

Investigating children's meaning-making and the emergence of musical interaction in group improvisation

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This paper describes what improvising came to mean to a group of 12-year-old children who, as members of a weekly lunchtime 'Music Creators' Soundings Club', were watched, listened to, and invited to reflect upon the process of group improvisation. Focusing on musical interaction as it emerged in the earliest stages of this work, this paper shows the relationship between children's actions and their reflective talk. It identifies emerging principles in a sequence of musical examples that portray children making music together and shows the nature of group improvisation as socially and musically inclusive. These children valued group improvisation most for its immediacy and continuity. Ways of delighting in how children behave musically and reveal their musical learning through conversation are discussed.

Introduction

The practice of improvisation as a collective creativity is rarely seen in school music programmes. Current practices and opinions tend to emphasise composition in the classroom (Sawyer, 1999; Bunting, 1999). Teachers' conceptions of improvisation can range from an anxiety-ridden process that involves 'anything goes' to a highly skilled genre embracing levels of aptitude beyond the realms of school music (Paton, 2000). For most teachers, group improvisation remains difficult to implement. Surprisingly, little has been written on children's conceptions of improvisation construed either socially or musically (Campbell, 1998; Kanellopoulos, 1999).

Whilst there are many and varied views on what improvising is, both within and beyond the tradition of Western art music, the psychological routes and socio-musical processes of adults remain the focus of a considerable body of research (Sudnow, 1978; Sloboda, 1985, 1988; Pressing, 1988; McPherson, 1994; Berliner, 1994; Brinner, 1995; Elliott, 1996; Sawyer, 1999). Yet it is by no means clear how adult practice informs our understanding of children's musical experience of group improvisation, and what they make of it.

Review of literature

The earliest research with young children engaged in improvising was carried out by Moorehead & Pond (1941, 1942, 1944, 1978) and Pond (1979, 1981). These seminal studies show that improvisation is at the heart of children's musical creativity and that

children can improvise alone and in groups. These findings indicate the natural tendency of children to use polyrhythmic structures in a group context through communication with each other. A small number of studies use improvisation to measure and map children's musical development (Flohr, 1979, 1985; Partchey, 1973; Dowling, 1984; Kratus, 1991, 1996; Brophy, 1998). These studies examine how children progress through hierarchical levels of increasingly sophisticated behaviours. Studies explicitly focusing on young children's spontaneous music-making (without instruction and/or structure by adults) also inform the present study (Cohen, 1980; Pond, 1981; Davies, 1992; Marsh, 1995; Campbell, 1998; Littleton, 1998; Young, 1999). The kinaesthetic nature and role of musical gestures in young children's music-making highlights the spontaneity through which improvised forms emerge.

Conversations with and between children, heard loudest in the work of Campbell (1998) and Kanellopoulos (1999), demonstrate that children can tell us a lot about their creative thinking (Webster, 1994). Few researchers, however, have widened the investigative focus from *how* children think, to what the nature of the phenomenon is, how it shows itself, and *what* meaning children ascribe.

Focus of this paper

This paper focuses on musical interaction as it emerged in the earliest improvisations by a group of 12-year-old children who, as members of a weekly lunchtime 'Music Creators' Soundings Club', were encouraged to reflect upon their experiences of making music. I aim to show how musical interaction emerged as a communicative intention in the early phase of a larger study, of which this paper reports one conceptual slice. (For further discussions see Burnard, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2001.)

Research setting and context

The present study was conducted in a multi-ethnic, comprehensive middle school in west London, England. Eighteen 12-year-old children participated in 21 weekly music-making sessions. The children volunteered to join a 'Music Creators' Soundings Club', which involved weekly lunchtime sessions lasting one hour. Every Friday lunchtime for six months, members of the club, who knew one another, converged on a music room. Most had performed together in orchestra, choir, or in class music, but none had experienced making music within the school setting where the musical tasks were not prescribed by a scheme of work. Their class music teacher described the extent of improvisation experienced in music class as:

[Being] fairly minimal probably because improvisation has not been emphasised in my training. It is mentioned but not given status in the National Curriculum and I feel less confident to teach it than other Attainment Targets. (Interview)

The research took place within school, but in a context distinct from the normal classroom. The physical setting of a classroom was familiar to them, but without the constraints of curriculum, assessment, and the presence of a teacher.

Given that the priority was to research child-directed activities and pupil-pupil talk,

the introduction of starting points, time limits or any other constraints on activities was inappropriate. It was considered that the activities should reflect the children's self-generated decision-making process. While it was considered important not to influence the children, or to attempt to manipulate the research setting, I acknowledged that I would be inviting them to create their own music. However, the responsibility for decision-making was based on the concept of passing ownership of the practice(s) to the children. The view of the child as artist was firmly expressed by Gardner (1982: 102):

Both young children and adult artists are willing, even eager, to explore their medium to try out various alternatives . . . both are willing to suspend (for whatever reasons) their knowledge of what others do, to go their own way, to transcend the practices and boundaries that overwhelm and inhibit.

For the purposes of clarification, this paper refers to children's group improvisation, which involved playing music that was not predetermined but rather negotiated between a company of players using immediate time frames where the music was made and played simultaneously.

Following Hennessey & Amabile's (1988) suggestions regarding creativity in research settings, my role was that of an interested researcher, not a teacher or assessor. As researcher, I assumed the role of participant observer following the advice of Grave & Walsh (1998), who recommended moving between reactive observation and active participation when researching children. I adopted a flexible stance, acting as (i) a concert manager of child-led improvisations, encouraging children to undertake and develop their own ways of improvising, (ii) a keen and committed listener, and (iii) an agent for reflection (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). My position within the school was as a friendly outsider who did not fit the more familiar role of teacher. This helped to keep my interactions within the 'Soundings Club' relaxed and informal.

Introducing the children

Of the 18 children, 12 were girls and 6 were boys. Fourteen had received instrumental tuition and 5 had completed graded examinations. Four had received no formal instrumental training. Only one child did not have an instrument at home. Fourteen children were of British descent, two were Afro-Caribbean and two Asian.

Methodology

Ethnographic strategies of observation, interview and examination of musical artefacts formed the basis for the fieldwork. The fieldwork divided into Early, Middle and Late Phases. Each phase comprised seven sessions. The use of video for recording observations provided the opportunity to 'freeze interactions and re-examine them repeatedly, to subject them to scrutiny, and to capture behavioural nuances precisely' (Adler & Adler, 1994: 383), whilst permitting me to act as a data source to build on the tacit knowledge of members of the group (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Focus group interviews made use of stimulated recall techniques (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990), which encouraged reflection on the music-making context. Notated versions involving analysis of recorded improvisa-

tions were used to 'freeze' experiential material (Sloboda & Parker, 1985) for relating experiential qualities (things said) with musical analysis (what was done). (A full discussion of the research framework and interview methodology can be found in Burnard 1999, 2000a, 2000b.)

A grounded theory method was chosen that involved three phases of data analysis, which included open coding, axial coding and theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Once all the performances were catalogued, a thematic analysis was undertaken. This involved the segmentation of data, a search for patterns, and the development of descriptive categories pertaining to each segment of data for comparison with other similarly coded segments. This paper focuses on the descriptive category of musical interaction.

The following techniques were used to enhance the credibility of the findings: triangulation of data sources (Denzin, 1978); respondent verification (Shulman, 1986); and independent investigators to cross-check the reliability of my thematic categorisation of the data (Cohen & Manion, 1994; Van Manen, 1990).

What follows is a sketch of the earliest settings in which this group of children began negotiating excursions into group improvisation. A chronological mode of presentation involving six improvisations is adopted from which a number of earliest emerging descriptive categories are discussed. (Musical examples will appear on the CD to accompany *BJME* 19.3.) The journey follows a musical terrain that begins with an ice-breaking solo improvisation (Example 1) and moves on to whole-group improvisations (Examples 2, 3 and 4), followed by trio improvisations (Examples 5 and 6). How each improvisation is situated within and parallels the flux and emerging pattern of communicative dialogue is explored. The samples of comments below are clustered accordingly and are typical of how these dialogues continued to support children's learning throughout the project.

Children's conversations about improvising

Coming to the 'Soundings Club' saw members first gather in a circle on the floor to eat lunch and consider how music-making might take place. These social opening moments served to frame ways of organising and reconstructing their musical experiences. The value of these utterances and responses both within and across conversations and the sense of musical community, which reflection promoted, cannot be overestimated. I convened each session as much wanting to examine *how* children approached group improvisation as to understand *what* meanings were collectively accomplished. The samples of conversations below concern the children's talk about group improvisation and are typical of the dialogue throughout the study.

1. 'When you like the sound, ideas fall out': selecting instruments

In the first session, the children elected to 'make a piece on the spot together'. This was decided by vote (with a show of hands) – a strategy that a member of the group introduced and was used often for making decisions. Another salient aspect of the earliest sessions was the choice of instrument for improvising. They began by selecting instruments with

colourful timbres such as maracas, hanging chimes, claves, bass metallophone, and suspended cymbal. Katya, a clarinettist, selected a bass metallophone. Lia, a guitarist, surrounded herself with various sized drums, a range of beaters, a suspended cymbal and a cowbell. Loreen and Liana, both pianists, claimed the congas in addition to their clarinets. Wasim, a cellist, surrounded himself with a group of instruments that included the cabasa, maracas and small bongos. Stevie observed the proceedings for several minutes and then left the room to reappear moments later with his double bass. Meanwhile, Ashton, a drummer, set his kit up directly in front of the camera. For Katya, the criterion for instrumental selection was that 'when you like the sound the ideas fall out'. Tim, a pianist and violinist, said 'on percussion you can do anything'. Remarkably, the majority (86 per cent) of improvisations out of the total of 116 recorded during the six months were performed on classroom-based percussion.

It was Dion, an extrovert saxophone player, who, without warning, became the first to 'make a piece on the spot'. This he did by leaping behind a set of congas and, after momentarily peering around purposefully at everyone, signalled his readiness to begin. The solo improvisation lasted 22 seconds.

Music Example 1 – Improvisation (solo) on congas: Dion's commences with a simple two-bar rhythmic pattern which is repeated over 12 bars using variously configured patterns of high and low tones in a strict metrical organisation of four-four.

This improvisation featured the repetition of a distinctive rhythmic pattern that was based on a patterned movement using both hands diagonally crossed over the congas. When he began to vary *how* he was playing, we witnessed the control of body motion and focus of mental activity in a dual drive toward maintaining continuity through repetition and modification. Ashton led the applause. This conversation followed:

Katya: I think it's time we all played.
Lia: Yeah! Can we all play?
Chloe: We could use Dion's pattern to get started and then branch out.

2. 'Can we all play?' Co-operative strategies for 'getting started'

The pace quickened as we moved on with a brief discussion in preparation for a whole-group improvisation. Many suggestions were offered. Dion happily suggested that all the drummers should start with 'my beat' and then 'carry on at different times'. All nodded their heads. He then suggested that the drums should 'fit to' his beat and 'just do it over and over again until we stop'. Again, there was agreement. Ashton moved onto the largest bass drum. This performance lasted 50 seconds.

The improvisation was a polyrhythmic percussion piece, often heard in school music settings, characterised by applications of more constraint than freedom. Importantly, it seemed to act out a need to create something musical. The need to organise sound,

Music Example 2 – Improvisation (whole-group) on percussion: The performance begins with the drummers playing Dion’s pattern. This is followed by the staggered entries of grouped instruments playing separate rhythmic lines building up the texture into layered ostinati patterns. This continues until closure is cued by Ashton to finish with a unison pattern of eight crescendo beats.

ranging from tightly controlled cues to regulated points of entry, was very social in nature, as the talk that followed illustrates:

- Researcher: What would you like to see happen in the next performance?
Katya: I think we should be getting started with a count in and do our own things.
Dion: Or what about if someone could give us a signal on a drum?
Lia: We could get in one after another around the room.
Ashton: I think we should start from nothing – and only play when we want – and end when we like.

Some comments underlined a desire to coordinate aspects of the performance through special gestures used as a frame for organising *when* to ‘get in’. Others promoted individual freedom of choice in allowing *how* players might ‘start from nothing’. This led to a discussion about ways to start an improvisation without a pre-planned or cued order.

- Katya: But who will tell us when to play?
Chloe: We’ll just join in as we go.
Lia: Yeah! OK. We’ll just get in when we are ready to play something.

Instead of relying on cued entries, the idea was to take responsibility for electing one’s own point of entry as implied in the statement to ‘get in when we are ready’. This involvement strongly resembles children’s games.

3. ‘Getting in’: identifying entry points

Similarly, the next improvisation showed how knowledge was constructed in children’s extraction and announcement to each other of surprising and newsworthy pieces of

Music Example 3 – Improvisation (whole-group) on percussion: The group sits in silent readiness for 12 seconds during which time players glance back and forth at each other to see who will make a start. Finally, Ashton initiates play with a rhythmic pattern on bass drum, which sounds like a 2+4 grouping with the fourth beat a rest. This appears to confuse the others. At 51 seconds, focus shifts to Dinali who offers up a pattern with a clearly regulated pulse played on tambourine. All others enter in rapid succession. Dion plays a dominant rendition of his previous pattern played loudly with sticks. Ashton responds with another pattern of even semiquavers. Ashton signals closure.

information about how to enter the improvisational flow (to 'get in') without preplanning ('as we go'). This performance lasted 3 minutes.

The comments that followed reveal further ideas that were later to be acted on and carried forward as the negotiated outcome from that discussion. Chloe said, 'Getting in [to play] was a problem until Dinali came in and then I thought I could fit to her beat.' Dinali's act of assertiveness, by playing a louder beat, caused a *shift in focus*. The encounter was interactive between players. 'Getting in' seemed to be an intentional point in the sequence of interaction whereby the players *attuned to* and *metrically aligned* with (to 'fit' and 'follow') the group-beat. The leader, usually a drummer who played the loudest and simplest beat, created the easiest entry points for the others to 'join in'. The interaction between the main drummer and the other players resulted in a division of *leadership* and *supporting roles*. This illustrates how particular musical roles and relationships were acted on and carried forward as the negotiated outcome from previous discussions. The children seemed to have a clear concept of what they were doing and how it happened. However, these roles could also be challenged or changed within the space of another group improvisation.

4. 'Stopping': negotiating musical closure

In the improvisation that followed, a new experiment in musical interaction emerged. It demonstrated the improvisational and interactive capability of children both to lead and to adapt rapidly. Previous conversations acted as a resource. The next piece, lasting 6 minutes and 29 seconds, shows these children sustaining a long and interesting improvisation.

Music Example 4 – Improvisation (whole-group)

Getting started: 0–47 seconds. The performance commences with a repeated motive on double bass that becomes a dialogue between players on double bass, wind chimes, metallophone and keyboards. The group-beat is absent.

Continuation: At 48 seconds Dion and Ashton enter with a slow beat. The others follow forming a layered texture.

First ending: At 2'51" a soft pulse pattern on bass drum plays under a decreasing density of players. A call and response texture follows.

Continuation: At 3'20" 'Dion's beat' is heard now elongated and shared with Ashton. Others re-enter playing as before. Ashton plays a dotted pattern on snare drum over Dion's beat. The space fills.

Second ending: At 4'46" the beat stops. Individual sound events, as in rubbing drum-skins, glissandi, trills and rolls, form a musical dialogue.

Continuation: At 5'26" Dion leads off again with 'Dion's beat'. It stimulates others to start again.

Third ending: At 5'50" the group-beat stops and one-note or single gesture events are sounded in dialogue. More keyboard events are heard.

Continuation: At 6'19" Dion enters again with 'Dion's beat'. Others enter.

Fourth ending: At 6'31" Dion finally stops. Lia plays a final cymbal crash.

In the conversation that followed, the desire to 'carry on' emerged in response to the absence of a group-beat. The result was a series of free and spontaneous exchanges of ideas between the players. Their unwillingness to heed Dion's cues to stop conveyed a desire to be freer to exchange ideas and to decide amongst them on when and how 'to stop'. Dion, on the other hand, was not content to relinquish his role as leader and continued to try to reassert himself by attempting to redirect the interaction through obligatory statements of his group-beat. By frustrating a cast of players who wished to find ways of 'carrying on', rather than messing around, the children arrived at the idea of dissolving the role of leadership through interacting freely and exploring some interesting ametrical musical exchanges. The direction of play appeared to shift between taking control and allowing freedom.

Many of the earliest group improvisations represent a transition into making music that was primarily set up between the players in conversations about possible communicative gestures for 'starting', 'carrying on' and 'stopping'. The following extract comes from discussions held in Session 2 where the process of negotiation became explicit. Adopting a line of reasoning that contains 'rules' about who starts and how to stop, the conversation concerns the taking on and communication of strategies for controlling and allowing freedom:

- Katya: How about if one person starts then we all come in? Then one person could stop and then all of us would stop, one after another, until there is silence again.
- Lia: Yeah, or the person who starts can then be the first to stop and then the next person starts, plays and stops and then another person plays and stops, until we have all had a go.
- Wasim: But it might be easier playing in smaller groups and someone starts like Ashton did before. Then we can hear what we are all doing and maybe start changing around more while we're playing together.

The latter suggestion was accepted and created a context for the following improvisations.

5. 'Carrying on': communicative gestures in a leadership challenge

In the same session, there followed a flurry of players seeking, attaching and settling into small groups. A signal of readiness came from a trio, which incorporated Ashton on congas, Tim on bongos, and Dion on side drum. The trio lasted 1 minute and 48 seconds.

Music Example 5 – Improvisation (trio) on percussion: The performance commences with Ashton who plays a movement pattern on congas. Tim who plays a similar pattern follows this. Dion enters in a slower rhythmic tempo. They continue until Tim cues for closure, playing a cross-rhythm followed by a rapid drum roll. Ashton follows with fading dynamics. Dion doesn't, and responds with three loud strikes. Resisting closure, he plays a loud and clearly pulsed group-beat which the others follow for a short time. Tim's second cue to end punctuates the flow by a pause, and then a heavily accented pattern played in slow rhythmic tempo which the others follow.

Tim's account of the performance refers to the time points along a continuum from 'starting', 'carrying on' and 'stopping':

We all found something to match with Ashton's rhythm. We listened and went with him. It's like they do a different rhythm but it goes with yours. I thought it should stop . . . rather than carry on because it gets boring if you don't have really complex rhythms, you shouldn't really carry on unless you're changing the rhythms, so I stopped. When it first started, we were following Ashton because he was the first one in but after we tried to stop, we had to follow Dion because he went on playing. He wanted to keep carrying on but we wanted to stop. [Source: Session 2]

Tim attempted to control the flow by communicating directives to Ashton who constantly monitored Tim both visually and aurally. Tim used non-verbal signs such as looking up at Ashton and used changes in movement gestures that included drum rolls, playing different rhythmic tempo and heavily accented strikes in a slower tempo. The focus shifted to Dion, who resisted Tim's cue to stop. Dion seized the initiative 'to carry on' by introducing a new, slower group-beat. Although the others followed Dion, the play was short-lived. Tim soon communicated another cue to stop in a clear form of address that indicated exactly what was intended. The *communicating gestures* of a drum roll, coupled with direct eye contact with Ashton, gave the cue 'to stop'. It was then that the roles of 'following' and 'leading' were most clearly differentiated. This was a skilled feat with knowledge obtained through performance rather than formal instruction. So far, they had performed in five improvisations.

6. *'You just play it as it comes': a shifting focus towards shared leadership*

Three girls performed the next group improvisation. Sorcha played the gong, Chloe the glockenspiel and Loreen the congas. Unlike the earlier trio, there was no assigned leader or regulated starting point. The performance lasted 45 seconds.

Music Example 6 – Improvisation (trio) on percussion: This trio improvisation begins without any pre-arranged plans. The performance commences with Sorcha striking the gong. Loreen responds by playing a rhythmic pattern on congas. Chloe enters soon after playing a four-note motivic pattern on orchestral glockenspiel over a crotchet beat that stabilises the ensemble. The pulse is unstable. Loreen pauses. There is a gap in activity. She plays an accelerating roll to which Chloe responds with a repeated tone in *accelerando*. Sorcha replies with an accelerating dotted rhythm. The piece concludes with a final musical gesture from each player of a *glissando* run, an *accelerando* dotted pattern and a terminating accented strike.

The interaction sequence was described as follows:

- Sorcha: I just hit it and then Loreen came in. She started leading because she was on the strongest instrument.
- Chloe: And then I thought I'd better get in. I was trying to do something that was not out of time with Loreen.

- Sorcha: And then she sped up [said while pointing to Loreen].
Chloe: And so I was going like 'Da da da' [she giggles] trying to go a bit faster and then we got a little bit out of time and then we got back in again.
Loreen: I was going 'Dadaa dadaa da' and then she played 'Da dada da'. I was trying to get to the end. [They all laugh].
Chloe: You're not thinking, 'Oh! in a minute I'll do this.' I don't think like that, there's not enough time . . . You just play it as it comes. [Source: Focus Group Early Phase]

How should we interpret such a variety of interactions? This reflection – or reconstructed dialogue – captured some of the complexity of interaction in a specific musical context. The sound-producing aspects of musical interaction in creating and manipulating sounds together included how they affected each other by coordinating, leading, following or disrupting each other's performances, and by making the ongoing adjustments and negotiations necessary to coordinate and blend. They defined the dynamics of interaction by describing the ongoing *shifts in focus* between players who continuously made adjustments in response to each other and conveyed musical interaction through communicative intention.

Adrian, another member of the group, metaphorically described what improvisation came to mean to him in another way:

Improvising is like an unknown shape. The circle is very important to me because if you make a mistake your partner is there to back you up and if your playing partner makes a mistake or has a collision then you're there to back him up and keep it happening. That's why I play different with different people. I don't mind if they stick to what they want to play. I do it because I feel that I explore music more. [Source: Final Interview]

Improvising, for Adrian, meant shared musical engagement with another player where each affected the other through directing and supporting, colliding, disrupting and inspiring. Improvising was an uncharted course with an unforeseeable outcome. The 'unknown shape' was always changing under the pressures and influences of a partner. How should we interpret these interactions as contributing to and revealing the children's musical learning?

Discussion

The children shared common perspectives on a wide range of phenomena. These included (a) interaction and focusing mechanisms (which provide the constraining or facilitating aspects of musical time for deciding where the beat is or whose beat to follow) and (b) interaction and role definition.

Interaction and focusing mechanisms

Players assumed a particular focus. The focusing mechanisms included:

- (i) gaining entry to play or 'getting in' by means of alignment with a group-beat;
- (ii) continuing involvement or 'carrying on' by interacting with an instrument or each other; and
- (iii) giving conscious cues 'to stop'.

Interaction and role definition

From the outset, *roles* were constantly negotiated and defined as, for example, 'leader' and 'follower'. These dynamic roles may have been established either before or during the course of an improvisation. Typically, the 'follower' spent much time 'following the leader with a rhythm that fits'. A 'leader' was an individual with the ability and desire to take control by defining the direction in which the others should move. A 'follower' played a more passive role, being musically led and influenced. Perhaps the most striking thing about the intricacy of this sort of purpose relates closely to the fundamental capacity of children to take part in forms of interaction established between the players during improvisation. Among the many skills deployed and extended here were those of creating a coherence of simultaneity and direction of responsiveness, which, at almost any point, determined further progression of the music. The children learned how to 'make everything fit together', or coordinate, blend, challenge, exchange, support and attune responses as determined by the choices made by leading players.

En route through an improvisation, the children negotiated and learned a range of *communicative gestures* that were critical to role-play and were manifest in several ways. A leader would provide cues for starting and stopping identified by a distinctive timbral quality or rhythmic pattern. Similarly, leadership challenges were often communicated instrumentally. Communicative gestures took the form of matched and differentiated patterns. Over time, the children learned new ways (and codes) of communicating because of the time spent improvising together.

Shifts of leadership also prompted *shifts in focus* from one player or musical event to another during performance. The direction of play appeared to relate to the other players present, who either took control or allowed freedom. The direction varied according to whether the interaction was (i) *tightly co-ordinated*, where a leader took control by playing a group-beat that functioned as a pulse for the others to 'follow with a rhythm that fitted', forming a musical hierarchy, or (ii) where leadership was shared and *control passed* spontaneously between players in a more loosely coordinated way. The children described their orientation as 'playing it as it comes', suggesting that spontaneity is an extension of interaction. Pond (1981), Marsh (1995) and Campbell (1998) highlight children's spontaneous music-making at play in unsupervised circumstances, where improvisation takes on the feel of a collective or socially shared activity. The present study shows how the children learned collectively to exceed their individual potentials by negotiating the *rules* and *roles* that were played out as the ethics of music-making established both inside and outside the performance event.

Practical implications of the research

One question that seems most problematic for teachers concerns the degree of intervention necessary to get pupils to the stage where they can successfully undertake group improvisation. I wish to address this question through three pathways.

First, the observation that group improvisation required these children to respond to an immediate musical encounter for which their *preferred choice of instrument* was

percussion suggests children should have the opportunity to make choices, experience options rather than obligations, and make their own selection of user-friendly and familiar instruments. The children in the present study chose instruments on which they experienced a physical ease of sound production since the process through which their group improvisation occurred was experienced within and through the body and all its sensibilities. Children's understanding of improvisation was characterised by their consideration not only of what happened but also of what was intended to maintain *continuity* ('carrying on') and *spontaneity* ('playing it as it comes'). As teachers, we need to intervene at the moment where a group collectively or an individual within the group feels unable to employ the whole body in a multi-sensorial experience that incorporates seeing, hearing and feeling the music as it unfolds over time.

Second, the observation that attuned musical responsiveness was essential to the children's exchanges suggests that teachers need to establish an atmosphere of *trust and empathy*. Intervention strategies must allow psychological room for the pupils to bring to bear the richness of their prior experience in which they see themselves and relate as members of a musical community that celebrates each other's success and failure. The value of social bonding and affirmation of individual identity, where every child can participate in immediate creation and take risks within a group, is what uniquely characterises the experience of group improvisation. Developing spontaneity and immediacy requires the teacher to step back, to intervene through questioning, using a style of leadership that empowers the group with freedom and responsibility.

Third, teachers need to ensure that pupils talk regularly about the focus of the improvising group and how the interactive networks are being played out. The discussions here were as interactive as the music-making. What improvisation came to mean to each child was not generated within one mind but, rather, constructed between people. The children's understanding of group improvisation was jointly negotiated and constructed as provisional, and frequently contested. This fluidity characterised all the sessions. Teachers need to provide opportunities for children to talk about, report and consider other people's views about musical engagement. Teacher intervention should most often arise through effective and direct questioning about the fortuitous discoveries in the pupils' previous performances. I am suggesting that what is important is the issues to think about and ways of thinking about them, rather than specific answers. As listeners and enablers asking how interaction occurs, teachers can begin to *formulate goals* concerning aesthetic effect, the ethics of music-making, roles and relationships, focus, sound ideals, musical processes, cues and communicative gestures. Teachers can thus explore fully how children learn to improvise in ways in which their musical cultures and meanings are valued.

Reconceptualising improvisation: changing minds and practice

Many teachers are reluctant to explore group improvisation. This may be an outcome of the predominantly functional role improvisation plays in composing activities or a focus on domain-specific expertise generated by adult models. It may also result from a lack of teacher training and confidence. There remains a need to transform understanding into a pedagogical representation of possibilities from which teachers will not shy away.

Teachers' reluctance to encourage such activity arises from narrowly defined values and standards, preoccupation with composition, fear of untrodden paths and uncertainties concerning risk-taking. However, these show that the developmental benefits and learning outcomes of group improvisation, if acted on, could make a difference to how we view the role of improvisation in music education.

This study challenges the findings of Kratus (1991, 1996), who reported that children were unable to carry out an improvisation because they had not reached the right stage of their musical development. The improvisation context of immediacy, described by one child as having 'no time to think' and the intention to maintain continuity ('to carry on'), leads to the proposition that children experience *thought as a function of action*. Improvisation allows the opportunity to celebrate a shared sense of purpose ('where we all play'), error ('collisions') and musical relationships between players ('leaders' and 'followers'). Interaction was apparent in the ongoing dialogue between body and instrument and the roles played out between relationships formed and framed within the group.

Clifton (1983) best summed up the developmental value of these activities: 'In discussing the mutual contributions made by the experiencing subjects . . . [it] is as much a field of giving as of doing, of accepting as of forming: action always means interaction' (p. 70). The developmental value of group improvisation is that (a) decisions are collective, (b) identity and relationships of participating players are developed, (c) participation is favoured over competition, (d) risk-taking is celebrated, and (e) being musical together is valued.

These findings have several important implications for music educators. Specifically, we need to:

1. *Approach improvisation as a process of musical interaction.* This means giving, exchanging, accepting and forming new music together purposefully, allowing the flow of influence to emerge within and between players by exploring different roles and relationships.
2. *Assist children to be musically inclusive.* This means allowing children choice of instruments, and enabling participation that embraces individual spontaneity at all levels of skill and aptitude.
3. *Exploit musical difference in musical ways.* Work with gestural cues for communicating and negotiating ways of 'getting started', 'carrying on' and 'stopping' that are communally orientated and intervening only when it becomes clear what questions to ask.
4. *Use children's talk to reconstruct their experience.* After each performance, players recall particular converging and diverging points in the improvisation and reflect on negotiated outcomes and moments of uncertainty and conflict.

Group improvisation provides opportunities for children to confer meaning on their creativity, to connect and interact in ways that uniquely develop a social and musical sense of self. All children have at their disposal a richness of musical resources. The intensity and immediacy of their expressive intention provide empowering qualities that thrive on musical interaction. We owe it to children to reconsider the concept of group improvisation in relation to their musical learning and construction of meaning.

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