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Musicians from birth: Early Years

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In the first in our series of Early Years updates, Jessica Pitt considers how qualified practitioners are a crucial part of the necessary reframing of early childhood music

Anyone who is the parent of a typically developing preschool child knows of the incredible changes that take place across the first five years of life. From being totally dependent on your caregivers for every aspect of your survival to arriving at school able to walk, talk, demonstrate knowledge of numbers and write your name; the outward signs of growth and development are obvious for all to see.



But what about musical growth and development? From birth, the dependent infant is a highly skilled listener, able to detect semitone changes in consonant melodies, react to known pieces of music, and from four months old, display biases for culture-specific musical features.

Far from arriving as a blank slate, these young musicians already have attuned skills to employ as competent communicators, seeking interaction from those with whom they have emotional ties. From infancy to toddlerhood, musical play can be observed through daily routines, play at home and in early childhood settings if one chooses to look for it.

With a growing drive to get children 'ready for school', however, evidence of this rich musicality can be overlooked. If what is needed for assessment is the emergence of communication, language and numeric skills, this is what will be noted and recorded. Within this 'getting children ready for school' discourse, the early years are cast as nothing more than a preparation for all that is to come in education, with the children in this life phase typified as pupils-in-waiting. I find this an impoverished way of thinking about the early years.

It is a pervasive notion to overcome, particularly when we consider how the National Plan for Music Education (NPME) of 2011 focuses on schools and school pupils' access to music learning. It ignores the incredibly important life phase that takes place before school. Early childhood music education (ECME) has been excluded economically, organisationally, and politically through this statutory document. By omitting early childhood from the NPME, the life phase it represents could be seen as lesser, unimportant, or preparation for the real music education that lies ahead.

The good news is that the field of ECME is a distinct discipline of music practice, attracting some of the most able musicians and artists. There is now a well-established, accredited professional qualification route through to masters level. The Certificate for Music Educators: Early Childhood, a part-time, distance-learning Level 4 qualification, focuses on skills and knowledge for practice across the 0-5 age phase (not just 3-5 years, which some consider to be Early Years), and for a variety of contexts.

For those seeking to explore theoretical perspectives and to sharpen their ideas to find answers to questions they have about their practice with music and young children, there is an MA in Early Years Music (MA:EY). This, too, is a part-time, distance learning course taken over three years. Both these programmes of study were devised by internationally recognised academic-educator, Dr Susan Young.

This practice could be epitomised by the following principles from Inspire-Music, based on the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage:

- Every child is unique and competent
- Each child learns music at their own pace and develops musical skills in their own time
- Effective practice creates an enabling environment for scaffolding children's music making
- Effective music practice is built on positive relationships with children, parents, teachers and other professionals
- Promote and model singing that is intentional, animated and accurate
- Work in ways that are sound rich and talk poor
- Support and promote cultural diversity
- Collaborate with others wherever possible
- Ground your work in reflection in and on practice.

Courses in ECME such as these are effective in challenging societal assumptions. They put play at the heart of young children's learning. They understand playfulness, responding to it with scaffolds that enhance and celebrate children's musicality.

Dr Jessica Pitt is a lecturer in music education at the Royal College of Music and lead tutor for the MA:EY music pathway mentioned above. For more information on the Early Childhood CME and the MA course, visit www.crec.co.uk.



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