

# Children’s Musical Experience as Meaning-Making in Early Childhood Education

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## Abstract

Music is commonly included in early childhood education and is often associated with children’s learning and development. In many educational discussions, music is primarily valued for its practical functions, such as supporting language learning, classroom routines, or social interaction. While this perspective helps explain the widespread use of music in early childhood settings, it gives limited attention to how children themselves experience music and how meaning emerges through these experiences. This paper explores children’s musical experience in early childhood education from a meaning-making perspective. Drawing on recent literature in early childhood education and music education, the study examines music as part of children’s everyday educational experience rather than as an instructional tool. Particular attention is given to children’s bodily, emotional, and social engagement with music and to the ways in which meaning is constructed through musical activity. By foregrounding children’s perspectives, this paper offers an educational understanding of music that moves beyond functional use and highlights its role in children’s processes of meaning-making. The paper concludes by discussing implications for early childhood education, suggesting that greater attention to children’s musical experience may contribute to more experience-oriented educational practices.

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## Keywords

children’s experience; music education; early childhood education; meaning-making; experiential learning

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## 1. Introduction

Music occupies a familiar place in early childhood education. Singing, movement, and musical play are commonly present in kindergartens and early learning settings, often as part of daily routines or group activities. In many cases, music is introduced to support specific

educational purposes, such as encouraging participation, supporting language development, or creating a positive classroom atmosphere. As a result, discussions of music in early childhood education frequently emphasize what music can achieve in terms of learning outcomes. While this perspective is understandable, it leaves open a more

fundamental educational question: how do children experience music in their everyday educational lives?

For young children, musical engagement is rarely experienced as formal instruction. Instead, music is often encountered through play, movement, and interaction with others. Children sing while playing, move their bodies in response to rhythm, and explore sounds in ways that are spontaneous and personally meaningful. These musical moments may not be planned or evaluated according to explicit learning objectives, yet they form an important part of children's daily experiences in early childhood settings. When music is viewed only as a teaching aid, the significance of these lived experiences from the child's perspective may be overlooked.

Recent developments in early childhood education research have drawn increased attention to children's experiences and perspectives. Children are no longer seen merely as recipients of educational input but as active participants who make sense of their world through everyday activities. Within this context, experience-based approaches emphasize the importance of understanding learning as something that emerges through interaction, engagement, and interpretation. Music, which brings together sound, movement, emotion, and social interaction, provides rich opportunities for such experiential engagement. However, despite growing interest in children's experiences more generally, children's musical experience itself has received relatively limited attention in educational research.

Existing studies on music in early childhood education have largely focused on developmental benefits and measurable outcomes, including cognitive development, language skills, and social competence. These studies have contributed valuable evidence to support the inclusion of music in early education. At the same time, this outcome-oriented focus has meant that less attention has been paid to how children experience music as part of their everyday educational activities. Questions about how children interpret musical experiences, how they engage with music in the moment, and how meaning is constructed through musical activity remain underexplored.

In response to this gap, the present paper examines children's musical experience as a process of meaning-making in early childhood education. Rather than

evaluating the effectiveness of music as an instructional method, the paper focuses on how children experience music and how these experiences contribute to their understanding of themselves, others, and their surroundings. By drawing on recent literature in early childhood education and music education, this study aims to offer a conceptual exploration of children's musical experience and to clarify its educational significance.

The paper addresses the following research questions:

How do children experience music in early childhood educational settings<sup>[1]</sup>?

How do children construct meaning through their musical experiences?

What educational value can be identified by focusing on children's musical experience?

By foregrounding children's perspectives, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on experience-based learning in early childhood education. It highlights the importance of understanding music not only in terms of its educational functions but also as part of children's everyday processes of meaning-making.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Children's Experience in Early Childhood Education

In recent years, children's experience has become an important focus in early childhood education research. Rather than treating learning as the delivery of predefined knowledge, many scholars argue that learning emerges through children's engagement with everyday activities. From this perspective, children are viewed as active participants who interpret and respond to their environment, constructing understanding through experience<sup>[2]</sup>.

Research adopting an experience-based approach emphasizes that young children's learning is closely connected to bodily action, emotion, and social interaction. Learning takes place through play, routine activities, and relationships with others, rather than through formal instruction alone. Paying attention to children's lived experiences allows educators and researchers to better understand how learning unfolds in early childhood settings. This shift moves the focus

away from outcomes and toward processes, highlighting how meaning develops through participation in everyday educational life.

Within this body of literature, children's experience is often described as relational and situated. Experiences are shaped through interaction with peers, adults, materials, and cultural practices<sup>[3]</sup>. Children's meaning-making does not occur in isolation but is closely linked to shared activities in which they participate. This understanding provides an important foundation for examining children's experiences in specific areas of learning, including music.

## **2.2. Music in Early Childhood Education: Moving Beyond Instrumental Views**

Research on music in early childhood education has frequently emphasized its contribution to children's development. Numerous studies have explored the role of music in supporting language development, cognitive skills, and social interaction. Such research has played an important role in justifying the inclusion of music in early childhood curricula, particularly in contexts where music may otherwise receive limited attention<sup>[4]</sup>.

At the same time, scholars have noted that this emphasis on developmental outcomes often frames music in instrumental terms. Music tends to be discussed in relation to what it can achieve, rather than how it is experienced by children. When music is valued mainly for its functional benefits, children's subjective engagement with musical activity may be overlooked, and the educational meaning of music may be reduced to its usefulness for other learning goals.

In response to these concerns, more recent studies have begun to explore music as part of children's everyday experience. Research on musical play and informal music-making highlights that children engage with music in spontaneous and imaginative ways that are closely connected to social interaction. These studies suggest that music is not only a structured learning activity but also an integral part of children's lived experience in early childhood settings. This shift in focus opens up possibilities for examining music from the child's perspective, rather than primarily from curricular or developmental viewpoints.

## **2.3. Children's Musical Experience and Meaning-Making**

The concept of meaning-making has gained increasing attention in early childhood education research. Meaning-making refers to the processes through which children interpret their experiences and develop understanding through action and interaction. From this perspective, learning involves more than acquiring specific skills; it includes developing ways of relating to others and to the world.

Applied to music education, a meaning-making perspective draws attention to how children engage with sound, rhythm, and movement as meaningful activities. Research suggests that children construct musical meaning through embodied participation, emotional response, and social interaction. For example, children may use music to express emotions, coordinate actions with peers, or explore personal and social identities through musical play. These processes often occur without explicit instruction, yet they play an important role in children's understanding and communication.

Recent studies have also highlighted that children's musical meaning-making frequently takes place in informal contexts, such as free play or everyday classroom routines. In these situations, children are not simply following adult-designed activities but are actively shaping musical experiences themselves. This reinforces the view that meaning emerges through participation and engagement<sup>[5]</sup>, rather than through predetermined teaching sequences.

## **2.4. Summary and Research Gaps**

Although existing research provides valuable insights into children's experience and musical engagement, several gaps remain. Much of the literature continues to prioritize developmental outcomes, with less attention given to how children experience music in their everyday educational lives. While research on musical play and informal music-making has grown, studies that focus explicitly on children's perspectives and meaning-making processes are still relatively limited<sup>[6]</sup>.

In addition, discussions of music in early childhood education often remain separated from broader educational questions about experience and understanding. There is a need for research that brings

together experience-based perspectives and music education in order to explore how children construct meaning through musical engagement. Addressing these gaps provides the foundation for the present study, which focuses on children's musical experience as a process of meaning-making in early childhood education.

### **3. Music and Meaning-Making in Children's Experience**

This chapter builds on the literature reviewed above and focuses on how meaning is constructed through children's musical experience in early childhood education. Rather than viewing music as a means to achieve predetermined learning outcomes, the discussion approaches music as part of children's lived experience. From this perspective, musical activity becomes a context in which children explore, express, and interpret their relationships with themselves, with others, and with their environment.

#### **3.1. Music as an Embodied Experience**

Children's engagement with music is closely connected to bodily movement and sensory experience. Rhythm, tempo, and sound often invite children to respond physically through actions such as clapping, jumping, swaying, or dancing. In these moments, music is not experienced solely through listening but through the body as a whole.

From a meaning-making perspective, bodily engagement allows children to make sense of musical elements in an immediate and experiential way. Children frequently adjust their movements in response to changes in musical intensity or pace, suggesting an intuitive understanding of musical structure. These bodily responses are not merely reactions to external stimuli but form part of how children interpret and experience music.

Embodied musical experience also supports children's sense of agency. When children are free to move and respond in their own ways, they actively shape their engagement with music. This freedom enables children to explore music according to personal interests and feelings, reinforcing the idea that meaning-making in musical experience is closely tied to active participation.

#### **3.2. Emotional Expression and Musical Meaning**

Emotional expression represents another important dimension of children's musical experience. Music often evokes emotional responses, and children frequently use musical activity as a way of expressing feelings that may not yet be easily articulated through language. Singing, vocal play, and sound exploration provide opportunities for children to express excitement, calmness, curiosity, or frustration.

From the perspective of meaning-making, emotional engagement contributes to how children understand their own experiences. Musical activities offer a space in which emotions can be explored and regulated in a relatively open and flexible context. For example, children may return to familiar songs for comfort or engage energetically with music during moments of enthusiasm. These emotional connections shape how musical experiences are interpreted and remembered.

Emotional meaning-making through music also occurs in social contexts. Children often respond to the emotional expressions of peers during shared musical activities. Through observing, imitating, and responding to others, children develop an awareness of emotions beyond their own. In this way, musical experience supports both individual emotional expression and shared emotional understanding.

#### **3.3. Social Interaction and Shared Musical Meaning**

Children's musical experiences in early childhood education are commonly situated within social contexts. Group singing, musical games, and informal music-making create opportunities for interaction and collaboration. These social dimensions play a central role in how musical meaning is constructed.

During shared musical activities, children listen to one another, follow cues, and adjust their actions in response to peers. They may take turns, imitate movements, or contribute ideas to a group activity. Through these interactions, musical meaning is negotiated and co-constructed. Meaning does not belong to a single child but emerges through participation in shared activity.

Social musical experiences also contribute to children's sense of belonging. Participating in group

music-making allows children to feel connected to others and to the learning environment. Music thus functions as a social practice through which relationships are formed and maintained, highlighting its relational dimension in early childhood education.

### **3.4. Meaning-Making in Everyday Musical Contexts**

Children's musical meaning-making often takes place in everyday situations rather than in formally planned lessons. Informal musical moments, such as spontaneous singing during play, rhythmic movement during transitions, or sound exploration using everyday objects, are common in early childhood settings.

These everyday contexts allow children to integrate music naturally into their daily experiences. Meaning develops through repetition, exploration, and personal engagement rather than through explicit instruction. Musical experiences become part of how children understand routines, spaces, and interactions within their environment.

Recognizing the significance of everyday musical contexts challenges narrow views of music as a separate subject area. Instead, music can be understood as an experiential medium that supports children's meaning-making across a range of activities. This perspective aligns with experience-based approaches in early childhood education, which emphasize learning as emerging through participation in everyday life.

### **3.5. Summary**

This chapter has examined children's musical experience as a process of meaning-making, focusing on embodied engagement, emotional expression, social interaction, and everyday contexts. Across these dimensions, meaning emerges through children's active participation rather than through externally defined instructional goals. Understanding music in this way provides a conceptual foundation for considering its educational significance in early childhood education.

## **4. Educational Implications for Early Childhood Education**

This chapter discusses the educational implications of

understanding children's musical experience as a process of meaning-making. Rather than proposing specific teaching methods or instructional frameworks, the discussion focuses on how this perspective may inform ways of thinking about music, learning, and children's participation in early childhood education.

### **4.1. Reconsidering the Role of Music in Early Childhood Education**

Understanding music primarily as a tool for achieving predetermined learning outcomes may limit its educational significance. When music is valued mainly for its contributions to language development, classroom management, or social skills, children's own experiences of music risk being overlooked. The discussion in this paper suggests that music holds educational value not only because of what it can support, but also because of how children experience and engage with it.

Viewing music as part of children's lived experience encourages a broader understanding of its role in early childhood education. Music can be seen as a space in which children explore sound, movement, emotion, and social interaction in ways that are meaningful to them. This shift in perspective moves attention away from external outcomes and toward the quality of children's engagement, allowing music to be recognized as an integral part of children's everyday educational lives.

### **4.2. Attending to Children's Perspectives and Experiences**

An emphasis on children's musical experience highlights the importance of attending to children's perspectives in early childhood education. Children engage with music in diverse and often unexpected ways, shaped by their interests, emotions, and relationships with others. Taking children's experiences seriously requires educators to observe and reflect on how children respond to musical activity, rather than focusing solely on planned objectives or adult-defined expectations.

From this perspective, children's spontaneous musical actions—such as inventing songs, responding physically to rhythm, or incorporating music into play—can be understood as meaningful expressions rather than informal or incidental behavior<sup>[7]</sup>. Recognizing these moments as part of children's meaning-making processes

supports a more responsive and child-centered approach to early childhood education.

### 4.3. Creating Space for Meaningful Musical Engagement

Understanding music as a context for meaning-making suggests the importance of creating space for open-ended musical engagement in early childhood settings. This does not necessarily involve adding new programs or structured activities. Instead, it involves allowing time and flexibility for children to explore music in ways that emerge naturally from their everyday activities and interactions<sup>[8]</sup>.

When children are given opportunities to engage freely with music, they can shape their experiences according to personal interests and social dynamics. Such opportunities support children's agency and participation, which are central to meaning-making. Rather than directing musical activity toward specific outcomes, educators may consider how everyday routines and environments can support children's musical exploration and engagement<sup>[9]</sup>. Furthermore, children often construct meaning through playful exploration, where play and learning are closely intertwined in their everyday activities<sup>[10]</sup>.

### 4.4. Implications for Educational Research

The perspective developed in this paper also has implications for research in early childhood education. Much existing research on music focuses on measurable outcomes and instructional effectiveness. While such studies provide valuable evidence, they may not fully capture the experiential dimensions of children's musical engagement.

This perspective highlights the need for intentional pedagogical strategies that support children's experiential meaning-making<sup>[11]</sup>.

Future research may benefit from approaches that foreground children's experiences and perspectives. Qualitative and interpretive research methods, for example, can offer insights into how children experience music and how meaning is constructed through musical activity in early childhood contexts. By focusing on experience rather than outcomes alone, research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the

educational significance of music.

Future studies may benefit from incorporating systematic observational approaches to capture children's lived musical experiences<sup>[12]</sup>.

### 4.5. Summary

This chapter has outlined educational implications arising from an understanding of children's musical experience as meaning-making. Rather than offering specific teaching strategies, the discussion emphasizes reconsidering the role of music, attending to children's perspectives, and creating space for meaningful engagement. These implications suggest that valuing children's musical experience may support more responsive and experience-oriented approaches to early childhood education.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has explored children's musical experience in early childhood education from a meaning-making perspective. Rather than approaching music as an instructional tool designed to achieve predetermined learning outcomes, the discussion has focused on how children experience music as part of their everyday educational lives. By foregrounding children's bodily, emotional, and social engagement with music, the study has sought to clarify the educational significance of musical experience beyond its functional use.

Drawing on recent literature in early childhood education and music education, the paper has shown that meaning in musical experience emerges through participation, interaction, and interpretation. Children engage with music through movement, emotional expression, and social interaction, often in informal and everyday contexts. These experiences are not peripheral to learning but form an important part of how children make sense of themselves, their relationships with others, and their surrounding environments.

Understanding music as a process of meaning-making highlights the importance of children's perspectives in early childhood education. When children's experiences are taken seriously, music can be recognized as a space in which children actively construct meaning rather than passively receive instruction. This perspective challenges instrumental views of music and

suggests that musical experience holds educational value in its own right.

The educational implications discussed in this paper emphasize that valuing children's musical experience does not require specific teaching techniques or structured programs. Instead, it involves reconsidering how music is positioned within early childhood education and attending more closely to how children engage with music in everyday situations. Creating space for open-ended musical engagement may support children's agency and participation, which are central to meaning-making.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. As a conceptual and literature-based exploration, the paper does not draw on empirical data from specific early childhood settings. While this approach allows for a focused examination of meaning-making, future research could build on the present discussion by exploring children's musical experiences

through qualitative or observational studies. Such research may provide further insight into how meaning is constructed through musical engagement in practice.

However, the contextual constraints of the study limit the generalizability of its findings, highlighting the need for broader investigations<sup>[13]</sup>.

In conclusion, this paper has argued that children's musical experience deserves attention as a meaningful educational phenomenon. By shifting focus from outcomes to experience, early childhood education research and practice may gain a deeper understanding of the role of music in children's lives. Recognizing music as part of children's meaning-making processes may contribute to more responsive and experience-oriented approaches to early childhood education.

Further interdisciplinary research is essential to deepen understandings of children's musical meaning-making across diverse cultural contexts<sup>[14]</sup>.

### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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