



Tuesday Tools: Observation – Responding to Musical Observations

Hello Rock and Roll community and welcome to another Tuesday Training tools as we discuss our focus for this month: observation. Last week, we discussed musical observation 101 to know what to look for in musical behavior, even if a child isn't making any sound! Today, we'll talk about the next step: now that I know I'm observing musical behavior in a child, what should I do about it as the adult in the room? Am I helping the child or harming their experience? Here are a few tips to consider as you're observing your children's musical output in your classroom:

Leave them alone

In past Tuesday Tools, we've talked about 'artistic flow.' Children don't plan out their music play in advance like an adult would schedule a rehearsal or practice time. Free music play evolves organically out of a child's experience living in the moment and responding to their environment. Children lost in the music also lose their awareness of themselves. They're not self-conscious or bogged down by any worries about how something sounds, they're just having fun. In my own observations when you call attention to a child while they're doing their thing, they may freeze, become self-aware, stop what they're doing, and find something else. Most of the time, it's best to just let them ride their own rhythm.

Remember the three Montessori Golden Rules: are they harming themselves? Another student? The materials/environment? If not, let them be and observe further. Take a minute to let them keep playing, even if you're feeling pressure to transition to the next part of your daily rhythm. Be aware of your gaze as well – are you staring at this child? I've found that even prolonged eye contact can throw a child off their flow. Be comfortable keeping them in your peripheral vision and use your ears to fill in the rest of the story.

Imitate

Sometimes, a child may catch you observing them and keep doing their thing. There's no one way to know if the moment is right to step in and interact, but if it feels right, try imitating what the child is musicking back to them. Maybe it's a simple vocal utterance, "bah bah BAH," or a short, repeated rhythm pattern, or playing with a vocal inflection. The child hears your imitation and repeats the behavior. You imitate their new creation back to them. So on and so on until you . . .

Start a Dialogue

We tend to think of a dialogue as something that involves words, but conversations can happen purely in music as well. Think of how jazz musicians take turns soloing back and forth, trading ideas, shifting perspectives, and feeding off what their partners just said. The same can be true for making music with young children. This can be an especially useful strategy for children who have trouble communicating their thoughts and feelings with words. Your musical dialogue may reveal something new about a child that they were unable to communicate. You may also explore imitating with different instruments or body parts – how does that "bah bah BAH" sound on a drum? Or on the bells? Or moved through my shoulders?

Encourage Collaboration

The classroom is not an isolated space, and there are other children present in the room. Sound travels easily in small classroom spaces, and eventually other children get interested in what's happening. Sometimes a musician wants to work on solo material, and that is perfectly fine. If a child is resistant to playing with someone else, you may have to facilitate the protection of their musical space. Other times, children have no problem inviting others into their music play and open their music play to their peers.

Use these opportunities to model respectful listening, taking turns, hearing new ideas, and working together. You may find that the new creative pair is getting along so well, they don't need the adult as a collaborator at all. If this happens, give yourself a pat on the back for setting up a beautiful music interaction, and go back to observing the children further to determine what new musical behaviors are on full display.

Have a great week everyone, and I'll see you for the next Tuesday Tools

Phil