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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## WHEN MUSICAL THOUGHT BECOMES OBSERVABLE: ANALYSIS OF MUSICAL GAMES WORKSHOPS IN A BRAZILIAN PUBLIC SCHOOL

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### ABSTRACT

The present article envisages an approximation to the conception of music as play with Jean Piaget's (1896-1980) Genetic Epistemology to explore possibilities for musical-pedagogical work in the school context. The study comprehends conceptual questions that involve play elements and aspects of human development, as well as empirical results of research conducted in a public school in the city of Londrina, Paraná, Brazil. With a qualitative approach, the study follows the Piagetian clinical-critical method. Participants were 12 eighth-grade elementary students. Results pointed towards the importance of understanding music as play and aspects of the thoughts involved in its development, thus designing music teaching through specific actions that favor the creative act and musical learning in school.

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## INTRODUCTION




According to Jean Piaget's Genetic Epistemology, the individual must act on the environment so that learning occurs. Accordingly, knowledge is a construction resulting from the individual's actions. For Piaget, the development of the cognitive structures occurs when there is assimilation and accommodation of stimuli from the environment. By acting on the environment, the individual manipulates, observes, listens, and thinks. In the process of knowing, the role of others and objects of knowledge in its construction is revealed, which offers resistance to schemas and exhibits fragility or insufficiency of the thinking structure. When facing the incompleteness of schemas, the structure is invited to transform through the modification of existing schemas or by constructing new ones. This process does not occur without the previous installation of an unbalance between assimilations and accommodations, affirmations and denials, part and whole, hits and misses, all dialectically interdependent (Wadsworth, 1996). The relation between Genetic Epistemology and musical education was the object of interest of several studies. Among those, the ones by Delalande (1984) and Swanwick (1988) stand out, in which the authors investigate musical development based on the understanding of the Piagetian theory of play (Piaget, 1964). Summarily, Delalande (1984) proposes that musical practices may be grasped through behaviors of the subject's sound and musical production. Such behaviors are fundamental for understanding children's sound production.

Therefore, a child's play activities are related to three levels of behavior: exploration, expression, and construction. On the other hand, Swanwick (1988) realizes music as a form of play composed by a triangle constituted of the concepts: mastery, imitation, and imaginative play. Aside from specificities of each one of these developmental theories of musical thought, both Delalande (1984) and Swanwick (1988), when thinking of music as play, grounded their propositions mainly on *La Formation du Symbole chez l'enfant: imitation, jeu et rêve, image et représentation* (1964) by Piaget. In this work, the Genevan author discusses the three types of play present throughout development: functional play, symbolic play, and games with rules. The sensorimotor and preoperational stages correspond to functional and symbolic play, respectively. In turn, games with rules associates with the concrete operational stage, while being maintained and improved in the formal operational stage. It is thus worth emphasizing that Piaget does not limit the play structure to the type of thought but highlights the predominance of the type according to the thought structure involved in itself. One can see in the Piagetian understanding of play, an element capable of triggering situations that allow the interrelation of processes and mechanisms necessary to the construction of knowledge, and that constitute problem situations loaded with challenges which to be solved demand the use of strategies. Following the adopted theoretical framework, these internal processes may be observed and analyzed through play elements. In other words, when thought can be observed (Piaget, 1974b). Finally, it is deemed appropriate to explain the meaning

as situations, placed in a space-time, which instigate processes of manipulation of sound objects discovered or invented by the own subjects, either individually or as a team. Therefore, this study is based on works that employ workshops according to the constructivist view (Macedo; Petty; Passos, 2005) and their approaches within the scope of musical education (Fernandes, 1997).

## RESEARCH ELABORATIONS

With a qualitative approach, this study was based on the Piagetian clinical-critical method (Delval, 2001). The research's primary objective was to analyze the creative process through participants' significances concerning their experiences during the musical workshops. The participants were 12 eight-grade elementary students from a public school in the city of Londrina, Paraná, Brazil. A total of eight encounters were conducted, organized in two stages, Preparation and Creative Act, which are detailed in the following:

Category: Music as an expression of affection	Category: Music as social value	Category: Expanded concept of music
C Sharp	F Sharp	E <sup>1</sup>
		

Source: Own authorship.

Frame 1. Specimens of participants' pictorial productions

**Preparation:** The stage titled Preparation aimed at offering participants the discovery of sound by employing different sound objects (available musical instruments and/or other objects). Besides, this stage included listening exercises, highlighting their fundamental importance in the creative process. Along with listening, participants worked on other musical concepts such as the notion of music itself, rhythm, melody, pitch, intensity, timbre, form, and other concepts that emerged from the experiences during the musical games. In this paper, we highlight participants' notions of music. In order to understand the way they signify the concept of music, we asked participants to make a drawing according to the question: What is music to you? By analyzing the materials collected during this first encounter, one can realize that the significances attributed by the participants share some similarities, which were reunited in four categories to elucidate subjects' understanding. These categories were the following: 1) music as an expression of affection; 2) music as social value; 3) expanded concept of music. For identification purposes, we opted for naming participants in the workshop using the nomenclature of the dodecahphonic scale, since it is a group of twelve subjects, thus allowing the preservation of the confidentiality of identities. Female subjects are designed with the following: C, D, E, F, G, A, B, B Flat. And male ones: C Sharp, D Sharp, F Sharp, G Sharp. As a way of illustrating each category, we opted for presenting a specimen of each one through pictorial productions of the participants:

The category "Music as an expression of affection" gathered the larger part of the productions created by the participants. In this group, one finds significances that mix elements ranging from the location of music in the environment (though unrelated to the activity developed by the subject) to the disclosure of an affective connection to the ensemble of musical elements to which the participants have access, such as a musical style or a favorite singer. On the other hand, the category "Music as social value" addresses the significance that assigns a social value to music. Only two participants fit in the latter.

Likewise, the category "Expanded concept of music" suited only one participant, who assigned a concept to music. Namely, an understanding that does not include unconventional sounds. It is worth highlighting that, particularly in the case of that participant, the difference in her process of musical thinking does not make her better or worse than the others. However, the other participants' analyses reveal the thought structures of different subjects implicated in the same process of musical education. Such differences of development do not hinder a creative work, because they complete and amplify themselves in the interaction with the other and the object itself.

**Creative act:** The main goal of this phase was to promote experiences of musical creating through different peer arrangements. The peer group constituted a privileged position for cognitive and affective exchanges, thus providing the subject change or strengthening of ideas, values, and feelings for social interaction. In this interaction, the composition was an important concept in the analysis. Therefore, we embrace a broader concept of composition as suggested by Swanwick (1988), who considers as such from the briefest musical manifestations to the most extended inventions. Under this view, the possible approximations from authors who support the creative musical act, in the process of musical education with assumptions of Piagetian theory, stand in the pleading that composition must be preceded by reflection as means for the subjects to signify the actions taken in the process of creation (Swanwick, 1988; Gainza, 1983; Koellreutter *apud* Brito, 2001). In this stage, five moments that guided the other workshops were established: 1) remembrance of the previous workshop; 2) thematic proposition and job organization (sound exploration, establishing of representative roles and structuring of the composition); 3) planning of creations; 4) interpretation of compositions; and 5) significances assigned to the experiences of the session. The moment denominated "Remembrance of the previous workshop" was always reported to the group by a volunteer participant, thus showing their view regarding the previous workshop. Such moment allowed us to realize the students' processes from what they reveal, highlight or omit in their recollections. In the second stage of the workshops, we conducted the "Thematic proposition and job organization". We based the thematic proposition of compositions on "extramusical themes"<sup>2</sup>, as proposed by Gainza (1983). The third moment of the workshop was devoted to the "Planning of creations". Understanding the importance of planning for musical composition and improvisation, as emphasized by Koellreutter (*apud* Brito, 2001), the workshops allocated a significant time for the conduction of this stage. During this phase, the subjects selected the material that they would work with (sound sources) and determined the roles of each participant during execution. After the planning of compositions, we conducted the "Interpretation of compositions", the moment in which the groups presented the collective creations and thereafter shared their "Significances assigned to the experiences of the session" verbally. As an example, we describe the aforementioned stage conducted by the participants of two groups formed during one of the workshops. The creative themes were "A night at the castle" and "Dawn in the forest", respectively. One can note from the following significances the way how some subjects of the first group described their own process of creation:

- G<sup>3</sup>:** [...] We tried to make a party theme, but it didn't quite work out because it sounded like an Indian thing. We tried to make sound with our mouths, sound with our body, with our hands, pens, everything. But it didn't work. My big takeaway was the experience of everyone trying, because it isn't easy!
- E:** When one says "A night at the castle" it reminds me of a harp song, a very calm piano. Classical. Then here we made it quite differently [...] We thought about a *rave* at the castle.
- D:** I think that the castle is related to fairy tales. That kind of thing.

2 Gainza (1983) uses the terms: theme, consignment or "game rule".

3 For identification purposes, we opted for naming participants in the workshop using the nomenclature of the dodecahphonic scale, since it is a group of twelve subjects, thus allowing the preservation of

1 The following words appear in the drawing, extracted from the text for

**G:** Our castle is modern.

It is important to give voice to the subjects in contexts such as those of workshops because it reveals the possibilities of evoking, in each subject, the schemas that they possess. In this case, the image that they had of the castle resembled the idea of a fairy tale, which is probably provoked by stories narrated in books and movies.

The other group's theme was "Dawn in the forest", with the following descriptions:

**B Flat:** The theme was "Dawn in the forest". We tried to make the sound of water [...] Bond paper symbolized the trees. That little rattle is like the tail of a snake shaking.

**D:** It was interesting representing a sound theme. A sound environment through objects like, for instance, the rattle, the glass of water. It was interesting to think of the situation of the sound environment like we really were at "dawn in the forest".

**A:** Each one "fitted" with an instrument. Some tried to make the (sound of) water and couldn't.

**B:** Each person identified with something. I tried to play the flute myself and it didn't work.

The social interaction that occurred in the making of music, employing constant exchanges of ideas between the participants, promoted different situations in which the subject's thinking conflicted with those of their peers, making them question their own thoughts. The constant exchanges of ideas between participants promoted different situations in which the subject's thinking conflicted with those of their peers, making them question their own thoughts. When the subject found themselves in situations in which their thought is conflicted by the thoughts of someone else, this collision may be an instrument to make them question their own thought, that is, to solve the perceived unbalance (Piaget, 1974a).

## CONCLUSION

In the workshops, participants were exposed to different challenges, strategies, problems, reflections, peer arrangements, and involving distinct musical elements in the proposed games. Therefore, they had the opportunity to fill possible gaps by becoming aware, which enables the formation of elements responsible for composing the cognitive structure. By facing a new situation, such as a specific consignment of musical composition, the mental structure underwent an unbalance, provoked by the insufficiency of elements acquired so far for the achievement of the situation. Through active regulation, subjects became aware due to the choices they had to make to solve the problem, compensate and achieve the proposal of composition established in the workshop in the collective context. The musical games workshops figure as an important resource, which creates opportunities for relations necessary to construct musical knowledge.

In this context, musical games reveal themselves as a favorable strategy to construct elements responsible for composing cognitive, social, and affective aspects, such as awareness, the formation of possibilities, social interaction, decentralization, and equilibration. Results have thus evidenced the relevance of musical games workshops as an experience of significance production and as an opportunity of making feasible the observation of creative processes. They function as a device to observe thought processes and, therefore, to allow reflections about the pedagogical and psychopedagogical performance with the author-subject of their own knowledge.

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