Time to Play: Developing inter-culturally sensitive approaches to music in children's centres serving predominantly Muslim communities

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Across Europe populations are moving and diversity is now the norm, particularly in urban centres. Newly and recently arrived communities tend to settle in the same areas, creating zones within cities characterised by a predominance of certain ethnic and religious groups. Music practitioners need to be able to develop intercultural competences to be able to work in diverse communities. In England, the growing Muslim population presents particular challenges to educational integration in music, arts and creative activity because religious mores may result in some constraints around certain forms of activity which are otherwise common-place in early years educational practice.

The Time to Play Project aimed to arrive at understandings and sets of competences for working with communities of mothers and their young children who are predominantly Muslim. It has placed four practitioners in 4 different urban areas to work in creative arts activities and music and, through processes of action research, explored the dilemmas, challenges and possibilities this work presents. The project raised a number of different issues on different levels from policy to practice. This paper will discuss the processes of acculturation for newly and recently arrived families and first/second generation families, and the challenges these pose to developing creative arts and music work with the families. It will discuss beliefs and priorities in relation to music for their children among the mothers and present some practical approaches explored by the project. It will discuss the experiences of the practitioners in developing intercultural skills; in particular the insecurities the project has generated.

As European Muslims become a more established and integrated group within societies, so approaches in music education need to evolve. Earlier ideas of 'multi-culturalism' in curricula need to be replaced with more sensitive and profound ways of working constructed around notions of inter-culturalism, cognisant of post-colonialist ways of thinking and the avoidance of 'othering' these imply.

"When we suppress differences, we also suppress dialogue and personhood . . . In contrast, communities of otherness celebrate divergent points of view. They invite the stranger to tell her story . . . and which of us has not denied difference in our classroom in the misguided attempt to create a community of affinity?" (Silin, 1995)

Introduction

When one of us (Susan), visited Bologna in June I learnt that on the Northern side of the city towards the airport lies an area that is becoming increasingly populated by people recently arrived from countries outside of Italy, mainly North Africa. I learnt that there are some tensions beginning to arise between this area and those neighbouring it. All European cities now have growing areas of segregation along the lines of ethnicity, with increasing socio-economic disparity between areas. A high degree of racial/ethnic/religious mix in its principal cities is the norm now in twenty-first century Europe and will increasingly characterise its national economic, cultural and political life (Lewis, 2007; Modood, 2007). Within this ethnic and religious mix, Islam is a dominant religion. But in spite of its long term presence in Europe, Islam is still seen as a foreign cultural import rather than an integral part of European society (Castelli & Trevathan, 2008). Likewise, issues concerned with diversity are still often seen as 'outside' and marginal to the concerns of early childhood music educators and researchers, rather than integral.

The recognition that a society is multiethnic, multicultural and multifaith is not simply about demographics, numbers and statistics, but about understanding that a new set of challenges are being posed for which new educational agendas are necessary (Clay & George, 2000). If education is about 'starting with the child'; a mantra for early childhood education, then 'the child' is not the imagined universal child of developmental psychology (in reality cast in the image of the white, western, middle class child), but the diverse, heterogenic, individual children of real lives and communities. Just as providers of early childhood music education have typically not adapted to the strengths, needs, and proclivities of the diverse communities we work with, so research and academics have generally failed to build a relevant information base to guide education practice for children and families from those communities. To attempt, in a small way, to address this shortfall, this paper reports on a project entitled 'Time to Play' which sought to develop interculturally sensitive approaches to creative play in Children's Centres serving majority Muslim communities in four English cities. Although the focus was broadly on 'creative play', the project team included mostly musicians, and so the music dimension of the project was strong. For this conference we will place more emphasis on the music.

It is becoming accepted that child development is culturally constructed (Rogoff & Chavajay, 1995). Cultural values and attitudes regulate the childrearing values, developmental expectations and emotional orientations of parents and carers, and their childrearing 'scripts' for achieving developmental outcomes that are valued within their communities (Rosenthal 1999; Tudge, 2008). Differences in cultural systems of beliefs, values and behaviours open up the possibility that parents from different cultural and religious groups will have different musical expectations for their children, will interpret musical experiences and activities in terms of how well they meet those expectations, and thus will support and prefer musical activity that is likely to conform to those expectations (Rosenthal 1999; Moss & Pence 1994).

Some studies have provided evidence that discontinuities between family and the provision in early childhood settings may be linked with poor

academic performance (Bradley & McKelvey, 2007; Abbas 2002), feelings of disorientation and insecurity (Fuligni & Fuligni, 2007), and poor social skills (Sylva et al, 2004). For these reasons, for children to experience continuity between their family cultural experiences and their nursery or preschool experiences is generally considered to be beneficial. Conversely, there are some suggestions that raised quality of experience outside of the home (where the home environment is poor) may have increased benefits (Sylva et al, 2004) and, moreover, that diverse types of experience may benefit children and support them in becoming adaptable to different cultural contexts and bi-cultural or multi-cultural. This is an area which is unclear and still needs attention. However, the ability to tailor musical activities, whether they are daily musical activities as part of day care or nursery education, or musical activities in structured sessions, to the cultural individuality of a particular child may have important consequences for that child's experience of music, and may help determine whether those musical experiences have a positive or negative influence on the child.

Social justice and respect
There are some European organisations dedicated to the promotion of social inclusion and respect for diversity in early childhood education which we have found inspirational and informative for our project. The Bernard van Leer Foundation supports a European network of trainers, practitioners and researchers dedicated to Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training (DECET). The network has developed and documented many practices in early years practice across Europe that support respect for multiple identities (Vandenbroeck, 2001). DECET writings emphasised for us (and we paraphrase from Vandenbroeck, 2001) that educational practices that foster children's multiple identities need to avoid 'two pitfalls: colour-blindness and tokenism'. Colour-blindness is the denial of differences, very often out of an honest concern to treat 'all children equal'. In practice this means that parents and children from minority communities are welcomed, but receive the (unintentional) message that they need to 'adapt' as soon as possible to what is considered 'normal' within the dominant culture. Tokenism on the other hand involves treating the 'culture' of a child's home life as fixed and static. Parents' and children's identities are thereby reduced to their origin by assuming there is something called 'the Somali culture' or 'the Muslim way of doing things'. In practice this means that special, yet stereotypical, events or displays are set up for children and families (such as a religious celebration with traditional songs, clothes and food). Such activities risk being both patronising and stigmatising, in that they overlook the complexities of children's personal histories and family cultures and ignore socioeconomic and other differences.

This marries with findings from the international study, Crossing Borders, from which Pascall reports (2006) that early childhood programmes are often willing to adjust their programmes to include cultural learning through celebrations, dress, food but do not tackle the deeper cultural and power differences. So, having roots in anti-racism paradigms for schooling and social change, influenced by post-colonial theory and critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2005), our ambitions to develop intercultural approaches to educational practice attempted to move beyond bland celebrations of diversity found

within multicultural paradigms and involved a critical approach to issues of social justice and ethno-cultural equity (Mac Naughton, 2006). We combined this with an exploration of how recognising and respecting difference, and, at the same time, looking for points of commonality and connection, might be translated in to approaches to practice (Zine, 2000). These words may tip on to the page easily and lightly, but in practice they represent heavyweight ideals; demanding to put in to practice.

The Project
The backbone of the project was the work of 4 creative play practitioners (two of them specialising in music) in 4 children's centres serving majority Muslim communities in 4 different cities in Central and Southern England. The populations at these four children's centres consisted of a cross-section of Muslim ethnic groups from South Asian (mainly Pakistani and Bangladeshi), Somali and Arab backgrounds. The practitioners visited the settings once a week during a period of approximately 8 months.

Principally the Time to Play project consisted of an action research approach. Its aim was to explore how to develop creative play with young children that might be appropriate in work with the families served by these centres. We take from McNiff (1988) that action research is about 'building up the wisdom to judge your own practice' (p. xiv). To 'build our wisdom', the project included regular full-day seminars for all participants where we met to talk and share achievements, dilemmas and frustrations. Through this process, understandings and ideas were tentatively and gradually formed.

Since an important aim of the project was to develop an understanding of the mothers' own views, current practices and values for their children, structured interviews were carried out with mothers in all four of the settings. A total of 86 interviews were carried out which have been subject to both quantitative analysis of the simple response and factual questions and qualitative analysis of the more extended responses. The interviews were undertaken by same culture interviewers in the interviewees' preferred language - either carrying out the interview directly or translating for an English language interviewer.   The interviews gathered in demographic detail and enquired about the parents' own educational experiences. The interviews asked about cultural and religious values in relation to play and music and the mothers' hopes and expectations for their children on entering preschool education. Only one portion of the questionnaire study will feed in to this paper; the portion which gathered in the mothers' views concerning musical activities with their children.

Displacement
For all the project team this was 'new territory' outside our familiar areas of music, young children's learning, educational practice and so on. We were nervous; nervous of revealing some prejudiced or stereotypical ideas or attitudes that we held deep-down and unawares and that might be (unwittingly) offensive; nervous of showing our ignorance of cultural and social issues that we felt we ought to know about. The project repeatedly made us self-aware of our own identity: our Englishness, our skin colour, our faith or secularism, our female gender, our generation and class and to go

back to questioning even the most fundamental values which underpinned what we were doing or what we wanted to achieve. Everything felt uncertain. The personal learning was, for all of us, difficult and sometimes stressful. We felt de-skilled, and at times inept. The written reflections of one practitioner suggest that these feelings of displacement, of being in 'new territory', mirror those of mothers who are newly arrived.

The challenges

It was important that authentic and interculturally sensitive approaches to working with the children and families would be from the perspective of a child's family. We took the position that in order to learn about another culture we have to look from inside to outside – essentially to learn to see our environment from another cultural group's worldview. Where this was achieved, it was through closer relationships between an individual practitioner and an individual parent. For example, one close partnership developed between one practitioner, a storyteller and musician, and a Somali mother. Did it help that this practitioner has spent time in a nearby African country? Did it help that this woman was a storyteller too, very knowledgeable about Somali poetry and politics? But we have to find connecting points and build on them. As it turned out, this mother was also a respected and active member of her community who could draw others in to attending the early years setting.

On the one hand, each project, as it started to evolve, could be uniquely tailored to each group of parents in response to their diversity, with detail of differentiation. Each project team member had been deliberately selected because they were very experienced and able to work independently. We did not provide them with a pre-specified programme, but invited them to develop and explore approaches according to their own situations and strengths. But on the other hand, we needed to attempt to pull out general suggestions and recommendations for practice that might be disseminated more widely.

Time to Talk

The space and time offered by the project enabled some mothers to meet and talk and, we would like to think, to engage in the process that acculturation requires, of shaping a new multiple or hybrid identity, a personal mix of cherished traditions from the past and choices for the future in the new country (Basit, 1997). Here one practitioner who is herself from an ethnic minority background was able to work with the group in a way that enabled discussion of issues around the care and upbringing of their children, while also fostering creative activities with the mothers and their children. What this practitioner, in particular, discovered was that the music and creative activities were often taken up by the mothers with a motivation that seemed to imply they were serving a need for the mothers, as much if not more than their children. Increasingly she designed activities that while, ostensibly for the children, could be taken up by the mothers. One activity involved drawing on fabric, while singing traditional songs, the images symbolically referring to aspects of bi-cultural lives.

Language

As might have been expected, language was a key issue. Where the setting included mothers who were newly or recently arrived, having no shared language of communication created added difficulties and the Time to Play practitioners had to rely either on non-verbal activity through song, music, movement, visual imagery or simple games, or work closely with someone who could translate. In one setting, working bilingually with a Somali mother who translated stories told originally in English, was one simple method.

Musical Instruments

We discovered some cultural resonances around certain instruments of which we had not been previously aware. The dholak, a barrel shaped drum which can be struck at both ends, is typically played by women at celebrations and for their own entertainment. This instrument carries positive meanings. Other practitioners incorporated dholak making and playing in to their activities. Zingar, wooden instruments with small jingles, were also introduced in one setting by chance, and were taken up and played by women with dance-style movements that were familiar to them. These represented some of the 'connecting points' that the project sought.

Restrictions around singing and dance

Although some fundamentalist beliefs in Islam include certain restrictions around singing and dancing (Harris, 2006; Wright, 2006), only a small number of parents responded on the questionnaire that they would restrict their young children's participation in performing music. The restrictions may increase as children – girls - age, but for young children they were minimal. Most parents, however, were concerned about the lyrics of songs; that were not associated with other religions or contained words about 'love'.

The mothers' participation in singing and dancing varied. While we understood that Muslim customs tend to consider these activities as associated with 'loose morals', there were nevertheless individual instances of women dancing vividly to live music played by one of the practitioners. Clad in abaya one mother energetically led a traditional dance. We learnt, increasingly, that there are no hard and fast rules; that while some may adhere to such restrictions, others may not. All we learnt is that practitioners needed to be alert and sensitive to the possibility of anxiety around certain activities. Indeed, increasingly the attitude of one practitioner was to encourage active singing and movement to songs among mothers and their children, to motivate them to join in collectively and to be somewhat blithe about any restrictions. Over-sensitivity to religious differences can also be a form of tokenism.

We invited the stranger to tell her story. We tried to listen and evolve our practice to connect with what she told us.

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