

Getting It or Not Getting It

While I have been writing these 60 odd chapters from every "angle" I can imagine, exhorting people to help children move and groove at ever earlier ages, I have also been trying to "get it going" at the local primary school. I've been postponing writing this chapter because it is a continuing saga of successes and failures and I wanted to absorb as many of each as possible before writing, but also, I procrastinate and will put this chapter toward the back of the book because I don't have a lot of convincing answers to the question "If kids are born to groove, how come so few of them are jumping at the chance to do it?" or "How come so few are thriving when they do get a chance to do it?"

Most school-age children are not shouting "show me how to do like you!" Here in the relatively privileged northwest corner of Connecticut, a very small percentage of the total K thru 3rd graders are showing up at our after school program from 3:15 to 4:15. We don't have a big "waiting list." Usually it is only one parent, at most, who shows up consistently and can take the time to participate once a week for any given 7 or 8 week session. Children's attendance is variable, cub scouts or brownies or sports or playing outside can take priority; enthusiasm for drumming and dancing seems to come and go, ebb and flow, with each person and with the group as a whole. Liz Faulkner and I try to keep it fun, open to improvisation as we impart basic skills, but sometimes it is too loose and children start wandering off or releasing energy counter to the flow of drumming-dancing-singing. Other times, it feels tight and coercive and too much like school to the children if I stay on one specific skill as a task for too long after a long day at school. So I try to keep it moving, keep it interesting, repeating the same skill lessons for salsa, samba, bomba, funka, getting up to dance the basic steps to each of these grooves if children are getting antsy or squirrely from just drumming, looking in each session for new dance moves and/or a new song or chant to do with each groove. We are always trying to keep a good balance between instruction and improvising/playing. Can you two or three hold the drum patterns while we dance? Two years ago when we started I couldn't ask that question. Now, on a good day, we have five or six drummers who can hold parts well, and usually a few children who can invent new dance moves, encourage others to try out their movements. But we don't really have a "show me how to do like you!" attitude or culture firmly in place yet. We are not grooving consistently. I can't shout "salsa!" or "samba!" and have everyone grab the right instruments and go to it. We're getting close, but not yet. And almost all of the children are not very eager to perform what they know, not impatient to get to the next style. It's enjoyable and challenging for most of them, most of the time, and there are more sustained flows of enthusiasm now than when we started two years ago. But we are not thriving. People are not lined up outside the door pleading for a chance to get in.

Partly, this variable energy week to week, and this lack of an inspiring ensemble after two years of intermittent after school programming, are both due to a decision I keep making over and over again: not to let go of or discourage in any way "those who need it the most." My goal has been to "leave no child behind" and to figure out what it will take, child by child, for everyone to be in satisfying grooves together. If all children are "born to groove" then all children can "get it." The only problem with a generous belief system and this specific goal is that it gives any one child a kind of veto power

over our processes moment to moment. And since three or four or more children having major difficulties of one kind or another can "take turns" exercising this veto. . . it slows us up a lot. I don't know how much it slows us up because I haven't tried the other strategies (see below) to find out. A very important kind of social learning is going on for everyone as we devise dozens of different ways (see below) to keep everyone "in it" and coping with their difficulties. And every time someone who has been struggling makes a breakthrough, the glow on that child's face, the appreciation of the other children, can bring tears to the eyes. At our last session one child suddenly revealed flawless hand over hand triplets at a brisk tempo and when I matched her pattern a big spontaneous cheer and applause went up from the group. Wow! One of us has that skill down, done, mastered. That accomplishment, and that cheer of approval may have been life transforming. That child knows, "I am a drummer. And everybody knows it!" Are all the delays, and starting over slower and slower, and the frustrations of the whole group etc. worth these moments of individual breakthrough? I think so. But I don't know so.

A few kids get it right away, can learn about as fast as I can teach; they are much quicker to learn than college students. But most are having difficulties of one kind or another. And some already have major difficulties, big obstacles, in the way of:

- 1) learning a simple pattern skill as 'personal coordination' or "something I can do";
- 2) learning to play that same pattern in solid, reliable 'social coordination' synch with others;
- 3) getting satisfaction from having the skill and holding the pattern in synch with others while other children hold a different pattern on a different drum or instrument i.e. 'personally and socially coordinated' grooving. It can be deeply satisfying to "own" or have a personal coordination, to learn a pattern skill and play it all by yourself. It can also be deeply satisfying to play a part with others. And it is often thrilling to players and witnesses when you can feel children interlocking their percussion parts, dancing happily to their own music, see and hear them drumming and singing at the same time, or dancing and singing at the same time, performing with energy and finesse in an ensemble. That's the best and only living proof of Born to Groove.

Some different overall strategies.

Family Strategies. Play with parents and children together. Siblings teaching siblings. Kids teaching parents. Parents practicing with kids. Twins have a huge advantage of practicing as peers together. Anyone can practice at home with other people any time. This is Music Together's whole approach and it is growing and spreading.

Intergenerational Strategies. Same all ages approach, but families, plural, could be playing together in neighborhoods or at parish halls. Or we could be bringing skilled elders at the old age home together with children who need skills. Find or create "the village" or sense of community that can sustain the transmission and exchange of dancing-drumming-singing skills.

Win the Advanced Strategies. Work and play intensively with the children who get it quickest hoping that an inspiring ensemble will attract more enthusiasm, participants, support, money, and so that ensemble members will become mentors and teachers, spreading the skills to the youngest over time and establishing a "feeder system" for their ensemble to get bigger and better and eventually divide into more ensembles. (This was the original MUSE, Incorporated idea that faltered in Buffalo when schools couldn't quite get the most skilled older children organized as regular mentors/teachers of

the pre-K and Kindergarten kids.) I will try a version of this strategy at the next school where I volunteer.

Special Class Strategies. My most discouraging teaching experience ever was working one summer at a private school with five or six boys who were labeled different ways and out to prove that all the labels were more than adequate and accurate. I kept trying to teach "everything I know" five days a week and they competed to see who could learn the least, find the best excuses for not learning, etc. Finally, in the middle of the fourth and final week of mutual suffering, I declared myself the winner of the "who's the biggest dummy" game since it took me over three weeks to figure out that this was the game we were playing! I turned it over to them and let them take turns playing lead rhythms that we would try to match: you call, we will respond, and the last three sessions were the best of the month. If I were to try a special class again with older children and early teens, I'd start by declaring myself El Stupido from day one, and find out what they would like to do with rhythm. What would you like to teach me or teach each other?

Inclusive Strategy. Let that be the name of what I've been trying to make work the past two years after school at the local primary school. Some different ways of keeping everyone "in it" with a chance of "getting it" are:

- 1) Always take a minute to review a basic pattern very, very slowly so that anyone who hasn't "got it" yet can give it another try. The children who have it in hand are reminded of how to teach it, how to break it down step by step, how to make it accessible to another person;
- 2) Try to remember who knows what so that as quickly as a child knows a pattern they can be made responsible for holding it steadily as others follow them or as others add another part;
- 3) Ask children who have trouble following and matching up with others to be leaders once in a while; if I match the leader and other children match up with me then we are all playing together and getting into a groove is possible;
- 4) Keep pairing up or grouping children on a part so that they reinforce each other;
- 5) Any time any one gets something going well make sure you notice and praise it and recommend that people learn from X, just keep your eyes focussed on the hands of X, do it like *that*;
- 6) It's usually safe to point out the weaknesses of those children who have a lot of strengths, correct the best players, so that everyone gets used to spotting strengths and weaknesses, and helping each other figure out how to "get it;"
- 7) Always have another challenge ready for any kid who has "got it" and is getting bored or annoyed; usually this can be a song to sing as you drum your part, or 'can you think of something to sing with this?' or can you dance while we drum this?
- 8) Repetitions that remind everyone that no matter how good you are or how slow you are in learning something new, everything we do will be repeated again and again and again, we'll always come back to simple salsa, and basic samba techniques, and the bomba is really just one eight beat conga part (with lots of variations and different supporting parts) but still, once you have learned The Part, you are a 'bombero.'
- 9) Keep "going around in circles" as per the further description of obstacles at Salisbury Central in Section 7 chapter 2.

Pat Campbell:

Any who may dedicate energy to spending time with children, drawing them into the expressive arts, may find the enterprise wrought with challenges. The finest groover, certified teacher, pro musician, academic scholar will face the realities of kids in all their amazing diversity... . getting it and not getting it. As adults make the trek to schools, youth clubs, community centers, and wherever else kids gather, they will meet up with the interested and disinterested, the willing and the will-nots, the excited and the ones slumped over, soured, arms folded over their chests as if to say, "Make me". More so in schools than on the outside; where learning is not voluntary but mandated, those who teach must figure a way through the labyrinthine attitudes of cool, of disinterest that is feigned or very real, and even of defiance. Teachers struggle daily with the concept of "no child left behind", working overtime to figure a way to reach and teach every single one, every bonded clique, even the unwilling. No children should be left out of opportunities to learn the means of expressing themselves musically, and it is the task of adults who work with them to figure out the music and method that hooks them, brings them on in to learn, makes the most sense for realizing their expressive potential.

Teachers know that children are motivated by the subject matter, and music has its own built-in power to stimulate the senses. Still, making the match of music to the children's interests is the trick, as is matching the ways in which great music can be brought to children's awareness and involvement. Good teachers maintain the importance of building an interesting curriculum, setting clear goals, communicating expectations, employing positive reinforcement, teaching cooperation, personalizing instruction, and demonstrating enthusiasm. With all of these techniques at our fingertips and theirs, children cannot help growing into the groove of "getting it" i.e., becoming the music.