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Music as Care and Well-Being for Children in the Integrated Education System

La musica come cura e benessere per i bambini nel sistema educativo integrato

ROSA CERA

The general purpose of this work is to understand, both nationally and internationally, the importance of musical activities in the current integrated education system. While the specific objective is to analyse the influence of musical experiences on the overall development of a child from 0 to 3 years, the questions to which the work has sought to provide answers, through an interdisciplinary approach, concern the relationship between music, the child's care and well-being, and the ludic and educational dimension of musical activities in families and educational institutions.

KEYWORDS: INTEGRATED EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM, MUSIC, LULLABIES, PLAY, CARE AND WELL-BEING.

The integrated education system: the international scenario

According to the Oecd, the curriculum plays an important role in promoting the continuity and progression from early childhood education and care to primary education. For this reason, curriculum alignment not only influences the quality of children's relationships and commitment in both kindergarten and preschool, but it also increases the quality of learning and long-term well-being[1]. The need, therefore, is to create an educational system where not only is the care of children dealt with in kindergarten but also in preschool, according to a principle of an ongoing integrated curricular activity. The creation of an integrated educational system has been the subject of discussion and thought in several documents and international debates for some years now.

In 1989, the United Nations Assembly, through the Convention on the Rights of the Child[2], had already highlighted the need to offer more help and assistance to children in order to be able to guarantee development of each child's personality harmoniously and completely. Subsequently, the recommendations of the European Council, held in Barcelona, and the European Commission 2013 also underscored the importance of directing member countries to invest in children, extending the range of services for children under three years of age to those aged three to six[3]. The European Commission's latest recommendation have also confirmed that high-quality educational services have long-term positive effects on both cognitive and relational levels. The ultimate goal of most European Union documents is therefore to protect children's rights. Included among these rights is certainly that of being able to ensure equal opportunities for education, care, relationships and play, overcoming inequalities and national, economic, ethnic and cultural barriers. An additional right includes that of being able to reconcile home life with time for the parents' care and work, promoting the quality of education and of the continuity between the various educational and scholastic services, and family participation in children's school life. The results of some research carried out by the Oecd have shown that the quality of educational integration and continuity also depends very much on the places where preschools and kindergartens are located[4]. The physical distance between the two educational institutions seems, indeed, to hinder continuity, while the use of the same structure helps children, on the one hand, to overcome the problems linked with logistical orientation and, on the other, allows teachers to exchange information regarding the pedagogical approaches used, thus facilitating knowledge sharing. In Austria, for example, the last year of kindergarten and the first two years of primary education are grouped together in order to constitute a period called the 'joint-entry phase'. However, this does

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not mean that the two institutions must have a shared curriculum. In pursuing the goal of educational continuity, in each Oecd country various strategies are used that involve different figures including teachers, families and school staff as a whole. In some countries, for example, days are organised in which kindergarten children visit and participate in primary-school activities; in others meetings are organised to inform parents. Furthermore, in the case of children with special learning needs, parents can count on the help of specialists[5]. In other countries, greater continuity is guaranteed by the teachers who, for instance, exchange information about their activities and the places where children usually learn and play. Regarding children up to three years, the debate on how to structure their curriculum and on the appropriate pedagogical methods to adopt is still lively and robust[6].

In Italy, Legislative Decree 65/2017 – issued on the basis of the delegation authorised in art. 1, (180-181) (e) of Law 107/2015 – the progressive establishment of an integrated system of education from birth to six years was envisaged, consisting of educational services for children along with state and officially recognised, private kindergartens. Educational services for children include regular and infant and toddler micro-nurseries, which admit children between 3 and 36 months; integrated services, which admit children between 24 and 36 months; supplementary services that contribute to the education and care of children in a flexible, diversified way, and are divided into play areas where children between 12 and 36 months are admitted; centres for children and families that welcome a child from the first months of life with an accompanying adult; and home educational services that welcome children between 3 and 36 months. Furthermore, the need, previously highlighted by the Oecd, to reduce as much as possible the physical distance between the various institutions that deal with children, was also incorporated into Legislative Decree 65/2017, which envisages that regional authorities establish day-care centres that will accommodate more educational facilities for children up to 6 years in a single complex or in neighbouring institutions. Beyond the logistical organisation of the day-care centres, the European Union Council, in Point 4(a) of its Recommendations on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems supports the need to[7]:

> (a) ensure a balance in the provision of social-emotional and cognitive development, acknowledging the importance of play, of contact with nature, and of the role of music, art, and motor activity.

Bearing point 4(a) of the council's recommendation in mind, the educational and care role that music plays in the overall development of the child, especially in the first three years of life work will be focussed on specifically in this work.

The Study

The questions that guided this work arose after a careful, in-depth analysis of a wide range of international, interdisciplinary scientific literature, as the sciences that contributed to understanding the topic being studied differed:

1. Could music be understood as a form of care for the child?
2. Can play activities using music be considered educational and care experiences?
3. Does music education fit into the educational services provided by an integrated educational system?

When a child is nourished by art and music

Several studies have shown the positive influence that different forms of art have on a child's overall development[8]. Indeed, scientific results have shown that participation in structured artistic activities contributes considerably to an increase in cognitive abilities. In an Oecd publication, it was also argued that there is a direct correlation between a subject's experiences and the brain's neuroplasticity. Moreover, teaching methods can benefit from the knowledge of the neuronal aspect underlying learning[9]. In the last ten years, it has been established by some neuroscientific studies that infants are endowed from birth with all the key components of musical understanding, such as recognition of intervals[10] and consonance – that is, if a piece of music is 'in tune' or

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not[11]. They are able to identify where the rhythm of a song[12] is and if a chord is in a major or minor key, based on Western musical harmonic conventions[13]. In the same studies, it was also shown how children are able to hear the complex syntactic regularities of harmonic music[14]. As for the development of linguistic abilities, clear evidence has been produced on how a child's vocabulary is mediated by the musical aspects of speech[15]. In fact, it is in the first three years of life that a child develops specific linguistic and cognitive skills, going through a 'sensitive period', in which there is a strong sensitivity to sound with which the infant learns to relate. The most frequent sound a child hears is that produced by the maternal voice. However, it is also the ensemble of the surrounding sound environment that influences the development of linguistic abilities. Therefore, the art of sounds, which develops in relationship to the external world with its ability to satisfy certain objectives and its faculty of assuming symbolic and instrumental functions, not only shapes the child's mind, but also contributes to strengthening 'acoustic imagination', considered essential for all forms of artistic and scientific knowledge[16]. Sounds already become important in a child's prenatal life, since the gestational period influences learning and perception in postnatal life[17]. From the prenatal period on, sound tends to have effects on a child's way of being. Moreover, sound and music education workshops, in which children have participated since birth, facilitate behaviours and the level of perceptual, motor and cognitive responses to be observed. Additionally, listening, singing, dancing and ensemble music at infant and toddler day nurseries can help prevent certain disorders related to child and adolescent development, thus ensuring greater psycho-physical well-being. It has been scientifically proven that the experience of musical activities influences a child's cognitive abilities such as, for example, memory, visual-spatial skills, processing speed, subsequent academic performance and general intelligence[18].

With regard to emotional and social well-being, music seems to influence the quality of the relationships that children establish with their parents and with educators in infant and toddler day nurseries[19]. There are numerous methods of interaction that are often used by educators: singing, speaking with a melodic voice, and movement or positive facial expressions. Indeed, rhythmic and melodic musical interactions are a source of important social information for children. Interpersonal synchrony, an important social component of musical commitment, is achieved when a person's movements are temporally aligned with the movements of others[20]. When children are able to synchronise their movements to a rhythm, they can usually synchronise their rhythmic movements with those of others. For example, singing, clapping, or synchronised walking by adults increases subsequent prosocial behaviour among the participants. Interpersonal synchrony, moving in step with the children, and singing familiar songs for them can also indicate belonging to the group, thus helping the child to make sense of the social world that surrounds him[21].

The energising and engaging effect of music, together with adequate stimulation, also encourages both motor exercises by the foetus and sensorimotor development during early childhood[22]. Indeed, infants between four and six months are particularly sensitive to the structure, unity and articulations of a musical phrase, such that they are able to segment it due to recognising certain indices with syntactic value, i.e., the lowering of the height of the final sound and its duration or octave interval[23].

Although the results of several studies have shown the positive influence of music on a child's overall development, there is still much resistance on the part of some educational policy makers regarding the inclusion of musical activities among early childhood learning experiences. For example, in Australia's Guide to Early Childhood Education, music appears only as a mode of communication and as an ancillary activity in promoting children's health and well-being. Hence, in the absence of national orientation, offering musical education is at the discretion of individual educational institutions[24]. In England, despite music sessions being listed in the activities and programmes carried out at those institutions responsible for the care of children from 0 to three years, there is nonetheless no clear legislation governing these activities[25]. Even in Italy, the situation is not much different; a large part of the work is freely organised by those involved in the care and education of children, thus bringing musical experiences back into supplementary services (Legislative Decree 65/2017).

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Do we play with music?

Play and playfulness are the basic characteristics of early childhood education and are a source of shared pleasure and creativity in learning processes[26]. Therefore, play seems to have a dual role. On the one hand, it draws a child's attention to respecting rules, since playing always means applying rules. On the other, it allows the child to step away from reality in order to build another, equally consistent world [27]. The types of games that children can play with music are certainly interactive as music is a medium through which it is possible to interact with themselves and others. A child's first musical production originates from interactions between parents and child in a form of 'communicative musicality'. Interactive musical games help the child to build his identity both by producing music (identity in music) and using music (music in identity). Moreover, it is a means of experimenting with different ways of being in the world[28]. Therefore, by playing with music, the child has the possibility of creating his own identity and of speaking about himself. For Jerome Bruner[29], fiction is a "way of knowing" and communicating one's experiences to the world. It is a way that lets everyone develop their own identity within their culture. Therefore, what is important for the scholar is not the way in which we discover a version of the world that already exists beyond our experience, but rather the way in which each of us constructs our own versions of the world. Indeed, narratives serve not only to shape our experiences, but also to demonstrate our "cultural belonging"[30]. This demonstration of belonging to a particular culture emerges not only through storytelling, but also through the symbols and forms we draw upon to narrate the stories themselves. For example, music is a set of symbols and forms belonging to each community, from which each person draws in order to develop their own identity. It thus becomes a useful tool in the construction of meaning and in the demonstration of cultural belonging. For this reason, it is possible to assert that there are two different theories concerning the relationship between identity and music: 'identities in music' and 'music in identities'. According to the first theory, each person assumes different social and cultural roles in music, as a member of the public, a singer, or a performer. The second theory refers, instead, to the ways in which we use music as a resource, for example, to mould the states of our feelings – listening to a particular piece of music to arouse certain emotions – or to demonstrate belonging to specific social or cultural groups. Through these processes, music can therefore be a means by which each child is able to build his own self and subsequently narrate and communicate it. To understand how the various forms of musical play influence a child's development, it is necessary to refer to theories on the evolution of symbols and the reflective thought of Greenspan and Shankar[31]. Greenspan's ideas[32] have challenged those child-development theories that emphasise the longstanding division between affect and cognition, highlighting how emotionally relevant emotions and relationships develop in conjunction with cognitive abilities and how they can even support them. Greenspan has identified six phases in the development of emotions and affects that emerge in the first three years of life: (1) ability to be calm, under control, and attentive; (2) ability to relate to others; (3) ability to have intentional two-way non-verbal communication; (4) ability to act on the world by engaging in a continuous flow of emotional interactions; (5) ability to have emotional ideas; and (6) ability to exhibit emotional thinking by linking ideas[33]. According to Greenspan and Shankar[34], our biological potential for learning, which includes the ability to perceive, organise and respond, is a necessary but insufficient condition for learning. A sufficient condition for learning requires social and emotional learning "tools", such as the ability to participate, interact with others, engage in emotional and social signalling, build complex models, organise information symbolically, and use symbols to think. These are, in fact, the 'tools' that allow us to acquire knowledge as well as to develop intelligence and empathy. Being a critical, culturally mediated process, playing with music is a means of stimulating emotions and feelings, thus encouraging the development of communication and the sense of self and of others. Indeed, creative musical play encourages the development of emotional skills and the understanding of others' emotions. Moreover, it increases the capacity of being self-aware, thus also stimulating attention, curiosity and the development of empathy[35].

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Lullabies: a source of well-being and of care for children and parents

Among the various musical activities, lullabies have particular effects on a child. They are characterised by being brief, underscoring individual virtuosity, and by having a constant rhythm and repetitive structure. Moreover, through a poetic language, they can also evoke images of domestic and wild animals and natural landscapes, or powerful spiritual or religious messages[36]. In their content, lullabies can indeed reflect traditional Christian religious beliefs about being grateful and praying for protection. In this way, parents stimulate a sense of gratitude for the child's life as a whole.

It is widely believed that lullabies contribute to nurturing socialisation and intimate sharing, as well as being a means by which to preserve cultural and family traditions. In some cases, this kind of singing can also be a situated learning process through which the child acquires the basic elements of a culture, a collective mentality, and local or family traditions. The ritualisation and ordinary nature of singing lullabies also contributes to creating a safe, inclusive climate for the child and a strongly intimate aspect evoked by the softness of the parent's voice and the parent's emotional harmony with the child's inner rhythm. Therefore, lullabies are a way of helping the child, through everyday life, to internalise familiarity and of being integrated into the surrounding world. However, to be considered a truly integral part of child care, a lullaby should promote intimacy and attachment as well as the child's autonomy, thus balancing the assisted process of falling asleep with the phase of complete independence achieved with sleep. The care effects of lullabies fall not only on the children but also on the parents who, through song, can recover from everyday stress. However, it is important for the parent to have some musical awareness, based on moving away from chronological time to enter the realm of a perpetual state that is more in line with the way children experience time. This involves adopting an approach sensitive to the child's inner rhythm. Indeed, lullabies have a transitional value and the elements that appear to be transversal in different cultures derive from the common effect that the basic rhythm has on human behaviour, which is identified for children with different cultures. Lullabies have, indeed, the same rhythmic structure in the most varied cultures, and even on a melodic and harmonic level one can recognise the relationships between emotions and characteristics of the music that evoke them, common to different cultures. The sweetness of the sound and the slowness of the rhythm are transversal elements to lullabies in various cultures, elements that accompany the child between the state of being awake to that of sleep.

In recent years, however, the way of listening to lullabies has changed. Media have also appeared in the musical life of infants, adapting songs to a multimedia repertoire via YouTube, App 1, and television. However, what appear as lullabies on YouTube have very little in common with traditional bedtime songs as they are notable for being real, instrumental or orchestral performances of slow, quiet musical pieces. Visually, most video clips consist of a series of electronic special effects, with bright, ever-changing colours and patterns or still images, most commonly of such toys as building blocks and teddy bears. The multimedia lullabies listened to the most, however, are those played on highly publicised and sponsored apps. All these modes could certainly relieve parents of the task of singing lullabies, but they indicate a lack of understanding or consideration as to the meaning of the parental interactions inherent in the traditional performance of a lullaby. The effects of multimedia on children vary according to their age. Little ones, whose relationships are usually focused on family members, could, for example, share a digitised library with parents or older siblings. It has also been shown how young children can learn to construct social meaning through mediated music as part of family routines. Indeed, looking at a video clip together in the evening can guide children's behaviour and support their involvement as social agents. In fact, Corsaro's theory of interpretative reproduction[37] maintains that, when children observe, interpret and then respond to lullabies mediated as part of their family's routine, they have access to a shared understanding of belonging to their family. Moreover, it is precisely through these shared understandings that children construct meaning and have the opportunity to reinvent or reproduce the cultural practices in their lives.

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Music for a pedagogy of care and well-being in an integrated educational system

The importance of music for a child's general development was always supported in the past by several educationalists. In 'Emile', Jean-Jacques Rousseau emphasised the need for the child to learn music in the most spontaneous, natural way possible, with practice coming before theory. In the nineteenth century, Friedrich Fröbel devoted much attention to motor education, rhythm and an introduction to the world of music and dance. Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi also saw in art generally, and in music specifically, a reconciliation between meaning and spirit, thus addressing the discourse from a more philosophical point of view[38]. Subsequently, in identifying the existence of different intelligences, Howard Gardner[39] mentioned musical intelligence, highlighting how musical exposure to sound at an early age can encourage listening to the rhythms of one's body (breath, heartbeat), playing at recognising and imitating onomatopoeic sounds, discriminating between natural and artificial noises, constructing simple instruments, and reproducing and inventing rhythms that let them develop and enhance their musical sensibility. Maria Montessori[40] was one of the first scholars to maintain that music education was essential for cognitive development and the overall education of children who must be introduced to music at a pre-school age through practical activities and materials that stimulate the ear's sensitivity. In more recent times, Edwin Gordon put forward his "Music Learning Theory", according to which, from birth, a child is able to learn music like spoken language, in a completely autonomous and spontaneous way. Nonetheless, the adult's role as an 'informal guide' is always considered important in what should be a good model of musicality, always ready to welcome a child's spontaneous offers of musical play and giving the latter the possibility of receiving a rich and stimulating musical enculturation[41]. Significant are, for example, the experiences of music for children aged 0-6 in Italy, in particular those organised by the schools in Reggio Emilia that are an educational model inspired by certain American schools. Nevertheless, there still seem to be some limits that hinder an adequate musical education due, at times, to the difficulty of considering music as a method of care for the child and for an insufficient musical preparation of the teachers.

However, the specific problem seems to be that a child's adult models, either parents or educators, seem to generally lack musical knowledge and skills. Indeed, most early childhood educators state that children, despite loving musical activities, have little chance of developing any specific knowledge on the subject due to the absence of adequately trained educators in this sector[42]. This situation has been demonstrated through the results of some studies that show how educators trained in music are able to propose different daily activities relating to sound, musical interpretation and music appreciation[43], as opposed to those having little familiarity with music who are less interested in performing activities of this kind and state that they have difficulty in limiting their lack of instruction. In other words, early childhood educators need to develop not only specific skills in the field of music, but also an inquisitiveness that, as Giuseppe Bertagna[44] has pointed out, allows them to go beyond simply using what is outlined in the curriculum. Sometimes, however, educators do not even have the skills needed to carry out what is stated in the professional guidelines, which support the integration of music in the early childhood curriculum as a way of furthering a child's development. The studies carried out so far have called for educators to have a better understanding of the key elements to be addressed in music, such as intonation, duration, intensity, and timbre[45]. Furthermore, play activities could be a way to integrate music into the early childhood curriculum and to do research in this area, e.g., through nursery rhymes, songs, stories of sound landscapes, or the creation of melodies and accompaniments. Music education should therefore be integrated into a multidisciplinary educational approach in order to support learning in other areas, and to encourage the development of early literacy and numeracy skills[46].

Conclusions

From the point of view of an integrated educational system, it would be useful for children to begin having musical experiences as early as infancy, as is the case, for example, in Germany and some Nordic countries where the concept of education also encompasses that of care. Moreover, there is no

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clear separation between early childhood education and kindergarten. Cartesian rationalism has certainly contributed to separating the concept of care from that of education, with the body considered as something separate from the mind. This way of understanding early childhood education has, however, been the subject of criticism by some scholars who, through their research, have shown how play, exploration, freedom of movement, relationships, and discussions with other children as well as musical activities are not only essential for body care and emotional development but also how these activities have a positive influence on cognitive development[47]. Music activates the primary emotions as defined by Giuseppe Bertagna, e.g., fear, happiness, surprise, interest and anger since they are auto-semantic and do not generate necessary meanings or reasoned thoughts by category.[48]. Therefore, children should not be considered merely rational beings to whom adequate education is to be ensured, but also as beings endowed with a body that transmits emotions, feelings and sensations, provided by the care aspect of educating. From the ontological and epistemological point of view, mind and body are indeed considered inseparable entities in the concept of educating. In this regard, Maurice Hamington[49] has argued, through the theory of embodied and performative care, that, on the ontological level, human beings are basically relational and embodied beings. The scholar developed his own theory, inspired by the ideas of the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty[50], who believed that it was impossible for human beings to be made up of a material physical body and a non-material mental substance. Instead, human beings are used to experiencing themselves through their bodies and engaging in various projects related to the environment in which they find themselves. However, this does not mean that the mind is less important than the body. Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty, the mind and body are inextricably linked. Hence, it is precisely through the body that human beings are able to perceive the world, a body that nonetheless needs continuous care and education. From an epistemological point of view, Hamington[51] highlighted the existence of a strong relationship between knowledge and care, since the more knowledge one has of another person, the greater the possibility of being able to care for him. Taking care of another demonstrates openness and attention to the needs that emerge in a particular relationship and specific context. Indeed, assistance contributes to the well-being and personal growth of individuals, recognising at the same time their interconnection and interdependence. Besides being characterised as a type of embodied care, the concept of assistance and care expressed by Hamington is also performative because taking care of others should be for educators both a mindset and an activity that can be pursued over time and space[52]. Although sometimes aware of children's emotional and physical care needs, nursery-school teachers have ignored this need to prioritise learning and education, considering care activities unprofessional[53]. Instead, taking care of others should be considered a moral quality, a high-value skill in which emotionality and corporeality are merged with rationality. However, it is not only nursery-school children that need greater care, but also the teachers themselves, who need adequate training in addition to suitable reflective and co-constructive spaces through which they can develop adequate skills both in the field of education and in taking care of all children.

ROSA CERA
University of Foggia

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