

## **Music, wellbeing and engagement in early childhood: Reflections from a pilot study focused on sound as artistic matter**

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### **Abstract**

Recent research in Music Education and Music Psychology has established important connections between music and children's wellbeing (Hallam, 2015, 2016; Hallam, Creech & Varvarigou, 2017; Smith, 2021). Consequently, several researchers have highlighted the need to implement more inclusive and democratic practices in formal and non-formal educational contexts, involving all children in participatory and meaningful musical experiences (Benedict et al. 2015; Hess, 2017; Wright, 2015). Following this demand, some scholars have criticized hegemonic Eurocentric approaches to music education, suggesting instead a departure from sound and sounding phenomena as larger categories that might incorporate children's diverse trajectories and life experiences, and invite all children to participate in truly engaged ways (Recharte, 2019; Thumlert & Nolan, 2019; Thumlert, Harley & Nolan, 2020). This paper reports preliminary findings of a pilot study that is being developed in a Portuguese non-profit association located in the central area of Portugal. This association aims to develop inclusive and democratic projects with children from 0 to 6 years old - that are not integrated in other social facilities such as nursery schools or Kindergartens - and their respective families. One of the main goals of this association is to raise the awareness of children's rights among community members and beyond, namely the right children have to free play since their birth. The pilot study covers 12 music education sessions named "Sound Hunters", dedicated to the development of an approach to music education with an intense playful component, departing from sound as artistic matter and involving competences related to deep listening, sound exploration and experimentation. All the activities were planned and implemented in an action-research project, using a series of new devices and tools specially created and adapted to children, that could be easily explored and manipulated by them autonomously. The participants included 15 children with ages ranging from 18 months to 5 years old, the association team and the authors as facilitators. This study applied the Leuven Scales (Laevers, 2005) to assess the children's' levels of involvement and wellbeing, using data from participant observation, field notes, and video and audio recordings. Results from this assessment were then triangulated with data from informal conversations and interviews with children and the association team. It was found that, during the periods of observation, children evidenced high and very high levels of wellbeing and involvement, especially manifested in their receptivity to the activities proposed during the sessions, self-confidence and self-assurance, and on their levels of attention, interest, and creativity. These findings were then corroborated by what children mentioned during the interviews and informal conversations about their personal experiences during the sessions.

In this paper we argue that these findings emerge as a consequence of the opportunities offered to children to make connections with sound phenomena deeply related with their daily lives and interact collaboratively with sounds through participatory processes genuinely opened to creativity and experimentation. Finally, we discuss how this perspective might promote more meaningful and inclusive educational practices, discussing the implications and challenges posed to music education in early childhood.

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