

***“Smooth as Butter”: Practices of Music Learning Amongst African-American Children*** (Doctoral Dissertation)

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe and analyze the musical content and learning processes apparent among African-American children in Tucson, Arizona, in two settings—an out-of-school summer program and an in-school student-focused musical activity period. Of primary interest were how African-American children demonstrated musical knowledge and skills amongst each other and what the knowledge and skills consisted of.

The theoretical issues guiding this study came from research focused on socio-cultural perspectives of learning, African-American children’s musical play, and multicultural music education. The conceptual framework for the study is a socio-cultural approach based upon Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory (1978, 1986) and modern interpretations of Vygotsky, such as Rogoff’s (1990) notion of apprenticeships and Lave and Wenger’s (1991) communities of practice. This study used an ethnographic and case study approach relying primarily upon participant observation and interviews for data collection.

The results of this study lead to several arguments. First, children learn music by participating to varying degrees within a community of practice. Individuals within the group serve as sources of information and skill based upon their own expertise and

interest creating an environment of reciprocity and shifting leadership. Furthermore, the bonds of friendship strengthen these communities of practice by providing pre-established common ground, intimacy, and concern amongst members. Second, musical play simultaneously functions to prepare children for adult life and allows children to engage in recreational entertainment. Moreover, the activities serve the distinct purposes of identity and gender-role formation and allow for exploration in areas of power and sexuality, especially as they apply to females. Finally, although specific musical abilities might not be chronologically developmental, engaging in particular musical activities is. Handclaps were most common among children ages seven to nine years, drills were practiced mainly between the ages of nine to 11 years, and dances were most frequent amongst children ages 11 to 12 years. A possible reason for the age-graded activities might be the increasing awareness and use of social commentary present in the lyrics and movements of a music-activity genre, rather than the technical complexity across a music-activity genre or genres.

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