

**The Musical Playground:  
Global Tradition and Change in  
Children's Songs and Games**

*Kathryn Marsh*

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In *The Musical Playground*, ethnomusicologist Kathryn Marsh issues a challenge to educators, music teachers, and all adults invested in the creative development of children, to question long-held, entrenched assumptions and beliefs about children's musical development, metacognitive abilities, and creativity and the importance of play. Marsh believes that the pervasive distinction between the playground and the classroom has had a negative effect on the full development of the creative potential of children and has resulted from adult-centered perceptions of child development that have created theoretical blinders. She presents a compelling case in general for taking the play of children seriously and in particular for recognizing the creative, cognitive, linguistic, and kinesthetic complexities of children's spontaneous musical play from all over the world. As evidence for her argument, Marsh presents carefully observed, documented, and analyzed data from her fifteen-year, cross-cultural study of children's musical play in schools both urban and rural from remote locations in Australia to sites in the United Kingdom, Norway, the United States, and South Korea.

Marsh explores the musical play of children at school by focusing on playground singing games and chants that

involve the interrelated elements of melody, rhythm, text, and movement. These games are learned and taught by children themselves, and through Marsh's meticulous field work in oral transmission, she traces both the conservation of particular patterns and the constant transformation and innovation of text, music, and movement. The book is directed toward music educators and ethnomusicologists, and Marsh begins by discussing the dominant theories regarding children's musical play and musical creativity, casting a cold eye toward such theories and adult perceptions about the musical play of children in general.

In music education, two major theorists provided the philosophical and pedagogical framework for much of the twentieth-century. Western musical education (including most state music standards for kindergarten through twelfth grade in the United States) fell under the purview of either Carl Orff or Zoltan Kodaly. Marsh details major tenets of both systems and emphasizes that both rely on the simplicity of rhythm, melody, and movement in children's music making. She provides an overview of literature critiquing these theories that draws attention to both the complexity of children's musical play and the disconnect between music as taught in the classroom and music made spontaneously by children, as well as music to which they are exposed through the media outside of the classroom.

Ethnomusicological research and studies of children's playlore, Marsh says, also have limitations. For example, the lack of cross-cultural research and the fact that most studies are geographically specific

means that so-called “universals” are often generalized from those specific contexts.

Finally, with regard to children’s musical creativity, Marsh states that although there has been strong and growing interest in children’s innate musical creativity, few studies have focused specifically on children’s spontaneous play. In addition, most theories posit a developmental “stage theory” that puts the more complex, metacognitive creative processes at much older ages than many current researchers, including Marsh. Marsh argues for going directly to the playground to observe and record games and the variations and transformations of those games over a period of years.

In the over three hundred pages that make up the substance of the book, Marsh discusses the methodology she used in her fieldwork, as well as the philosophical, ethical, and practical issues of being a researcher, observer, and participant in various cultural settings. She then meticulously documents the influence of social groups, the media, and the classroom on playground singing games and the impact of ethnicity, gender, and age on the teaching and learning of the games. Throughout, she offers examples of music, handclapping, movements, and text from each school, ultimately producing a body of evidence that shows the complexity of the creative process in children as young as six.

To supplement the description of the data, she provides a thorough index of the singing-game genres in each site over fourteen years and a detailed index of musical and movement notation as well as selected musical transcriptions of the games described in the text. In addition, she in-

dicates where video clips of the games she describes can be found on the companion Web site.

Ultimately, Marsh’s analysis of playground singing games provides incontrovertible evidence that, contrary to notions of the assumed simplicity of young children, children’s musical creative play consists of complex, subjective, and collaborative improvisations, ones that involves a combination of tacitly understood rules or constraints, memorized words rhythms, and movements—and variations on them—in performances composed dynamically in the moment, then changed over time.

This clearly written, detailed, and sophisticated work is a major contribution to the field of ethnomusicology; however, Marsh’s findings also have extremely important practical implications for music-education pedagogy, curriculum, standards, and assessment, as well as to the field of play research.

Marsh challenges educators to question inherited preconceptions and assumptions that are outdated and limiting and to pay attention to and learn from children’s play, thereby enabling them to incorporate aspects of what occurs spontaneously on the playground or while waiting in line into ways of learning, playing, and thinking in the classroom.

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—Victoria Stevens, *California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, CA*