice which are concerned with compromise and integration.

While this dialogue could happen easily and smoothly in the course of this mother and child group, such dialogues are rare in relation to the music provision provided for children without parents present. But even here, time and opportunity could be made for these conversations and for this kind of respectful exchange of information to be seen as integral and essential to the work.

Conclusion

Ultimately working towards intercultural approaches in early childhood music asks for a shift in how early years music educators consider their professionalism, away from a focus on activities and resources and a technical 'body of knowledge' on children and education, and towards a reflexive professionalism that listens to parents and children and involves them in making decisions about content and pedagogical processes. This professionalism recognizes that all educational activity is burdened with social and political responsibilities. Educators therefore need to be capable of reflection on these responsibilities, to become wary of norms and conventional models and in their place welcome multiple perspectives, acknowledging that knowledge about 'good practice' is always provisional, tentative and involves the integration of and compromises between different approaches, expectations and values.

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