

Musical Contexts as Bridge-builders in Early Childhood Music Education in Kenya

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The word “context” generally denotes “the situation in which something happens, and helps (a person) to understand it.” (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 7th edn.). In a musical sense, context determines the functions of music in society. In most cases, however, there is an overlap of roles within a single situation. For instance, music may entertain as well as communicate a message. Similarly, music that validates religious rituals may also evoke a physical response from its listeners. These examples illustrate the versatility of music as an art form.

Like every other age group, young children experience music in its many situations. In the early years, they tend to associate certain music with certain activities. While lullabies suggest that it is time to sleep, singing games may be associated with playtime.

This paper suggests that the integration of musical activities from diverse contexts is highly beneficial to music education. It reports an investigation of music in 3 contexts, namely school, places of worship, and homes. Four children, all between 7 and 8 years old, were interviewed concerning their performance in music in school, at home, and in the place of worship, to determine:

- What musical activities they engaged in within these contexts;
- Whether these activities overlapped within the different situations;
- In what ways the overlap promoted the children’s musical development.

Finally, the paper discusses principles that may be drawn for music education in early childhood and subsequent stages.

Background

Kenya is an African country situated across the equator in the Eastern-central area of the continent, on the coast of the Indian Ocean (Infoplease 2011). Flanked by countries including Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda and Tanzania, Kenya as a nation is crucial in terms of business, trade, economics, and also education. Kenya’s education system is designed mainly along the lines of the British system of education (as it was at the time of their occupation of Kenya). This educational structure is one of the enduring legacies of the British to Kenya. From the language used in communicating in the classroom (English) to the subject matter of what was taught until certain aspects of the system (European literature, history, geography and music) were altered about 25 years ago, the British influence was clear-cut and solid.

This education system, in turn, shaped the path of music education, especially in terms of the type of music performed in schools. At all levels of schooling, children sang songs of English origin, such as singing games, folksongs, and madrigals

(Akuno 2005). Such songs as *The Farmer in the Dell*; *Ring o' Roses*, *Polly Oliver*, and English madrigals like *Now is the Month of Maying* and *Fair Phyllis* were popular from pre-independent Kenya. This music gained great prominence in the education system, to the extent that a person was not considered musically educated if they could not perform it. Music literacy was also a part of musical training at primary and secondary school (ibid. 2005). As an outgrowth of this, the singing of “set pieces,” or European songs arranged for choral groups, also became an important aspect of music education. Such songs were eventually to become an important component of the annual Kenya Music Festival, a music fete that brings together educational institutions of all levels, from early childhood centers to universities. These “set pieces” were, and still are, an integral feature of the festival. In a sense, they still present the most technical aspect of the festival, and choirs that excel in such music are hailed as being highly musical.

Another important genre introduced in the country by the European missionaries was hymns (Odwar 2005). These were introduced in schools as part of general singing, and also as a component of worship. Some of the schools established by the missionaries have continued the tradition of hymn practice up to the present times, as well as the singing of at least one hymn during one morning a week. Hymns were important not only in schools; they were also an important aspect of worship in churches established by the missionaries. Hymns therefore became the means of connection between two different contexts, namely church and school.

Although, over the years, much has changed within the education sector in Kenya, some aspects of the previous educational structure and practice still linger on. This remnant also influences what happens musically in contexts other than the formal school setting. The next part of this paper examines music education in early childhood settings. It then analyzes how the historical foundations of Kenyan education have shaped early childhood music education, also examining the various contexts in which music exists within early childhood education today.

Music Education in Early Childhood Settings

As mentioned above, early childhood education, like all other levels, was also influenced by the British. At the time when the country was fighting to attain self-rule, parents were separated from their children in certain regions because of the independence wars. These children were cared for by older siblings and one designated adult (Kipkorir 1993). The British also established preschool centers for their own children in Nairobi, Kenya's capital city, as well as in other areas where they lived. Such centers did not focus much on academic development; rather, they provided an avenue for socialization. After Independence, centralized systems of childcare continued to be necessary to help working parents look after the welfare of their young children. Native Kenyan children now dominated these centers. The English songs that had been taught to the British children were now taught to Kenyan children, and thus a tradition was established. Singing games of Western origin therefore became a central feature in musical activities. To this day, children in preschools perform Scottish dances and many singing games of Western origin.

The decade after Independence ushered in a new era where nationalization of education became a key priority for Kenya and other African nations (e.g. Ominde

1964; Gachathi 1979). Emphasis was placed on the need to teach, inter alia, Kenyan history, geography, literature and music. Early childhood educators were expected to use materials locally available to make teaching aids, as well as to teach the children the music of their culture. Whereas the shift was easier in areas like language, where Kiswahili (Kenya's national language) gained prominence as a language of communication, the same was not the case in the teaching of music. The challenges in this regard ranged from the fact that teachers had no prior experience with Kenyan music in their training (Anangwe 2002 cited in Digolo 2003); to the struggle to accept traditional Kenyan music, which had earlier been discouraged, because it was regarded as contradicting certain tenets of the Christian faith (ibid. 2003). Thirdly, the coexistence of multicultural communities in urban areas meant that no single community dominated an area; hence, no music of any one community represented all those living there.

Despite the above challenges, much progress has been made in the nationalization of early childhood music education. Children continue to identify with music from Kenya, as they also embrace music from Western cultures. The promotion of indigenous music in education is ongoing. Therefore, alongside the Western singing games, children are performing singing games from their own cultures. The shift from the dominance of hymn singing in the church to contemporary gospel music has also influenced music in early childhood settings. Now children sing short songs that involve call and response or some action that enables them to identify various parts of their body. While the urban areas tend to have more Western than Kenyan music, the increasing presence of Kiswahili songs acts as a balancing factor. Sometimes the Kiswahili songs are translations of Western singing games, while others are authentic. This state of affairs is acceptable in view of the fact that education, like every other sector, is shaped by internationalization and globalization.

Musical Contexts within the Framework of this Paper

A quick search on the internet reveals the multifaceted meanings of "Musical Contexts." From a description of the elements of music, to the listing of different works or forms, the definition covers a wide range of issues and contexts. However, in this paper, musical contexts are confined to cultural, social, and geographical environments within which the said music exists. There is a strong justification for the delimitation of context into these three areas. The cultural context in which a musical work is composed or written greatly influences its performance. A greater understanding of the cultural values, beliefs, and philosophy of a community enables a performer to appreciate the use of certain lyrics, rhythmic patterns, melodic intervals, or movements accompanying the music (Onyeji 2009). In an African context, culture is the bedrock of society, hence music, as one of the means of expressing culture, conforms to its norms. A simple example of the relationship between culture and musical performance in Africa is the emphasis on communal over individual performance. This practice reflects the spirit of community existing among Africans, and the sense that one belongs first to the community and then to oneself.

Social context in this paper refers to the particular group where a musical performance takes place. Three such contexts are identified, namely the school, church, and the home. These three have been selected purposively. School is an

important part of a child's life, and, second to the home, is the place where the child will spend much of his life—from early childhood up to at least the early 20s. Secondly, school shapes the child's thinking, philosophy, and development in very profound ways. Thirdly, musical performance in the school environment is much more structured, and happens more deliberately than it does in any other situation, due to the ordered manner in which school programs are run.

The church is also an important social context in Kenya. It is another of the legacies bequeathed by the mainly British settlers. At least 80 percent of Kenyans are nominally attached to a church. Music forms an integral aspect of worship in the church; hence, the importance of the church context cannot be overstated.

Finally, the home is where the child truly belongs at the end of the day. Children return home and digest what they have observed, internalized and practiced in other settings. The importance of the home environment is often not fully appreciated. At home, children are able to loosen up and cast off all inhibitions, becoming what all the other contexts shape them to grow into.

The Study

A group of four children, all between 7 and 8 years old, were interviewed about their involvement in music, particularly singing, in school, at home, and in the place of worship. The children all attended different schools. Two of them attended the same church, and all four lived in different parts of Nairobi, Kenya's capital city. All the participants were boys. The choice of gender was not deliberate; they were the most available to participate in the study. Following is some biographic data for each of the boys, as well as the type of school they attend (whether public or private) and the church they attend (in terms of denomination). Each of the children is discussed under a pseudonym.

Introducing the Participants

Duncan

Duncan is 8 years old. He is the younger of two children. His elder sister is 3 years older. Duncan comes from a middle class background. Both parents have careers, working outside the home. The family attends a Pentecostal church not very far from their home. Duncan and his sister attend a private Christian school. They either take the bus, walk to school (it is not very far from their house), or are dropped off by either parent on their way to work, since the family has two cars. Duncan's parents appreciate music. While they do not perform music as such, they have bought their children a synthesizer, a guitar and a drum set.

Joshua

Joshua is 7 years old. He is the youngest of three children. His eldest sister is an undergraduate in a private university in Nairobi, while his older brother is in his last

year of high school. He is also from a middle class background. Both parents teach at the University. The family attends a Catholic church in the neighborhood. Joshua walks to school, as it is only about a kilometer from his home. He attends a private school with no particular religious affiliation. Joshua's parents are not particularly interested in music, but they encourage him to participate in musical events at school. They also bought him a recorder, which is a requirement for his school music classes.

Alan

Alan is 7 years old. He is the older of two children. He has a younger sister who is 4 years old. Alan's parents also work outside the home. They are a middle class family. Alan attends a private school affiliated to a Pentecostal church. They hold prayers at school every morning and evening to start and end the day, respectively. Alan's family attends the same Pentecostal church as Duncan's family. Alan is picked up and dropped home from school by bus. Alan's parents appreciate music. His mother used to sing in the church choir but dropped out due to a busy schedule. Alan enjoys singing during Sunday school. He also sings at home before prayers every night.

Charles

Charles is 8 years old. He is the oldest of three children. His younger brother is 5 years old, while his youngest sister is 2 years old. Charles's parents both teach at the University. His mother is a lecturer in music education. Charles's family are Seventh Day Adventists, attending church on Saturdays. He attends a Christian School (the actual name of the school is Thika Road Christian School). The school is affiliated to a Baptist church. Charles is picked up and dropped home from school by school bus. Due to his mother's interest in music, Charles sings in the Children's church. Although they have a synthesizer at home, he rarely plays it.

Method

The four participants in this study underwent an interview over a period of a week. The aim of the interview was to determine their level of interest in, and engagement with, music at school and in church. The interview was also undertaken to determine their preferences in musical activities and what they would like to be done to afford them greater enjoyment in music. Due to the difficulty of arranging the research schedule with the children's school and home programs, three of the four interviews were carried out by telephone. This method undoubtedly posed certain challenges, some of which include the inability to study the unique nuances that in themselves add a certain dimension to findings. However, as the majority was interviewed using the same method, there was a sense of uniformity, which is crucial to the research process. The results of the interview were then analyzed qualitatively, and themes and trends were identified and discussed.

The mothers of the four boys were also interviewed, to establish the boys' musical activities at home and at church. This was found to be necessary, as it was not always possible to obtain the required information from the young participants. The interviews also provided a means of corroborating some of the information provided by the participants.

The participant interviews were carried out to determine:

- What musical activities they enjoyed;
- What musical activities they engaged in at school, at home, and in church;
- Whether any of these activities overlapped within the different situations;

The interviews carried out with the mothers sought information on

- What musical activities the participants engaged in at home and at church;
- Whether there was any similarity between music performed in the three different contexts
- Whether the parents regulated the participants' musical activities in any way;

Results

Musical Activities Enjoyed by Participants

The participants expressed a variety of views on the musical activities they enjoyed. The most commonly enjoyed activity was playing the synthesizer, by two of them (Charles and Duncan). Both these boys reported that they had a synthesizer at home. Their mothers confirmed that they played the instruments. Charles's mother, who teaches music at the university, reported that she had taught her son some tunes, which he played as an accompaniment to singing by the family. However, he could only play with his right hand. Duncan's mother reported that he played whatever tunes he had learned at school. However, due to her limited knowledge of music, she was not always able to tell if he was playing the right thing.

Musical Activities at School

All four participants reported that they sang at school. Asked what they sang, the most common were hymns, sung during prayers. Duncan and Joshua also reported that they played instruments at school (synthesizer and recorder, respectively).

Musical Activities in Church

All participants except for Joshua reported that they sang songs in church. Joshua only reported that sometimes they presented poems in their Sunday school class. Charles's mother reported that they had a diverse singing program in church, ranging from a children's choir (which she helps train, and of which Charles is a member), to performing songs from children's DVDs.

Musical Activities at Home

Three of the four participants indicated that they sang songs at home, particularly during prayer times. Only one of them (Joshua) did not sing at home. However, he reported that he listened to music from the radio, which he accessed from his sister's cell phone "whenever she allowed him to."

Overlap of Musical Activities

There was some overlap in all cases, for the three participants who sang at home. This was found especially in songs sung at church and at home. There was also some similarity in songs sung at school, since the participants all attended schools with a religious affiliation.

Results from Interviews with Mothers

Musical Activities at Home and at Church

Information was sought from the mothers about these two contexts, as a parent was mostly present in these situations. The mothers generally confirmed the information provided by the participants. In one case, the participant (Charles) declined to mention that he listened to music downloaded onto his cell phone from the internet, but his mother indicated that she had on occasion found him listening to this music.

Overlap of Musical Activities

Except for one participant (Joshua), all the mothers reported that the participants sang some of the songs learned in school. However, Joshua would practice playing the recorder at home, while Duncan played the synthesizer for his parents as required by his music teacher. Charles would on occasion sing a song he learned in school, or indicate that a certain song had also been sung at school. Alan insisted that they sing one (religious) song together as a family every night, because it was a requirement of the schoolteacher.

Parental Regulation of Participants' Musical Activities

All four mothers regulated the participants' musical activities, albeit for different reasons. In the case of Joshua, his mother mainly ensured that he did not listen to music past his bedtime; however, it was evident that certain music was not encouraged, especially music with lyrics that she found unacceptable. For the other three participants, the mothers consciously sought to ensure that their children listened to music that validated their religious beliefs and doctrine. One mother reported that her son listened to secular music when she was away, although she had found him listening to this music on a few occasions. She discouraged this habit whenever she

could. The mothers all regulated musical activities in various ways, the most common method being to keep the radio or television where they could be accessed only at certain times, to listen to or to watch specific programs.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to establish the different contexts in which musical activities among 7 and 8 year olds took place, and whether there was a link between these contexts that would benefit their overall music education.

The information was sought through open-ended interviews with the participants and their mothers. The use of interviews as the sole data collection method was an adjustment of the earlier intention to conduct observation sessions. This adjustment reflects the ongoing negotiations and realignments that take place in every research project, often due to issues that come up in the research process. Some of the issues informing these realignments involve ethical dilemmas (Cohen et al. 2007), in this case, in research involving religion and faith issues, which tend to touch on a person's very identity. The findings of the study, however, provide an opportunity for interesting dialogue with regard to the issue at hand.

Participants' Enjoyment of Musical Activities

The findings of the study reveal that three out of the four participants reported enjoyment of musical activities. The fourth participant (Joshua) exhibited much less enthusiasm with regard to the issue, a situation that may be explained variously. However, for the three who reported a positive attitude to musical activities, two stated that they enjoyed playing the synthesizer. It is worth noting that one of the two plays the instrument at school for his music lessons. He also plays at home, both for his own enjoyment as well as to fulfill the requirement that parents also listen to him performing music. His mother reported that she enjoyed listening to him, but could not correct any errors due to her limited understanding of music. The other respondent who enjoyed playing the instrument did not play it at school, but on an instrument kept at home. With help from his mother, a lecturer in music education, he is learning to play this instrument. Both the respondents who enjoy playing the synthesizer also indicated that they liked to sing. The third participant reported that he enjoyed singing "action songs." It is unlikely that the school offers instrumental tuition, since all the musical activities he referred to involve singing. However, he has a strong liking for singing. The fourth participant (Joshua) plays the recorder at school. Although he also plays it at home, it was clear from his response that he did not play much outside of school.

This finding suggests that children's enjoyment of musical activities, while usually spontaneous (Temmerman 2000), is greatly enhanced within a supportive environment. It is also evident that the performing of musical activities across different contexts, in this case school and home, strengthens children's participation and enjoyment of musical activities. However, the interconnection between the different contexts is strengthened by parental and family support. Joshua, who plays

the recorder at school, but hardly ever performs at home, confirms this. It appears that his family members do not encourage him to perform much, suggesting his lack of enthusiasm in this regard. Musical contexts can therefore become effective bridge-builders in music education when the similarity of musical activities across environments occurs within a supportive framework.

Overlap of Musical Activities

All four participants reported overlapping of musical activities, whether playing of synthesizers at home and school, singing of hymns at home, school, and church; and singing of various children's songs at school and at home. Although this section is closely related to the discussion above, the emphasis here is on the overlap rather than the enjoyment of musical activities. When musical activities overlap across contexts, there is a smooth transition into different environments. In children's minds, there are few demarcations in learning; therefore, music provides an effective means of ensuring that learning is uninterrupted across different contexts. Alan, who reported that he enjoyed action songs, also reported that he enjoyed singing such songs both at church and at school. This finding is an indication that children's songs should bear the unique characteristics that attract them to the music, regardless of the context.

Parental Regulation of Musical Activities

All four participants reported that their parents regulated their musical activities at home. The interviews with their mothers confirmed their responses in this regard. In one case, the parent reported that she regulated musical activities mainly to ensure that her child went to sleep early enough to awaken fresh for school. The other three mothers regulated musical activities associated with the various technological devices found in the home. One mother locked the TV and radio in her bedroom, so that the participant could only access them with her consent, at specified times, to watch certain programs. Two of the participants accessed music through cell phones, and listened to the music using ear phones. In one case, the mother forbade him to listen to this music; therefore, he only did so in her absence. In another case, the mother did not stop the participant from listening to music in this way, but he has limited access to the music, as he would use his sister's phone only when she allowed him to.

Regulation of children's musical activities revealed the premium placed on music not just as an art form, but as a means of expression that communicates one's philosophy of life and beliefs, hence one's identity. This seemed to be the mothers' rationale in their quest to ensure that their children listened to and enjoyed music that validated their beliefs, particularly their religious orientation and doctrine. This was further confirmed when none of them mentioned regulation of music in church; they mostly regulated musical activities in the home.

This finding has certain implications for music education and development. These include, firstly, the fact that educators, curriculum developers, and policy makers need to understand and appreciate the cultural and social contexts in which music occurs in their part of the world. Knowledge of issues such as children's

religious affiliations would provide an important guideline in the choice of musical resources as well as the planning of musical activities.

In cross-cultural environments, one way of ensuring that the music prescribed for education is acceptable, is for children to be given opportunities to perform music from their cultures, and tell a story about that music and the culture from which it comes. All stakeholders should take a keen interest in studying the cultures and basic religious beliefs of those represented within the surrounding area, in order to address their need for gaining musical knowledge and skills, while respecting their cultures. This is quite a tall order, but one that could greatly enhance the learning of music.

Conclusion

Cultural, social, and geographical contexts present diverse settings within which musical activities can thrive. There is evidence that such contexts are interrelated insofar as musical activities taking place within them are concerned. This interrelatedness of school, home, and church should be viewed as a means of strengthening musical development in children. Although the music taking place in each of the three situations may be different in order to address the different facets of human life (emotional, social, intellectual, and spiritual among others), connections can be made through the selection of musical resources that resonate with children's physical abilities (action songs), intellectual capacity, cultural orientation, and religious affiliation. Support by parents, teachers and religious leaders in this regard, can go a long way toward strengthening and solidifying children's convictions regarding the need to participate wholeheartedly in musical activities, in the long run, resulting in a well-educated child with a holistic view of music education.

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Bio-Notes

Dr. Elizabeth Achieng' Andang'o is a lecturer in music education at the Department of Music and Dance of Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya. She holds a PhD in Music Education. Her doctoral work entailed the designing of a multicultural curriculum for Early Childhood Music Education in Kenya. She intends to further develop this work as a contribution to Music Education in Kenya. She also seeks to promote greater collaboration between the Department of Early Childhood Studies and the Music Department at her University.

Dr. Andang'o's research interests include Music Education, Early Childhood Education, Cultural Issues in Education, Multicultural Music and interdisciplinary studies. She is currently working with a group of researchers on AIRS-Advancing Interdisciplinary Research in Singing. This collaborative research seeks to promote music education through cultural integration.

She has presented papers and been part of symposia at various international conferences and seminars including Research in Music Education (RIME) 2011 and 2009; International Society for Music Education (2006, 2008, and 2010); ECME Seminars (2006, 2008, and 2010) and *Integrating the Arts* 2010 (USA) among others. She has published papers in *Early Child Development and Care*; *Arts Education Policy Review* and the *East African Journal of Music Education*. She is also involved in a project documenting the profiles and contributions of key personalities in Kenyan music. Elizabeth is a Commissioner in Early Childhood Music Education Commission of ISME since 2010.