

## “Surface and Depth”: Generative Tensions for a “Comprehensive” View of Music Education

Margaret S. Barrett  
University of Tasmania, Australia

---



### Abstract

*In this address, I explore the possibilities of a comprehensive view of music education that works from and towards a notion of children as “curriculum-makers.” Drawing on the findings of a number of research projects, I explore the generative tensions that exist in the transitions between the music of the home and that of school, between the learning and teaching practices of the school and children’s communities of musical practice, and between the curriculum of the school and children’s individual goals and aspirations. The interrogation of these generative tensions provides a context to consider the implications for curriculum of children’s visions of their musical futures. I suggest that were we to admit children to the curriculum-making process, to value their role and contributions as “curriculum-makers,” curriculum-making might well become a comprehensive process.*

### Introduction

In laying out the central argument of his classic text *Art as Experience*, John Dewey reminds us: “the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience” (1934, p. 1). He suggests that the prestige that particular works of art acquire can create “conventions that get in the way of insight” (1934, p. 1), that a work of art can become “isolated from the human condition undeq 12 12 5g2tihe412 588 768 re W n BT /C:

engenders in actual life-experience” (1934, p. 1). Pursuing this argument, he suggests: “the real work of art is the building up of an integral experience out of the interaction of organic and environmental conditions and energies” (1934, p. 67).

In later work, Dewey suggests that education in and through the arts can “prepare a person for later experience of a deeper and more expansive quality” (1938, p. 28). Maxine Greene (1995, 2001) and Elliott Eisner (2002), amongst others, have taken up this view as they argue for the centrality of arts experience in education and life. Dewey’s focus on experience does not

Pondering upon these views has led me to think about the music curricula we develop and implement with children. Have particular approaches to curriculum acquired such “prestige” that we no longer see beyond the “conventions” that surround them? Is it possible that a music curriculum can become “isolated from the human condition under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience” (Dewey, 1934, p. 1)? Were we to consider, to paraphrase Dewey, that the actual music curriculum is “what it does with and in experience,” what are the implications for the ways in which we shape and implement music curriculum? Does the music curriculum we offer prepare our children for “later experience” of music and life of a “deeper and more expansive quality”?

Before we can begin to address these issues, there are some prior considerations that need to be taken into account: what do we know of children’s experience of music curriculum? How do they understand music curriculum? Wh



### Stories of children / children's stories

The literature in music education is replete with stories of children: stories of what they learn, how they learn, and in what sequence. These stories, created and told by adults have shaped children's music experience in formal music education settings (Barrett, 2006b). However, "bumping up" against normative accounts of children's musical development (e.g., Deliege & Sloboda, 1996; Hargreaves, 1986), engagement and experience, other accounts are beginning to emerge (e.g., Barrett, 2005a, 2006b; Campbell, 1998, 2002; Marsh & Young, 2006). These accounts have begun to trouble some taken-for-granted notions of what constitutes music development, of the nature, scope, and purpose of children's musical thought and activity. The notion that children are more than "adults in blueprint" has led to a growing interest in children's participation in the musical cultures in which they live (Boynton & Kok, 2006).

As we seek to develop a multi-perspectival view of curriculum and curriculum-making in music, it is essential that we explore children's stories as they unfold in their daily lives (Custodero, Britto, & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Custodero & Johnson-Green, 2003), as well as the sanctioned stories others tell of children. The notion that children are unable to present a view of themselves to the world, to construct and communicate individual understandings, has been challenged in the fields of development (Rogoff, 2003), the sociology of childhood (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998), and in arts education (Barrett & Smigiel, 2003, 2007). Children are "culture-makers by nature ... they are born into history and community" (Abbs, 2003, p. 55). The recognition of children as "active contributors to, rather than simply spectators of the complex processes of cultural continuity and change" (James et al., 1998,

p. 83) has grown significantly over the last decade. In relation to music specifically, I have argued that children are engaged in "culture-making," as "meme-engineers" who select, reject, adapt, modify, in short "engineer" their musical narratives and life-worlds (Barrett, 2003a). Just as children are "culture-makers," I suggest that children are also "curriculum-makers." As a profession, I wonder if we are prepared for the challenge such recognition offers us?

In the following, I shall present three children's stories as narrative exemplars (Clandinin, 2006b; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of music and music education experience to illustrate some of the generative tensions that arise from a multi-perspectival view of curriculum and curriculum-making in music education. These are drawn from various research projects that have explored the nature of children's musical thought and activity.

### Narrative exemplar 1

Jay<sup>1</sup> is one of 20 participants in a 3-year longitudinal project that aims to identify the function of invented song and music-making in young children's identity work (Barrett, 2005-2007).<sup>2</sup> Children have been recruited from two settings, a Kindermusik program,<sup>3</sup> and a childcare center. Child participants are aged approximately 18 months when they join the

---

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used for all research participants throughout the narrative exemplars.

<sup>2</sup> Barrett, M. S. (2005-2007). *Young children's world-making through music: Young children's identity construction in and through music*. Australian Research Council Discovery Grant No. DP0559050.

<sup>3</sup> Kindermusik is a commercial franchise that provides group music tuition in dedicated age-related programs for children aged 0-7 years approximately.

project, although some have joined at later ages (up to 36 months). Data generated in the project include: interviews with parents at regular intervals; observations of the child participants by researchers in either Kindermusik or childcare settings; interviews with workers in either the Kindermusik or childcare settings; parent-developed video diaries of their child's musical activity; and parent-maintained weekly overview diaries of their child's musical activity (paper diary). These field texts are providing material for the development of rich accounts of young children's musical thought, activity and identity work, and providing insight into the ways in which children and families use music in their daily lives.<sup>4</sup>

*Jay's story*

*When I first met Jay aged 3 years and 2 months he had only been attending Kindermusik for 6 weeks. In our first interview, Jay's mother told me he "spends a lot of the day dancing round, singing made up songs .... And he has a guitar he's had for about 2 years. He loves to, not play it, but he loves to make music with his guitar. Whenever he hears music on the CD player or sees something on the television the first thing he does is he runs and gets his guitar and sits in front of the television or sits in front of the CD player and plays along" (Mother, Interview 1).*

*Jay is absorbed in and by music, "it's just an integral part of his life" (Mother, Interview 1). Music marks his routines, his moments of quiet, his moments of exuberance, his communication with others, his moments with himself. "He spends a lot of the*

*time," says his mother, "a lot of the day, he's just free forming around the property. And I notice sometimes he's just running. He was doing laps and he was singing as he was doing laps.... Quite a free existence" (Mother, Interview 1).*

*Jay's mother has captured one of these moments on video, and I sit in my university office watching a small figure, clad in blue gumboots, jeans and a bright red jumper flash through the gum trees and the tall grasses of the family property, singing along to himself. He comes to rest by a stone wall, draws breath, and starts to sing again. Waving his arms in alternation for emphasis his song-making works through fragments of "Old MacDonald," references the middle section of "Rudolph the Red-Nosed R*

---

<sup>4</sup> Jay's story is crafted from interview data (mother), video diary data, weekly overview diary data, and field notes.



*but we don't have any CDs because we haven't got around to getting any. I've got a few Playschool CDs. He likes those Playschool CDs, and I think mainly classical CDs and he does listen to the afternoon shows but there's nothing explicitly music in those ones. He doesn't mind an ad. Loves an ad" (Mother, Interview 1).*

*all these very daggy ... gro day.tgro day.tt 0 0 0v t*

*Jay is adept at strumming his ukulele, the instrument slung low, the neck angled down, his right hand maintaining a steady, rhythmic strum. Whilst the "guitar" is his favorite instrument, Jay can make an instrument from anything. Two egg cartons, struck together, accompany his song "Here we are in the kitchen" (see Figure 1).*

Figure 1.

In the Kitchen Jay



*Music has always been important in Jay's mother's life. "I used to play the flute when I was younger, used to play a lot of music, sing and I haven't done that for years. But we have a lot of music in the house and my husband enjoys it too but not in any creative capacity really. Just the CDs these days. I sing with Jay and we dance around and that sort of thing. Yes, every day there'd be some sort of music in the house .... I still love really daggy music. Steeleye Span and*





*sleeve. I have an enduring memory*

*out the melody to “Row, Row, Row your Boat.” As we talked it emerged that he had worked these tunes out on a keyboard. He described his working process to me, one that occurred during visits to a friend of the family: “Someone hasn’t tried to teach me yet. But I couldn’t play it, so then I just figured it out when they completed it. I try playing it and then I make it up and then I started practicing and then I get it right. ‘That’s not it, that’s not it,’ and then when she came back again I played and she said, ‘That wasn’t “Row, Row, Row Your Boat Gently12 0 0 12 150a1as 150.72 515.76BT /CS0 cs 0 0D2 588 768 re W n BT /CS0 cs 0 0 0 scr*

### **Narrative exemplar 3**

Further challenges for music education arise from the analysis of data generated through a recent national (Australian) study<sup>8</sup> of children's perspectives of the meaning and value of the arts in their lives, and the nature and extent of their participation (Barrett & Smigiel, 2003, 2007). In phase two of this project, 135 children aged between 5 and 18 years participated in artifact-elicited interviews that sought to probe their perceptions of the arts and their participation. Children were recruited from 27 youth arts organizations across the nation, covering the arts forms of circus, dance, drama, media, music, and the visual arts. An analysis of the data generated in music sites (4 in total) revealed five key factors concerning children



percent and puts forward 100 percent so  
you are not feeling as though you are  
doing everything that she doesn't  
deserve because she is doing everything  
she can to make up for it as well. In the

ar(f588 444 44 and p588 768 ra Wand Ton CS0 cs 0 0 0 scn /TT2 1 Tf 12 0 0 12 108 540.84 Tm [( ! )Tj414. .  
for operas and—yes.”

Dedicating so much of her life to  
singing, I wondered about Alana's  
family and her time with  
the arts.

“My step

evidence of the importance of the arts in young people's lives, of the time and dedication they devote to arts experience and activity, and their desire to achieve in the arts to the best of their ability. The findings of this research raise several questions as we ponder the implications for our curriculum-making:

1. Are children offered sufficient "performance" (as distinct from "playing") opportunities where engagement with an audience and the sharing of their "love" of music is a feature?
2. What are the characteristic features of "unity of purpose" in school music education, and how might it be fostered?
3. Are children sufficiently challenged in their music-making?
4. Are the relationships generated in music education supportive of musical development? And
5. Is individual growth and well-being fostered through music education? (Barrett & Smigiel, 2007).

### **Reflections on generative tensions**

## REFERENCES

- Abbs, P. (2003). *Against the flow: Education, the arts and postmodern culture*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Barrett, M. S. (2003a). Meme engineers: Children as producers of musical culture. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 11(3), 195-212.
- Barrett, M. S. (2003b). Invented notations and mediated memory: A case-study of two children's use of invented notations. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 153/154, 55-62.
- Barrett, M. S. (2003/2004) The representation of music: A case-study of invented notation. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 161/162, 29-28.
- Barrett, M. S. (2005a). Representation, cognition, and communication: Invented notation in children's musical communication. In D. Miell, R. MacDonald, & D. Hargreaves (Eds.), *Musical communication* (pp. 117–142). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Barrett, M. S. (2005b). Musical communication and children's communities of musical practice. In D. Miell, R. MacDonald, & D. Hargreaves (Eds.), *Musical communication* (pp. 261-280). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Barrett, M. S. (2006a). Inventing songs, inventing worlds: The 'genesis' of creative thought and activity in young children's lives. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 14(3), 201-220.
- Barrett, M. S., (2006b). Aesthetic response. In G. E. McPherson (Ed.), *The child as musician: A handbook of musical development* (pp. 173-192). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Barrett, M. S., & Smigiel, H. (2003). Awakening the "sleeping giant"? The arts in the lives of Australian families. *International Journal of Education and the Arts*, 4(4). Retrieved

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000).



Shusterman, R. (2002). *Surface and depth: Dialectics of criticism and culture*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.