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An analytical lens for studying informal learning in music: Subversion, embodied learning and participatory performance

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An analytical lens for studying informal learning in music: Subversion, embodied learning and participatory performance

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Abstract

Concepts of informal learning in music education have been developed from adult interpretations of the ways in which young people are perceived to learn. Informal learning can therefore be reified or transformed into pedagogy that prioritizes an adult understanding of the processes of learning. This article presents the first part of an analytical lens, created through a meta-synthesis of ethnographic literature, that allows a comparison of an academic understanding of informal learning with the “real-life” experiences of children. It draws on data collected from an empirical study into the ways in which children and young people learn informally in and out of school to illustrate three key themes; subversion, embodied understanding and participatory performance. It concludes that it may be more fruitful to conceptualize “informal learning” as “informal learnings” to better capture the multi-faceted and complex nature of children’s informal learning experiences.

Keywords: informal learning, children, subversion, participatory performance, music

Informal learning in school

Music education scholarship has been traditionally concerned with music teaching and learning that takes place in institutions such as schools and universities, or with organized and recognized processes and pedagogies such as those utilized in studio instrumental teaching (Green 2002). However, over the last few decades—spurred on in part by a growing concern with declining student motivation and participation in school music (Lamont and Maton 2008)—research in music education has taken an increasing interest in the ways in which people learn music outside of institutions, blurring the lines between music education, ethnomusicology, and the sociology of

music (Green 2002). Many of these extra-institutional learning practices have been called “informal” (Folkestad 2006), and contrasted with the perceived “formal” learning in school to the detriment of the latter (Harwood 1998), with the result that more and more teachers are being asked to include “informal learning practices” within their teaching (Allsup 2008, Green 2008, Sexton 2012). Within the UK, the inclusion of informal learning practices in the school context has gained such popularity, and has proved so successful (Hallam et al. 2008) that regulatory bodies such as the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) cite examples of informal learning as “best practice”, towards which other teachers should aspire (OfSTED 2012).

The inclusion of some aspects of informal learning in school music lessons has a long history (Finney and Philpott 2010), especially in Scandinavian countries (Georgii-Hemming and Westvall 2010). However today, within both the UK and Australia, informal learning in school music has become almost synonymous with the work of Professor Lucy Green (2002, 2008). Following her ethnographic observations of the learning approaches of “untrained” popular musicians, Green (2002) suggested that aspects of their informal learning style could be successfully transferred into school teaching. At the heart of Green's work is a concern with the condition of school music teaching and learning—in particular, the low motivation of students to engage with school music, poor teaching of non-classical genres such as popular music, and the lack of value that many curricula ascribe to the music that is meaningful to many children and adolescents. As a result of Green's recommendations, a pilot project called “Musical Futures”, which aimed to remedy students' perceived lack of engagement, was introduced to schools in the UK. In the following passage, Green describes the differences between formal and informal musical learning, which underpins the philosophy and practice of Musical Futures thus:

First, informal learners choose the music themselves, music that is already familiar to them, that they enjoy and strongly identify with. By contrast, in formal education, teachers usually select music with the intent to introduce learners to areas with which they are not already familiar. Second, the main informal learning practice involves copying

recordings by ear, as distinct from responding to notated or other written or verbal instruction and exercises. Third, not only is the informal learner self taught, but crucially, learning takes place in groups. This occurs through conscious and unconscious peer-learning involving discussion, watching, listening to and imitating each other. This is quite distinct from the formal relationship which involves adult supervision and guidance from an expert with superior skills and knowledge. Fourth, informal learning involves the assimilation of skills and knowledge in personal, often haphazard ways according to musical preferences, starting with whole 'real-world' pieces of music. In the formal realm, pupils follow a progression from simple to complex, which often involves a curriculum, syllabus, graded exam, specially composed piece or exercises. Finally, throughout the informal learning process, there is an integration of listening, performing, improvisation and composing, with an emphasis on creativity. Within the formal realm, there is more of a separation of skills and an emphasis on reproduction. (2008, 106)

There have been some reports of the successes and difficulties presented by running Musical Futures projects in schools (Gower 2012, Sexton 2012). Difficulties have included practical problems such as resourcing (including space resources) as well as problems faced by a perceived loss of control on the part of the participating teachers, and poor opinions of the project held by other staff members and school management. However, the overwhelming majority of studies (Green 2008, Hallam et al. 2008, Jeanneret 2011) have reported a huge growth in student motivation and enjoyment, along with a demonstrable increase in instrumental and musicianship skills. These benefits have led to Musical Futures reporting that one third of secondary schools in the UK now use its methods in full or part. In Australia, Musical Futures has had a particular impact in the state of Victoria, and student teachers across Victoria and New South Wales are introduced to, and given access to training about providing opportunities for informal learning in both primary and secondary school music lessons.

While the response to Green's informal learning pedagogy has been largely positive, some voices in the academic community have raised concerns. Allsup (2008) notes that the participants in Green's original, 2002, study were both ethnically and culturally homogenous, and mostly male. Added to this, the youngest participant was 15, with the average age of participants far older. This indicates a

“top-down” approach to informal learning practices in schools—drawing on the informal learning practices of older adolescents and adults, and applying them to teenagers and children who may or may not learn in a similar way. As with more traditional pedagogies, this could be seen to implicitly condone the privileging of an adult world-view, and as Wright (2010) warns, we must be weary of pedagogies where we might find “inequality masquerading as equality” (267). Moreover, given the highly personal nature of learning, it seems somewhat naive to assume that the informal learning practices documented and recommended by Musical Futures are the only forms of informal learning, based as they are on one type of popular music. It might therefore be more useful to understand Musical Futures as an ethnopedagogy (Dunbar-Hall 2009) for more authentic learning of guitar-based pop and rock musics, rather than the leading definition of informal learning in music. To better understand how informal learning practices can be best utilized in the teaching of music to children, it is perhaps more pertinent to start with studies that examine children's own and unique musical cultures, and the informal learning practices that they utilize when participating in their musical worlds.

Informal learning(s) in school

Children's musical cultures were, for many years, overlooked by ethnomusicological and socio-musicological studies. Traditionally, children were seen as the recipients of adult cultures, “proto-adults” who were the novices of a larger, adult musical tradition, and not deemed important enough to merit serious scrutiny (Young 2009). However, scholars such as Campbell (2010), Marsh (2008), Young (2012), Lum (2007) and Bickford (2012) have been making enlightening forays into children's musical worlds and cultures, documenting and analyzing musical practice in many different spaces including the school, the playground, the home, culturally bound youth groups and even toy shops. This meaningful scholarship, which blurs the traditional lines of music education scholarship, ethnomusicology and the sociology of music, has revealed a complex musical world from which adults are often excluded, in which children are highly engaged producers and consumers of both music and culture. Children are shown to have highly eclectic and discerning musical

tastes (de Vries 2011), and to engage in music in a variety of ways, often simultaneously composing and performing (Campbell 2010) or subverting known texts (Marsh 2008). Children's cultures are at once influenced by, and yet separate from, adult musical cultures. As Bickford (2011) demonstrates, the role of popular music within children's musical cultures is critical, facilitating both musical and social development. While children have always used popular music in their play (Marsh 1999), today the ubiquity of internet access across the developed world has made unsupervised childhood access to music far easier. The explosion of simple-to-use social websites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, and the prevalence of smart phones with free apps, means that children in the 21st century have greater access to music than ever before. These new ways of engaging with music have had an understandably large influence on children's transmission of their musical cultures. Sharing music is now increasingly mediated digitally (Bickford 2011), as children are able to play favorite tunes at any given moment, thanks to the rise of the pocket-sized mp3 player. In Vermont, Bickford (2011) researched a group of tweenagers involved in complex social and individual identity work, mediated through their relationship with popular music and mp3 players. He described the intimate sharing of personal music, and the ways in which children enacted their (sometimes fraught) social lives through music:

children constantly saw in their MP3 players the childish potential for exactly the sort of manipulability, interactivity, and movement that characterized the rest of their material culture, reimagining them not in terms of transcendent freedom from bodies, spaces, and sociality, but as tangible anchors to their material, embodied, and spatial surroundings, and especially to one another. (7)

Digital games are also used in the teaching and learning of music (Young 2009, 2012) with children engaging with family and friends via computer games and television programs. In a study conducted in the UK, Young described the interaction between children and their families which occurs through musical games in the home, including digitized karaoke. She demonstrated how the layers of familial relationships, as well as the development of complex musical skills, can be facilitated through this form of play both at home and at school. The children in her study spent

many hours singing and dancing together, often using games which scored them for accuracy of rhythm and pitch. These digital pedagogies have become commonplace in both schools and the home, and have supplemented the more traditional “playground pedagogies” that have been more extensively documented (Dzansi 2004, Harwood 1998, Marsh 2008). Marsh highlighted a complex children's culture of teaching and learning, as well as creating and composing musical playground games. She identified several commonplace playground pedagogies found throughout many countries and cultures, including the way that children stand in close proximity to the game they wish to learn or participate in. Her description of these children's legitimate peripheral participation demonstrated the ways in which culture and cultural artifacts are transmitted on the playground in a dynamic process of ongoing enculturation and change which consolidates children's agency within and ownership of their musical worlds.

Studies of children's musical cultures clearly demonstrate the varied ways that children and young people interact with both music and each other. Particularly when teaching or learning, children can be seen to blend together both formal and informal learning practices, leading to unique learning experiences. While there have been multiple calls and recommendations that this scholarship be used in the classroom (Campbell 2010, Harwood and Marsh 2012, Marsh 2008), there have been few reports of ways in which teachers actually utilize them in practice (see Harrop-Allin 2011).

Upon first examination, informal learnings (both sanctioned by teachers and occurring “naturally”) appear to facilitate a greater degree of musical agency. Agency is “the power to act” (Laurence 2010, 253), something that many children are denied in traditional pedagogies. The potential for informal learnings in school to contribute to a project of democratization is tantalizing (Feichas 2010, Green 2008, Mans 2009, Saether 2008), however, we must remain wary of the potential that we as adults understand informal learnings differently to children. The discrepancy between “top-down” informal learning pedagogies and the lived informal learnings of children and adolescents is one that deserves attention. With this in mind, this article presents the preliminary findings of a project which uses a meta-synthesis of pertinent literature

to create an analytical lens. By focusing on the informal learnings documented in these texts, it has been possible to create a lens of nine key themes which were then explored through fieldwork conducted in the UK and Australia. In this article I will be discussing three of these themes; subversion, embodied learning and participatory performance, with reference to data drawn from two primary schools.

Creating an Analytical Lens

Using a meta-synthesis to create a lens through which to analyze raw data can be an effective way of focusing the initial stages of a research study. This was demonstrated by Karlsen's 2011 study of musical agency and the ways in which people use music. Through the analysis of three seminal sociological texts about musical agency; *Music in Everyday Life* (DeNora 2000), *Music and Informal Learning in Everyday Life* (Batt-Rawden and DeNora 2005), and *Musicking* (Small 1998), Karlsen (2011) was able to examine very diverse learning situations while retaining an analytic framework which tied the data together.

This proposed lens likewise holds the potential to capture the musical as well as non-musical outcomes of interactions with music ... it allows the researcher to focus on a very wide range of a person's encounters with music, no matter in which contexts they take place. (117)

In order to create a meta-synthesis of children and young people's informal learnings, I selected a variety of in-depth studies that focused on the lived, everyday musical experiences of 4–18 year olds. Literature for this synthesis was thus selected according to the following criteria: that it reported upon a study of school-aged learners (4–18); that the study was ethnographic in nature; that it was concerned in some part with learning informally; that a good understanding of the study could be obtained from the reports (either theses, books, or multiple articles); and that it was readily available, written in English, and if not published then stored as a doctoral dissertation on ProQuest. The 12 texts that were included in the meta-synthesis were: Tobias (2012), Lum (2007), Davis (2008), Green (2002), Green (2008), Marsh (2008), Bickford (2011), Young (2012), Pitts (2007, 2011), Campbell (2010), Wright and Finney (2010), and Burnard (1999). Each of these texts

prioritized the lived experience of their student-participants and examined day-to-day musical experiences in a variety of settings.

The inclusion of multiple settings was particularly important, as it ensured a representation of different culturally important spaces in which children and adolescents learn. At the heart of conceptualizing “informal learnings” is the acknowledgement that students learn differently in different contexts, even when those contexts have similar characteristics (Harwood 1998, Harwood and Marsh 2012). Harwood (1998) demonstrated this by contrasting the learning that occurred in an after-school play club for girls with the learning that typically occurs in a music classroom:

Both classrooms and playgrounds offer what seems at first blush a social context for learning, that is, children are learning music in groups, rather than through individual lessons such as private piano or other instrumental study. However, the constraints imposed upon behavior in school music classes typically serve to undermine the elements of social learning that are effective on the playground. (55)

Harwood clearly demonstrates the importance of contextual “rules” to learning, acknowledging that as a microcosmic society, each learning context contains its own implicit rules and power distributions. This is particularly evident within schools, where some areas are typically controlled by teachers (which I have called “teacher mediated spaces”), and others by students¹ (“student mediated spaces”); away from the (usually) ever-present gaze of adults (Marsh 2012). There are also liminal spaces within schools where the relationship of power between teachers and students is not so clear cut, or where power is actively and dynamically negotiated from moment to moment. These I have termed “negotiated spaces”.

A teacher mediated space is a space in which the underlying rules of context state that the teacher is in control. A typical example would be a classroom in the middle of an ordinary lesson. Student mediated spaces are more complex, as it is plausible to argue that there is no space in which school-aged students are in complete authority—their bedroom is in a house owned by their guardians, their playground is part of their school. However, there are spaces within school in which students have a greater degree of ownership, and are able to construct their own learning

environment. Within a school, the typical example would be the playground. However, a particularly interesting and relatively new student mediated space can be the aural space that they create for themselves by using an iPod or mp3 player (Bickford 2011). This can be a space within a space, a place where students can be in control despite physically being in a context in which they are not. Finally, negotiated spaces are liminal spaces in which the rules governing student/teacher control are reset and re-negotiated. An example could be the production of a school musical, in which all participants are volunteers, and all are working towards a shared and relatively equally valued goal. Another example could be the use of practice rooms in a music department at lunchtime, or a workshop led by a visiting musician. While these are not totally unique or unusual occurrences, they are equally not regular enough for co-constructed rules to have developed and become fixed (as in the other two cases). Understanding the multiplicity of power-determined spaces that exist within schools affords an additional framework for understanding how the distribution of power can fluctuate, which allows us to then analyze the effect this has on the musical agency of children.

By conducting a meta-synthesis of a wide range of literature, it was possible to draw together multiple perspectives covering a range of participant ages and learning contexts. By focusing on the informal learnings documented within each text, it was possible to identify nine key themes. These themes were found across all 12 texts, and were as follows: subversion, embodied learning, participatory performance, immersion, fluid roles, enjoyment, technology, media, and haphazard acquisition. In this article, I will be discussing the first three themes and contrasting their occurrences in the texts with their manifestation in the informal learnings of children in two primary schools. These three themes, subversion, embodied learning and participatory performance were chosen for presentation in this article as they interestingly provided examples of data that in some cases fitted, and in others did not fit the meta-synthesis lens.

Methodology

The data presented here are drawn from a larger ethnographic study involving both primary and secondary schools in the UK and Australia. The methodology, data collection methods and data analysis methods were informed by an interpretivist theoretical perspective, guided by a phenomenological epistemology (Crotty 1998), which prioritized understanding the experiences and perceptions of the participants. As my age precluded me from the children's peer culture in which I was interested, a degree of separation was achieved which ultimately allowed me to view the everyday phenomenon of interaction between the children, the peer culture they inhabited, and music as an outsider looking in (Crotty 1998). Each school is considered a single case within a multiple-case study design. Research designs utilizing case studies are particularly helpful when examining complex social realities (Yin 2009), such as the musical worlds inhabited by children.

Data were collected using a variety of methods recommended for ethnographic studies. The majority of the data were obtained through video recorded observations of children's music making, coupled with video recorded semi-structured interviews, and research conversations (Young 2009, Wood 2005) which were documented in over 54 hours of videos. This recorded material was supplemented by the compilation of reflective field notes and the collection of relevant documentation (including screen shots of social media, and downloads of popular games and apps). The video data were then indexed, with relevant passages transcribed verbatim. This allowed the data to then be coded according to the nine themes drawn from the meta-synthesis. This facilitated a thematic analysis that was at once directly related to the meta-synthesis literature. Following this process, the coded transcripts from the field recordings, interviews, and research conversations, along with field notes, were subjected to a process of constant comparison (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011) which helped to triangulate the data both within and between schools.

The Research Context

Both schools involved in this study are comparatively small, and both serve areas made up of a majority rural population. The British school, “Oakwood” Primary School², is situated in England, close to the Welsh border, and at the time of the data collection had 75 students enrolled. It is staffed by three full-time and one part-time teacher, as well as a variety of support staff. The Australian school, “Blue Hills” Public School, is in rural New South Wales and had just 19 students, one full-time and two part-time teachers, and multiple support staff. These schools were selected as they presented both similarities in their position as relatively small and rural, and contrasts for example, in the socio-economic demographic of their students. At Blue Hills, in Australia, many of the families rely on government support, and the area has a high unemployment level. In contrast, the children that attend Oakwood could be described as predominantly middle class. Both schools cater for a majority white, English speaking population.

The schools comprised a convenience sample (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011) as I had prior relationships with teachers in both schools which facilitated my access. At Oakwood, in the UK, one of the teachers is a close family member, and I have spent extensive time in the school occasionally helping as a teaching assistant, teaching as a music teacher, and attending school functions such as the Christmas production and Summer Fayre. In Blue Hills, the principal is also a close relative. While these prior relationships allowed me a certain degree of insider knowledge, I also had to maintain an awareness of my personal bias, which leaned towards seeing the schools and their music programs in a positive light.

In the following section I shall present some of the data that I collected from the two primary schools as short, illustrative vignettes. I will examine the relationship of these vignettes with the three themes of subversion, embodied learning, and participatory performance, in order to better understand the ways that these themes manifest and interact in real examples of children's informal learnings.

Subversion

Within all of the texts included in the meta-synthesis, the idea of subversion (both musical and behavioral) was very important. This did not seem to diminish with age, and retained a character throughout of transformation and creativity, often with negative undertones. Undermining or subverting the implicit “rules” and accepted power distributions appears to bring a great amount of pleasure to children, and helps to foster and strengthen the bonds of peer culture (Bickford 2011). Often, subversion is assumed to be negative and to have a “victim”—either an adult (Lum 2007), or other children (Davis 2008). In both Lum and Bickford's studies, musical and behavioral subversion is clearly used to undermine the authority of the teacher, with children using heightened language to disrupt lessons, or listening to music in class times without permission. In these cases, the children are exercising an enhanced agency, something that is perceived to be inappropriate in a teacher-mediated space. There were several examples of “disruptive” subversion found in the two primary schools in this study. However, there were also many examples of children using subversion to positively empower themselves, where there was no victim and the result was greater musical agency and strengthened bonds of friendship.

Subversion: Arthur's “silly voice”

At Oakwood Primary School, students used musical subversion within the clearly teacher-mediated space of a choir rehearsal. Arthur, a 6-year-old boy, used a “silly”, highly nasal voice to subvert his part, which cut across the other singers. Following his “silly” singing, Arthur immediately looked to the other children sitting around him, gauging their reaction and demonstrating that his subversion had a clear audience of his peers. This clearly irritated the teacher leading the choir, who immediately stopped the rehearsal and told the children “*I don't know what happened! We sang this so beautifully last week!*” (Recorded observation, 17 December, 2012). In this case, Arthur was both bonding with his peers through the shared joke of singing in a silly way, but also testing the behavioral boundaries of a negotiated space. While he was not necessarily targeting the teacher, she was

obviously not the intended audience for the subversion and was thus excluded from the joke—verified by her disappointed response to the subversion. By controlling his contribution to the music, Arthur also controlled the situation, delighting in the inappropriate nature of his performance. A similar fascination with the inappropriate can be found in some of the playground games reported by Marsh, for example, a clapping song which contained the words “Size 24 D bra” (Marsh 2008, 109), and in the participants of Bickford's study, who were keen fans of inappropriate music such as the Bloodhound Gang's *Bad Touch* (a reasonably graphic rap song about sex).

Inclusive subversion: Laura's “wings”

However, subversion is not always exclusive. In the student mediated playground of Blue Hills Public School, NSW, subversion was commonly used as a tool of inclusion, without any victim. The girls in the school had a tradition of dancing to self-selected popular music at their recess and lunch times, and would play music loudly via YouTube, which they accessed on the classroom's interactive whiteboard. While the school had a core of strong and engaged dancers, who led the sessions, there were also some peripheral girls who had not yet developed the confidence to dance or take the lead, despite maintaining strong friendships with the girls who did. Laura, in Year 5, was one of the less confident dancers. However, she had developed a strategy of subversion to aid her inclusion—taking common dance moves and subverting them, making them appear silly and performing them for the amusement of her peers. In Figure 1, Laura and the other girls were dancing to “Wings” a 2012 song by the all-female British group Little Mix. Rather than dancing seriously as the other girls did, Laura performed a silly flying move, which she repeated every time the word “wings” occurred in the track.



Figure 1: Laura's "wings" dance

She was careful to never subvert the movements of the other dancers, rather, she took her cues from the lyrics of the songs, thus ensuring that she was not seen to be mocking her friends. This was understood by the other dancers, who took a great deal of amusement from Laura's dance moves, often copying her and joining in. In this particular case, the "wings" move was quickly adopted by the other dancers, and included in their play. In this way, subversion was used to both enhance the peer culture of the group through creating in-jokes (Bickford 2011), and also allowed Laura to join in with her friends without fear of unintentionally looking silly. Subversion created a safety net for her, which in time enabled her full inclusion into the "serious" dances.

Embodied Learning

Embodied learning was found throughout the meta-synthesis texts. Allusions were frequently made to the fact that the participants often knew or understood more information than they could articulate verbally. This tacit understanding was eloquently and personally explored by Davis, "there are things that I know through my body that, through the experience of living, I no longer need to articulate in words, or for which articulation is redundant" (Davis 2008, 69). This description of embodied understanding is similar to kinesthetic learning stored in muscle memory. Several of the children in Marsh's study described this phenomenon when learning a

new game, “your hands just glide into it” (2008, 141). In some of the meta-synthesis studies, embodied learning proved a barrier between children and adults. Bickford found that some of his participants had an active aversion to explaining their understanding of music. Bickford suggests that, at the heart of the miscommunication between teachers and children is a tendency for children to accept embodied, or “intimate” understanding (2011, 219), whereas schools value “instrumental communication” (219) the essence of which is decontextualisation and critical reflection (supported by appropriate vocabulary). This again highlights a power discrepancy between children and adults, where the values of one group are clearly prioritized over another. Other examples of embodied understanding can be observed when children talk about the processes of learning. Often children talk about “just picking it up” from others around them, in a process that Strauss (1984) calls “incidental learning” (200). This phenomenon was described by PJ, the aspiring rap artist who participated in Wright and Finney’s (2010) study:

You listen to the music and think, oh that's really good, you know... So I pause the music and just sit in silence for a bit, have silent thoughts and then, *I don't know how it happens* but something would come to me by thinking in my head, I just feel like, that sounds good, that sounds really good ... I get there in the end. (235, emphasis added)

Throughout the informal learnings documented in the meta-synthesis literature, embodied learning and embodied understanding were verified as important and valid forms of learning and understanding, providing a contrast to the instrumental communication that is commonly equated with more traditional pedagogies. This suggests that informal learnings could provide an opportunity to more fully democratize education, by accepting a form of knowing that is valued by the majority. The power of embodied learning can be seen in the following example, drawn from Oakwood in the UK.

Embodied learning: Peter's beaters

Unlike Bickford (2012), I found few examples of embodied learning providing a barrier to learning or teacher/student communication in either of the primary schools I visited. Both schools fostered a culture of asking questions, and children

seemingly felt uninhibited when asking for help to articulate their thoughts, even when this meant admitting that they did not understand. Moreover, teachers at both schools were happy to use practical demonstration as evidence of understanding. At Oakwood, the idea of experimentation was tightly interwoven with embodied learning, especially amongst the early years of school. When children found it difficult to articulate an understanding, they were encouraged to experiment practically, until they found an answer or solution. This was evidenced by the informal learning exploration of Peter, a 6 year old boy who found it difficult to play the chime bars. He had not yet mastered the motor skills to handle the beater in such a way that the chime bar produced a ringing sound; instead, he kept deadening it. However, he knew that something was wrong, and pointed it out to his teacher, who suggested that he try some different methods of striking his instrument. Over the course of a week, mostly in teacher-mediated spaces and situations, Peter engaged in an innovative and solitary exploration of his chime bar and beater, using some novel experiments until he was able to obtain the desired sound. This included behaviors that would not usually be sanctioned by his teachers, including hitting the chime bar against the floor, and playing it loudly and very close to his ear. By allowing Peter the space to explore his tacit understanding that something was wrong, his teachers not only facilitated the creation of a negotiated space within their traditionally teacher-mediated one, but also facilitated his creative musical agency, enabling him to develop his musical skills driven by a desire to solve a problem, rather than simply practising something that his teachers had shown him.

Participatory Performance

Turino (2008) defines participatory performance as “actively contributing to the sound and motion of a musical event through dancing, singing, clapping and playing musical instruments when each of these activities is considered integral to the performance” (28). As its name suggests, participatory performance prioritizes participation, sometimes to the detriment of typical Western musical conventions such as integrity of pitch (Harwood and Marsh 2012). Evidence of the importance of participatory performance was found throughout the meta-synthesis texts,

suggesting that *lived experience* is crucial to the learning practices of children throughout a range of different contexts. Within teacher mediated spaces, it appears that greater engagement from the students is achieved when they are able to spend significant amounts of time making music away from the pressures of a presentational performance such as a concert. Tobias (2012), for example, paints a vivid picture of a group of students who are self-directed and highly motivated, engaged wholly in the act of composition and production. Turino (2008) suggests that this could be because participatory performances encourage “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi 1996) a pleasurable state in which the participant is highly engaged and focused. Interestingly, while several of the studies, including those of Tobias (2012) and Green (2008) reported on a process which ultimately had a presentational performance as a goal, it was participatory performances that characterized the *learning* process. Typically, teachers focus on presentational performances, both in the sense that they work towards a presentational goal such as an assembly or concert, but also in the ways that they normalize spontaneous musical events, for example correcting pitch or tempo. Turino stresses that typical Western notions of “correct” performance are not the priority of a participatory performance, rather the focus is purely on the extent of participation amongst the performers. Embracing participatory performance, and perhaps forgoing musical standardization, may therefore be a powerful tool in the informal learner's repertoire.

Participatory performance: Taylor Swift karaoke

The social importance of participatory performance was clear in one instance in Oakwood. In the student mediated space of a classroom at lunchtime, a group of girls were working together towards the student-initiated talent show. Keen to perform Taylor Swift's 2012 song “We are never ever getting back together”, they listened and sang along with Swift's recording multiple times. To begin with, the girls were spread out across the classroom, engaged in other activities such as making Christmas cards, and they treated YouTube a bit like a shared mp3 player. However, after the Swift song was selected, a few of the girls stopped their activity and walked over to the

computer to more closely interact with the song and music video. In that session, they sang and listened to the song three times in a row, drawing around them a growing group of girls who all sang together. Their interactions with each other and the song were clear: they danced together, added in gestures to reflect the character depicted in the story and generally worked together to produce a strong performance of their favorite song. Following the repetition of the song with the lyrics, they decided to find a karaoke version on YouTube which had removed Swift's vocals. The girls delighted in the added challenge, and only stopped their singing when it was time to pack up for the afternoon. In the end, none of the girls performed this song in the talent show. For this group in Oakwood, this spontaneous, participatory performance was a powerful social moment. It helped the girls to bond through an intersection of shared interests: Taylor Swift, singing, popular music and media. It was quite clear that they had entered a state of flow, and were focused on the activity at hand, rather than on the eventual, hypothetical performance. As well as participating in a social learning experience, the girls were also engaged in an informal musical experience, as they worked together to perfect the nuances of Swift's performance, forgoing pitch accuracy for an engaging performing style. Furthermore, they were exercising their agency by immersing themselves in a song that had a high cultural value for them, but not necessarily for their teachers.

Conclusions

In this article, I have focused on just three of the nine themes drawn from a meta-synthesis of literature about informal learning. By drawing on data relating to the lived musical worlds of children, I have hoped to avoid an overly top-down approach to informal learning, instead preferring to conceptualize children's learning experiences as informal learnings in order to recognize their complexity and diversity. As well as beginning to understand the complexity of these highly social and personal pedagogies of the participants of this study, I have also started to explore the equally complex and nuanced themes themselves. As in the meta-synthesis texts, subversion is shown to be rife throughout children's informal learnings. However, rather than being exclusive and negative, subversion has been

shown to have the potential to frame very positive learning experiences, as a highly social and strongly consolidating force—the powerhouse behind much peer group bonding. While this is supported by the literature, there is a tendency to see subversion as a negative force, often placing children and adults in opposition. In contrast, using or positively acknowledging subversion (both musical and behavioral) within teaching could lead to feelings of camaraderie between teachers and their classes. Accepting children's subversions as an important part of learning could help alleviate feelings of alienation and frustration on the part of teachers. Perhaps appreciating the creativity inherent in subversion could go some way towards its rehabilitation.

The data also demonstrate the potential of embodied learning as a valid and important form of learning while simultaneously presenting none of the negativity seen in some of the meta-synthesis texts, which document the lack of communication between children and adults. However, demonstrating a positive example of embodied learning equally supports the supposition of the earlier literature, that allowing children the space and time to develop an embodied understanding of music can lead to powerful learning experiences. This strongly supports Green's argument that learning occurs over an extended period of time, often without following a pre-ordained path of progression (2008). However, this approach to learning is difficult to implement in many schools in both Australia and the UK, given their highly prescribed curricula and rigorous testing schedules.

Finally, performances in which participation is valued and, indeed, prioritized, help to democratize music education and learning experiences. As with subversion, spontaneous participatory performance is very common throughout children's informal learnings, is highly social, and helps to consolidate peer cultures and friendships (Bickford 2012, Campbell 2010, Marsh 2008). The participatory performances in the data I collected were of music that the participants enjoyed and strongly identified with, just as Green (2008) describes. While there was a general leaning towards popular music, the participatory performances also included Christmas carols, nursery rhymes, religious songs and classical music. The opportunity for teachers to utilize this as a pedagogical technique is clear; it is a

simple case of identifying and engaging with the music that their children enjoy, and incorporating it into day to day school life.

While these findings go some way to supporting the work of Green and Musical Futures, the complexity of just three of the nine themes arising from the meta-synthesis could suggest that informal learnings themselves are far more complex than the literature suggests, and that reifying them into a universal pedagogy may not be appropriate. Of course, more work is required to fully understand both informal learnings in primary and secondary schools. The next stage of this project is to examine all nine themes both in primary and secondary school contexts, as well as completing an inductive thematic analysis of all data to explore the potential of further important facets of informal learnings which may have been missed in the meta-synthesis. For example, across all the vignettes provided here it is clear that movement and dance are integral to the learning experiences of the participants—a theme that was not derived from the meta-synthesis. Furthermore, each of the examples given here demonstrate that the children are engaged in highly exploratory, co-operative learning where power relations are in a state of constant flux. This has important implications for the theorizing of informal learnings; simply creating a typology or list of characteristics effectively silences the social realities of learning which can blind us to pedagogically imposed hegemony. Thus, to move forward it is important that we not only identify informal learnings, but that we prioritize understanding the *lived experiences* of children and adolescents as they learn informally; that, ultimately, we actively engage in a process of reflexively questioning our educator/researcher assumptions of what constitutes informal learning. If we, as educators truly want to demonstrate a commitment to value children's musical cultures in education, we must both listen to and learn from the informal learnings that already occur within children's musical worlds.

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Notes

¹ The larger study from which the data in this article is drawn included both children and adolescents, and thus the moniker "Student-Mediated Spaces" was adopted. In this article, only data pertaining to children are presented, however "Student-Mediated Spaces" is maintained for consistency.

² Pseudonyms are used throughout, for both schools and participants.

About the Author

Athena Lill is a doctoral candidate at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, University of Sydney, having previously completed a music degree at Oxford University, and a Postgraduate Certificate of Education together with a Masters degree in education at the University of Cambridge. Prior to commencing her PhD, Athena taught as a specialist music teacher in secondary and primary schools in the UK and Australia. Her area of research focuses on children's musical worlds, and the ways in which children and young people learn music informally, both in and out of school. She is grateful for the financial support provided by the Henderson Scholarship.

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