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12. PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT IN MUSIC WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

A Cross-Cultural Study

BACKGROUND

Parents play an important role in fostering young children’s learning. Specifically, parents are critical in terms of providing stimulating and responsive experiences in promoting young children’s development in the early years (Ghirotto & Mazzoni, 2013; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Also, parents’ responsiveness to children’s learning is important, and this is most vividly illustrated in brain development research (e.g., Bradford, 2012; Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2015; Jensen, 2008). Besides this research in the West, researchers in the East (e.g., Luo, Tamis-LeMonda, & Song, 2013; Yim, Boo, & Ebbeck, 2014) also consistently confirm the significant role of parents in facilitating children’s learning.

Parents are commonly regarded as being an indispensable factor behind young children’s musical experience (Gudmundsdottir & Gudmundsdottir, 2010; Youm, 2013; Zdzinski, 2013), mainly because parents are usually their children’s first music teachers (National Association for the Education of Young Children NAEYC, 2005). They can influence both the quantity and quality of the musical environment at home (Acker, Nyland, Deans, & Ferris, 2012; Brand, 1986; Custodero, Britto, & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Researchers, therefore, have called for parents to be actively engaged in their children’s musical learning.

Parental engagement with their young children in musical home environments has long been an area of research interest (LUM, 2008; Shelton, 1965; Williams, Barrett, Welch, Abad, & Broughton, 2015). To evaluate the musical stimulation provided in homes, there are different measurements available in the research field. For example, Brand (1985) devised a measuring instrument named Home Musical Environment Scale (HOMES). This 15 item self-reporting measure helps parents “to assess and improve the musical stimulation of their own home, while researchers can use it to sharpen their knowledge about children’s musical development” (Ruismaki & Tereska, 2006, p. 116). However, HOMES was designed particularly for parents of lower elementary aged school children. There seems to be limited tools available to measure parents’/caregivers’ levels of engagement in music with children aged under 5 years.
This present paper has three focuses. First, it reports on the findings of a new self-reporting instrument named *Caregivers Musical Engagement Scale (CMES)* devised by the researchers to measure parents’ engagement in musical activities with their children aged 4–5 years. This self-reporting instrument differs from HOMES, which consists of items concerned with the ownership of musical instruments and parents’ musical background, whereas CMES is a five-item scale which focuses specifically on parents’ *actual* musical practice (e.g. playing musical games with children, or watching music-related video programs with children). This design of CMES was used because parents’ *actual* behaviours have been found to be the most influential aspect of parental engagement in both music (Creech, 2010; Custodero, 2006; Custodero, Britto, & Xin, 2002) and non-music research (Zeedyk, Longbottom, & Pitts, 2005).

Second, this study focuses on parents who enrolled their 4–5 years aged children in long-day child care centres. Such an age range and an early childhood educational context have been commonly overlooked in early childhood research. de Vries (2008), for example, expressed his disappointment about the lack of research into music learning particularly in “pre-schools, child care centres and with private music education providers for the Under 5s” (p. 1).

Third, this present study used a cross-cultural approach to investigate parents’ engagement in music with their young children in both the East and the West. Most current and available researches were conducted in the western context (e.g., Koops, 2011). Music, however, is a universal language. As argued by Shek (2006), with the Chinese population being roughly one-fifth of the world’s total population, relevant data from Chinese people must be collected if any findings can be claimed to be universally generalizable.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

This study was devised to investigate parents’ levels of engagement in music with their young children (aged 4–5 years) in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) and South Australia. Specifically, two major research questions were investigated as follows:

• What are parents’ levels of engagement in music with their young children (aged 4–5 years) in HKSAR and Australia?
• Are there any relationships between parents’ levels of engagement in music and their cultural contexts?

METHOD

This paper is part of a larger research project which investigates factors influencing children’s (aged 4–5 years) engagement in music in HKSAR and South Australia, with a particular interest in children in long-day child care educational settings, by