Xylophone Playing: Implications on the Acquisition of Cultural Skills and Values among Nso’ Children

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Abstract

Among the Nso’, children are situated within the family and community as active members who witness what takes place; they interact with community experiences and they are included within the day-to-day of the ‘adult world’. Hence their education is grounded in a belief that ‘doing’ is very important. It is through this that children are groomed in cultural skills and values that enable them to socialise and integrate in society. It is within this framework that this study was carried out in the Bui Division of the Northwest Region of Cameroon on Nso’ children to examine the implications of xylophone playing on the acquisition of cultural skills and values. Participants in this study (N = 8) were school children of 8 – 12 years from 2 intact xylophone playing centres, Saa Ntoh and Taa’Shitiy. All participants attended a general orientation and engaged in xylophone playing session every day for an hour in three months. A Mixed methods design supported by both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection was used. The findings indicated that xylophone playing had positive implications for the acquisition of cultural skills and values.

Keywords: Implications, Xylophone playing, Acquisition, Cultural Skills and Values

Introduction

Music, being a universal language central to every culture of the world, has been used to entertain, communicate, educate, inspire, and instill a sense of social and communal understanding (Crowley, 1992). All children are born with natural musical ability which varies from child to child (Custodero, Britto and Brooks-Gunnet, 2003). For example, rhyme, rhythm, song and movement have historically been used as powerful teaching tools that have infused the values, mores and customs of cultures and societies. Music universally, reduces mental fatigue, calms tension, focuses thinking, and greatly impacts creativity and sensitivity. Listening to music also stimulates the release of endorphins which are produced in the brain to relieve pain and produce a euphoric state.

Stages of Traditional Music

Omibiyi-Obidike in Akuno (2005) categorized two stages of traditional music education shared by communities throughout Africa. The first is the music education every child
received, beginning from birth and continuing until death. The aim of this education was to “integrate individuals into their culture” and to incorporate them into the musical components of communal life (Akuno, 2005, p.12). This education also socialized individuals into their community, thereby giving them their distinct identity as part of the cultural group. Music in early childhood was incorporated into daily play activities in the form of singing games and songs on nature or animals, particularly those with peculiar habits, such as the wily hare, greedy hyena, or slow tortoise. Girls also imitated their mothers, rocking dolls while singing to them. Chants were another popular feature in childhood play and provided opportunities for improvisation because those performing them always strove to add new lines to them to make them longer.

The second stage of music education was professional and, therefore more exclusively provided to those were talented or showed a certain inclination toward music Omibiyi-Obidike in (Akuno, 2005). A talented child from the age of about eight or slightly older was guided through the intricacies of learning and performing on an instrument by a family member. It is worth noting that professional training in instrument playing was largely a male domain because of cultural beliefs that prohibited women from playing or sometimes even handling certain musical instruments. Additionally, girls’ domestic duties left hardly enough time for learning an instrument (Agak, 1998). Most girls, nevertheless, built their musical repertoire through songs taught to them by their mothers.

Children’s first and most natural percussion instrument is their own body (Voglar, 1977, p.136). Making the “body sounds” of tapping their feet, patting their thighs, clapping, snapping, and making vocal sounds can help children feel beat and rhythm as a physical experience and lead them to confident musicianship. At a very early age, children also look for objects to satisfy their inclination to produce sound. They may use anything and everything available such as the rungs of a crib, pots and pans, squeaky toys, or filling cabinet drawers. Similarly, “authentic” instruments can enrapture children, and they will explore the various ways in which these can be used to produce different sounds. They will shake, tap, roll, or blow into them, or rub them against something or someone else, or pull them up to their ear or against the ear of a friend. At first, children are concerned solely with exploring sound effects. Consequently, free experimentation should be the starting point for musical encounters with instruments (Voglar, 1977). While exploring the sound making qualities of “found” and “authentic” instruments, children’s natural curiosity has scope to probe the unknown which may eventually lead toward setting predetermined goals, such as creating patterns and coordinating sounds with other players. Children often reproduce certain sounds over and over again to gain clearer understanding of their action in relation to the sound. This leads to better control of the instrument and greater sense of personal satisfaction.

**Stages in Xylophone Playing**

According to Dowling (1973), xylophone playing/learning involves three stages:

**Rhythm:** The xylophonist begins with rhythm because it is the most basic of all the elements. He teaches this through natural speech patterns, such as speaking, singing, music and movement, which are all naturally connected. The teacher then leads the learner through their own creative process. By connecting speech patterns to the rhythms, the child can master whatever meter or rhythm is needed. This naturally also leads to body rhythm patterns and movement to the music.
Melody: Melody is taught in the same way. Simple intervals grow out of the natural pitches from the words. These intervals combine to make a melody. This melody can later be put onto instruments. That is, "Experience first, then intellectualize." Only after the playing has been taught does the teaching of notation occur. Sometimes, the xylophone experts hold the hands of the learner having playing sticks and notate melodies with, for quick mastery of the position of the bars.

Improvisation: Part of the playing and experiencing which is essential to the learning is the element of improvisation. As frightening as improvisation seems to be to adults, it is freeing to children. No rules! The teacher sets up boundaries in which the child can create his or her own rhythm, melody, or dance.

Above all, the xylophone player must develop a high sense of selective attention, that listening-in and intent participation.

Theoretical Bases of the study
The study was based on Cooperative Learning Theory of Rogoff (1992). Rogoff (1992) in her theory on Cooperative Learning proposes a sociocultural approach that involves observation of development in three planes of analysis corresponding to personal, interpersonal, and community processes. I refer to developmental processes corresponding with these three planes of analysis as apprenticeship, guided participation, and participatory appropriation, in turn. These are inseparable, mutually constituting planes comprising activities that can become the focus of analysis at different times, but with the others necessarily remaining in the background of the analysis. I argue that children take part in the activities of their community, engaging with other children and with adults in routine and tacit as well as explicit collaboration (both in each other’s presence and in otherwise socially structured activities) and in the process of participation become prepared for later participation in related events.

The metaphor of apprenticeship provides a model in the plane of community activity, involving active individuals participating with others in culturally organized activity that has as part of its purpose the development of mature participation in the activity by the less experienced people. This metaphor extends the idea of craft apprenticeship to include participation in any other culturally organized activity, such as other kinds of work, schooling, and family relations. The idea of apprenticeship necessarily focuses attention on the specific nature of the activity involved, as well as on its relation to practices and institutions of the community in which it occurs - economic, political, spiritual, and material (Rogoff, 1992). The concept of guided participation refers to the processes and systems of involvement between people as they communicate and coordinate efforts while participating in culturally valued activities. This includes not only the face-to-face interaction, which has been the subject of much research, but also the side-by-side joint participation that is frequent in everyday life and the more distal arrangements of people's activities that do not require copresence (e.g., choices of where and with whom and with what materials and activities a person is involved). The "guidance" referred to in guided participation involves the direction offered by cultural and social values, as well as social partners; the "participation" in guided participation refers to observation, as well as hands-on involvement in an activity (Rogoff, 1992).

The concept of participatory appropriation refers to how individuals change through their involvement in one or another activity, in the process becoming prepared for subsequent
involvement in related activities. With guided participation as the interpersonal process through which people are involved in sociocultural activity, participatory appropriation is the personal process by which, through engagement in an activity, individuals change and handle a later situation in ways prepared by their own participation in the previous situation. This is a process of becoming, rather than acquisition, (Rogoff, 1993). It is truly educative in its effects in the degree in which an individual shares or participates in some conjoint activity. By doing his share in the associated activity, the individual appropriates the purpose which actuates it, becomes familiar with its methods and subject matters, acquires needed skill, and is saturated with its emotional spirit, (Rogoff, 1992).

The Problem
One of the major musical instruments of the Nso’ people is the Xylophone (njáng). The ‘Njáng’ is central to various celebrations among the people of Nso’. It is used to entertain people at festivals and also in their religious worship. It can however be said that it is in the funerals and death celebrations that the xylophone is most important as a communicative tool, and that is where the best xylophone experts perform. The traditional xylophone, known as the njäng, is one of the least academically explored instruments in Cameroon and Nso’ in particular. The basic organology of the instrument is not documented; both the traditional and contemporary performance practices have not been addressed.

Although the traditional xylophone indigenous music has the potential to be used as an educational tool in enhancing the development of the working memory through recall, recognition and reconstruction, it has remained unutilized and neglected. Children participate in the playing of these instruments daily, yet little has been documented on the nature of this instrument and how it can impact memory recall, recognition and reconstruction and further develop cooperative learning skills, cultural skills and values in children. Based on these assumptions, the researcher sought to examine the implications of xylophone playing on the acquisition of cultural skills and values among the Nso’ children.

Objective of the Study
The study sought to examine the implications of xylophone playing on the acquisition of cultural skills and values among the Nso’ children of Bui Division in the North West Region of Cameroon.

Methodology
The participants in the study were 8 school children of 8 – 12 years from 2 intact xylophone playing centres, Saa Ntoh and Taa’Shitiy. All participants attended a general orientation and engaged in xylophone playing session every day for an hour in three months. The rationale for selecting only 8 participants is because the xylophone is a four part instrument played by four people. The findings indicated that xylophone playing had positive implications for the acquisition of cultural skills and values.

Procedure
The following procedure was used for the collection of data for the study: Contact visits were made to the xylophone playing centres selected at different times. And an interview was administered on xylophone experts to determine the impact of xylophone playing on the acquisition of cultural skills and values among Nso’ children.
Findings of the Study

The implication of traditional xylophone playing on the acquisition of cultural skills and values

Playing njáng constitutes an important component to many traditional activities among the Nso’ of Bui Division. During my interactions and interviews with local expert njáng players, vital information regarding the role that it plays among the local people was gleaned.

- **Playing njáng as a guided learning process**
  In analysing children’s way of learning and acquiring expertise in constructing and playing njáng, useful insights on how to design appropriate pedagogies for effective teaching and learning purposes can be gleaned. The local expert informants disclosed to me that they had gained the skill of playing and constructing njáng through observations and constant mentoring from the famous players in their local areas. However, this must begin with passion from childhood with randomising uncoordinated melodies. In the classroom situation, the above pedagogy, if adopted, could benefit the learner to master new tasks. Creating interest and sustaining it as an important component in the learning process. Unfortunately, the practice of many teachers is that of seeing learners as tabula rasa or blank slates that need to be filled with information and knowledge from the teachers. Using dialogue to negotiate for meaning by both the teacher and learner is a preferred approach. Similar findings by Seavoy (1982) among the Sisala people of North West Ghana have been documented. These findings are consistent with the current study findings on how children gained the skill of playing xylophone. In the study by Seavoy (1982), boys aged six associated with the expert players of xylophones, attempted to play drums when adults were not playing these instruments.

- **Intellectual processes involved in the construction and playing of njáng**
  The intellectual processes underpinning the construction of njáng were singled out as being portrayed in recognizing the right tree and arriving at a correct pitch. Playing njáng as I observed the whole process requires a lot of concentration. Hence, striking the correct plank while playing njáng involves having mental maps, that is previous knowledge of the instrument to avoid striking wrong planks of njáng. Playing an instrument correctly is a sign of the skill and intelligence that the player has acquired. Studies that have been done in Zambia have shown that the concept of pitch was mainly influenced by the region where an individual hailed from (Mensah, 1970).

- **Cultural and Economic values involved in the playing of njáng**
  It was observed that the playing of njáng emits quite a good number of cultural values in children such as patience, collaboration, team spirit, self-esteem, creativity, stardom, self-actualization, socialization and conservation of cultural beliefs and values. The playing of Xylophones led to employment, social security, sporting activity, entertainment and recreation. In the light of Nsamenang (2005) the traditional xylophone can be seen as an aspect of socialization, which entails the learning of expectations, habits, skills, values, beliefs and other skills and requirements necessary for effective participation in social living.
In this sense socialization is “the process by which an individual becomes a member of a particular culture and takes on its values, beliefs and other behaviours in order to function within it” (Nsamenang, 2005). According to Mukela (2013), the findings of his study from the village music experts have also revealed that xylophone (silimba) played a major role in strengthening harmony in the villages. During major village activities, silimba played a cardinal role in acting as soloist. Dancers followed suit as expert players played leading songs on silimba. Songs sung during the girls’ initiation ceremonies for instance were meant to communicate important lessons to the initiate, while those that had deviant behaviours were ridiculed.

The study has also revealed that participation in musical activities in the Nso’ context was meant to socialize and help children assume social responsibility leading to the acquisition of social cognition. Unlike in the Western perspective where participation in musical activities primarily focused on individual achievements in academic subjects, the role of traditional xylophone music in the Nso’ context, performed mainly through training, was to bring about the development of social cognition for children to become fully functional members of society. Through intent participation and guided participation, children were likely to acquire the skills relevant for integration in community activities. It was equally observed from findings that children’s observation of the construction and playing the traditional xylophone leads to a systematic, consistent and logical building of thought patterns and consequently, behaviour.

Emerging Grounding Theory of Xylophone Playing

- The playing of traditional xylophones demands teaching learning requirements such as practical exercise, quality control, repetitive learning, passion, knowledgeable mentor and ability to manage energy.
- Knowledge acquisition in traditional xylophone construction and playing comes from significant elders (father) and parents.
- Playing of traditional xylophones leads to the development of skills such as memory reconstruction, recognition, serial and cued recall, cognitive skills, verbal and communicative skills, mathematical skills, psychomotor skills, interactive skills and a sense of technological precision.
- Learning in the playing of traditional xylophones leads to the acquisition of individual values such as patience, collaborative/team spirit, high self-esteem and improved social status. It leads to creativity and skill, self-actualization, stardom and socialization.
- The playing of xylophones lead to socio-economic development in relation to economic benefit, employment, social security, source of livelihood, sporting activity and recreation as demonstrated in the Socio-Cognitive Model of Traditional Music below.
Emerging Grounding Theory
A Socio-Cognitive Model of Traditional Music: Focus on Xylophone Playing

Source: (Bongwong, 2015).

Conclusion
The study has found that indigenous xylophone music activity has many educational benefits underpinning them which could be very useful for promoting intellectual and sociocultural development among children. Incorporating these activities in the school curriculum and allowing children to perform them could greatly promote children’s development in cultural skills and values. Localizing the school curriculum through the inclusion of indigenous music activities would help inculcate values of social responsibility and help integrate children to function appropriately in their community. Through this study, it has been demonstrated that indigenous xylophone music activity is important for children’s cognitive and sociocultural development. Findings from this study therefore have strong implications for justifying the inclusion of indigenous music activities in the school curriculum because they function to maintain social connections between school and community.
References