The green papaya tree sways in the wind as five-year-old Su-In chants to the rhythms of a pebble game with her friends. "Chwee loh chwee payng payng," she chants while teasing her little friends in Mandarin Chinese. Sometimes her teasing sounds are gibberish, but at other times rhythmic patterns of eighth notes and sixteenth notes can be discerned.

In a ranch home, where tall pine trees grow, sandy-haired Mark and his siblings play with a new game they got for Christmas. They decide who goes when by singing "eeny meeny miny moe" in repeating pitch patterns of seconds and thirds.

On the smooth black pavement of a city schoolyard, five African American girls play a jump rope game. "Go Alley! Go Alley! Go girl, go!" the girls call, using pats, claps, and snaps to coincide with unpitched rhythmic vocalizations while their friend skips the ropes with agility and ease.

The musical play of children is a worldwide phenomenon. From the city playgrounds to the play areas of the megamalls, from the street shops of Calcutta to the affluent communities surrounding New York and London, from the Venda communities in South Africa to the villages of Venezuela and Vietnam, children play, dance, create, and sing with their peers in everyday life. They develop their own

Understanding the nature of children’s play with music throughout the world can give teachers ideas for how they can provide stimulating musical experiences for their young students.

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repertoires of songs that are influenced by, but separate from, the surrounding adult world. Adults are often unaware of the complexity, values, and varied forms of children's musical play. In school settings, children's musical expressions can still be seen and heard when teachers set class goals and initiate instructional designs that feature and encourage it. But it is just as likely for the sounds of children's musical play to remain outside the realm of lessons organized by teachers, even when music making is both a natural and necessary part of childhood.

As guardians of children's musical education, music teachers need to keep abreast of children's musical interests and involvements inside and outside the classroom. It is also useful for them to know something of children's musical play, both locally and internationally, as such an awareness can lead to a greater understanding and appreciation of the rich musical possibilities that children everywhere possess and express. Observation and documentation of the musical features and different contexts of children's musical play can lead music teachers to more thoroughly understand children's musical development and musical cultures. The role of teachers as facilitators of children's musical play becomes increasingly important when the music that children make may be used as a springboard into developmentally appropriate music instruction.

**Cultural Contexts of Children's Play**

Play is an important medium for learning in young children's lives—wherever they may be. It assists them in their development of language and reasoning skills, and it fosters social competence and peer-group interaction.

Through the sensory and exploratory experiences they crave, little ones learn about themselves and others, and about the environment in which they live. Children learn how things (and people) look, sound, feel, and taste through playful experiences, and the more that young children can sense and explore, the more they come to know. They learn of their world through the playful songs they sing, and they learn music through opportunities to explore and discover just what music is, how it is made, and how they may wish to use it in their lives.

Play has been described as a "cause and effect" of a particular culture within which children are raised. This means that children use play as a vehicle for cultural learning, and their play can serve as an important indicator and reflection of their development. For example, a chant such as "one potato, two potato," which determines who goes first (or who obtains a certain object), reflects a Anglo-American traditions of turn taking, competition, and rules. The call-and-response dialogues in the hand-clapping routines of African American children reflect an emphasis on the communal and collaborative traditions that are so valued in their culture.

Musical play is part of children's culture.

The hopping chants of children in India emphasize the collective child culture in which they grow, since they hop together to the rhythms they chant. In addition to learning the repertoire of chants and games, Indian children learn the social skills of establishing membership in a peer group and of learning game rules and ritual actions, while continually reinforcing physical skills (e.g., running, walking, hopping, and skipping) that are important in their growing years.

The role of play theory in early childhood and early elementary K–3 curricular development has received increasing attention in the last two decades. As a result, play has become an integral part of the curriculum and is gradually being integrated into educational efforts in many nations. Yet descriptions of children's play (and musical play) are historically anchored within the worlds of North American and European children.

The literature is limited when considering other cultures and social classes, where the circumstances, processes, and acceptable ages of children's play differ, as do cultural values and goals. Knowing the traditional singing games of England, which have been found in variant forms on American playgrounds, is fascinating, but it does not supersede the need to understand children's musical play elsewhere in the world (for example, in Chad or Chile or China) so that teachers can more broadly know the nature of children, including those who may populate their classrooms, and apply that knowledge to curricular experiences.

Changing demographics in North America and elsewhere have prompted the study of the cultural underpinnings of children at play and created a need for teachers to look more carefully at the nature of children's play. Traditionally underrepresented groups—such as African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans—will likely constitute one-third of the U.S. population in 2020, and they are in the majority in many schools already. The flow of immigrants is expected to continue to draw young people from throughout the world who will marry and raise families in North America. The children who will populate schools and preschools will increasingly come from these non-European groups, and teachers will need to be prepared to meet their unique needs.

As their classrooms diversify, teachers will be working with children who vary in how they interact with adults and peers, how they learn and play, how they view teachers and school, and how they are affected by their parents' beliefs and practices. Teachers will face the task of coming to understand, appreciate, and show sensitivity to these differences as they interact with children in the classroom. They will also need to plan effective ways to provide their young students with developmentally appropriate knowledge of people from other cultures and cross-cultural experiences that are significant and positive. Knowing how children play, and play musically, offers impor-
Musical Play in the Classroom

The following ideas are inspired by the ways children have been observed playing with music in Brazil, the United States, and Malaysia. The text of this article provides more details on these examples of musical play. The suggestions below are appropriate for use with children from early childhood through second grade.

Ideas Inspired by a Singing Game of Brazilian Children
1. Sing the “Bambu” song (figure 1) to children. Share with students the meaning of the Brazilian-Portuguese words, describe the bamboo trees in Brazil, and explain how the children sing and dance in celebration of these beautiful trees.
2. Invite children to remember songs they may know about flowers, plants, and trees (e.g., “The Mulberry Bush,” “Willow-bye,” “Sakura,” “O Tannenbaum,” “Kalinka”).
3. Help the children learn the song “Bambu,” singing repeatedly until the words, rhythms, and pitches come together. Pat the pulse while singing.
4. Announce that there is a circle game to go with “Bambu,” and ask students to name other circle games they may know (e.g., “A-Tisket A-Tasket,” “Paw-Paw Patch,” “Uga Uga Uga,” “Shake It Baby,” “Ring around the Rosy”).
5. Teach children how to play the singing game “Bambu” as Brazilian children do.

Ideas Inspired by an American Child’s Musical Utterances
1. Allow children time for free musical play (five minutes, ten minutes, or more, depending on the total music time that is available).
2. Facilitate children’s free musical expression by making instruments and “sound makers” (spoons, tubes, boxes, plastic cups) available to them at exploratory stations in the classroom.
3. Sing to children often, and chant rhythmically to them. Suggest musical ideas for later use by singing—instead of saying—some of what you wish to communicate to them.
4. Ease gradually into musical activities by choosing some of the melodies and rhythms that you have children perform while at play.

Ideas Inspired by a Malaysian Chant
2. Perform those patterns using body percussion (claps, pats, snaps) and invite children to respond.
3. Divide children into two groups, one to keep beat by patting and clapping, while another performs the selected rhythmic pattern(s)—after you or with you.
4. Invite students to find a partner and devise their own hand-body percussion rhythm. Model simple examples, and free the children to create movements of their own.

tant perspectives on what social values and interactive styles—and even thought processes—are important, all of which can help teachers design and deliver relevant and meaningful lessons.

Musical Play in Cultural Context
Musical play is part of children’s culture. They sing and dance in rhythmic and pitched patterns alone, together, and with toys, household items, and yard objects. There are, however, cultural variations in how children participate in musical play and at what ages they are expected to play in certain ways. For example, in the Marquesas Islands of the Pacific, elementary schoolchildren sing and organize themselves into games of Keu lova, in which one team of children chases another in a game of “catch,” but in a study of children’s play in Kenya, games such as this were virtually never observed. Musical games that involve throwing or tapping with a tightly wrapped cloth are found principally among children in Thailand and Cambodia, and they continue to be played by adolescents in rural Cambodia (but not in Thailand) in flirtatious ways that can lead to courtship and even marriage.

Circle games are a constant in many cultures, but they vary in whether hands are held, whether dancing in place is requisite, whether clapping or stamping is evident, or whether there is an “it” in the center or revolving at the outside of the circle. Such variations reflect different cultural emphases on the importance of certain gestures and long-held customs within these singing games.

The past fifteen years have seen a small but steady stream of studies on children’s musical play in various cultures. Research on children’s musical play has been directed toward children in American and British urban schools and playgrounds, Jamaican children, Ghanian children, and Australian inner-city schoolchildren. Some feature collection and analysis of children’s singing and chanting games, while others give attention to the ways children use music in their play, including variations and vocalizations to rhythms they make or move to. Studies of the manner in which children preserve traditional musical games of their community (and what that preserved repertoire may be) are counterbalanced with studies of their spontaneous musical expressions. Whether composed or improvised, of a long heritage or recently invented, children within American borders (and far beyond them) have found the need to make music part of their play.

The following descriptions provide a glimpse into the musical worlds of children’s play in three different cultures: Brazil, the United States, and Malaysia. The Musical Play in the Classroom sidebar offers suggestions for how music teachers can integrate these types of playful music-making activities into their instructional activities and take an active role in encouraging, making suggestions, and providing creative reinforcement to children’s musical play in their classrooms.
imitating
The
of
Children.

A
their
language,

Anthony's

To
Aroeira,

Text
Bamboo,

Motif

As
they
sing
this
song,
very
young
Brazilian
children
play
a
circle
game
in
which
a
chosen
"it"
steps
along
inside
the
circle.
On
the
word
tirara,
the
child
in
the
circle
selects
a
partner,
and
the
two
join
hands
and
dance.
When
two
(or
more)
children
are
inside
the
circle,
the
more
recently
selected
child
selects
a
new
player
and
then
the
three
(or
more)
children
inside
the
circle
join
hands
to
dance.
This
selection
process
continues
until
all
children
are
paired
and
dancing.
Every
time
a
new
player
is
selected,
the
children
sing
the
third
line
with
the
name
of
the
newly
selected
person
(e.g.,
"tirara
a
Anna"
or
"tirara
a
Arnaldo").
In
school
and
in
their
own
backyards,
young
children
grow
in
their
social
interactions
as
they
play
this
singing
game,
for
"Bambu"
is
as
well
known
in
Brazil
as
"Ring
around
the
Rosy"
is
in
English-speaking
countries.

The
Musical
Utterances
of
an
American
Boy.
One
five-year-old
boy
at
solitary
play
in
his
North
American
preschool
was
the
subject
of
multiple
observations
over
the
course
of
several
months,11
and
his
behavior
is
likely
to
be
familiar
to
teachers
who
have
observed
how
musical
moments
infiltrate
children's
play.
Little
"Anthony"
was
a
veritable
mine
of
musical
treasures:
short
melodic
phrases,
rhythmic
patterns,
text,
and
textless
songs
that
accompanied
his
play.
Anthony
had
short,
blond,
ruffled
hair
and
was
described
by
his
teachers
as
"gentle
and
quiet
but
a
handful
at
times."
His
favorite
activity
was
playing
freely
with

A
Singing
Game
of
Brazilian
Children.
As
is
the
case
with
children
everywhere,
Brazilian
children
learn
the
language,
rhythms,
and
melodies
of
their
local
music
by
observing
and
imitating
adults
and
other
children.
The
circle
song
and
game
"Bambu"
(figure
1)
is
popular
with
Brazilian
children
from
toddlerhood
through
their
early
school
years.
The
song
names
two
types
of
bamboo
trees
(aroeira
and
mantagueira)
that
grow
in
tropical
and
subtropical
rain
forests.

Figure
1. "Bambu"

Text in English
Bamboo, tirabu (a playful expression)
Aroeira, mantagueira (two types of Brazilian trees)
They took Arnaldo
To become a bamboo tree.

Motif
Whistled by Teacher's Aide

wooo-ooo-oo-oo-ooh.

Anthony's Response and Variations

wooo-ooo-oo-oo-ooh.

wooo-ooo-oo-oo-oo

wooo-ooo-oo-oo-oo
a Lego set in the corner of the classroom. His musical utterances were frequent as he constructed cars, planes, ships, and buildings, and his repertoire was rich with the short melodic phrases he sang and whistled and the rhythmic motifs he tapped with his Lego structures, or on them.

Once, Anthony's musical utterances were a response to the unconscious whistling of a teacher's aide. After the aide whistled a simple pattern, Anthony softly whistled a variation of the aide's pattern. The call and response between Anthony and the teacher's aide went on for four minutes. Each time, Anthony would respond with the same musical motif, at times altering a rhythm or varying the melody (see figure 2).

Instances like this call and response reveal that Anthony's solitary play did at times incorporate a musical dialogue of sorts. There were other musical moments, too, including a clean-up time when the teacher instructed the children to put the toys away. Together with his peers, Anthony dutifully cleaned up and sang the song their teacher had taught them (figure 3). Some children sang as they cleaned, but others did not. Later, Anthony took a rhythmic segment from the song and played with it—tapping his foot and altering the rhythm and tempo. At other times of the day, when he was deep in thought (e.g., coloring a picture of a flying parachute), Anthony would repeatedly chant the rhythmic pattern from the clean-up song on the neutral syllable *doo*.

Children play with music, and they also play through music. Little Anthony's musical utterances were his way of playing with the musical features that pleased him and best represented his musical thinking. Teachers may facilitate such incidents of musical play and guide children's participation and understanding of the music in their lives. (See the Musical Play in the Classroom sidebar for ideas.)

A Chant for Two Malaysian Girls. As children learn music, they frequently enjoy taking it apart, tinkering with segments of it, and pulling out the catchy phrases they prefer. In a hand-clapping game, two seven-year-old Malaysian girls in an elementary school chanted a rhythmic pattern from “Chan Mali Chan,” a famous Malaysian folk song (figure 4). “Chan Mali Chan” is not translatable from the Malay language but is a syllabic chant that Malaysian children use in their play (just as North American children use “Eeny Meeny Miney Moe”).

The young girls knew the whole song, but they were fascinated by just one segment, which they repeatedly chanted. The girls added a movement to reinforce the pattern, one that had them facing each other in pairs and clapping in a pulse that moved in double time (figure 4). The added movement to the pattern consisted of “patsching” (patting on the laps with both hands), clapping their hands together (first the right hand followed by the left), and snapping to finish off the rhythm segment. The rhythm precisely matched the movement, with a strong down beat at the beginning of the pattern. The most intriguing observation was the girls' choice to reinforce the down beat by patting on their laps as if this kinesthetic movement would help to keep them in time with each other.

**Figure 4. “Chan Mali Chan”**

![Figure 4. “Chan Mali Chan”](image)

(with a partner)

**Text:** Chan! Ma-li Chan! Chan! Ma-li Chan! Chan! Ma-li Chan! Chan! Ma-li Chan! Chan! Ma-li Chan!

**Movement:** P C(R) C(L) S P C(R) C(L) S P C(R) C(L) S S S

**Movement Key**
P = pat both hands on the lap
C(R) = clap partner's left hand with your right
C(L) = clap partner's right hand with your left
S = snap both fingers in the air

**Celebrating and Stimulating Musical Play**

Young children living around the world are singing, moving, and playing. It is part of their home cultures, neighborhood cultures, and regional and national cultures. Children are similar in their desire to engage in musical play,
yet there are variations in the nature of their play; in how it may sound and how it may look. Their musical play includes the singing games they play and preserve through the generations (as in the case of the Brazilian “Bambu” song); the spontaneous and nonchalant musical inventions, imitations, or variations (as in the case of the North American boy, Anthony); and the intentional additions and new layers of creative expression on familiar music (as in the case of the Malaysian girls' invention of a rhythmic movement). Children are clever at bringing music into their playful interactions, and teachers would do well to notice the content and process of their play.

If play is a “cause and effect” of the culture within which children are raised, then teachers, parents, and administrators need to be aware of this important process of transmission. As adults responsible for the young generation’s welfare and education, teachers must challenge themselves to find creative ways to incorporate children’s musical spontaneity in the classroom. Look and listen to the children: their musical interests, skills, and knowledge are evident in their laughter, their interactions, games and rituals, and even their solitary play. We will do well to respect and celebrate the diverse and creative musical cultures of children within our classrooms.

Notes

3. James E. Johnson, James F. Christie, and Thomas D. Yawkey, Play and Early Childhood Development (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1987); Louise Boyle Swinarsky, Mary-Lou Breiborde, and Jo-Anne Murphy, Educating the Global Village: Including the Young Child in the World (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill, 1999); and Olivia Saracho and Bernard Spodek, Contemporary Perspectives on Play in Early Childhood Education (Greenwich, CT: Information Age, 2003).