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The Songbird and the Percussionist: Listening to and Implementing Non-Speakers' Musical Preferences

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Abstract

The purpose of this participatory narrative inquiry was to understand the musical experiences and preferences of two non-speaking children within the location of their school (institution), their interactions with music and the music setting (social), and to understand the culture of communication for these individual non-speaking students in a speaking centric institution (music education). Picture Exchange Communication (PEC) and Augmented Alternative Communication (AAC) were used to invite musicking and clarify participants' preferences. Video "think-alouds" and visual elicitation (drawing) methods were used to center participants' voice in analysis. Thick descriptions of participants' musicking preferences and communication styles are included. Recommendations for student centered instruction through student agency and autonomy also are shared.

Musical Preferences

Introduction

Individuals with disabilities (IwD) often encounter barriers throughout their education tenure. Barriers can range from accessibility of space to differences in communication. For almost twenty years, researchers have considered how to center the lived experiences of IwD in research on policy (Murray, 2012), higher education (Denhart, 2008), early childhood education (O'Leary & Moloney, 2020; Parry, 2015), and in music education (Blair, 2009; Draper, 2022; Parker & Draves, 2017; Rathgeber, 2018). Researchers in a variety of fields have contributed to our understanding of the importance of including perspectives of IwD to better understand their lived experiences. However, research that highlights the musical experiences and music-making preferences from the perspective of elementary school-aged Children with disabilities is sparse. Research that centers on the experiences and preferences of elementary CwD who are non-speaking is non-existent. The purpose of this paper is to share the musical experiences and preferences of two non-speaking children within a public-school setting. After detailing supporting literature on the inclusion of IwD in research processes, I will share findings while also sharing my researcher tensions to center participant voices throughout the research process.

Literature Review

Voices of IwD in Policy and General Education
Researchers have examined the experiences of disabled individuals in policy, higher education, and within general education. Murray (2012) highlighted *The Disabled Children and Young Peoples Participation Project* (DCYPPP), a program in Northern Ireland that sought to center the voices of children and adolescents in the development of health and social care initiatives. Participants in the project stated they felt empowered to advocate for themselves. Denhart (2008) interviewed 11 college students with learning disabilities to better understand the barriers encountered in course work and peer and professorial interactions. Participants stated they had to work harder than their non-disabled peers and shared that asking for their accommodations seemed an inconvenience for professors, leaving participants feeling misunderstood. Papalia-Berardi et al. (2002) considered legislation and previous research, as related to undergraduates with disabilities (UwD) regarding essential functions of preservice teacher coursework and teaching. The authors highlighted similar struggles participants in Denhart (2008) experienced. Additionally, authors outlined systemic factors that contributed to UwD's struggles and provided recommendations to increase UwD's successful completion of their degree program.

O'Leary and Moloney (2020) employed narrative inquiry to better understand the experiences of young children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in an early childhood program in

Ireland. The researchers used photo-elicitation to gather the children's perspectives and relied heavily on caregiver narratives to understand the experiences of young children within autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Parry (2015) also examined the experiences of children with disabilities (CwD) in early childhood programs. Rather than engage caregiver perspectives, Parry considered the social interactions of children with and those without disabilities. Using observations and photographs of play and staff interviews, Parry found that CwD often engaged in parallel play and physical proximity within groups of Cw/oD already playing together. In addition, he noted that CwD struggled with stamina when peers dominated the play rules and did not consistently play with the same peers.

Voices of IwD in Music Education
Researchers such as Blair (2009), Draper (2022), Parker & Draves (2017), and Rathgeber (2018) have considered the perception of music education from the perspective of IwD. Blair (2009) examined IwD in a self-contained secondary music setting with students creating songs with looping software. Participant's feelings and preferences about their musicianship were gathered through recordings, art, and their looped compositions. Blair (2009) noted a consistent tension to center participant voices due to differences in communication. Parker & Draves (2017) examined the student teaching experiences of two preservice music educators (PMEs) with visual impairments. Participants stated that they need accessible music (e.g., scores), either struggled with or appreciated provided support (e.g., aide), and encountered negative attitudes toward their disabilities. Rathgeber (2018) interviewed and musicked with adolescent and adult musicians with disabilities to better understand the experience of disability through music. Rathgeber, by centering lived experiences of IwD, endeavored to "trouble taken-for-granted assumptions of disability" (2018, p. 2). A band student, with a limb difference, being directed away from the trombone by their director because their body does not match the director's belief of how a trombone players' body should function, is a taken-for-granted assumption.

Draper (2022) was curious if perspectives of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), as related to their classroom music experiences, aligned with those of their caregivers and teachers. Draper shared instructional strategies, centering student strengths, and how to develop an inclusive classroom climate. Draper (2022), like Blair (2009) acknowledged the importance of collaborating with CwD, but stated that, due to their limited communication, verbal contributions were minimal.

Multimodal Communication in Community and Research Spaces
Multimodal communication may be described as communicating meaning through gestures, eye gaze, body language, objects, and/or Augmented and Alternative Communication (AAC). The use of multimodal communication, specifically AAC, by individuals with high

communication needs in classroom and health care settings as well as the inclusion of AAC users in data collection has been examined by researchers. Dee Price et al. (2021) argued for the inclusion of AAC users throughout the research process. The authors explored various means of research methods with AAC users and shared findings from practice. Through evaluation of existing methods, the authors created three methods: (1) Theory Generated Photo Elicitation, (2) Participant Generated Sensory Selection, and (3) Adapted Image Selection.

Dada et al. (2021) examined the use of the Involvement Matrix[1] to guide the development of healthcare resources with and for adolescents with severe communication disabilities. Participants used laptops, AAC, text to speech, and pen and paper to communicate their ideas on the creation of health care resources for those with severe communication needs. Ibrahim et al. (2022) engaged in an exploratory inquiry to better understand multimodal communication. Researchers considered photo data, physical gesture, the use of Talking Mats, and AAC devices. Upon a critical analysis of data collected, Ibrahim et al. (2022) concluded that certain visual methods of data collection, for example, photo-elicitation, may not provide a holistic account of participants' experiences. Walsh et al. (2024) considered the involvement of AAC users, specifically those with cerebral palsy, in qualitative research. Collaboration with device users, skills and knowledge to adapt methods, and taking adequate time for involvement were noted, by researchers, as necessary elements to ensure inclusion of AAC users throughout the research process. Through video analysis, Ibrahim et al. (2024) established three outcomes that noted issues of communication exchanges between speaking teachers and children who use AAC. The researchers stated that teachers either did not notice, misinterpreted, or did not respond to or acknowledge multimodal communication given by participants. Van Goidsenhoven and De Schauwer (2020) sought to disrupt the idea of "voice" through a reflexive analysis of the making of the video *Swinging Together*. This short video centered Heleen, an 18-year-old with autism who employs multimodal communication. The authors suggested that "voice" should be considered outside of normative structures (e.g., speaking) and that voice can be expressed through a connection of bodies, objects, spaces, and relationships.

Participatory Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry explores "the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individual's experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, p. 4). Therefore, the purpose of this inquiry was to understand the musical

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[1] The Involvement Matrix is a framework that includes individuals within research in three phrases preparation, execution, and implementation. Researchers take on different roles within these phases. Roles include listener, cothinker, advisor, partner, and decision-maker. More information may be found at https://www.kcrutrecht.nl/involvement-matrix

experiences and preferences of two non-speaking children within the location of their school (institution), their interactions with music and the music setting (social), and to understand the culture of communication for these individual non-speaking students in a speaking centric institution. In narrative inquiry, the researcher must "practice deep reflexivity while living and being in the relational inquiry space" (Finlay & dela Cruz, 2023, p. 1). It is integral that the narrative researcher establishes a relationship with participants to build trust, share, understand, examine, and re-story their experiences. As such, I chose to work with two students with whom I had worked in a previous field experience. Researchers engaging in narrative inquiry typically "challenge the dominant narrative of a phenomenon, which is a widely accepted story that influences how people perceive and interpret a specific experience/s" (Finlay & dela Cruz, 2023, p. 1). As most research about children with disabilities (CwD) is from the perspective of caregivers and medical professionals, or the researcher themself, the "dominant narrative" is not from the lived experience of the child.

As I sought to understand the experiences of non-speaking students, I had to consider a non-normative approach to narrative inquiry. As such, I chose to blend participatory research (Deszcz-Tryhubczak & Marecki, 2022; Montreuil et al., 2021; Moody et al., 2022; Tiefenbacher, 2021) with narrative inquiry. In participatory research, participants may be involved in all or some aspects of the research process (Vaugh & Jacques, 2020). Vaughn and Jacques' (2020) "choice points" guided participants' accessibility into co-constructing the research design. The incorporation of participatory research enabled me to challenge the dominant narrative as well as normative structures within research regarding CwD. In this participatory narrative inquiry, participants guided the design of the research location, the data collected, and participated in analysis at their access points.

Theoretical Framing

Those who employ Critical Disability Theory (CDT) examine disability through intersectional identities as they relate to larger institutions (e.g., music education) and to question systems that function to exclude, dismiss, or otherwise control IwD (Edwards & Imrie, 2003; Goodley et al., 2019; Loja et al., 2013). Tenets of CDT informed my critique of existing music education structures (i.e., student agency, curricula, materials) and validated my decision to move away from normative research structures (design, analysis, etc.) that typically dismiss and/or control IwD. Rather than constructing a research environment that suited my expertise, I encouraged participant agency to decide when and what data would be collected, how it would be analyzed, and the "what next" for music education. Participants dismantled and reassembled my research expectations and norms to meet their individual access points and interests. In addition, they challenged and reshaped my understanding of voice, meaning making, and existing within normative structures (Flewitt, 2005; Van Goidsenhoven & De Schauwer, 2020).

Researcher Tensions

I experienced a great deal of tension and hesitation throughout the research process as I strove to center the voices of participants who are non-speaking. How could I ethically engage non-speaking children on the spectrum in research to better understand and learn from their experiences when many might consider their perspective impossible or "useless" (Hess, 2021)? Additionally, is knowledge spoken or written the only way to attribute meaning or evidence of lived experience (Whitehead, 2019)? As a mother of two neurodivergent individuals, and someone with a hidden disability, I understand the experience of navigating spaces where the individuals' voice or experiences are neither heard nor valued. It was important for me to move away from the dominant caregiver narrative to a child-centered narrative, and to be mindful that my experiences and researcher expertise did not consume design, data, or analysis.

I worked to re-examine my understanding of "voice" and to consider that communication is multimodal (Flewitt, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 2024; Van Goidsenhoven & De Schauwer, 2020). This study required flexibility of approach to data collection and reflexivity of my position as researcher, educator, and mother in ways I had not previously considered (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000; Flewitt, 2005; Goldstein, 2017; Hall, 2003; Patton, 2015; Tiefenbacher, 2021). I constantly struggled with how to gain, render, interpret, and share participants' narratives ethically and accurately. I addressed these tensions and hesitations through maintaining a research journal, conversations with caregivers, and consistently asking participants permission throughout the research process using participant preferred communication.

Length of Engagement, Data Analysis, and Trustworthiness

I engaged participants in three music sessions between November and December 2022. All sessions were in the morning before 10:00 am and the length of each was determined by the participant. Communication was key throughout data collection and analysis. I used Picture Exchange Communication (PEC) to gain consent to musick with each student prior to each session. The PEC consent form is included below:

Table 1

Picture Exchange Communication consent form

	I have listened to and understand why you want to talk to me about music class. I know that I can ask to stop whenever I want to.	
	I agree to talk with you about music class.	
	I'm happy to be video recorded as we talk/play.	
	I am okay if you share my stories with other people.	

I did not attempt to jot field notes during activities or talk too much during musicking sessions. Instead, I participated with each student, when invited, and asked questions regarding their musical choices as they/we musicked. Musicking sessions were recorded with permission. Once our musicking time had concluded, I jotted down my musings, observations, and reflections. I also consulted stakeholders during data analyses to see if my wonderings aligned with their experiences. This collaboration allowed me to decenter my voice and center

students' voices. Field notes and data analysis from prior sessions informed the setup of each future musicking session.

Data Analysis

I included the participants when analyzing their video data. Participants communicated about their data through their chosen means of communication; echolalic phrases, PEC or Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC), and drawing. I implemented drawing as a form of analysis as the visual arts have been used by researchers with children with complex needs or whom may not be literate (Driessnack & Furukawa, 2011; Macgregor et al., 1998; Merriman & Guerin, 2012; Wright, 2007).

I watched their musicking videos and selected moments of intense communication: vocal sounds, echolalia, emphatic gestures, and intense focus that demonstrated their musical preferences. I selected smaller clips, rather than having the student watch their entire videos, as I knew each participant had a limited attention span for non-preferred activities.

During analysis, participants were provided blank sheets of paper, a blue and an orange marker, and PEC communication (happy/sad). Each morning in class, participants are asked how they feel by pointing to colored PEC. Each feeling is associated with a color. In their classroom, orange is the color for happy and blue, for sad. I chose these two colors during analysis for familiarity and consistency. I gave participants a choice of a musicking activity to watch, which was chosen using PEC. As participants watched, I asked them to tell me how they felt about the activity through drawing by choosing either the PEC for happy or sad (below). The PEC were without color to see if their marker color choice aligned with their PEC choice.
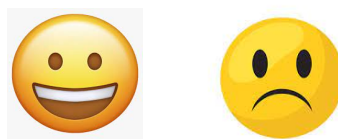
Figure 1. Picture Exchange Communication Happy and Sad Faces.

Each participant watched three videos, which were viewed three weeks after data collection ended. I provided one analysis session per participant to reduce the time they were removed from instruction. After participants analyzed their data, I reviewed musicking session videos and my research journal with participant's drawings to confirm their communicated musical preferences.

Participants and Location of the Lived Experiences

As stated earlier, I had already built a working relationship with each participant prior to working with them for this study. Both participants were enrolled in a midsized, midwestern, public elementary school in the United States. They received most instruction within a self-contained classroom. Music, art, and physical education classes were with their general education peers. Participants and their self-contained peers also received an additional music class within their classroom. This is where I first met and worked with the participants, whose pseudonyms are The Percussionist and The Songbird, by providing a few music classes during the spring semester of 2022 for undergraduate observations.

The Percussionist (P)

Before The Percussionist (P) was presented with his data to analyze, I asked him to pick a picture from Google images that he felt best represented him. P held his face as close as he could to the laptop monitor as I slowly scrolled. When he grabbed my hand, I stopped. He pointed to and picked the image below:

Figure 2. Google Image Chosen by (P), the Percussionist.

The image is of a young, Black boy, wearing sneakers, green pants, and a blue top. The young boy's thumbs and first fingers are pointed out to each side. His head is tilted to his left shoulder as he smiles with an open mouth as if singing. Around the boy are swooshes to indicate that he is moving. *This* is The Percussionist (P). Movement, for him, is a way of life. Although P is non-speaking and uses PEC and AAC, he also uses vocal sounds and hand gestures to communicate. The inflection of P's vocal sounds will inform you if he is happy, frustrated, agitated, or playing with you. His hand gestures inform you if he wants or needs an object and whether he prefers your proximity. During musicking sessions, P spent the most time engaged in music when drums were the focal point. This is why he was nicknamed The Percussionist.

The Songbird (S)

Before The Songbird (S) analyzed her data, I pulled up pages of google images for her to choose an image that she felt represented her. I tried to scroll for her. "No!" S said, as she picked up my laptop and set it on her lap. The Songbird scrolled through several pages before choosing the image below:
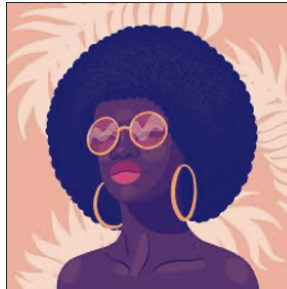

Figure 3. Image Chosen by (S), the Songbird.

The image is of a Black woman with a naturally styled afro. The woman is wearing sunglasses and large gold hoop earrings. She is leaning back, eyes closed as if listening to a song or about to sing one herself. This individual's posture is tall and powerful, confidence radiates from her stance. *This* is The Songbird (S).

S demonstrated strength in choices and how she expressed her feelings or needs. While she may not understand confidence as Webster might define it, she exudes a similar energy to the individual in the image above. S is comfortable in her choices and craves space to just be. One must pay close attention to the tone she uses to decipher what she is saying. A simple "no" from The Songbird, spoken softly, could mean, "I don't like it, but okay." It could be echolalic while she works on a non-preferred task. Or the "no" could be said loudly to mean, "I'm absolutely done with this!" I learned that S needed as much control and/or choice in learning as possible to stay on task during non-preferred activities. I also learned that S loves to play piano and sing, and seeks comfort while learning (e.g., laying on the floor with her work). As S always had a song to sing, this is why I called her The Songbird.

Location: Where the Musicking Happened

Choosing the location of where data collection took place had to be, to my best ability, on the students' terms. Musicking at their school was the logical choice. School is where participants knew me and associated me with music. I partnered with their special education teacher and principal in working out a consistent day/time to musick with them. In my initial research

design, I detailed three musicking sessions with P and S where they shared, through choice and participation, their preferences for musicking. I went into data collection understanding that P and S may only want to participate one day. To do more than one visit, they needed to demonstrate a preference for sharing space, time, and music with me so that I might be invited back. My goal was three musicking sessions, and I was invited back three times.

Our musicking space was not the music classroom, but a conference room. It was the only space available to us during the time it was most convenient for P and S to have an extra music class. Our room had a center table around which most musicking took place, the only windows were those in the door that looked out into the cold, grey hallway. Two chairs were placed on either side of the center table so that the student and I could face one another or, in some instances, sit side by side. A small table was behind and to the side of the center table which held a Casio keyboard. Two tubanos, a xylophone, scarves, a toy microphone, bean bags, and PEC song boards also were in the room to be used at the students' choosing. PEC song boards and choice activities were based on previous musicking sessions with me, and activities stakeholders stated were of interest.

Musical Preferences: The Percussionist and The Songbird

The Percussionist (P) and The Songbird (S) are multimodal communicators. To convey their musical preferences, I had to approach findings in a way that challenged the idea of "voice" and find "common ground" in communicating with P and S (Flewitt, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 2024; Van Goidsenhoven & De Schauwer, 2020). I acknowledge that the writing of preferences are my words. To best center S and P's voice, I will share their preferences through thick descriptions so the reader may hear and see the many ways in which they communicated.

The Percussionist (P)

Musicking Day One
Although I first met P in the spring of 2022, and worked with him and his peers a few times, I had to build a different relationship with him in fall 2022. He had not seen me since May 2022. The day of our first session, P, myself, and a paraprofessional whom we will call Angel, walked to the conference room. P did not stand by me. He did not gesture toward me. In fact, he made sure Angel was in between us as we walked the hallway. When we arrived at the room, I invited him to the music table. I asked Angel to sit back and let P lead. If we musicked for five minutes or 25 minutes, it was up to him. Angel did not engage with P during any of the musicking sessions.

The Percussionist, seeing nothing on the table, looked at me, stuck out his tongue and proceeded to lay down on the floor, as if to say, "You're kidding me! Where's the music stuff?" Once I sat down and pulled the song PECs to the table, P stood up and sat in the chair beside me. I held up two PEC cards, one with a picture of scarves, the other a microphone. I said, "you choose." P looked between the two and began to move and vocalize. I assumed, based on his vocalizations, that he wanted to sing. So, I began improvising on a neutral syllable to see if he would echo me. P turned his body to me and changed the pitch of his vocalizations. I then handed him a plastic toy microphone. P inspected the microphone, held it up to his eye, placed it on his mouth, and began to hit it and then hold it to his ear. The metal spring in the plastic tube provided P sensory feedback. As he held the microphone to his ear, I sang and tapped the microphone to continue the vibration.

We then moved to scarf dancing along with Stevie Wonder's *Superstitious*. This song was selected due to its child-preferred tempo of 100 bpm (Rose, 2016). P chose the color of his scarf, and we began to dance. At one point he paused, as if processing the song, and then excitedly grabbed his scarf moving back and forth. He seemed to like when he dropped his scarf, that I would pick it up and move it up and down on his head to the beat. I did this after each intentional drop of the scarf. After the 1:45 minute mark in the song, P decided he was finished. I asked him, with PEC, if he was happy or sad. He was not interested in answering my question and turned his back to me.

Knowing he liked drums, I asked, "P would you like to do drums?" His body fully stopped when I said drums. As I walked toward them, P started vocalizing "m d r d m d r d." This was the pattern I had sung to him earlier as he inspected the toy microphone. I echoed him as I brought the drum over. When I placed the drum in front of him, he moved his right hand up in excitement and reached for the mallet. The next six minutes of the music session were an exchange of P playing and me echoing his patterns on the drums. Often, he would bring his head down close to the drum to feel the vibrations closer to his ear. I sat back and let him engage with the drums at his leisure. After 12 minutes of total musicking, P was finished.

Musicking Day Two
A week went by before I saw P again. On this day, I picked him up from art. He stood up immediately when he saw me and, with Angel, we left. When we got to the music room, he sat in his chair and pushed microphone on his AAC. I sat down, put it to his ear and sang, m d l, descending, on a neutral syllable. He responded with vocalizing and grabbing the microphone. He spent time banging the microphone on the table and putting it up to his ears. P was asking for time to explore what he was using. I tried to engage with him in his exploration, but he turned away from me. I waited. This exploration lasted two minutes. Near the end, he began to smile and respond with short, one pitched vocalizations. I held up two

PEC cards, a drum and a microphone and said, "You choose." As I did this, he pushed three times on his AAC "I want cookie." I reinforced with "first choose, then cookie," P vocalized his frustration, but quickly used his left hand to pick the drum PEC and ate his second cookie as I brought over the drums.

P grabbed his preferred drum and began to play. This time, I listened to his non-spoken communication and simply let him explore. P preferred to move between the large and small drum as he, again, brought his ear close to each instrument. After thirty-seconds of playing with his hands, he reached for the mallet. I handed him the mallet and I began chanting to the beat of his playing. When he stopped playing, I stopped chanting. P paused and grinned at me. He started to play again but faster; I followed his tempo. He stopped again, smiling. This exchange went on for almost two minutes when he stood up and moved his body. He tapped a PEC to wait, so I stopped. The mallets had fallen. He pushed his AAC, "help." I leaned down and picked up his mallets.

Later, I brought out the xylophone. I selected this instrument as he loves drums, and wanted to see how he would respond to a new instrument. I played one bar three times and handed him a mallet. As I reached for my mallet he began to play. Once he stopped, I began to play. When I stopped, he played. P intentionally moved his body away from the xylophone when he was ready for me to have a turn and leaned in when he wanted to respond to my improvisation. This musicking session lasted 17 minutes, five minutes longer than the first. I asked him if I could come back again. I was greeted with a smile. I interpreted his smile as a yes.

Musicking Day Three
When I arrived to pick up P, he walked up, took my hand in his and walked me out the door. When we arrived at the music room, P immediately went to grab the microphone. I asked him, using PEC, to wait as this is a skill he was working on to use his AAC to ask for items he wants and/or needs. He pushed the button for microphone, and we began our session. Instead of grabbing the microphone he wanted to move and sing. I sang a pattern, and, on this day, he hummed it back to me with an accuracy not yet demonstrated. During this session he discovered that if he held the microphone to his ear and hit his arm on the table, he could feel/hear the vibrations immediately. He would imitate my singing by hitting the microphone the number of pitches I sang. He explored the microphone for five minutes.

We then moved to the drums. P began with mallets and shared playing between his and my drum. I tried to copy his motions on the drum. At one point he laid his head on the drum while I played. That day, P wanted physical contact. He would reach out to high five but left his hand in the air for me to drum on his hand. When I stopped, P would drum on mine. Later, he grabbed my hands and used "hand over hand" to show me what he wanted me to play. In

response, I began drumming and singing for him. P's response was a whole-body dance between the chair and standing up. We ended our music session with more "hand over hand" drumming. This session was the longest, at 20+ minutes.

Data Analysis and Interpretation of Musical Preferences and Communication Strategies

Using drawings and schema, familiar to The Percussionist, regarding emotion and choice, I will share P's feelings about his musical preferences and his interpretation of his recorded data. First, I will share and describe each drawing. Following each drawing, I will add my interpretation.

Scarf Dancing
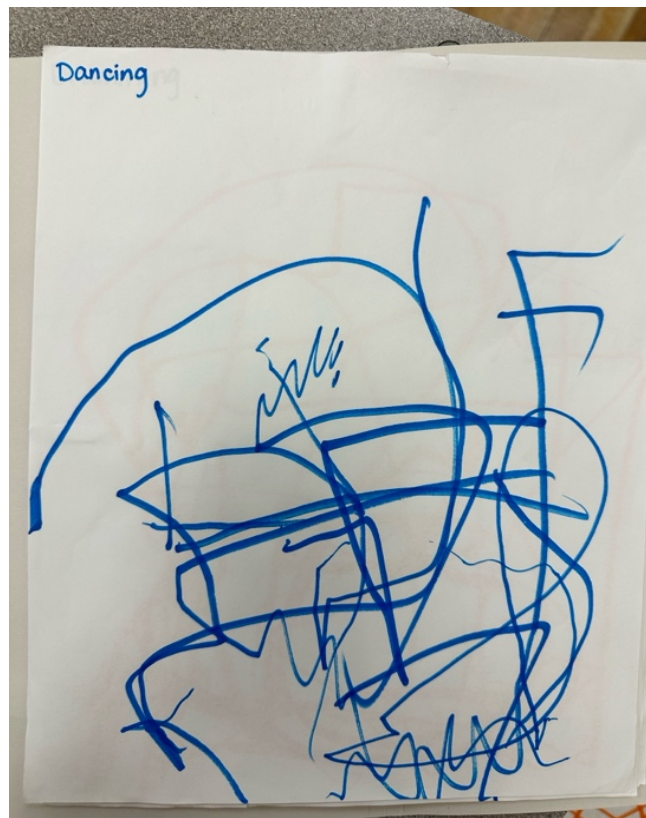
Figure 4. Dancing Drawing by the Percussionist (P).

<The Percussionist > P was very intentional with his drawing as he watched the video. Often, he would pause, look at the video, and continue drawing. I encourage the reader to notice the contrast between the thicker sharp lines and, softer swoops, and the lighter squiggles underneath. When I would ask a question in the video while he was dancing, the pressure on the marker increased. When P saw himself dancing alone the pressure decreased, and when he

watched me put the scarf on his head, he drew squiggles. P placed his marker down once the video stopped and proceeded to request a snack using his AAC.

<My interpretation> Choosing blue for sad, to describe the dancing activity could mean a few things. I know P loves to move and dance. However, I do not know P's favorite music or way to dance. The choice of blue could mean that he did not like the music selection. It could mean that he liked the activity, but it was not his *most* preferred activity (e.g., drumming). If I were to continue musicking sessions with P, I would use this data to ask other education stakeholders (caregivers, special education teacher) if they know his favorite music and to use that in my next session (Draper, 2022; Ibrahim et al., 2024; O'Leary & Moloney, 2020). When he danced in class, he typically chose to listen to and dance with his musical Elmo. As Elmo was not a part of our sessions, and my question to P was, "Is dancing a preferred activity, does it make you happy?" may be why he responded with blue.

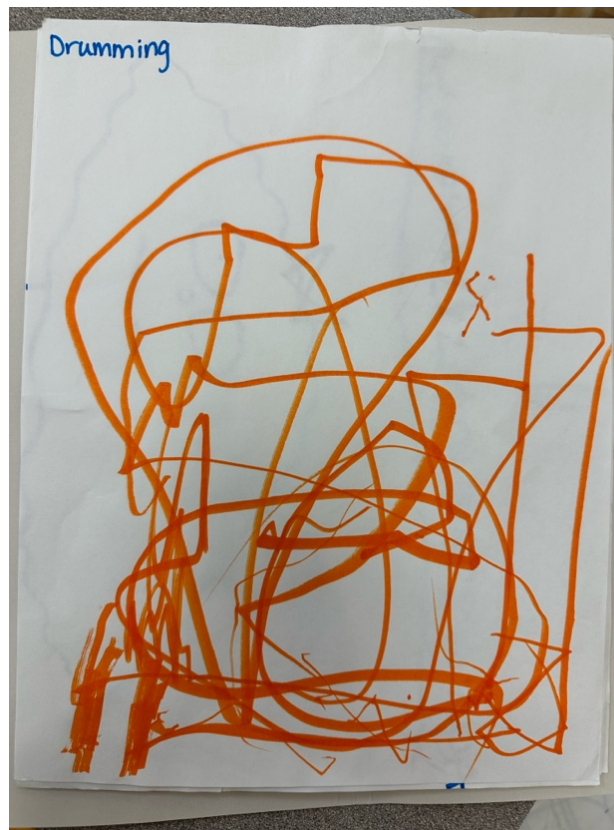*Drumming*

Figure 5. Drumming Drawing by the Percussionist (P)

< The Percussionist-> In this drawing there are larger swoops, less light squiggles, and more pressured marker points where the color is darker and thicker. There is more art filling this page than the previous drawing. In this clip there was no talking, only collaborative drumming. When playing together, the marker made larger motions. The heavier pressure came when P played alone and close to the drum. He continued drawing once the video stopped and did not stop until I asked for the marker. He covered my hand that was holding the clip board as he drew.

<My interpretation> Before handing P the clipboard with a new, blank sheet of paper, I started the clip of him drumming for me, "hand over hand," from our last musicking session. Without prompting P grabbed the orange marker and began to draw. While I noted him making marks during certain times of the video, he did not look directly at this video as much as the first clip. It seemed he was drawing what he had played as the movement of the marker matched the intensity of his playing. Choosing orange could indicate a few preferences. P could be saying that his most preferred activity is drumming. As P needed proximity to the drumhead, his choice could indicate preference for instrument vibrations. Finally, his marker swoops, made when we played together, could indicate that he enjoys collaborative drumming. However, I must note that I was not invited to collaborate with P until the final music session. This could indicate that P needed a level of consistency and trust before being invited into his way of musicking (Blair, 2009; Parry, 2015).

Watching the Video
< The Percussionist> There is almost no blank space left on the front page which is unlike the other drawings. P motioned for help to turn the paper over to continue drawing, by grabbing my hand and leaning into my right shoulder. Like his second drawing, there are large swoops, and lots of pressured marker points where the color is rather intense. There are more intense marker drawings on this paper. Drumming and singing with the toy microphone are seen on the screen. When I paused the video, the drawing continued past multiple prompts to return the marker.

Figure 6. Watching the Video Drawing by the Percussionist (P).

<My interpretation> I tried to not prompt P too much with this question. I simply asked, "Do you like watching and talking about music with me?" No sooner had I asked the question, P grabbed the orange marker. I had not yet pushed play on the laptop. I do not know if P chose orange because of my question or because he was happy that we were hanging out together. This was our fourth meeting between November and January and his body language communicated he was happy to see me. P frequently grabbed my hand, leaned into my right shoulder, and sniffed in my direction all the while smiling. This was P's most intense drawing, and one that took the most time. His color choice and markings may mean the one-on-one attention with a preferred object (e.g., the drum) and having autonomy to share, are preferences (Murray, 2012; O'Leary & Moloney, 2020).

The Songbird (S)

Musicking Day One
The Songbird loves and respects her special education teacher, Jane, more than any other teacher or paraprofessional. She demonstrates this by completing most non-preferred tasks through Jane's encouragement or working directly with her. As such, Jane accompanied us to each music session. Jane never interfered with S's musicking but did assist me with

recommendations to better communicate and connect with S. I first met S in the spring of 2022.

S first chose to sing by grabbing the toy microphone on the table. I selected a familiar echo song and proceeded to lead the activity. S stopped and put the microphone down. What she wanted to do was sing her own song and be the leader. S proceeded to improvise patterns, and I echoed each phrase she presented. This lasted about three minutes. I asked her how she felt when she sang, and she pointed to the alone and frustrated PEC.

After the microphone, S chose to move with scarves. I wanted her to choose the song we danced to, but I did not have PEC for each song. I held up my right fist I said, "Stevie Wonder," then I held up my open left palm and said, "Beyoncé and Lady Gaga." S chose Beyoncé and Gaga. I made the mistake of asking too many questions (What color you want? What color should I have? Do you want to sit or stand?) trying to give her as much control as possible over the situation. S softly said, "no, no, no," and then screamed at me to "calm down!" Jane later explained that my questions were too complex, and that S was getting frustrated with me.

After scarves we moved to the piano. I tried to adjust the volume and was told, "no," so I sat back and watched her play. As she played, S informed me she had a piano at home, but also, to stop asking questions. Her piano playing involved both right and left hands, with chords in the left hand and melody in the right. When I asked her about her playing preference, she responded with, "No. Stop that." S's clear preference was to play without explaining the why. Her first session lasted 18 minutes. I asked her if I could come back, and she emphatically tapped the PEC and said, "Yes!"

Musicking Day Two
We began at the table, and, upon the recommendation of Jane, I worked to use fewer words so as not to overwhelm S. I placed two PECs in front of her and said, "choose." The Songbird quickly pointed to "microphone." After being handed the microphone she said, "thank you." I placed the PEC song sheet in front of her, the same from day one, to see if she would want to lead or let me lead. I began singing and she echoed the entire song. The first day I had shown the whole PEC song board, on this day, I covered up the PEC song board only showing one row of PEC at a time. S seemed more comfortable with this and sang the entire song. When asked how singing made her feel she again said she felt alone. However, on this day, she stated she was happy when she sang alone.

S then selected to play the xylophone. I modeled for her a bordun while I sang. I passed her the xylophone, set up in F pentatonic, to encourage her to play. As she played, I sang;

however, S chose to create on the bars her own melodic phrases. After she continued to play, I asked if I could play with her. She handed me a mallet and we played. S indicated it was my turn when she placed her elbow on the table, holding her mallet up. I indicated it was S's turn when I placed my mallet in my lap. After a minute of collaborative play, she gestured to my mallet to play alone. I noted that she began playing the mallets as she played the piano, with one note and a steady beat in her left hand as her right mallet explored the remaining bars. When asked how she felt when playing the xylophone, she again selected sad.

As S did not seem to enjoy using scarves during the first session, I asked if she wanted to play drums to the music. I presented her with the same music choice (*Superstitious* or *Telephone*) she chose Telephone. Instead of playing the beat, which I modeled, she focused on playing the rhythmic patterns of the speaking and singing. When S finished with the drums, I asked if her if she knew what was next. She paused and enthusiastically said, "Piano!" S was very quiet that day, and while she enjoyed the activities, you could tell other things were on her mind. This was very evident during piano. S would look off into the distance or up at the ceiling, whereas the first day her focus was on the instrument. When asked how she felt playing piano, she again chose sad and alone.

Musicking Day Three
Our final musicking session was our longest. S was excited to see me. Together, with Jane, we walked toward the music room. I presented S with two choices, scarves or microphone. Surprisingly, she chose the scarves. Having learned from our first session, I put a pile of scarves on the table and said, "choose." As she selected and said, purple, I said, "Oh, my favorite color!" The Songbird responded with, "Choose something else!" Clearly telling me, she was not sharing her color. As soon as I pushed play, this time to Superstitious, she began to move. At first, we danced in our chairs. Once the singing began, she got up and led me in our scarf dance. She indicated she was finished by placing her scarf on the table and then walked to her seat.

Playing the drums was S's second choice. I was sure to ask permission to sit beside her and ask what drum she wanted. I began chanting Engine, Engine as she played. Rather than playing the beat she played complementary rhythmic patterns. I asked her if she wanted me to continue to chant or play, she said "Chant." During this time, we took turn playing the drums with either mallets or our hands. I asked if she wanted to lead the drumming, and she responded with "Yes!" while reaching for the mallets. We played drums for about six minutes. She shared that playing the drums and dancing made her happy.

The last half of our session was singing and piano. We sang the same song from the second day. She showed she knew the song and sang with me, but only once. As S moved to the

piano, I asked if I could watch her play. She said, "Yes." Near the end of her piano playing, she discovered the metronome button with the prerecorded "play along" song. She pushed play and reset four times as she enjoyed the initial musical pattern played on the recording. Playing piano encompassed the seven minutes of our final session. The longest of the three, we musicked together for about 20 minutes.

Data Analysis and Interpretation of Musical Preferences and Communication Strategies

In this section, I will share S's feelings about her musical preferences and her interpretation of her recorded data. S shared how she felt about her musicking activities and preferences while she colored, spoke, and employed PEC. I gave S a clipboard and a blank piece of paper per video clip and asked her to describe how she felt about each clip using the same happy or sad emoji PEC, and blue and orange markers, as P.

Singing
<The Songbird > The blue marker was grabbed quickly. A picture of a girl, indicated by the bow is drawn with the blue marker. The eyes drawn are wide circles with small pupils. The lips are pursed tight and thin. The nose round, like hers. The entire body represented by two squiggly lines. The marker markings are thin, soft, almost hesitant. Above the girl are words to a song that is being sung. She is alone.

Figure 7. Singing Drawing by the Songbird (S).

<My interpretation> At each music session, after S sang, I asked how she felt. Each time she pointed to PEC that indicated sad, alone, and/or frustrated. At first, I was confused. S loved to sing. This was confirmed by the music educator, Jane, other stakeholders such as the speech and language teacher, and me in previous engagements with S. In speaking with Jane between music sessions, she informed me of some outside stressors on The Songbird. While analyzing her data, I asked S a question, "Do you sing when you feel alone?" She responded, body turned and no eye contact, with a soft, "yes." I asked one more question, "Does singing make you feel comfortable?" Again, a soft, but higher pitched, "yes." Her eyes remained on her drawing. I shared this with Jane, after the data analysis session. Our conclusion, S does love singing; however, singing may be what she does when she feels sad or alone. Singing seems to comfort and perhaps empower S (Murray, 2012; O'Leary & Moloney, 2020; Draper, 2022).

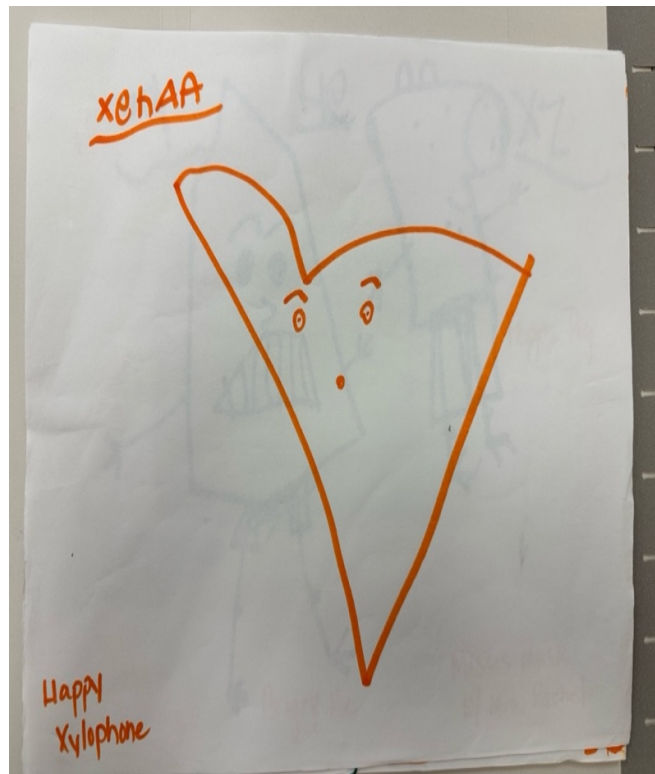*Xylophone Clip*

Figure 8. Xylophone Drawing by the Songbird (S).

< The Songbird> S begins to watch the video. After some consideration, orange is selected. Quickly and clearly, a large heart is drawn near the center of the paper. The markings are of even line and pressure. The heart is given two small eyes with eyebrows and the lips are rounded to a small "oh" of surprise. Above the words happy are written.

<My interpretation> The video clip was longer than the singing clip. S drew but was finished before the clip was over. I asked her what the word meant above the heart, and she said, "happy." I asked if she liked playing with me and she said, "yes." I could interpret the heart as she loves instruments, demonstrating a preference in musicking through instruments. I could interpret the heart as S prefers to musick with others rather than alone. Or it could be both. In watching and rewatching her video, it appears she loves the opportunity to explore and create on any instrument. During musicking she would frequently pass me the mallet and then take it when she was ready to play. While she only consistently smiled while playing the drums, her focus and stamina were longest when she was at an instrument (Blair, 2009; Parry, 2015).
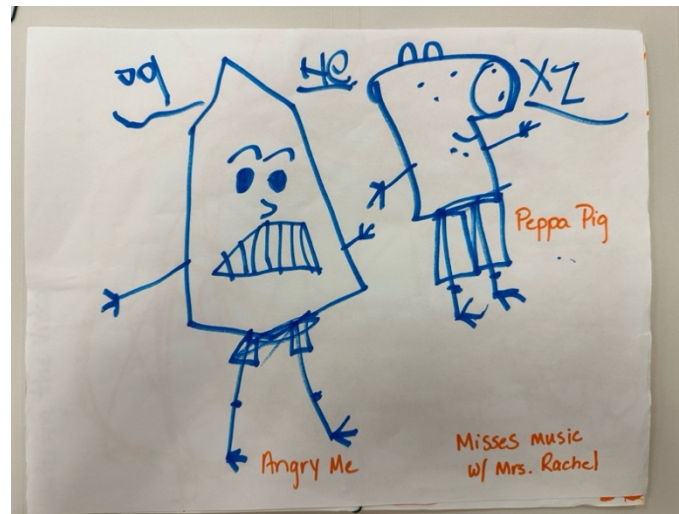
Piano Clip

Figure 9. Piano Clip Drawing by the Songbird (S).

< The Songbird> The blue marker is quickly grabbed. Her marker pressure is more intense and direct. Two individuals are drawn. One has a grimace with teeth showing. The eyes are filled in, with raised eyebrows, and a rounded nose. A hand reaches out to the other individual but not touching. The other individual has two dots for eyes and a smile. To be the same, both are given shorts. A title is written and forcibly underlined. S begins to move more, rocking back and forth as she colors. She is interrupted and points, "Peppa Pig." She glances at me and continues to draw.

<My interpretation> S was more intense with this drawing. As I had selected the piano clip for her to watch, I was surprised when she selected blue (sad). When she began to draw two people, I asked her who was in the drawing. She replied, "Me and Peppa Pig." I do not know the connection between the piano and Peppa Pig. It could be that Peppa Pig is a favorite show,

and when she plays piano, she plays music she remembers from the show. It could be that she simply likes Peppa Pig. When the clip ended, I asked S how she felt about the piano. She loudly said, "Angry!" and tossed the marker away. I asked if the other drawing was her, and she said yes. I asked her why she was angry, "Mrs. Rachel," she said while looking at me. I asked, "You are angry with me?" "No!" exclaimed S, "miss Miss Rachel." I wanted to clarify, so I asked, "S, do you miss making music with me?" S responded, "Miss music Rachel." I looked to Jane, who was sitting on the floor with us, and she confirmed S's response with a nod. This led me to interpret her drawing as she enjoyed and preferred to play the piano, but the video clip was of our last session. As such, we had not had a music session since, and she was sad and angry because she missed and preferred musicking with me. This, to me, explains the choice of blue in relation to the piano clip (Blair, 2009; Draper, 2022; O'Leary & Moloney, 2020; Parry, 2015).

Limitations and Revisiting Researcher Tensions

As mentioned earlier, the entire study, from design to data collection to dissemination, has been full of tension. Silence, eye gaze, touch, smell, and use of objects are all forms of communication (Flewitt, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 2022, 2024; Van Goidsenhoven & De Schauwer, 2020). My mode of noting observations within video recordings and participant analysis of data through drawing may be considered limitations due to the insertion of my "voice." While I attempted to make meaning of interactions through "bodily acts" (e.g., eye gaze, gesture, participant-initiated hand over hand), mutual understanding was hindered through possible misinterpretations or lack of acknowledging preferences silently communicated (Fylkesnes & Ytterhus, 2021; Merleau-Ponty, 2020). While I believe what The Songbird and The Percussionist have shared greatly contributes to our understanding of the musical preferences of non-speaking students, findings must be cautiously interpreted.

Recommendations for Music Educators

The Percussionist and The Songbird offer a great deal of advice for music educators regarding the musical preferences of all children. As with the findings, I recognize that these are written through my interpretation. The tenets of Critical Disability Theory provide researchers impetus to question power imbalances, highlight intersections of identity within institutions, and change the locus of control to include rather than exclude. In these recommendations, the power leans in my favor as part of the normative structures of research. However, these recommendations are informed by S and P to encourage music educators to balance power in favor of the student and to initiate change to instructional choices.

Although it is important that music educators are prepared with content-enriched lessons, incorporating student choice and voice into planning and instruction may support and sustain

student engagement. While we may include caregiver perspectives (Draper, 2022; O'Leary & Moloney, 2020), it is important to center students in planning and instruction. Providing multiple opportunities for student choice helped me to build a positive relationship with participants. The more they trusted me, the more willing they were to try something new. While this level of agency may be more accessible in a self-contained setting, children in any music setting can be included in decision-making (e.g., the length of engagement in a lesson activity, instrument/elective choice, song choice, whether to move and sing or sit and sing) (Draper, 2019; Robison, 2021). In addition, I used participants' preferred means of communication to normalize and center their voices. Agency can empower and provide stamina for future decision-making (Murray, 2012). I was able to learn about S and P from their many modes of communication. I encourage music educators to listen to the silences, watch for eye gaze and gestures, to hear what those they teach are asking to do musically (Flewitt, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 2022, 2024; Van Goidsenhoven & De Schauwer, 2020). Autonomy within the music setting and being able to exist without being confined supported P and S's ability to engage and learn (Wiggins, 2016). If we lingered on a preferred activity (e.g., the piano or drums), they often would engage in a less preferred activity (e.g., movement, talking, and singing). Although I did not have specific objectives for each session, by our third musicking session, P began to imitate my vocal phrases precisely, and S began to take turns musicking on preferred instruments. While uncomfortable for the music educator, following students' pace in lesson activities (e.g., general or ensemble) may increase student learning outcomes and more quickly solidify concepts and techniques taught (Blair, 2009; Draper, 2022; Denhart, 2008). Following participants' pace and paying attention to multimodal communication strategies seemed to increase P and S's willingness to try new things and build our rapport (Flewitt, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 2022, 2024; Van Goidsenhoven & De Schauwer, 2020).

Providing wait time within a lesson is essential to increased student involvement, learning, and "in-the-moment" instructional choices (Alsaadi & Atar, 2019; Ingram & Elliot, 2016; Wasick & Hindman, 2018). Wait time increased my understanding of participants' musical preferences, content to embed in musicking, and participant skill development - musical or otherwise. Providing a longer wait time also increased P and S's musical responses. Some students may require longer wait times to respond to questions or provide a musical response. Lengthy silence can be uncomfortable for educators and students (Wasick & Hindman, 2018). In extending my wait time, the frequency and length of P and S's musical responses increased over each musicking session.

Music educators can learn much about those we teach when we musick with rather than lead. Play and student-centered instruction enrich music content and skill development (Coss, 2019; Wilson, 2022). Elementary music educators can use students' musical preferences to inform

accompanying instrument selection, the creation of Orff arrangements, recorder instruction, and independent group learning centers. Inviting students to model their musical play, for example, a hand-clapping game, may inform instruction over several classes. The Percussionist, The Songbird, and I encourage music educators to take as many opportunities as possible to musick with those they teach. Ensemble directors could bring chanting and singing games, call-and-response activities, or creative movement within rehearsals. This "Gamification" may increase student engagement and artistry (Stephens, 2021). In addition, those they teach could be invited to take part in leading rehearsals, allowing the music educator to play beside those they teach.

Conclusion

Students desire autonomy and agency – the ability to exist freely and to choose how to exist in the spaces they inhabit (Blair, 2009; Wiggins, 2016). That does not mean that we, as music educators, should not provide structure to instruction or simply let go and let students do as they choose. Rather, inviting student agency and encouraging autonomy in PK-12 music education means that educators should consider moving from being the sage on the stage to the guide on the side. As music educators, we must become comfortable with the idea that what we think we know about how those we teach learn is relatively small. To know what those we teach think, feel, and need to succeed, we must welcome critique and learn to observe and follow students' lead. We may provide students with a roadmap to musical engagement and learning, but the path forward for each child is as unique as the children themselves.

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