DEFENDING *the* MAGIC: CURRENT ISSUES *in* EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

by Dee Joy Coulter, Ed.D.

In an ideal world, everyone's work would be his passion. Indeed, we go out of our way to surround ourselves with such people. We search for a mechanic who can intuit the problem with cars, a veterinarian who really understands our pet, an accountant who takes special pride in finding obscure tax deductions, and a classroom teacher who lives to awaken the dormant genius in our child. Even our choice of hair salon, restaurant, or specialty shop is influenced by this quality of aliveness and passion.

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As rare as this trait can seem at times, I am struck by its amazing frequency among music teachers. It is clear that music has touched their hearts, kindling a precious fire that they, in turn, carry to the children in their classes. I am guessing that you, dear reader, are one of these magical teachers. The field you have chosen—the musical education of young children—is facing new perils and new possibilities as it grows in popularity and importance. I invite you to reflect on some of the key issues that you will soon need to address and explore ways to meet these concerns so that you can keep your magic alive and continue enlivening the young children in your classes.

Discussion Issue #1: Whatever children *can* learn, they *should* learn — and the earlier the better.

When we look carefully at the way young children learn, we see that it is a dreamy and almost unconscious imitation of the world around them. Young children have an innocence and an unpretentious way of becoming absorbed in whatever interests them. They are usually so busy observing the world that it doesn't occur to them to begin observing themselves. It is very important that you keep it that way. Protect the child's mind as long as you can. Once children become self-conscious, their wonderful beginner's mind must give way to the reasoning mind of the grade school child and their approach to learning must shift.

You have them when they are deeply impressionable, when they constantly absorb not only what you offer but who you are. This is a great responsibility, and you must monitor who you are in their presence. Bring children your best qualities—your freshest will, your warmest heart, and your most inspired mind. Offer them only those musical experiences that you truly love and can breathe life into. Watch that they are inspired by each offering, and if they are not, trust their taste. It isn't time for that yet. Fortunately, young children are usually

drawn to precisely what they need next in their development. If you simply pay close attention to their responses, you don't have to become a child development expert to know what to teach and what to postpone.

Discussion Issue #2: Young children have short attention spans. They have to learn to pay attention to the lesson.

For most children this simply is not true. If they are offered activities, objects, and an environment that nourishes them in some way, children can exhibit amazingly long attention spans. (The child with a genuine attention deficit disorder is a different matter and would need to be discussed at length some other time.) For now, let's consider what nourishes most children, what sustains their attention. I have been repeatedly impressed with the quality and duration of attention of the many young children I have observed in early childhood music classes. You are doing many things just right to be getting those results! It is as if there is something fundamentally nourishing about what you offer children.

Discussion Issue #3: Music is about performing. You can't tell what a child is taking in. You can only measure what the child produces or puts out.

Imagine how silly that idea would be if we were talking about food and digestion. We can easily tell if food nourishes. Children grow. We do not have to measure the food as it comes out to know that it went in! Likewise, we do not have to put on talent shows to demonstrate that a child is being nourished by music education. I would suggest that your offerings nourish children in three ways. Their souls are nourished by the music itself; their bodies are nourished by the graceful movement; and their minds are nourished by the rhythm. The idea of nourishment is quite accurate and presents the challenge of determining which "food" is really nutritional. We could even speak about feeding strategies for each of these realms.

For example, to feed the soul it is important to choose "real" music, music that lives in a culture and has a long tradition or music that lives in your heart and makes you want to sing. Treat such music as an invitation for the soul to rise up to meet it. It is easy to tell when this shift is taking place. I see it whenever an audience of music educators is invited to shift from listening to singing together. Suddenly, the postures straighten, the color returns to the cheeks, and a joy spreads throughout the room. Music lives in the body of a choral or orchestral conductor, subsides between movements or songs, then gathers new momentum and bursts forth to direct the next musical moment, inviting the participants to lift their hearts, their instruments, their voices in song. It is important to remember that you are as important as a great conductor to these children. Choose as your repertoire that which can inspire them and nourish their soul.

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To feed their bodies, you need to invite children to move. Not just any movement is nourishing, however. Frenzied, out of control movement or wooden, dysrhythmic movement has no nutritional value. Movement needs to have an underlying grace about it and needs to lend itself to practice and eventual mastery. As you model the movements that the children will imitate, it is very important that you embody that movement. Don't just show

them the outer form or "steps" to the movement. Live into it, capture the flow of it, and for that moment, inwardly become a dancer. If you find the children can't copy the movement, resist the urge to divide it into a series of frozen poses. This kills the grace in the movement. Children aren't nourished by "looking good," only by experiencing the joy of the movement flow. If they can't do the full movement, simplify the whole movement so they can imitate it as a motion and not as a mere pose. Poses are a form of self-consciousness and may cause the child to lose that innocent wholeness we want to preserve.

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To feed their minds, you need to offer rhythm. What is it about rhythm that pleases and nourishes the mind? My musician friends tease out any number of qualities and refer to pulse, steady beat, syncopated beat, syllabics (or the syncopated beat of words), and rhythmicity to name a few. Not being a musician, I simply swim in such abstractions when trying to handle musical jargon, so I will tell you what I see, and you can play with the labels as you see fit.

I am reminded of a great musical magician, the late Avon Gillespie, who would often call out, "Who will give the breath," to establish the pace of the next song. And when someone gave it, he caught it and kept it alive through the song. I watch professional singers go within to keep the pace alive between verses of their song. I see that some songs have a proper speed and have no life-giving pace until the choral director invites the group to pick up or slow down the tempo to its proper timing. Is this the pulse, the life-giving property underlying the music, the driving force beneath the melody? Whatever its name, it is vital nourishment for the brain. This rhythmic connection with life is essential for stimulating the growth of the brain's frontal lobes.

We know two very important things about the frontal lobes. First, they are undergoing their main growth spurt when a child is between the ages of 2 and 6 years of age. After that, they will not surge again until the child is almost 20 years old. Only the linkage of other brain regions to those powerful frontal lobes will bring about cognitive changes in the meantime. Second, the frontal lobes thrive on rhythm and are invited to become the brain's "executive headquarters" only in those children who have established a measure of rhythmicity, grace, and "motor flow." Why does this matter? Consider the amazing list of gifts the frontal lobes have to offer. The frontal lobes allow the child to

- work with patterns and designs;
- handle complexity and tap into higher order thinking skills;
- plan ahead;
- think about the consequences of actions before doing them;
- develop and use "inner speech" (so they can talk to themselves and do verbal planning);
- develop impulse control;
- have empathy for others;
- maintain alertness;
- sustain concentration;
- develop a sense of initiative;
- handle confusion and chaos without panicking; and
- work cooperatively in groups.

Discussion Issue #4: The driving force behind teaching must be an elaborate *curriculum* with clear *objectives* and *activities*. *Content* is the critical element.

In the early 1920s, Rudolf Steiner, founder of the Waldorf schools, suggested that the instinct for parenting was dying out and would soon need to be replaced by a conscious understanding of how to parent. We have seen that come to pass, and we can now say the same thing about teaching. We have lost much of our instinctive understanding of how learners develop and what best nourishes them along the way. Teachers have had to compensate for this with more knowledge about child development. So, yes, we can benefit from a developmentally sound curriculum with well-designed objectives and a suggested timeline for introducing appropriate activities. But if we return to our nourishment analogy, this is like saying we can benefit from an understanding of what nutrients the body needs and at what ages different foods become digestible. These guidelines help us in the planning stages, as we gather ideas for the week's activities or grocery shop for the week's meals. But just as we wouldn't force-feed food because some chart said it was good for the child, we cannot allow our common sense to be overridden by pressures to present the day's material and force the child to learn when resistant.

The children are the critical element in the classroom, not the lesson plan. It is grand to have a plan, but only as a starting point. From there, teachers should feel free to adapt, shift the focus, inject humor, imagination, or to drop the whole thing if the situation offers a fresh possibility that captures the fancy of the children and yourself. Content and form are indeed essential, but they only represent about 10% of the art of teaching. The other 90% is magic, and magic only exists in the moment with the children.

Discussion Issue #5: It is important to cover all the lesson plans in a timely fashion or the children will "get behind."

When tackling comments like this one, you are moving to the very heart of the conflict in the field of education. Do we educate or do we instruct? Do children unfold or do they acquire knowledge? The root for the word educate is *educare*, which means "to draw forth," while the root for the word instruct is *instruere*, which means "to pile upon." When we are educating, we are drawing forth or nourishing that which lives within the child. Much about music education is of this nature since it invites the children to unfold and live into their musicality. But even in music, there exists a body of knowledge and skills to be acquired. As children learn, they enculturate and prepare themselves to participate more fully and more skillfully as the newest members of the culture. So, within reason, we do "pile upon them" the rules and ways of the culture. If we lean too heavily in this direction, we can pile so much upon them that they are overwhelmed. We can get caught up in the sense of urgency about timelines and begin to "cover" both the material and the children.

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As long as the children are truly engaged in what you offer, as long as your offering is "nutritionally sound," and as long as the children leave your classes inspired and not exhausted, they are growing just as well and as fast as makes any sense. Stay attuned to your students, keep offering them what they seem hungry for, stay aware of what is the next developmentally appropriate step, and then relax about timelines.

Discussion Issue #6: Early childhood education involves a developmental sequence of lessons which impart content. We must be able to measure the mastery of that content.

This issue is related more to the instruction side of the field than the education side. It is concerned with the development of skills and the development of the child's readiness to learn future skills. You are probably already working in many ways with this perfectly legitimate concern. When you take the time to be sure a child learns to hold a mallet correctly, to finger the keys in the best way, to stand correctly with a violin, or to treat a drum properly, you are establishing an extremely important foundation for future musicianship. Not only are you creating respect for the instruments, you are developing postures and movement practices that are ergonomically sound, preventing future repetitive motion disorders should your students choose to go deeply into their music.

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When you introduce children into the world of practice, building on children's love of repetition, you are laying the groundwork for endurance and for confidence that effort will pay off if they study long enough. You are building trust that out of failure can come success, as that mystery called "the practice effect" takes hold and works its magic with them. Children who have discovered these lessons are much better equipped to handle frustration and failures later on in life, without collapsing into learned helplessness.

So, early childhood music educators have a clear sense of content to impart and skills to develop, as well as a sense of the proper sequence of instruction needed to impart that content and build those skills. But what can you say when asked to measure the mastery of such content? There is a trend toward more and more evaluation and toward evaluating right after the lesson has been offered. If the lesson consisted of an array of facts, then immediate testing would be fine since it would measure intermediate rote memory skills. If the lesson attempted to convey ideas, philosophies, or elements of style, then perhaps the testing should wait two weeks or even a month or more to let the ideas settle and resurface as hunches, questions, and ideas from the child's own mind.

The thinking of the young child is not a matter of facts or verbal ideas. Children learn with their will, and their learning shows up as a set of habits that have been seated through playful practice. How long should we wait to measure a habit? Are we interested in when it takes hold, how long it lingers, whether the child builds on it or lets it fade? And what about all the wonderful learning that takes place as a matter of the unfolding and nourishment of musicality? How will we ever measure that?

What can you say when evaluators begin to take their place in your beloved field? You can study and discuss this issue with colleagues so that you are clear about what you think is worth measuring. But do not let evaluators pressure you into teaching what they know how to measure. Instead, insist that they figure out how to measure what you feel is worth teaching. That may sound like simple common sense, but public school teachers are struggling against that pres-

sure constantly. They would be the first to recommend that you take the time to get very clear about what you really believe is worth teaching and learning in your field and then that you campaign vigorously to encourage evaluators to develop ways to measure those important qualities. Fortunately, you are not alone in this struggle. Researchers are becoming more accommodating to questions and concerns of teachers. Early childhood educational research, in particular, is in a state of flux as researchers search for the most appropriate questions to ask. You can be heartened by research now in progress, such as that being conducting by the Foundation for Music- and Movement-Based Learning, since pioneering efforts are being made to measure the subtle nuances that are at the heart of the magic you are creating in your classrooms with young children.

From my vantage point as a general educator, these six discussion topics are the most challenging issues facing teachers. In discussing them, I hope to have stirred your curiosity and renewed your commitment and vigilance toward your field of early childhood music and movement education. I would encourage you to write to this journal to share your insights, comments, reactions, and coping strategies with regard to these issues and to raise any other issues that you would like your colleagues to consider.

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THE EARLY CHILDHOOD MUSIC ASSOCIATION

The Early Childhood Music Association (ECMA) is the first international organization of education professionals founded on the ideal that all children should be given the advantage of music and movement instruction in their formative years from birth through age 8. The Association is for all teachers of young children, in both formal and informal, public and private settings, with no specific curriculum or pedagogy endorsed or required for membership. The 1996 International ECMA Convention will be held August 2-6 in Santa Fe (see p. 57 for details).
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