

“BAA, BAA, BLACK SHEEP,’ ‘KIRIBANG,’ AND ZIMBAS”: GAMBIAN CHILDREN’S AGENCY IN MUSIC MAKING AT SCHOOL, AT HOME, AND IN THE COMMUNITY

Lisa Huisman Koops
Case Western Reserve University
lisa.koops@case.edu

In-depth study of specific children’s music making practices has the potential to improve American music education by contributing to the development of a culturally informed approach to music pedagogy. Teaching music using a culturally informed approach, with consideration for the social and cultural contexts of the music being taught and learned, requires teachers to combine theoretical knowledge of a musical practice with practical musical experiences. This combination of theory and practice requires research on musical practices, including the teaching and learning processes within musical practices, as well as adjustments to teaching methodology and techniques.

With the intent of developing an approach to pedagogy that accounts for cultural elements of specific musical practices, the purpose of this research was to construct an ethnography of the children’s music culture in a suburban community of The Gambia, West Africa. The specific problems of this study were to observe and describe the forms, meanings, and cultural contexts of children’s music making, as well as their musical pedagogical processes, and to apply this information to the practice of teaching world musics in elementary general music settings.

During three months in The Gambia, I observed children playing and making music in home, school, and community settings; interviewed children and adults; attended adult-centered musical events; and learned to play many of the children’s music games. After establishing my presence in the community and becoming acquainted with the children and adults who participated in this study, I video- and audio-taped observations of play sessions and interviews. I used these recordings in feedback interviews with participants, in which they responded to recordings of themselves or other children playing and singing.

In this paper I will explore the varying levels of agency, or power, control, and authority, exerted by Gambian children in music making and suggest implications for American music education based on this discussion. The three references in the paper title refer to the three spheres of children’s music making: school, home, and community. Gambian children are surrounded by music, an integral part of daily life, including worship, work, relaxation, learning, socializing, and creative expression. They participate in their musical world through listening, observing, singing, dancing, clapping, and playing. In settings in which children have a greater degree of control, such as on the playground or during play sessions at home, children show their power through choice and use of language, movement, attitude, and decisions in songs, dances, games, and playing instruments. Children exhibit less agency inside the school classroom and at adult-controlled community musical events.

Recognizing the importance of agency to children’s musical experience suggests that American music teachers provide opportunities in the music classroom for student leadership and control over musical experiences and repertoire, respecting students’ need and desire for agency within music making. Music education researchers must also consider the importance of children’s agency when designing research studies. For instance, researchers could ask children

to help develop questions and methodology, as well as share research findings with children participants and ask for their feedback in confirming or editing the findings.

Companion to Powerpoint Slides

Slide 1: Title

Slide 2: Agency: Power, Control, and Authority

Culturally informed music pedagogy calls for teaching music with consideration of social and cultural contexts of music making. This study examined children's music making in a suburban community in The Gambia, West Africa; Baatiikunda is a pseudonym to protect participant anonymity. One of the key findings in examining forms of children's music making was the importance of agency (power, control, and authority) in children's music making.

Slide 3: Music at School

The classroom and playground were two very different spheres of music making in the school in which I observed: in the classroom, students were often passive and unenthused about singing English songs; on the playground, children actively participated in music games and dances in local languages as well as English. Children were required to use English in the classroom; on the playground, they often chose to play English games but altered the words. Students exhibited more agency on the playground than in the classroom.

Slide 4: Inside the Classroom

Music was viewed as an extra-curricular activity at the school in which I observed; in former years it had been a required part of the curriculum, but had been cut previously at the teacher's college, and this change was being transferred to the classrooms as well. I observed differences in engagement level between students singing English songs and local language songs; in several cases, as a class the students performed more accurately, with better expression, and more involvement when singing local language songs than English songs. Since adults typically controlled music making in this environment, children exhibited agency through their level of participation and attitude.

Slide 5: On the Playground

The children I observed on the playground engaged in a range of musical activities, from informal singing and playing of found-sound instruments (bottles, cans) to dancing and music games. They used a variety of English and local language games; the English was often altered and did not seem to be a focus of the activity. Kiribang, or Chinese jumprope, was one of the most popular games in May, but by July had been banned by school officials. They said that girls playing it were immodest (their underwear could show when jumping over the rope) and that it distracted the children from their studies. Kiribang continued to be the game of choice outside of school. On the playground, children exhibited agency through their leadership of the games and dances; creativity in creating new games, levels, or rules; and in monitoring competition and deciding who was in or out.

Slide 6: Music at Home

I observed children singing, playing music games, dancing, playing instruments, and listening to music in home compounds and neighborhoods. Local language songs and games were more prevalent in home play situations than at school, with English songs and games occasionally used. Kiribang (similar to Chinese jump rope) was the most popular game; children showed agency in choosing to play this “forbidden” game, monitoring the play, and keeping track of an extensive series of levels. In home play situations children were often in mixed age groups, which gave older children the opportunity to lead and teach younger children. The children I observed showed agency through this leadership, as well as in enacting power struggles in several games, and in preparing for participation in adult music making. An example is one group of children I observed who formed a dancing circle and took turns dancing in the middle while several young boys played familiar drum rhythms on overturned buckets.

Slide 7: Music in the Community

Children participated in music in the community in informal events, such as a local soccer team parading around to collect money in honor of their championship, and in formal events, such as services of worship. *Sabars* and *Zimbas* were common events: a group of drummers, hired by several families or a neighborhood, set up a semi-circle of drums in a neighborhood and the people gathered, especially women and children. Women took turns dancing in the middle; children watched and occasionally danced, either in the middle or on the sidelines. Children also watched the drummers and learned the social context of the music making. The children I observed also experienced music at parties, formal ceremonies like weddings and naming ceremonies, and at religious observances. These events were largely controlled by adults, so children’s agency was typically shown by choosing to participate and at what level.

Slide 8: Gambian Children’s Agency in Music Making

This slide contains a summary of the findings from the groups of children I observed: for them, music was an integral part of their daily lives. They participated in a variety of ways, including through listening, observing, singing, dancing, clapping, and playing instruments. They exhibited agency through participation, attitude, decisions, use of language, and adaptation of repertoire.

Slide 9: Implications for Teaching

The importance of agency, and the observation that children participated more in situations in which they had control, suggests that teachers consider providing more opportunities for student leadership within classrooms. Activities are needed that give students control over repertoire and musical experiences. Teachers should consider how to incorporate students’ music (playground and/or popular music) into the music classroom. In doing this, however, teachers need to find a way to leave control of the music in children’s hands. Another approach is in teaching musical repertoire that students will then take outside the classroom and continue to work with.

Slide 10: Implications for Research

Further research of the role of agency in music education is needed in music classrooms as well as on playgrounds, in our own backyards as well as in other cultures. Researchers could consider asking children to serve as research consultants, helping to develop research questions and

member-checking data and interpretations. Finally, children should be given choices when asked to participate in research projects, and their decisions and input should be taken seriously.