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A study of children's musical play at the Little Gym

Alison Elaine Alexander

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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A STUDY OF CHILDREN'S MUSICAL PLAY AT THE LITTLE GYM

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Music Education

In

The School of Music

by

Alison Elaine Alexander
B.A, Mercer University, 2003
B.M.E., Armstrong Atlantic State University, 2005

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To Connor and Brady, my inspirations!

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways music is used in classes at the Little Gym. It also attempted to uncover the benefits of the use of music in the classes as identified by the participants. This investigation of music at the Little Gym required the use of standard qualitative data collection strategies performed over the course of four months of fieldwork. Approximately sixty hours of observations were completed, both as an observer and a participant observer, and twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and teachers. Data analysis entailed transcribing and coding interviews, examining observations field notes, and reviewing the Little Gym website and class brochures. Emergent themes included the use of music to facilitate transitions, give instructions, and enhance creativity and imagination among students. Further, the benefits of music in the classroom included helping children focus, creating a positive distraction for the students, and providing music education benefits. Music educators and classroom teachers working with early childhood teachers working with early childhood learners might apply these findings in their classrooms, introducing elements of musical play into lessons, using music to facilitate transitions and give directions, and providing opportunities for children to enjoy positive experiences with music.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

It is 10 o'clock, on the dot. The door opens and fifteen pair of little feet run across the gym floor to the big red mat where the teacher has just dumped a bucket of green shakers for her class. This class of "Big Beasts," a Parent/Child class for children ages 19 months to 2 ½ years, is ready to begin. Fifteen pair of eager hands grab a shaker or two and run excitedly to their parent or guardian, sometimes sharing one with their parent. The teacher sings, "*Oh, everyone please shake your shakers and sing along with me. How do you do you big beasts, how do you do?* (Shakers are hit on the ground twice.) *How do you do you big beasts, how do you do?* (Shakers are hit on the ground twice.) *Oh, you come to gym for fun and we get you on the run how do you do you big beasts, how do you do?*" (Shakers are hit twice, once more). Then, the children are given instructions to shake their shakers up high, shake them low, and the next song begins. The children happily shake their shakers and follow her lead. "*It's time to put your shakers away, shakers away, shakers away. It's time put your shakers away, at the Little Gym.*" The children quickly run towards their teacher, toss their shakers in the bucket and run back to their seats. Some of the children are so excited to be in class, they run straight past their parents and out into the classroom, playing on the classroom equipment before getting corralled back into the circle for opening instruction time.

Music is used as a tool in the classroom with children across America. Some classes focus exclusively on teaching music to young children, introducing notes and other musical concepts. Other classes play music in the background, using it solely for its entertainment value. However, the Little Gym of Baton Rouge uses music for many reasons. A careful examination of the reasons why music is used at the Little Gym, as well as what children gain from the use of music in the classroom might serve as a valuable resource to both educators and parents.

Although researchers have studied the effects of music within classroom settings, there is limited research available about preschool children and their involvement with musical activities performed outside of a music classroom. In an attempt to fill this void, I sought to understand how music is used in the Little Gym classes as well as the benefits that children gain from the usages of music in those classes. Music educators might benefit from understanding how children react to the use of music in classrooms that are not typical music learning classes and how it might be advantageous to incorporate these types of activities into their classrooms. Also, parents and non-music educators can benefit from a greater understanding of how music incorporated into these activities will help their children and students.

The Little Gym is an example of an environment that uses music as a secondary means of teaching. The Little Gym website, <http://http://www.thelittlegym.com>, describes the company as one that offers classes “filled with movement, music, learning and laughter. From week to week and from year to year, our age-appropriate curriculum is designed to facilitate ongoing skill development and maximum fun. Children progress at their own pace, developing their confidence as they develop their skills.” Music is not the focus of the class; however, music is used throughout the class to engage students in activities and learning. The Little Gym uses music to draw children into the activities that are provided for them and allow them to interact with and learn from the music used in the classroom. One of the aims of this project was to discover the uses and benefits of music at the Little Gym.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Play is a natural process for children, a process that comes as second nature to the growing and maturing child. Carra Lou McCaskill stated that “for the child, play is the business of life and his toys are his tools” (1943; p. 1086). In fact, walk into a room full of children and you may hear questions and comments such as, “Will you play with me?” or “I want to play with that toy.” In describing play, Richard Addison stated that “play is a difficult word to define, yet we all know what it means” (1991, p. 207). Children are not known to be idle beings and, as such, children become entertainers of themselves. In fact, play seems to be a necessary part of life for children. As McCaskill sought to understand play, she made the following comment:

The young child does not need a reason for his play, and he is not interested in a particular accomplishment. He plays because it is his business, and he does it spontaneously, gaily, wholeheartedly. While he is about it he develops in all phases, his rate of development being determined by his play materials and his experiences, but he is not playing in order to develop. He has no motive other than happiness. The responsibility as to what advantages he enjoys as a result of his play rests solely upon the adults responsible for him (1943; p. 1087).

Indeed, a child’s work is his play and children value play as an adult values his work. The goal for a child’s play is on-going, with no specific goal but the process itself (Addison, 1991; Berger & Cooper, 2003; Stevens, 2003; Tarnowski 1999). Although children themselves do not seek to learn through playful interactions, it has been well documented that children do indeed learn from play (Lew & Campbell, 2005; McCaskill, 1943; Smithrim, 1997). Children develop socially, emotionally, physically and cognitively through the action of play (Addison, 1991; Tarnowski, 1999; McCaskill, 1943). Additionally, children benefit both from free play as well as the opportunity to play with specific learning tools. In their research, Berger & Cooper stated that children needed extended, uninterrupted time for play episodes as well as appropriate

materials in the environment (2003). Appropriate tools in the play environment help to foster more learning (Berger & Cooper, 2003; McCaskill, 1943).

Not only is play an integral part of a child's life, music is also a natural part of the life of a child (Addison, 1991; Kemple, Batey, & Hartle, 2004; Lamont, 2008; Campbell, 2010). Turn on a radio and watch an eighteen month old toddler spin in circles as he listens to the music.

Visit a parade and watch a three year old clap to the beat of the bass drum. Kemple, Batey, & Hartle stated that "when young children hear music, they move to it" (2004, p. 31). Lum and Campbell discussed that "musically intended or not, children sing, chant, and move rhythmically at play in social interactions and collaborative learning projects with other children as well as in individual tasks set for them at school by their teachers" (2007, p. 52). Even without the formality of a music classroom, children are aware of the music in the world around them. And, in children's musical play, the lines is blurred "between the roles of performer, listener and critic" (Harwood, 1998 p. 56). For instance, Patricia Shehan Campbell (2000) made several observations of children about the way they experience music. In her research, she noted, "Music is woven into the fabric of Ramona's life; she plays games, dances, and dreams of making a video – all to the accompaniment of music" (p. 25). In addition, "Music 'happens' to children, and many are immersed in it all the day long. They socialize, vent emotions, and entertain themselves through music" (Campbell, p. 32).

Because music is such a large part of the life of a child, researchers have suggested that it is vitally important that a child's first experience with music be a favorable one (Denac, 2008; Stellacio & McCarthy, 1999). Olga Denac stated the following:

The level of expressing interest in music activities and the level of development of music abilities are closely linked with the child's first experiences in music. For this reason it is important that the children are offered a variety of musical experiences already in the

preschool period so that they can form a positive relationship toward music (2008, p. 439).

In addition, Benjamin Bloom, in his book *Developing Talent in Young People* (1985), commented that professional musicians and athletes looked back on their childhood experiences in that particular area and saw that they had good experiences that created interest in a particular area. They remember their childhood teachers as nurturing and fun, who created an interest that they sought to pursue as they grew. Bloom characterizes this phase of learning as the romance stage, where children develop a love of a particular activity. All successful musicians and athletes could look back on positive experiences during the romance stage, which led them toward the precision stage of learning before progressing to the third and final stage of learning, the integration stage. Most importantly, though, was the fact that moving too quickly through the romance stage of learning diminishes interest and drive during the precision stage. Since a child's musical interest diminishes with age (Bowles, 1998; Denac, 2008), as educators, our job should be to make music fun and exciting so that children will develop a love of music and be interested in further pursuing the field throughout their childhood.

Since both music and play are a part of a child's life, the two can be combined to create an active musical play environment. Olga Denac pointed out that "When asked to choose their favorite music activities, most preschool and school children chose playing an instrument, since it enabled them to take active part in the educational process" (2008, p. 442). A child's natural response is to be actively involved in music and music making, so those responses should be encouraged on a regular basis (Neely, 2001; Campbell, 2000). In her research, Donna Brink Fox noted that

The National Association for the Education of Young Children proposes that children learn through play and that they learn through positive social interaction with others. Music is woven into social encounters and relationships, into routine home and classroom

behavior, into transitional times, into isolated play times, and into cooperative play in classrooms and child-care settings. Children find music making an ongoing individual and social part of everyday life. (2000, p. 24)

Richard Addison describes how important experiencing activities are for children when he stated, “if ‘hands on’ experience is nowadays a buzzword for adults, how much more important must it be for children!” (1991, p. 212). Furthermore, he mentioned “that many children are being crippled musically by being deprived of the opportunity to play with musical materials in the same way that they play with other play objects” (1991, p.212). Give a child a train, and he finds a way to make it run across railroad tracks or fly through the air. Give a child a pair of rhythm sticks and he will experiment with them to create different sounds, play “air drums,” and create new musical experiences for himself. McCaskill suggested,

The child is naturally rhythmic, and from early infancy loves music and rhythm. He likes to express himself in music and is able to do it with an ease and abandon which are beyond adult attainment. He ‘does what the music says’ through a wide range of activities from running, skipping, stamping, marching, clapping, and dancing, to ‘flying,’ and dropping to the floor, completely relaxed, eyes closed, when the music becomes a lullaby” (1943, p. 1089).

Furthermore, as children experience musical activities, the need for corrections and criticisms should not exist (Berger & Cooper, 2003). Children should be encouraged to enjoy musical free play so that they can have a personal experience with music. (Berger & Cooper, 2003; Smithrim, 1997). In fact, Kathryn Marsh discovered that “there has been an increasing realization in recent years of the importance of informal sites of music teaching and learning for the development of children’s musical attitudes, competencies and understandings” (1999, p. 2). As we encourage children to learn, we also must be aware of their ability to learn. Much research has been completed on how children learn and at what age children’s intellectual growth is at its greatest (Manins, 1994; Romanek, 1974; Turner, 1999). Donna Brink Fox remarked that “early education experiences significantly impact the long-term direction of children’s

development” (2000, p. 23). Lev Vygotsky, an academic psychologist, “asserted that all fundamental cognitive activities have social foundations and remain quasi-social forever” (Dimitriadis and Kamberelis, 2006, p. 193). His learning theory encouraged educators to be aware of the learner’s zone of proximal development, defined by Vygotsky as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (1978, p. 86). The most effective teaching and learning processes occur during this zone of proximal development, when the learner moves past the current level of competency, moving “learners into the nearest reaches of their incompetence (not too far) and should help them become competent there. As learning continues, the leading edge of the reaches of incompetence keeps moving on” (Dimitriadis and Kamberelis, 2006, p. 197). Kempe, Batey, & Hartle (2004) spoke to this in his research as well. He discussed Jerome Bruner’s theory of scaffolding, which refers to the continuum of supportive structuring that more competent others provide as a child masters a new strategy or skill” (p. 32). As educators, we can use musical play to teach basic music concepts using simple terms. As children learn and develop, we can add new terms to that concept, building upon their knowledge. By introducing music at a young age, children can begin to learn musical ideas without having to know the full meaning behind the concepts. Thus, as terms are presented later in life, children will already have a basic understanding of its meaning. For example, giving children the opportunity to march to the beat during a “Little Gym” class teaches them the idea of steady beat, without giving them the terminology behind the idea. Later, in musical training, children will know what a steady beat feels like, and will then be given the opportunity to

understand the musical concept behind it. In fact, this idea of the sound to symbol is the foundation of the Kodály pedagogy (Kodály, 1964).

Robin Wes, the founder of The Little Gym, realized the benefits of children's play and has sought to build upon these benefits through the classes he offers. Children are given the opportunity to experience music in a fun and exciting way. They are given hands on experience with musical instruments such as shakers to use during circle time. By providing these activities, a child's curiosity is peaked and he is given an opportunity to be creative with the instrument. The Little Gym was opened so that children could experience these types of opportunities on a weekly basis, a safe place for children to learn and grow. In their book, "Gymboree: Giving Your Child Physical, Mental and Social Confidence Through Play," Joan Barnes and Susan Astor stated the following:

These preschool years are the period when our children are most dependent on us, their parents, and when we have the least amount of outside help. In other words, we are our children's chief instructors during what may well be the most important part of their education (1981, p. 2)

As others have discovered, Barnes and Astor realized the importance of the familial relationship in the development of the child (Brand, 1986; Gordon, 1997; Fox, 2000; Johnston, 2005). In addition, De Gratzner (1999) found that parents realized an improved and enhanced relationship with their children when participating in a music program together. Therefore, a child not only benefits from the class itself, but also from the social interaction he has with classmates and parents that attend with him.

The purpose of this research was to explore how music is used in classes at the Little Gym, as well as the benefits children gain from the usage of music in classes. Data collection was guided by the following questions:

1. How is music used in the classes offered at The Little Gym?

2. What are the perceived values and benefits of music as indicated by the parents and instructors?

The following chapters will explore the values and benefits associated with the use of music in Little Gym classes and possible applications for the use of music in early childhood learning situations. In Chapter 3, the site and context of the Little Gym is discussed while Chapter 4 reviews the method used to conduct this study. Chapter 5 examines the findings and discussions of the research and Chapter 6 explores the conclusions of the research.

CHAPTER 3: SITE AND CONTEXT

Located on a main thoroughfare in a large metropolitan area is a large sign advertising the location of “The Little Gym.” Nestled in the back of a group of businesses, the outside of the Little Gym looks very similar to a typical office building. However, once you open the door, you are likely to see children playing, eagerly awaiting the beginning of their Little Gym class. When you enter the Little Gym, you walk into a waiting area. To your right is a large couch and an oversized chair, surrounding a train table full of toys. There is also a door that leads to the party room, where children often enjoy birthday parties and other events held there. Immediately to your left is a brightly painted storage unit for shoes and other personal items; shoes are not allowed to be worn by anyone in the classroom. In front of the storage unit are two rows of four chairs, where parents often sit while waiting for their children to finish their classes. To the left of the storage unit is the registration desk where a Little Gym employee usually sits, welcoming parents and children as they enter. Surprisingly, the waiting area smells clean and fresh, despite the presence of dirty shoes and sweaty children! The main office is set off to the extreme left, through a separate door usually closed to participants. The entire front wall is lined with clear glass windows where parents and other observers can watch the children during class, without being overly intrusive. Every once in a while you will notice a parent waving or gently encouraging his or her child.

A door located in the middle of the front wall leads to the gym classroom. The walls are painted bright colors of purple and green, inviting the children to come in and play. During a typical Parent/Child class, children are swinging from the uneven bars to the right, testing their confidence on the balance beam to the left, and crossing an obstacle course between the parallel bars in the center. Ms. Kristal is stationed at the bar to the left of the door, helping children with

their flips, while other children are laughing, clapping to music, and chasing one another around the focal point of the room, the big red mat. This mat, which takes up half of the classroom, is the gathering spot for the children at both the beginning and ending of class. As class continues, the children flock to the back closet which contains a number of fun items used during various classes: sports equipment, balls, parachutes, hula hoops, and a variety of other manipulatives used to create excitement and draw interest to class activities. During the Parent/Child classes, the children know that if Ms. Heather or Ms. Kristal head toward that door, something fun is about to happen. A parachute may appear, or a bucket of balls may be emptied.

A one time observer of a typical Little Gym Parent/Child class may think that the class is loosely structured and children are allowed to run around with very little instruction. And, to some degree, that is the case. However, the class is specially designed to allow for optimal enjoyment and exploration. After just a few classes, children begin to understand the sequence of events and their attention is drawn to the various activities as music plays an important role in the flow of the classes. Transitions from one activity to the next, as well as sequencing of events are both made easier through the use of music.

On most days, the teachers greet me with a smile and “Hi guys,” as I walk through the door with my two boys. Immediately, one of my sons races to play at the train table with other children while the one attending class that day takes off his shoes and places them in the cubby, ready and waiting excitedly for class to begin. The lobby is full of bubbly excitement as one group of children waiting for class lines up at the door and a second group of children exits the classroom and congregates in a circle on the floor waiting for their stamps, their reward for attending class. Stamps are given on hands, feet, and even little tummies! The room is full of

giggles and laughter as parents discuss plans for play dates or trips to Chick-fil-A for lunch and children get geared up for the next activity.

The Little Gym opened its doors in 1976 with a focus on children's growth through play. Founder Robin Wes wanted to create a learning environment where children were free to learn and grow without the pressure of competition. In fact, "he created an environment filled with the spirit to achieve rather than the pressure to win" (<http://www.thelittlegym.com>). The Little Gym became a franchise in 1992 and has since opened more than three hundred gyms worldwide.

The Baton Rouge Little Gym has been owned by Heather West for the last ten years. Ms. Heather, a kinesiologist herself, was looking for a way to further her career when she was given the opportunity to purchase the gym. She looked at this new business as a way to continue using her specialty, as well as provide for children and their families. The teachers at the Baton Rouge Little Gym all have different backgrounds, including college students who love working with children, those with a background in health care wanting to use their knowledge to help children and their families, as well as teachers committed to continuing the traditions of the Little Gym. The teachers all participate in intense training at the gym and through the franchise before being given the opportunity to teach a class. The gym itself is open Monday through Saturday, with classes beginning as early as 9:15 a.m. and ending as late as 7:30 p.m., depending on the schedule. (For the full schedule of classes, refer to Appendix A). The classes are designed to help children develop confidence as they grow physically, mentally and socially through play and interaction with children their own age. Although a child may not realize what he or she is learning through the classes, growth is evident to parents and instructors through the process of participation. The Little Gym's website, <http://www.thelittlegym.com> remarks,

With more than 300 locations across the globe, The Little Gym is the world's premier experiential learning and child physical development center for kids ages four months

through 12 years. Each week, progressively structured classes and a positive learning environment create opportunities for your child to try new things and build self-confidence, all with a grin that stretches from ear to ear.

The Little Gym features a non-competitive environment where children ages 4 months to 3 years can participate in a Parent/Child class, while children ages 3 to 12 can take classes in Karate, Sports Skills, Dance, and Gymnastics. Although none of the class descriptions features the term “music,” music is an integral part of the learning environment. In fact, Robin Wes, the founder of The Little Gym was not only an educator and a kinesiologist, but a musician as well. He continues to write music used in the Little Gym classroom each week.

The curriculum features the idea of “three-dimensional learning,” where the three dimensions are called “Get Moving!,” “Brain Boost!,” and “Citizen Kid!” The Little Gym website, <http://www.thelittlegym.com>, describes the three dimensions in the following way:

1. Get Moving! - Physical activities to burn that boundless energy, plus build flexibility and strength, develop balance and coordination, and encourage agility, rhythm and overall fitness to launch a lifetime of healthy habits.
2. Brain Boost! - Designed to expand the mind and develop a love of learning, these exercises foster listening skills, sustained concentration and decision-making, prepare for or reinforce school lessons, and nurture problem-solving ability and creative expression.
3. Citizen Kid! - These activities teach life skills like sharing, working in a group, listening and leadership—all skills that translate to a well-adjusted, well-rounded superkid.

The Little Gym classes provide opportunities for growth as children build upon success each week and learn new skills at their own pace. Children are encouraged to try new activities and learn new skills during each class, but are only encouraged to do so at a pace well-suited to them. Each child is given the opportunity to try and perfect a new skill, with individualized instruction. Music is incorporated into each and every class in a variety of ways. Music is used from the moment children walk in the door until they leave. Children warm-up in each class with musical activities such as shaking shakers and singing songs. Whether in Gymnastics,

Dance, Karate, Sports Skills or Parent/Child classes, instructors sing songs in order to give instructions as children move from one activity to another. Furthermore, music played during class is used both as a rhythmic activity and as instruction. The aim of The Little Gym is to promote “Serious fun.” The fundamental idea behind The Little Gym is to teach children that they do not have to be the best, just do their best, by ”Building Self-Confidence in Children, One Humongous Grin at a Time.”

The Little Gym of Baton Rouge has been a successful operation under the current owner for the last ten years. This particular gym serves children throughout the greater Baton Rouge area, although there are Little Gym franchises located in 35 states, Canada and 24 countries worldwide. Ms. Heather and her staff of talented teachers work each week to provide learning situations that not only encourage children to have fun, but push themselves outside of their comfort zone and build their self-confidence. Nestled in the back of a shopping center, people may drive by the Little Gym every day, oblivious to the fact that it sits next to a popular hibachi grill and behind a strip of small restaurants frequented by local business people. However, drive down this road with my two small boys, and Little Gym is the most familiar sight on the street! The gym includes a lobby, small office area, classroom and additional room used for birthday parties and other gatherings. The classroom itself includes “the mat,” a big red gymnastics mat where both warm up and ending activities take place. Additionally, gymnastics equipment such as parallel bars, uneven bars, two balance beams and other mats and are strategically placed around the classroom. The classroom is only quiet when it is empty! During classes, the room is filled with laughter, encouragement and praise as children work on new skills and challenges. The use of music during these Little Gym classes was the focus of the present investigation.

CHAPTER 4: METHOD

This case study of exploration of music at The Little Gym Baton Rouge required the use of standard ethnographic techniques and qualitative data collection strategies performed over the course of four months of fieldwork. The child participants in the classes, as well as the content and process of the musical play experience, were of interest in this research. Observations were conducted in the Little Gym classes during the spring semester of 2012 both as a parent participant in the “Beast” class with children ages 19 months to 2 ½ years and as an observer during different classes available at the Little Gym, all for children five and under. I recorded fieldnotes by hand (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995) while observing the classes as a participant observer (Spradley, 1980). I observed children in the context of their participation at The Little Gym, as well as the structure of the classroom activities and the way music is involved in the activities. I paid particular attention to the way the child participants interacted with the music while also discussing with parents and instructors how the music influenced the children in the classroom.

I conducted twelve in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Fontana and Frey, 1994): one with the owner/operator of The Little Gym, one with the program director, and ten individual interviews with parents of children who participated in various classes. The participants were selected based on the length of time their children had participated in Little Gym, as well as the classes in which they participated. I sought participants from a wide sampling of classes, including each level of the Parent/Child and the preschool aged classes. Each of the parents interviewed had a least one child who had participated in Little Gym classes over the course of the 2011-2012 school year, many having participated longer.

Interviews began with questions about the informants' music background. Questions related to the informants' perception of the way music is used in class, benefits of the use of music in the classroom, and general questions about how music is used outside of the Little Gym classes were included in the interviews (Refer to Appendix B for semi-structured interview protocol). Interviews were an average of thirty minutes, ranging from fifteen minutes to forty five minutes. I transcribed each of these interviews for analysis, and these transcriptions resulted in forty-eight single spaced pages. I analyzed the transcription by identifying emergent themes, using open coding, closed coding and color coding as described by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995). Material artifacts such as class brochures and the organization's website were also examined. The variety of data-collection methods helped to provide depth to the process, as well as serving as a source of data triangulation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006), and analysis was a constant process during and after fieldwork (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995). Federal regulations dictate that research involving human participants requires approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB), and this was requested and received from the Louisiana State University IRB for Human Subject Studies (see Appendix C). Additionally, participation consent forms from each parent and instructor were completed prior to the study (see Appendix D). Throughout the course of this paper, I will use pseudonyms, using first and last names to identify parents, Ms. followed by a first name for teachers, and first names only for children.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Two-year-old Brady runs into the classroom the moment the door is open. He dodges parents and children from the previous class as he makes his way to the big red mat to take a seat. Bryan, also two, runs straight for the balance beam and begins climbing while two-year-old Anna immediately heads toward the uneven bars and swings. Parents make their way towards their children, encouraging them to take a seat on the big red mat. Ms. Kristal walks in, says, “Good morning, Beasts!” and grabs the bucket of shakers from the shelf. She dumps the shakers on the floor and all of the children flock to her to collect their shakers. The children joyfully shake their shakers, return them to the bucket, and scatter around the room. Addison runs toward the uneven bars, while Brady sits, ready to be introduced by his mom and perform his trick for the class. After introductions, the class begins their warm-up activity. Today, the music tells them to walk, run, gallop, and jump. Then, Ms. Kristal brings in the parachute and the children are instructed to walk, run, gallop, and jump while holding onto the parachute. However, while Anna and Bryan are holding tightly to the parachute and following the directions on the music, Brady is sitting happily on top of the parachute, going for a ride as the children and parents walk the parachute around the circle.

After warm-ups, “It’s time to go and play today” is sung and the children scatter across the gym, looking for their favorite piece of equipment to climb or their best friend to chase. Music continues to play throughout the class. Anna walks across the beam while the “Alphabet Song” is played. Ms. Kristal helps Thomas with one of the skills for the day, attempting a backwards roll. Bryan and Brady begin chasing each other around the mat, then Brady is distracted by the water fountain and needs help getting a drink. After twenty minutes of free play, Ms. Kristal opens the storage room door and dumps the trash can full of balls on the floor.

The children are encouraged to try and kick the balls across the floor. Eliza kicks the ball, then runs off to hide. Bryan decides to throw the ball to his mom, while Thomas decides to take off toward the uneven bars to get a few minutes of extra play. Five minutes later, the balls are put away and children are chasing bubbles, trying to pop them with their hands and feet. Addison squeals as Ms. Kristal picks her up to reach a high bubble. As the last bubble is popped, the children run to sit with their parents to sing “Grand Old Duke of York.” The closing song is sung and a mad dash of children rush to the lobby for stamps.

Throughout the course of this and all Little Gym classes, music is played from beginning to end. Whether the music is sung by the instructor or played through an iPod, there is not a minute of class that is void of music. The use of music in this type of classroom benefits children in many ways, as discovered in observing classes and interviewing parent and teachers involved at the Little Gym of Baton Rouge.

Uses of Music at the Little Gym

Through observations at the Little Gym and discussions with parents and teachers, I found that music is used in a variety of ways. The emergent themes discovered through this process include music to facilitate transitions, music as instructions, and music as a means of enhancing imagination and creativity.

Music to Facilitate Transitions

Throughout each Little Gym class, I observed that music is used to facilitate transitions between activities. Songs such as, “It’s Time to Go and Play Today,” (See Figure 1 for

notation), move the children from the warm-up activity to the free play time.

It's Time to Go and Play Today

The image shows the musical notation for the song 'It's Time to Go and Play Today'. It consists of two staves. The first staff is in 4/4 time, with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The melody is written on a treble clef. The lyrics are: 'It's time to go and play to-day, play to-day, play to-day. It's time to go and'. The second staff starts with a measure rest of 6 measures, then continues with the melody. The lyrics are: 'play to-day, at the Lit-tle Gym.' The song ends with a double bar line.

Version 2: It's time to put the shakers away, shakers away, shakers away. It's time to put the shakers away, at the Little Gym.

Version 3: It's time to put the balls away, balls away, balls away. It's time to put the balls away, at the Little Gym.

Figure 1 – It's Time to Go and Play Today (collected and transcribed by A. Alexander)

Ms. Kristal, the program director at the Little Gym of Baton Rouge, asserted that music is used during class to help transition children into the class, to move children from one activity to the next, and to prepare them for the end of class. Ms. Kristal commented, “The ‘Hello Song’ (See Figure 2 for notation) kind of pulls them all in, it’s like, ‘okay, we’re about to start class.’”

Shake Your Shakers

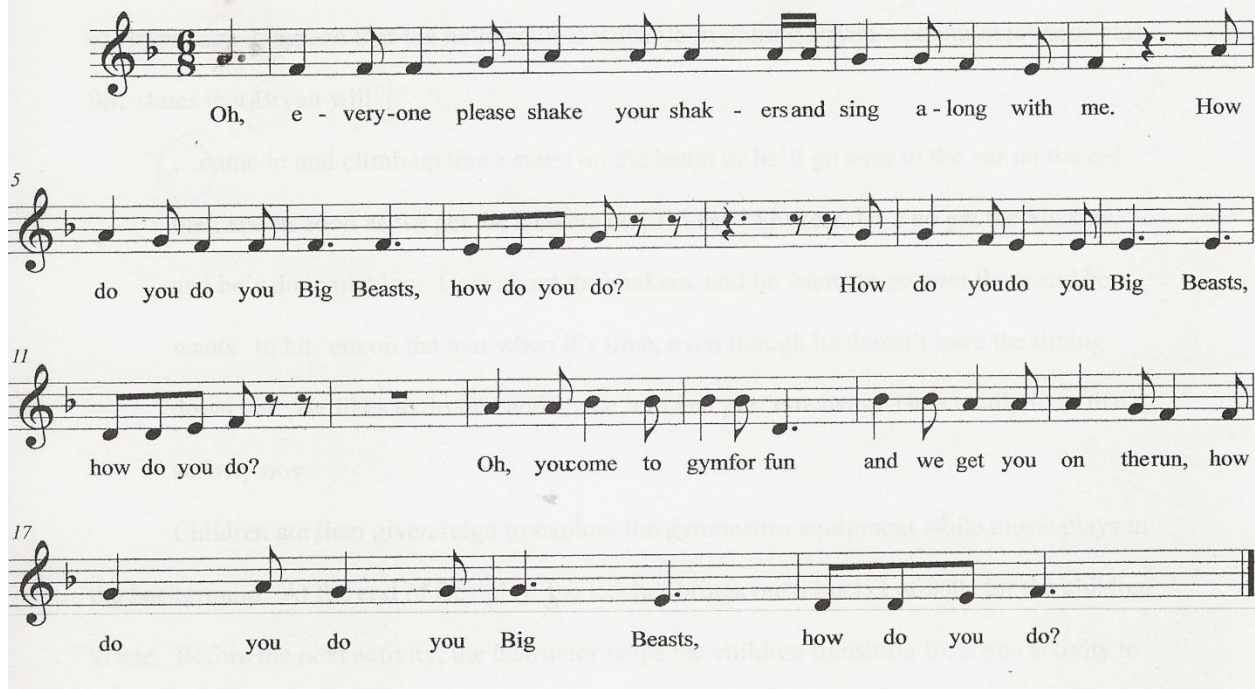


Figure 2 – Shake Your Shakers (collected and transcribed by A. Alexander)

It's a good point for us to, once we draw them in with the music, to kind of set out the expectations for them, so it gets everyone together as a group, cohesiveness, just sitting them down.” Sarah Smith, mother of Bryan, age 2, agreed that the hello song is valuable in pulling Bryan’s attention towards class. She states that Bryan will

...come in and climb up those stairs on the beam or he’ll go over to the bar on the red mat, and as soon as we get the shakers out, I’ll say “Shakers, let’s go get the Shakers,” and he’s done playing. He’s about the shakers, and he wants to go over there and he wants to hit ‘em on the mat when it’s time, even though he doesn’t have the timing down yet. He likes to do that and shake ‘em and put ‘em away. He’s totally in to that activity now.

Children are then given reign to explore the gymnastics equipment while music plays in the background. At the end of free play, the teacher brings out a bucket of balls for the children

to use. Before the next activity, the instructor helps the children transition from one activity to the next by singing, “It’s time to put the balls away, balls away, balls away. It’s time to put the balls away, at the Little Gym” (See Figure 1 for notation). This song not only signals the end of the ball time, but alerts the children as to what comes next. The children immediately gather the balls, often grabbing balls from children who are not willing to part with their ball for clean up time! The children then gather in the middle of the big red mat to play with bubbles. They experiment with the very difficult to pop bubbles, catching them on their fingertips, stretching them, and popping them with their hands and feet. As soon as the last bubble is popped, the children run to meet their parent or guardian sitting on the mat. They know it is time for “The Grand Old Duke of York!” (See Figure 3 for notation) Then, to transition from this point to the close of class, the “Bye Bye Song” (See Figure 4 for notation) is sung, signaling the end of class. Then, the phrase “It’s time to get some stamps.” is sung in a sing-song type voice. Children immediately leave the mat, run to the classroom door, and eagerly meet another employee who is armed and ready to stamp little feet, little hands, and sometimes little bellies!

Sarah Smith and her son Bryan, age 2, appreciate the use of music in the transitions of the class. She stated,

He definitely knows the order, balls, then bubbles, then drumming. Grand Ol’ Duke, he’ll come over and sit on my lap without me telling ‘em, and as soon as I flip ‘em back, he starting’ to drum. He’s ready, you know?

The Grand Old Duke of York

The Grand Old Duke of York, he had ten thousand men. He marched them up to the

6 top of the hill, and marched them down again. And when you're up you're up, and

11 when you're down you're down. And when you're only half way up, you're neither up nor down. He

17 marched them to the left, he marched them to the right. He marched them upside down,

23 oh what a sight!

Figure 3 – The Grand Old Duke of York (collected and transcribed by A. Alexander)

Line Up! Line Up!

Line up! Line up! Line up! Ev - ery bo - dy line up!

Figure 4 – Line Up! Line Up! (collected and transcribed by A. Alexander)

Elaine Stroud, mother of Keith (age 5), described the music use as a way to help the children transition into the class, move towards the high energy middle section of class, and then calm down for the end of class. She stated,

I think they probably do their music that way on purpose. The middle of the class is really high and excited, the very last song they do is laying on their tummies on the floor tapping their hands. So, they do stuff at the beginning to get them warmed up and then they get real big in the middle and then they bring it back down at the end.

Even parents with the youngest participants notice the benefit that music provides in helping children feel comfortable with transitioning through the class. Amy Sanchez, mother to Celia, (9 months), stated, that the “Ms. Heather sings whenever we’re going to change activities, and she realizes that change is coming and she’s ready for it. She follows, she goes, when it’s time to play, she’ll play, when it’s time to play with the balls, she’ll do it.”

During the classes for children ages three to six, music is used to help with transitions as well. Rhymes such as “*Line up, line up, line up! Everybody line up!*” (See Figure 4 for notation) or “Down by the Station,” (See Figure 5 for notation) are used to encourage the children to move from one station to the next. Kristal described this as “just incorporating fun tunes to keep them engaged, really.” For instance, in gymnastics, when the children finished an activity on the uneven bars, the instructor sings, “*Line up, line up, line up.*” The children quickly get in line and put their hands on the shoulders of the child in front of them, often trying hard to be the caboose of the train! Then, the children begin singing along with “*Down by the station, early in the morning, see the little funny bugs all in a row. See the station master pull the little handle. Puff, puff, choo, choo, off we go!*” (See Figure 5 for notation)

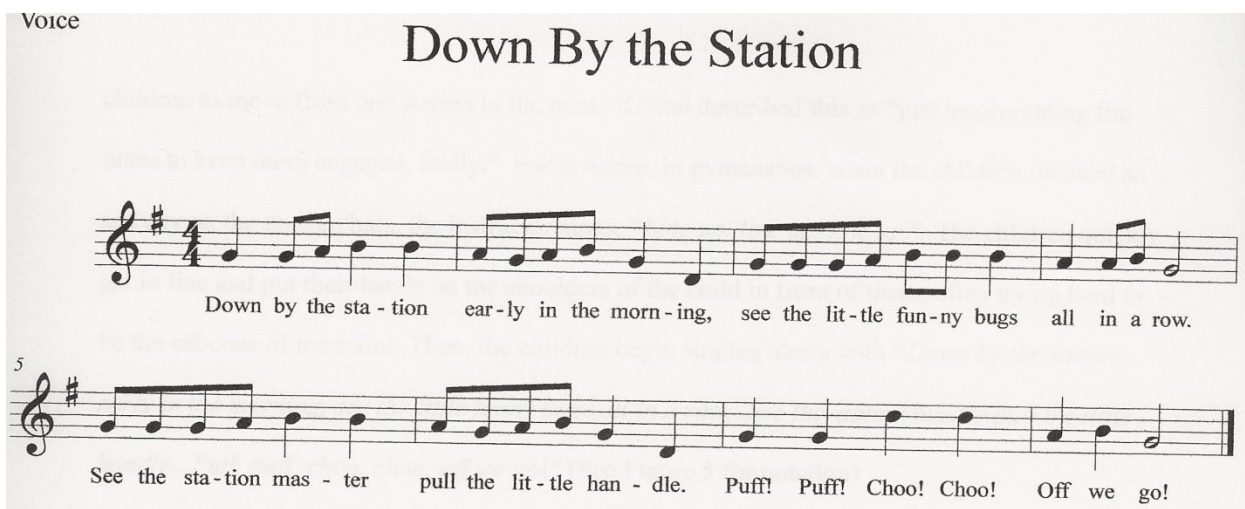


Figure 5 – Down By the Station (collected and transcribed by A. Alexander)

Ms. Kristal cannot imagine teaching classes without using music to help transition.

It would be quite hectic, ‘cuz you would be sitting there yelling, “Everyone get in line. Okay, everyone get in line.” You know, but the song, it snaps them into it, everyone lines up, they’re like, “alright hurry, we’re going.” When they hear you start to say “It’s time to change,” ...and if they don’t come by that point, when you start “Down by the Station,” they know that you’re leaving them, they’re like, “okay, alright, I’m coming.” So I think that if we didn’t have music to do transitions like that, it would be very hard, ‘cause at that time you would be only just correcting. “Okay, guys, you need to line up. You need to line up. Alright, we’re leaving,” that kind of thing. It’s quite funny, I guess, ‘cause I’ve been doing it for so long, I couldn’t even imagine transitions without music.

Polly Strickland, mother of Avery (age 4), noticed that during Avery’s classes, “there’s usually a little song and they know it’s coming and I think they anticipate what’s coming up next for the structure.” In fact, every Little Gym class is closed with the “Goodbye Song” (See Figure 6 for notation). The children lay down on the floor on their tummies and play the drums on the floor. Immediately following the song, the teacher sings the sentence, “It’s time to go get stamps.”

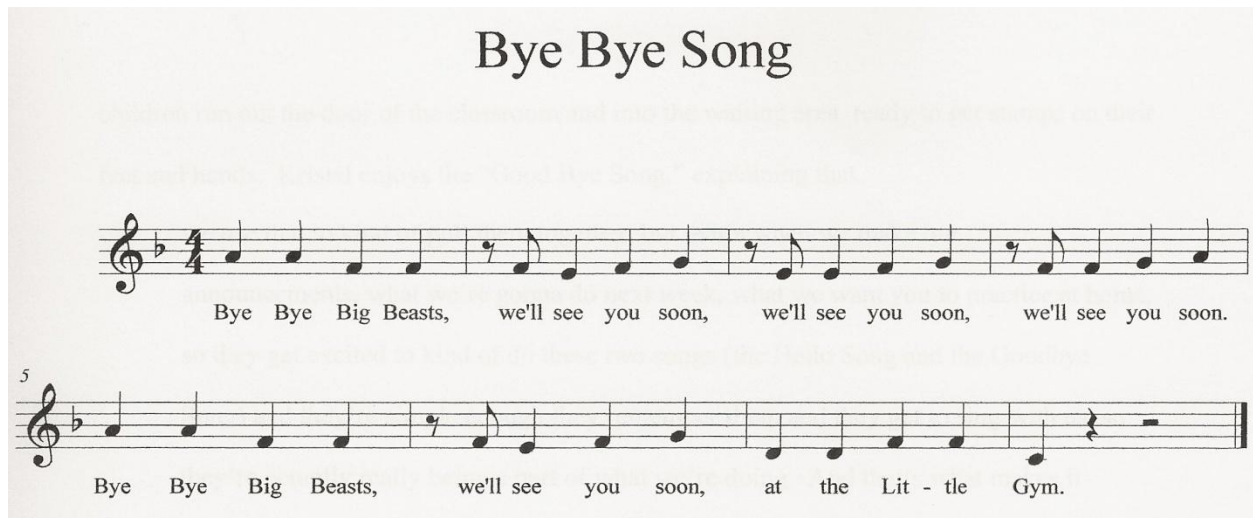


Figure 6 – Bye Bye Song (collected and transcribed by A. Alexander)

The children run out the door of the classroom and into the waiting area, ready to get stamps on their feet and hands. Kristal enjoys the “Good Bye Song,” explaining that

we use that to kind of pull them together, but that’s when we make our announcements, what we’re gonna do next week, what we want you to practice at home, so they get excited to kind of do these two songs (the Hello Song and the Goodbye Song) and they’re simple enough they remember them and they get to sing with us, so they’re actually really being a part of what we’re doing. And that’s what makes it awesome for them. Like, okay, “I know this song and I’m ready to sing, let’s do it.”

The children not only recognize the song, but they participate and understand what it means when they hear the songs.

Johnson-Green (2008), realized that “As infants develop through preschool years, the ways in which families use music change, moving from intersubjective, emotional regulation and facilitation of transitions throughout daily routines to educational strategies.” Families have used music as a means to help transition through daily routines for years, so it only seems fitting that educators use this technique in the classroom environment. In the case of the Little Gym, music is used to transition students into the lesson, through the lesson, and then throughout the end of the lesson.

Music as Instruction

Music was also observed as a means for giving instructions to the students. Children quickly reacted to the music directing them to jump like a kangaroo or run around the mat. Further, children responded well to their teacher singing a clean up song. They heard the song, immediately recognized it, and moved into action. From the first song to the last minute of class, songs are used to tell students what to do, where to go, and how to do certain skills. Heather West, the owner of the Baton Rouge Little Gym, discussed why music is used for those instructions. In the opinion of the owner,

Kids actually respond to music, far sooner than they respond to any other verbal stimulation. Their sense of hearing is the most acute sense from birth. It's developed a lot more quickly than any of the other senses, and it's sort of a universal language, you don't have to translate it to understand and feel the music, and it's meant to stimulate those neurons in the brain that give a sense of calm or comfort and excitement all at the same time.

The first instructions sung during class are, "It's time to put the shakers away" (See Figure 1 for notation). Children immediately react to the instructions and there is often a race to see which child can put his shakers in the bucket first! This tune is used several times throughout class, although the words are changed to fit the specific situation.

Children quickly put their shakers away and return to their seats with their guardian. The instructor goes around the semi circle, asking each child to introduce themselves, tell their age and showcase a "trick" for the others. This trick may be a forward roll, another trick learned during class, or could be as simple as running across the mat from one side to the other. Children then participate in several warm up activities, which vary from week to week. One activity involves the children running around the mat, then galloping, then jumping while the music gives the directions. Another activity helps to prepare the children to practice forward rolls. The music will instruct the children to put their hands on the ground and touch the ground,

tuck their head, and then complete the roll. Either way, music is involved, and may be sung by the teacher and the class or sung through the speakers. Other songs are used to direct children in learning a new skill. For instance, teacher Ms. Heather stated,

if I were to say, “Reach up high and touch the sky, hands down, touch the ground” (Sing-song), I’m taking them through a set of skills that I want them to do that is a subset of skills put together that create a skill. You know, in a forward roll, I want them to reach up high and touch the sky, then go down to the ground and they tuck their head and roll over, then I’ve used the music, or even “The Wheels on the Bus go Round and Round,” would the parachute go up and down or would the parachute go in a circle?

The children respond quickly to the musical use of instructions. Not only are they learning a new skill, but the flowing nature of the music helps them learn the steps and remember them as they practice the new skill at home. Ms. Kristal discussed this in even further detail.

Just like with kids, if you put it in music, you’re more likely to have them remember that and give it back to you, than just a regular conversation. And that’s why we say in Parent/Child [class], that the young age, to sing things to them, like clean up time, make it a song. It doesn’t only make it fun for them, but it helps them to remember. They get excited when it comes back around, because they know what you’re asking them to do. Instead of saying, “Go pick up your toys,” put it into a cute little song, put on your jammies, let’s go brush your teeth, let’s eat dinner. It may seem silly to some people, but you actually see a whole different type of learning and interaction happening when you put things into music for them, instead of just dialogue.

When music is used as instructions for the children, the children react. During a Parent/Child Big Beast class, the music instructs the children to jump like a kangaroo. The children begin to jump, even before the instructor jumps to reinforce the instructions. Ms. Heather discussed the way the children react to the music used in class.

A lot of times the kids will actually listen to the music before they will listen to the instructors. And, since it is directive music, they are actually responding to the music a lot more often than they are to the specific instruction of the adult or another person in the room. It also allows, it’s the structure portion, portion of the structure that can almost seem unstructured. They recognize the songs, they remember quick instructional songs, and it makes instructions seem a lot more easy. Kind of like the spoonful of sugar, right?

The types of directive music range from how to jump to when to clean up the room. In fact, Ms. Heather described the following:

In the warm-ups and in the group activities and such, it can be used to describe an action that you want them to do. You can incorporate, if you're doing fast music, you want them to move fast. If it's slow, you want them to move slowly. We even use music as our cues as to when an action is supposed to happen. Since we use directive music, the words are the directions. The tune is the cue for what activity you want them to do. Sometimes we even put rhyming words together to get them to do certain body positions in order to do a skill, to follow a set of skills.

At the end of all of the birth to three-year-old classes, the teacher empties a bucket of bouncy balls for the children. The children are often given instructions on what to do with the balls, such as kick the balls, throw them with one hand, or try to throw them over handed using both hands. As one can imagine, at the end of the activity there are balls all over the classroom. So, instead of instructing the children to gather the balls, the teacher sings, "*It's time to put the balls away, balls away, balls away. It's time to put the balls away, at the Little Gym*" (See Figure 1). Instantly, the children run around the room picking up the balls, putting them away in the bucket and running back for more.

Karla Luther realized that the musical instruction is better than the spoken word for her two year old daughter.

I think that's super good for them, and so it makes it more fun for 'em. I mean, I don't know how, at their age, I don't know how just taking, just listening to teachers talk and just telling them, I don't know if that would catch their attention at all. I think that keeps them focused on what's actually going on, what their talking about. I think that 100%.

Ms. Heather sees on a daily basis that the spoken word is not nearly as effective as musical instructions.

I mean, a song is so much easier to digest than a spoken word. You've got the different tones of your voice, you've got the different inflections, you've got the quicker beats, you can slow it down, you kind of affect a group much more effectively with

turning it into a song than by saying, “You need to go sit by the wall.” “It’s time to sit by the wall today” (sing-song voice) sounds a lot more fun than “Time to go sit by the wall.”

And, as Ms. Heather noted, many of the instructional songs including the clean up song and time to sit by the wall today sound similar, but the words are different. The children are familiar with the tune and listen to the different words. In fact, I have never observed a class where children did not listen to the words of the teacher-sung instructional songs and react immediately. Elaine Stroud mentioned that learning through music is beneficial to her children. She stated, “All their instructions are set to music. So they get up and they move to the rhythm. And they have to listen to the music to know what instructions to follow. So, I think that’s beneficial.”

The music directives are used differently in each class. As in the Parent/Child classes, the Pre-Kindergarten classes use warm-up music to prepare them for class. During this music, the children are directed as to what to do next. Ms. Kristal said that the “warm-up music is not supposed to be the lead, but we’re helping them to kind of understand what the music is telling them to do. The music directs everyone what to do, but there should never be a point where the music is doing all the work...” In other words, the music gives the spoken instruction, but the instructor and the parents should be demonstrating what the music instructs for the children. The Dance classes use music as one of their biggest tools. In the dance class, children are instructed to listen to the music and dance according to what the music sounds like to them. Ms. Kristal described the use of music in the dance class by saying,

So, we’ll put on a song, and it may say to try these things, but it’s really a point where they just get to do whatever they think a ballerina looks like, or you’re asking them to dance like an animal. They have to tell us what they think an animal would look like if they’re dancing, so we’re not really directing...

Ms. Heather mentioned that they also use music during the Dance class to encourage listening to the music. For instance, “We’ll use it for dancing hard, or dancing soft or dancing fast or

dancing slow, what would a twirl sound like? For the most part, there's a lot more background music that's just not directional. It's just music." The music is instructional, and the children pay close attention to the words so that they can properly participate in class. In fact, in observing the classes, I found that the spoken was less effective in instructing children than the music.

Parents have also noted the importance music has to their children in the transfer of skills from classroom to home. Elaine Stroud mentioned that she often incorporated the clean-up song at home. She said,

They have a cleanup song that we would sing at home, they have a bye bye song that we would lay on the floor, "Bye Bye you big bugs, we'll see you," whatever, so yes, we incorporated those at home as well. I thought it was a good idea. I saw it there and just modeled it home, not necessarily so she (Alexis) would do better in the class, just because I saw it work there so we tried it at home.

And, Elaine Stroud's belief in the use of music is so strong that she uses it on a daily basis with her son during home school lessons. She discussed how she uses music during a typical day.

Keith is in kindergarten and he learns through music. One of the programs that we use to teach him is called Readeez. And it sets all his vocabulary and his language learning to music, so everything has a song. We learn about money through songs, we learn about words, the meaning of words all through song.

Polly Strickland also uses music to teach her children and understands that music helps the children remember more than if they had just heard something through spoken word.

That's how they learned phone number, address, that's how they learned to spell their names, a lot of their reading sounds. We always make little rhymes, so anytime that Stacey's studying, anything for education, we always make rhymes and put it to music.

Blacking (1995) observed that families often use music in teaching children important aspects of society. Additionally, Campbell (2005) found that engaging in musical play is typical for all children. Since music and learning to follow directions is a large part of a child's life, it only

seems fitting that the two are combined as an instructional technique and this is evident at the Little Gym.

Music as a Means of Enhancing Imagination and Creativity

Activities at the Little Gym encourage play, first and foremost. Children are free to play and create without restraint during the entire class. In addition, during the Parent/Child classes, children are not scolded for leaving a group activity to experiment with a piece of equipment. The children are free to use their creativity, while the music is used to enhance their imagination. During the warm-up, the instructor will turn on the song and then help direct the children in certain activities. In one class, the participants formed a circle and followed directions that included walking, running, and pretending to be an animal. The children may be asked to be a kangaroo and jump across the mat, or they may be told to be a bear and crawl on their hands and knees. Ms. Kristal described the use of imaginative music as the following:

[In] Parent-Child classes, we take them through, a lot of imaginary play like we did for the learning unit. The theme we are doing is animals. We are using the animal sounds. And then we are working on movement. Instead of someone just saying “I want you to jump,” they have to actually be these things. Like, we’re doing the pirate thing today, so they’re going to be Jake and the Neverland Pirates and Peter Pan and we have to take them from the Little Gym into this whole new dimension and the music helps us. It’s a tool to get there. And, so basically, us just giving them a story line isn’t as awesome as putting on the music and it really takes them to that place.

During the warm-up music, the words of a song may instruct a class to walk like a bear. While the teacher may demonstrate the action, the sound of the music takes the children into a forest listening to the sounds of nature. Ms. Kristal even described the fact that the music could be enough to help take the children deep into their imagination, but the actions of the teachers help take it to a different level. The children are encouraged to bring the music alive through their actions.

The Little Gym also uses musical manipulatives to help enhance the imagination of the children. The opening song of all of the Parent/Child classes uses shakers to help bring the music alive. Children use scarves to interpret the sounds of the music they are hearing. At the end of every class, children drum on the floor using their hands as the instruments. Kristal describes the use of the manipulatives as follows:

We use shakers, at the end we do the drums with our hands, sometimes we'll bring out, like if it's animal week, we'll bring stuffed animals and stuff like that to help with the music. But, that's again, really bringing the music alive. Using the tools that we have to really do that. We do rhythm sticks, we do the parachute with the music, we do stretch rope with the music, again there are a lot of cognitive benefits there, but they also get to be in a group setting working with their peers, learning how to play in a group kind of thing.

The Little Gym definitely capitalizes on the opportunity to allow children to play with musical manipulatives in unstructured ways. For instance, in one class, the teacher passed out a pair of rhythm sticks to each of the children. The music instructs the children to do the following: Tap the stick together, tap the stick to the sole of your foot, tap the sticks on the floor, saying "tap, tap, tap, tap," encouraging the children to tap to the beat of the music. The music further instructed the children to tap their sticks together, tap them high, tap them on certain parts of the body, and use one stick like a hammer and one stick like a nail. Further, the music then suggests that the children should roll the sticks across the soles of their feet like a rolling pin. This use of manipulatives not only encourages children to concentrate on the beat of the music, but also to use their imagination to make the sticks into different items, such as hammers and rolling pins.

The Dance class uses music to enhance the imagination more so than any other class. The creative movement exercises include the idea of dancing a particular way or mimicking a particular animal. For instance, the teacher may ask the class how to demonstrate the way a

particular animal would look when doing an arabesque. Ms. Kristal discussed how important music is during the class.

We do a lot of creative movement in dance, so what we do is we just put the music on for them at that point, dance is more of a background for tap and ballet. It's just to kind of keep them in rhythm with the music, if we put on, like, fast paced songs for tap to keep them going, we put on slower songs for ballet, kind of mellow them out, but in between we do creative movement.

The use of manipulatives and imagination during musical play are cognitively beneficial to children. A variety of educational studies have shown that early childhood experiences have a great effect on cognitive development. According to Bloom (1985), 80 percent of a child's intellectual growth occurs between conception and age eight, suggesting that the services of the Little Gym are beneficial for development. Music educators have begun to stress the need for early musical experiences (Romanek, p. 129), and, as previously noted, children benefit from playing with musical instruments in the way they would play with other toys (Smithrim, 1997, p. 18). Music educators would do well to allow free play with music instruments so as not to stifle creativity. The Little Gym introduces music to children in a way that is exciting and stirs creativity among them, allowing them to have a positive first experience with music. Zur and Johnson-Green (2008) established that children benefit from expressing themselves through musical activities. They commented,

Parents, therefore, might expand the ways in which they think of children's music making to include spontaneous songs, chants, rhythmic creations, and movements. Adults who understand their children's music making as a meaningful and necessary aspect of growth and development may help children develop their expressive capabilities (p. 298).

It would appear that the structure and content of the Little Gym classes are doing just that, fostering creativity through the use of music.

Benefits of Music Use in the Classroom

During interviews, both parents and instructors felt that music used in the classroom benefits the children. Parents and instructors discussed a wide range of benefits, including music as a means to focus, music as a means to transfer skills, and music as a positive distraction.

Music as a means to Focus Attention

When children enter the classroom, they are often excited and running around the classroom. Children are easily distracted by all of the interesting equipment in the classroom and could have difficulty focusing during the class. However, the music directs the children toward the activities and helps them to focus on their tasks. Theresa Williams, mother of Anna (age 2) said that the music helps to draw Anna into the activities. When Anna comes into class, she runs around and plays. Theresa Williams commented, “she’s so active, too, I mean, you’ve seen her, you know, she likes to climb and run a lot. So, music does distract her away from that a little bit.” She continued by saying that music actually helped her to focus on the activities rather than play. When Anna hears the opening song, she stops swinging from the uneven bars and runs to the red mat. The song definitely draws Anna away from the equipment and into circle time and helps her focus on the task at hand.

Shelby Brown, mother of Cameron (3 years) and Alyssa (19 months), noted how important the warm up music is at helping her children participate in class. She described the warm up songs as “...actually telling them what they need to be doing. You know, like sometimes they play the whole song, sometimes they don’t... it helps keep them focused on what they should be doing and whatever that skill is that they’re learning.” She further described the use of music during this time as a way to “keep(s) them stimulated, I think it keeps them interested, they’re not just listening to, yes, they are listening to the teacher’s voice, but they

have that [the music] in the background, I think it kind of helps the class flow.” She continued by stating that she feels that the music helps to provide structure to the class.

The warm up music is especially helpful for Alyssa, who has difficulty joining the class. Shelby Brown describes Alyssa as clingy and shy when entering class. But, the music helps her focus on the activities, rather than the nerves of being in the environment.

Karla Luther, mother of Addison (age 2), described the musical experience in the classroom as the following:

I definitely think the benefit of it is it kind of gets them excited to me, at the beginning when they get started and it’s fun and kind of loud, I think that gets them wanting to participate and excited about class. I do think that they turn that down a notch but they use it as a background, a little background for them, and that keeps them, I think calm, not just like dull and where they don’t want to do anything anymore, but even keel which I think brings them down a notch from the beginning where they are running around and playing and listening to the music loud and doing what the music says. So I definitely think that it’s a super, a super great technique to use with toddlers.

The music helps the children focus on each activity, according to the level at which the music is played. Polly Strickland also believed that the music helps the children focus.

I think it helps them remember what they’re doing, for sure. And I also think that when they’re singing the songs with them, they’re all listening and paying attention and staying in their place, versus just the teacher standing there talking to them, because of their attention span at their age.

Based on my observations and conversations with teachers and parents, it does appear that music is being used effectively to focus the children on the activities of the class and draw their attention towards specific tasks. This finding is unique to the present investigation, as music as a means to focus attention did not emerge in any of the previous studies reviewed.

Music as a Positive Distraction

Further, several parents mentioned how shy their children are and how much the music

provides a distraction to their nerves of being in class. Polly Strickland discussed how much this affected her oldest daughter, Stacey.

Stacey, she was such a momma's baby, I guess, and clung to me so much, whenever they would sing, let's go and play today, it seemed like she would get excited and sing the song and maybe venture off from me a little bit more. If they had just said, "Okay, go play," I don't think she would have ever let go of me. I mean she was still clingy, but she would interact with the kids a little bit more. Like when they all laid down on their bellies to play the drums, she would get down there and do it.

Sarah Smith has recognized this with her two year old, Bryan, as well. Bryan often walks into the classroom and begins climbing on the balance beam or swinging on the uneven bars, keeping himself separated from the other children. Yet, when the instructor takes out the shakers and begins the songs, Bryan runs to the big red mat, grabs a shaker, and begins to participate with the other children. Bryan will participate in the warm up activities, and although he stays close to his mother, he does participate. The music excites him and encourages him to participate. During free play, you can often find Bryan dancing to the music on the big red mat, rather than exploring the equipment with the other children. Yet, Sarah Smith sees this as an improvement as he is actually in the class, participating to some extent.

Shelby Brown also appreciates this benefit of music in the classroom. Although her son Cameron has no trouble joining his classmates in participating in class, her daughter, Alyssa, is, as Shelby Brown says, more anti-social. Alyssa is very shy and often runs or cries when she is around people she does not know well. However, Shelby Brown credited the music to helping Alyssa transition in to the class.

I think the music added a little calming factor to her. In a way, I think that has kind of helped her come out a little bit in class and try, and now she's actually loving it. In the opening when they play the opening music and get to run or when you're doing your warm-ups, she's starting to get into it. Because, I'll sing the song with the guy, or Kristal is singing the song, so she sees it and she's starting to have more fun with it. With, in the beginning with her, I thought, "oh goodness, is she ever going to get into this class."

And, it probably helps that Shelby Brown sings some of the same songs used in class to Alyssa at home. Alyssa is becoming accustomed to hearing the music and having familiarity with the music allows her to feel more comfortable in class.

Not only does the music distract the children from the nerves of simply participating in class, the music also proves to be a distraction to the children as they are nervous about trying a new skill. Theresa Williams discussed about her daughter, Anna, as she was walking the balance beam by herself.

On the beam today, she wanted me to sing her ABCs. She walked the beam by herself.... In class this morning, we were singing and she walked the whole beam by herself. She wanted to do it again and she said "ABC, momma." She wanted me to sing it. She doesn't know all the words, yet.

So, although Anna was typically nervous to walk the beam without help, the use of music distracted her enough to help her conquer her fear. And, it was a pretty impressive task for a two year old to walk the length of the beam without help!

Amy Sanchez, mother to Celia, sees that the use of music plays an important part in her life and the life of her child. However, she notices the benefit of music played in class at home, rather than in the classroom. Celia, normally outgoing and bubbly at home does not always participate in class. In fact, Amy Sanchez said, "In class, she's very quiet, and very observant. She has a lot to say, believe me, she definitely talks here at the house, just not in class." Amy Sanchez observes everything that goes on in class, but does not always participate. However, when she gets home, she brings out shakers and other music that are a part of the class. And, although Celia does not always participate in class, Amy Sanchez noticed that the music "[B]rings out of her a few things, like wanting to dance and wanting to sing and clap. I think it's a good influence." She added, "I do think that Little Gym does a great, great job, in providing a background for dance, musically, physically and other things." The music provides an excellent

distraction for the students, by drawing them towards the task at hand, as well as helping them forget the fears they feel about both the skills and the social situation. Again, this finding was unique to this study, as none of the literature reviewed discussed music as a distraction.

Music as Subject Matter

Other mothers noted the musical benefits their children received while participating in the Little Gym classes. Elaine Stroud mentioned, “It inspires them to clap on rhythm, and move their bodies to a certain way to the music. Keith likes to jump in time with the rhythm a little bit different than Alexis, Alexis would sit and clap and Keith would jump up and down.” She added, “It teaches them rhythm, movement in time with the music, in that case listening and listening to instructions.” Shelby Brown, mother to Cameron and Alyssa, ages 3 and 19 months, also appreciated the use of music in the class.

He’s old enough now that he gets it, and gets excited about a song, or whatever, or the music, and he just wants to dance to it, or sing to Alyssa, or teach Alyssa how to do it. So to me, that’s the biggest benefit, that he’s enjoying it so much, by being there and hearing it, that he comes home and teaches his sister... But, I definitely think it has made Cameron more aware of music, and of the beats, and of, you know what I’m saying, to where he is more interested at home...

These findings are consistent with the research completed by Romanek (1974), who discovered that preschool children are interested in music and want music to be a part of their play.

Interestingly, one mother, Elaine Stroud, actually realized for the first time the musical benefits Little Gym provided for her children. She appreciates what Little Gym has provided for her children in terms of physical activity and self esteem and now appreciates even more the idea that Little Gym provides musical benefits as well. And, research has shown,

The level of expressing interest in music activities and the level of development of music abilities are closely linked with the child’s first experiences in music. For this reason it is important that the children are offered a variety of musical experiences already in the preschool period so that they can form a positive relationship toward music (Denac, 2008, p. 439).

Music used in the Little Gym helps children develop an appreciation for music such that cannot be developed if they had no previous exposure to music. Both the instructors and parents realize this and appreciate this aspect of the Little Gym.

Based on my observations and interactions with parents and teachers, I found that music is used to facilitate transitions, give instructions, and enhance creativity and imagination among students. Further, the benefits of music in the classroom included helping children focus, creating a positive distraction for the students, and providing music education benefits.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

Applications for Music Educators

Many of the musical activities the Little Gym uses are activities similar to those children in a typical preschool or lower elementary school music class would experience. Little Gym accomplishes this without the intent of actually teaching music. Children are given the opportunity to enjoy music without the pressure of practice. Children listen to music, sing along, and learn to process beats and rhythms. Due to the nature of case study research, the findings are not generalizable. We can however explore suggestions as to how music can be used with young children. While some of these things may be happening in classrooms already, the findings of this study may serve as a reminder of the ways music educators and classroom teachers might use music in early childhood settings. Music educators and classroom teachers might use these techniques in classes to engage children and draw them into music. In doing so, children are introduced to music in a positive, non-pressure situation which could help them develop an interest later in life. Further, the Little Gym does an excellent job of allowing children to experiment with music without fear of correction. Obviously, behavior must be corrected in order to insure the safety and comfort of the other children. Yet, children can allow their creativity to take hold as they participate in class. Berger & Cooper (2003) observed that “When adults corrected children’s actions, musical play sometimes ceased.” And, Smithrim’s (1997) observation of the musical free play of eight 3-and4-year olds indicated that children experienced and demonstrated musical growth during free-play music sessions. Therefore, music educators and classroom teachers might consider allowing early childhood learners to experience free play with music with little to no correction, so that they might experience positive musical experiences which, in turn, might lead to a lifelong interest in and love of music.

Directions for Future Research

Although this study focused on the use of music at Little Gym, there is still much information to be learned about the use of music in learning situations with preschoolers and elementary school aged children. Further studies conducted at the Little Gym could include studying children over a period of several years, from the earliest classes (4 months) through preschool to see how they react to the use of music, as well as how their musical interests develop across time. These students could be compared to children who entered the program at various times to see if music played a different role for them. Following a cohort of children through the youngest program through their entry into grade school and beyond could show the longitudinal effects of their early exposure to music.

Not only could additional studies be completed at this particular Little Gym, studies could be completed in centers such as Gymboree Play and Learn classrooms to compare the use of music among preschool learning centers. During these studies, getting the child's perspective of music rather than just observing their behaviors could allow the educator to see through their eyes. In addition, studies comparing the use of music in a preschool elementary music classroom to a classroom such as the Little Gym could help both music educators and educators outside of the music classroom enhance learning among their students. Studies focusing on how well children learn through music could help educators of all levels know how to use music in their classroom. Lastly, applying the techniques used at Little Gym to a music classroom and investigating the effect of these techniques could be beneficial to music educators of all levels.

Conclusion

The Little Gym of Baton Rouge uses music in many ways to enhance the learning experiences of the children involved in all of their classes. Music is used in the classroom to facilitate transitions allowing the class to move seamlessly from one activity to the next. Further, music is used as a means of giving instructions to the children. Rather than listening to the spoken words of the instructors, children benefitted from hearing the instructions through the music and seeing the instructions demonstrated by both parents and teachers. Music is also used to enhance the imagination and creativity of the children. As the children hear musical instructions, they also hear sounds that can encourage them to think beyond the instructions. Parents also appreciated all of the benefits the music used in the classroom provided to their children. Music helped the children focus, transfer skills, and provided a positive distraction.

Through this study, I learned that music provides more than just background noise during classes at the Little Gym. Music provides enjoyment, excitement, and cognitive benefits to the children involved. I hope this study will serve music educators by reinforcing the idea that there is more to music than simply teaching musical skills to students. Music can be used as a learning device in teaching skills for classes outside of music. Music can be used to transition from one activity to another, allowing for ease of movement and providing not only a time saving technique but a way to alleviate classroom management issues. Overall, music has proven to be a benefit for instructors, student, and parent participants at the Little Gym and can be a benefit to educators as well.

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APPENDIX A CLASS SCHEDULE

Parent - Child Classes (Infants to 3 years)

	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
Bugs (4 to 10 months)		11:00 AM					
Birds (10 to 19 months)				9:15 AM	10:00 AM		9:15 AM
Beasts (19 months to 2.5 years)			10:00 AM	10:00 AM	10:45 AM	9:15 AM	
Beasts/Super Beasts* (19 months to 3 years)			6:30 PM				10:00 AM
Super Beasts (2.5 to 3 years)				10:45 AM	9:15 AM	11:30 AM	

* Denotes class with combined age groups

Pre-School - Kindergarten Gymnastics (3 to 6 years)

	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
Funny Bugs (3 to 4 years)		10:00 AM	11:30 AM		5:30 PM		11:15 AM
Giggle Worms (4 to 5 years)		6:30 PM		3:30 PM			
Good Friends (5 to 6 years)				6:30 PM			

Grade School Gymnastics (6 to 12 years)

	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
Flips (6 to 12 years)		4:30 PM					12:15 PM
Twisters (6 to 12 years)			3:30 PM		6:30 PM		
Aerials (6 to 12 years)				4:30 PM			
Jets (6 to 12 years)			4:30 PM				

Dance The Little Gym Way (3 to 12 years)

	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
Jazzy Bugs (3 to 4 years)							10:15 AM
Jazzy Bugs/Giggle Toes* (3 to 5 years)		11:30 AM				10:30 AM	
Good Leaps/Jazzy Jets* (5 to 12 years)			5:30 PM				

* Denotes class with combined age groups

Sports Skills Development (3 to 6 years)

	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
Mini Jacks (3 to 4 years)				5:30 PM	11:30 AM		

Karate Classes (4 to 12 years)

	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
Chopsticks		5:30 PM					

(4 to 6 years)							
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APPENDIX B SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol for Instructors

1. How long have you been an instructor at Little Gym?
2. What drew you to the Little Gym?
3. Define your musical background.
4. Explain the use of music in a typical Little Gym class.
5. Describe the way children react to the use of music during class.
6. In what ways do you use music to instruct children?
7. Describe the way you use music with the different age groups and class types.

Interview Protocol for Parents

1. How long has your child been a participant at the Little Gym?
2. In what classes has your child participated?
3. Describe your musical background.
4. In what ways do you use music in your home?
5. Describe the way your child reacts to the music used during class.
6. Describe the way your child uses music outside of the Little Gym classroom.
7. In what ways does your child use the musical activities used in class at home?

APPENDIX C
LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY IRB EXEMPTION APPROVAL

Application for Exemption from Institutional Oversight

Unless qualified as meeting the specific criteria for exemption from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight, ALL LSU research/ projects using living humans as subjects, or samples, or data obtained from humans, directly or indirectly, with or without their consent, must be approved or exempted in advance by the LSU IRB. This Form helps the PI determine if a project may be exempted, and is used to request an exemption.



Institutional Review Board
Dr. Robert Mathews, Chair
131 David Boyd Hall
Baton Rouge, LA 70803
P: 225.578.8692
F: 225.578.6792
irb@lsu.edu
lsu.edu/irb

-- Applicant, Please fill out the application in its entirety and include the completed application as well as parts A-E, listed below, when submitting to the IRB. Once the application is completed, please submit two copies of the completed application to the IRB Office or to a member of the Human Subjects Screening Committee. Members of this committee can be found at <http://www.lsu.edu/screeningmembers.shtml>

-- A Complete Application Includes All of the Following:

- (A) Two copies of this completed form and two copies of part B thru E.
- (B) A brief project description (adequate to evaluate risks to subjects and to explain your responses to Parts 1&2)
- (C) Copies of all instruments to be used.
*If this proposal is part of a grant proposal, include a copy of the proposal and all recruitment material.
- (D) The consent form that you will use in the study (see part 3 for more information.)
- (E) Certificate of Completion of Human Subjects Protection Training for all personnel involved in the project, including students who are involved with testing or handling data, unless already on file with the IRB. Training link: (<http://phrp.nihtaining.com/users/login.php>.)
- (F) IRB Security of Data Agreement: (<http://www.lsu.edu/irb/IRB%20Security%20of%20Data.pdf>)

1) Principal Investigator: Alison Alexander Rank: Graduate Student
Dept: Music Ph: 912-220-9081 E-mail: aalex33@lsu.edu

2) Co Investigator(s): please include department, rank, phone and e-mail for each

Sarah J. Bartolome, Assistant Professor of Music Education, CMDA
225-578-2681
sbartolome@lsu.edu

IRB#	<u>E5835</u>	LSU Proposal #
<input type="radio"/>	Complete Application	
<input checked="" type="radio"/>	Human Subjects Training	

3) Project Title: A Study of Children's Musical Play at The Little Gym Children

Study Exempted By:
Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairman
Institutional Review Board
Louisiana State University
203 B-1 David Boyd Hall
225-578-8692 | www.lsu.edu/irb
Exemption Expires: 2/12/2015

4) Proposal? (yes or no) ☐ No If Yes, LSU Proposal Number

Also, if YES, either ☐ This application completely matches the scope of work in the grant
OR ☐ More IRB Applications will be filed later

5) Subject pool (e.g. Psychology students) Children <18, Gym instructors, parents of children <18

*Circle any "vulnerable populations" to be used: (children <18; the mentally impaired, pregnant women, the aged, other). Projects with incarcerated persons cannot be exempted.

6) PI Signature Alison Alexander Date 1/10/12 (no per signatures)

** I certify my responses are accurate and complete. If the project scope or design is later changes, I will resubmit for review. I will obtain written approval from the Authorized Representative of all non-LSU institutions in which the study is conducted. I also understand that it is my responsibility to maintain copies of all consent forms at LSU for three years after completion of the study. If I leave LSU before that time the consent forms should be preserved in the Departmental Office.

Screening Committee Action:	Exempted <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Not Exempted <input type="checkbox"/>	Category/Paragraph <u>1</u>
Reviewer	<u>Mathews</u>	Signature	<u>Robert C Mathews</u> Date <u>2/13/12</u>

APPENDIX D

SAMPLE CONSENT FORM

Study Title: A Study of Children's Musical Play at The Little Gym
Consent form for Parents and Teachers

1. Performance Site: The Little Gym, Baton Rouge, LA
2. Investigators: The following investigator is available for questions about this study, Monday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Alison Alexander (912) 220-9081
4. Purpose: The purpose of this case study is to explore the value of children's musical play in a non-musical learning environment.
5. Subject Inclusion: Children, ages six months to six years enrolled in classes at The Little Gym in Baton Rouge, LA, parents of enrolled students and teachers of those classes.
6. Number of Subjects: approximately 50
7. Study Procedures: This study involves three data collection strategies: Observation, interview, and review of material culture. Formal observations of children participating in The Little Gym classes will be conducted throughout the duration of the project. Participant observations will be conducted by the researcher as a part of mommy and me classes. Parents of child participants as well as the owner and teachers at The Little Gym will be interviewed. Each 30-minute interview will be audio recorded. The investigator will ask the questions listed on the attached "Semi-Structured Interview Protocols" (see last page of this document).
8. Benefits: There are no direct benefits related to participation, however this study may contribute to our understanding of the value of the use of music with young children.
9. Risks: There are minimal risks associated with participation in this study, however, sometimes people get nervous when they are interviewed and audio recorded. You are free to stop the interview at any time should you feel uncomfortable or anxious. Additionally, you do not have to answer

any question you do not wish to answer. Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your responses. Audio files and interview transcripts will be saved on a password-protected laptop to which only the investigator has access.

10. Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.

11. Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

12. Signatures:

The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigator. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Signature of Subject

Date

Study Exempted By:
Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairman
Institutional Review Board
Louisiana State University
203 B-1 David Boyd Hall
225-578-8692 | www.lsu.edu/irb
Exemption Expires: 2/12/2015

Hi. My name is Alison Alexander. I am a student at LSU. Right now, I'm trying to learn about how your teachers at Little Gym use music in your class. I would like to ask you to help me by being in a study, but before I do, I want to explain what will happen if you decide to help me.

I will ask you to tell me how music is used in your classroom. I will ask you if you like music, how music makes you feel, and what your teachers do with music during your class. By answering the questions, you will help me understand how music is used in your class.

Your parents, teachers and classmates will not know what you have said. When I tell other people about my study, I will not use your name, and no one will be able to tell who I'm talking about.

Your mom or dad says it's okay for you to be in my study. But if you don't want to be in the study, you don't have to be. I won't be upset, and no one else will be upset, if you don't want to be in the study. If you want to be in the study now but change your mind later, that's okay. You can stop at any time. If there is anything you don't understand you should tell me so I can explain it to you.

You can ask me questions about the study. If you have a question later that you don't think of now, you can call me or ask your parents to call me or send me an email.

Do you have any questions for me now?

Would you like to be in my study and answer some questions?

Name of Child: _____

Parental Permission on File: ☐ Yes ☐ No

Child's Voluntary Response to Participation: ☐ Yes ☐ No

Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____

(Optional) Signature of Child: _____

Study Exempted By:
Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairman
Institutional Review Board
Louisiana State University
203 B-1 David Boyd Hall
225-578-8692 | www.lsu.edu/irb
Exemption Expires: 2/12/2015

VITA

Originally from Savannah, Georgia, Alison Alexander is a candidate for the degree of Master of Music Education from Louisiana State University. She obtained her Bachelor of Arts degree in music from Mercer University in 2003 and her Bachelor of Music Education from Armstrong Atlantic State University in 2005. From 2004 – 2008, Alison taught music to students in preschool through twelfth grade at Memorial Day School in Savannah, Georgia. Alison has been the director of children's choirs in Savannah and Plaquemine, Louisiana since 2003. Alison now lives in Louisiana with her husband, John, and their two children, Connor and Brady.