

Charlie Heim
Music 498A
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Case Study: Stepping Stones
Musical Development in Early Childhood

For about three months, I had the pleasure of spending my Monday mornings with a group of children, aged roughly between one and three years, in a class group called “Stepping Stones.” My job, more or less, was to teach music. Both of the latter words, however, seem to fall short of accurately quantifying my role.

I was a teacher in only the loosest sense of the word – I was (along with my partner, Becky Lewis) in charge of the class, and was directing the activities. Those activities, in turn, were technically musical in nature. My reservations about firmly using these terms stem from the fundamental element of the Stepping Stones experience: play. This simple concept is the basis of the educational philosophy and techniques that we used, and comes largely from the work of Edwin Gordon. His work, along with that of his colleagues from the *Music Play* publication, stresses the importance of play in the educational development of children. Because of this, our classroom activities were hinged on the concept of freedom, fun, and a lack of formal instruction. Through the use of movement – both in directed ways (“touch your nose”...) and improvised, free ways (“flow,” free dancing, etc.) – we were able to introduce students to a multitude of musical concepts.

The facets of music that the students were exposed to were manifold. These included basic understanding of tonal (resting tones, song structures, tonalities) and rhythmic (note durations, meters, patterns) content through simple songs, chants, and

games. Further, their aural and kinesthetic skills were exercised: most every song and game incorporated movement, and time was prescribed in the lesson for students to listen and physically react to recorded music. The content presented, however, was not in and of itself the most important part of the class; it was the means in which the content was delivered that was so crucial. The lack of formal instruction gave way to a free-for-all of student ingestion and interpretation of what was being given to them. As teachers, my partner and I strove to stay in the students' cognitive realm – despite what we felt they should know, it was important to keep all of our musical doors open so as not to shut out any new learners.

The means by which these learners took in information was of critical importance to the structure of Stepping Stones' "music time". Based on the research of Gordon, our lesson plans and activities were set up with recognition of his defined stages of learning. To know exactly where the student's cognitive development is coming from – and where it's going – provided an invaluable resource in the success of my teaching. As I continued working with the children, I was amazed to see young faces, expressionless but for their silent intake of information, show their manifestation of the stage of musical absorption. As we progressed together, many began to react to what was happening in a variety of ways, showing their increased cognition of the material that they're sensing. By the end of our ten-week residence, I was dumbfounded to see some students who completely "got it" – could sing a resting tone, a part of a tune, move and pat in tempo – after having little to no musical understanding at the program's inception. I gave them their first musical abilities, their first expression of innate musical aptitude.

Working with young children indeed was a fascinating experience. Having not spent much time in a classroom of two-year-olds (at least, not for a decade or two), I was extremely unsure of how to conduct lessons, manage the students, and engage their creativity and exploration. Through the study of Edwin Gordon's research, I was able to understand, identify, and work with students at various stages and means of learning. Being able to watch and guide the students' development, to see their increasing cognitive grasp of the musical art form, was fundamentally valuable. Knowing how developing minds perceive music and process sound is crucial to me as an educator, a performer, and a musician; the implications and applications of this knowledge will continue to inspire.