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Mothers' Perspectives on the Value of Early Childhood Music Classes for Their Toddlers

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Abstract

Parents' perceptions and beliefs regarding the benefits of early childhood music classes for toddlers are a significant determining factor in their decision to introduce music into their children's lives. The current study aims to explore the beliefs and experiences of 12 mothers attending parent-toddler music classes in an early childhood music center in Cyprus. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to probe the mothers' motivation to enroll their children. A wide range of perceived benefits were expressed during interviews. Interestingly, while participants identified intrinsically musical benefits of engaging in early years music classes, the findings reveal that the majority of reasons given could be categorized as being non-

musical, including, social/emotional, cognitive/educational and physical/motor-skills benefits. The insight gained into parents' perceptions and expectations has given us the impulse to consider how we can work with the mothers to better support musical learning, both during the classes and at the home.

Introduction

Over the past several decades there has been a major shift in how the first three years of childhood is viewed. This has occurred both from a practice perspective, where a rapid expansion in the provision of baby and toddler music classes is in evidence, and from a research perspective, with many researchers investigating various aspects of music teaching and learning for this specific age group (Ilari, 2016, 2018; Pitt & Hargreaves, 2017a; Young, 2016, 2019; Young & Ilari, 2012). The “formerly incompetent infant... has been eclipsed by the competent infant who is capable and skilful and is attuned and responsive to his/her environment” (Young, 2016, p. 11). Music classes for infants and toddlers accompanied by their parents is now a common out-of-home activity in many countries and the number of parents accessing these activities continues to increase (Abad & Barrett, 2017). Early childhood parent-child classes represent “a unique form of community music education” (Rodriguez, 2019, p. 96), where both children and parents are co-participants and co-learners. However, the nature and composition of such classes varies greatly (Abad & Barrett, 2020; Adachi & Trehub, 2012; Blackburn, 2017; Greenhalgh, 2017; Gudmundsdottir & Gudmundsdottir, 2010; Young, 2016, 2018).

A parent's role is considered crucial in introducing music into their children's lives and in selecting musically rich, enjoyable, and stimulating environments which will nurture children's musical potential (Ang et al., 2022; McPherson, 2009; Rodriguez, 2019). At the same time, parents' motivation and engagement are vital, as they are the ones to support their children to participate in and continue with music. But what really makes a parent of a toddler consider enrolling with their child in a parent-child music class?

Literature Review

Much early childhood music education (ECME) research has focused on the nature of infants' and toddlers' musical learning, discussing the musical and non-musical benefits for the young learners, the role of parents in their child's musical development, as well as parents' motivation to enroll in early childhood parent-child music classes (Fox, 2000; Ilari, 2005; Koops, 2011; Mehr, 2014; Pitt & Hargreaves, 2017a, 2017b; Rodriguez, 2019; Savage, 2015; Webber & Koops, 2022; Youm, 2013). The many transfer benefits attributed to music learning may be a determining factor for parents in deciding to enroll their young children in group

music activities (Pitt & Hargreaves, 2017a). Research highlights that the benefits of active engagement in singing, listening to music, moving, dancing, playing instruments, improvising, and more are not limited to enjoying the activity, having a nice time, and developing musical skills (Koops, 2011; Pitt & Hargreaves, 2017a, 2017b; Rodriguez, 2019; Savage, 2015; Webber & Koops, 2022; Youm; 2013). Through musical play in a rich musical environment, toddlers begin to learn and to assimilate information that has musical value, and also facilitates the acquisition of a range of life skills including the development of language skills, motor skills, cognition, and social skills.

Various studies in Australia, the United Kingdom, Korea, and the United States discuss parents' motivation for enrolling their children in ECME classes as well as their perceptions and perspectives regarding music programs for babies and toddlers. Koops (2011), for example, highlighted that parents appreciate the enjoyment that stems from musical interaction and the children's musical growth during joint early childhood music classes. In researching South Korean parents' understanding of ECME, Youm (2013) underlined the value parents place on the role that music, a rich learning environment, and the provision of a joyful experience, play in facilitating and supporting children's future learning. These findings are similarly confirmed in Abad and Barrett's research; parents enrolled in ECME classes because of their belief in the value of music and in the role it plays in supporting their children's general development, including the development of social skills, and in its power to enhance family relationships (Abad & Barrett, 2020).

Savage's (2015) study in Australia also discussed parents' understanding of the benefits of attending music classes with their children. In this case, parents expressed a wish for their children to develop the confidence to perform in front of others, to learn to appreciate music, and to receive a good grounding in preparation for future instrumental tuition, as well as the opportunity for socialization (Savage, 2015). In the United Kingdom, Pitt and Hargreaves (2017a), on the other hand, found that while parents enrolled in ECME classes with their children, although appreciated all three categories of benefits, were more concerned about the social and emotional benefits of their participation than musical benefits. In the United States, Rodriguez (2019) discovered that parents initially enrolled in ECME classes because they wished to provide their children with positive music experiences and to develop their appreciation of music, which they believed would help their baby's brain and vocabulary development, as well as helping them to socialize and interact with others. Over the course of the classes, parents also identified a number of additional benefits, including enjoyment, the acquisition of new knowledge, and the opportunity to socialize and interact in a safe environment (Rodriguez, 2019). A recent study by Barrett and Welch with ten participant Australian families discussed not only the benefits gained by children but expanded to include benefits for the parents. These included parents' development of music knowledge and skills

and numerous social benefits (Barrett & Welch, 2021).

Over the last decade in Cyprus, parents of young children appear to have shown an increased interest in participating in ECME classes. As a result, numerous music afternoon conservatories or music centers offer either a franchised early childhood music program or have created their own program in the Greek language. Despite the increased interest and the many offers of early childhood music programs, no research has been done in regard to babies and toddlers' music education in Cyprus.

The current study was carried out in an early childhood music education center in Nicosia, Cyprus, which has been facilitating weekly music classes for babies aged 10 months to children aged 7 years old over the last ten years. Specific parent-child programs which cater to children up to 3 years old require active parental involvement. Activities are designed to facilitate, through play, social and musical interaction between the participants. These weekly classes (45-50 minutes in duration) are taught jointly by two early childhood music educators in a relaxed and friendly environment. The classes always begin and end with the same welcome and goodbye song, and all participants are actively engaged in singing, listening, moving, dancing, playing instruments, and improvising.

Although the parents' aims for enrolling in ECME classes span musical and non-musical goals in all the aforementioned studies, their aspirations depend on various factors such as the educational context, the type of early childhood music program, the culture, parental background, the age of the children, and many more. This implies that there is no one universal approach, nor one unified parental perspective on the value of early involvement in music. The current study, which is the first study to investigate early childhood music education for babies and toddlers in Cyprus, was carried out with a group of mothers who participated in parent-child music classes for babies and toddlers (10 to 30 months). It focuses specifically on their perspectives, exploring their belief in the value of such programs, and how they think their child benefits from participating in the program. The main objectives of the study were to investigate the participating mothers' motivations to engage their children in organized music activities from an early age, the benefits they expected their toddlers would potentially gain from the music classes, and the perceived benefits after enrollment.

The study focused on the following research questions:

1. What motivated participating mothers to engage their children in organized music activities from an early age?
2. What benefits did the mothers expect their toddlers would gain from parent-toddler music classes when they enrolled? What additional benefits, if any, did they identify during classes?

3. What could we learn as early childhood music educators in investigating the parents' perspective regarding the value of early childhood music classes?

Method

The current study is a qualitative multiple-case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Data were generated through individual semi-structured interviews with 12 mothers, each of whom had attended weekly early childhood music classes for two consecutive years. Participants were drawn from families currently enrolled or who attended classes the year before. Mothers selected were among those who had demonstrated commitment to the program, and with whom we had developed a deep relationship over time. This purposive sampling was chosen to allow for more open discussions. Five mothers had been with us for more than four years, with one or two children in our parent-toddler music classes, whereas seven mothers had only one child currently enrolled at the time of the interview or in the previous year. All mothers were between 28-44 years old, ten were in full or part-time employment and two were “stay-at-home” mothers. All but two of the participating mothers held tertiary education qualifications. The only other criteria we set in selecting the participants, besides participating in our parent-toddler music classes for more than one year, were a willingness to participate and to be available at times when we, the researchers, were available to carry out the interview. In addition, we tried to recruit participants with varied backgrounds in music. We had originally contacted 14 mothers but two cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances. Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes, and participants were interviewed individually, with both researchers participating.

We designed semi-structured interviews (Schmidt, 2004) with a flexible pre-set list of questions that focused on three main topics: the reasons mothers had enrolled in early childhood music classes, the benefits they expected from their participation for their toddler, and the benefits they identified over the course of the program. Further questions were posed during the interviews depending on the participant's responses to the questions and discussion within the three main areas. This allowed for more clarification and in-depth discussion on the points raised. The common guiding questions helped the researchers to secure some consistency between the various interviews. Confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms to replace participants' names. In line with ethical protocols, all participating mothers were informed in detail of the research, its aims, and that the interviews would be recorded before they were asked to complete letters of informed consent. As we were “insider researchers” in that we were also the teacher facilitators of the parent-toddler music classes, and having already established an easy going and open communication relationship with the mothers, we decided to interview them over coffee in one of the coffee shops in Nicosia, at a place and time convenient for each mother. Bearing in mind the danger of researcher/teacher bias, we were very careful to avoid placing ourselves in

a position of power, making it clear to the participants that we wanted to investigate their views and parental perspectives on early childhood music programs. On the other hand, we also shared Savage's (2015) position that one could argue that mothers could be considered as being in the position of power since they were the "customer" in our business.

Interviews were fully transcribed verbatim into a word document. Analysis of the interview data followed an iterative process of categorisation into themes according to Cooper & McIntyre's (1993) seven-stage process. Initially, independent analysis was undertaken by each researcher. Individually we conducted a thematic analysis through a process of reading, re-reading, and coding the interview data, and organised these into themes and thematic categories. Common themes were identified and once they were established, were grouped into thematic categories. Frequency counts were undertaken to identify the number of responses under each theme. Both researchers then compared their themes and thematic categories. Only in one instance there was no agreement on whether one theme would fall in one thematic area or a new one, and so advice was sought from a colleague involved in ECME research and practice. Representative quotations illustrating each thematic category were identified.

Results

The findings of the study are organized in three main parts, focusing on a) the reasons given for enrolling in ECME classes, b) the mothers' perspective on the expected benefits ECME classes would have for their toddlers and c) the perceived benefits the classes had for the toddlers as a result of spending at least one year within the program.

"Why Music Classes?" – Grounds of Enrollment

As we were interested in investigating mothers' rationales for enrolling in a parent-toddler class, we focused on their particular reasons for choosing to engage their children in early childhood music groups. One of the reasons that emerged repeatedly in the interviews was that the mothers had either read or heard about the many benefits attributed to early engagement with music. One of the mothers discussed how music fosters babies' development in a holistic way, compared to swimming and yoga classes. A second reason was that mothers had spotted signs of music potential in their child, observing them attempting to sing from a very early age, continually singing all day, and/or responding excitedly to music through movement and dancing. In some cases, music was already considered important within the family culture and was present in everyday life, and so, it was natural for mothers to find ways to involve their children with music as early as possible. Another reason for choosing music over an alternative activity centered on parents' own experience of early involvement with music, or their wish that they had an opportunity to be engaged with music when they were

young. As Kate pointed out, because both she and her husband came from a musical family, for them it was taken for granted that their child would be involved with music as soon as possible. In addition, the desire to be engaged in a joint activity with their child, especially in cases where mothers worked many hours or had more than one child and were looking for quality time with their youngsters, were also factors that brought the mothers in the music classes. Lastly, mothers spoke about their wish to provide their pre-school child with early opportunities to develop social skills and learn to co-exist peacefully with others.

“How Will Early Childhood Music Classes Help?” – The Expected Benefits

We asked the participating mothers to recall the potential benefits they had expected their children might gain when initially enrolling in ECME classes. Six main benefits emerged from the data. While this is a qualitative study with a small number of participants, and therefore the responses may not be generalizable, we considered it interesting to see which of the expected benefits were the most and least popular. Table 1 captures the benefits mothers expected their children would gain from music classes, with N representing the number of interviewees who mentioned each benefit.

Table 1

Expected benefits of ECME classes

Non-music related benefits	N	Music related benefits	N
Social skills	7	Musical Skills	7
First structured/organized activity	7		
Motor skills	4		
Brain development	4		
Quality time with their children	4		

Many toddlers in Cyprus go to school around the age of two and a half or three years, so developing social skills and learning to co-exist with other children and parents in a new environment were good enough reasons for seven mothers to opt to enroll in group music classes. For example, Carol stated:

The main reason that led us join the music classes was not music. It had to do with the fact that Christine, as the only child in the family, was always with me at home, and I felt the need to start something so that she would develop her social skills,

which were at a zero level at that time! I wanted her to become member of a group, to socialize and interact with other children of her age, to feel safe with other people around. (Carol)

Related to this, seven mothers also considered that participation in ECME classes would be beneficial in terms of learning to participate in a structured and organized activity, and in learning to differentiate this kind of activity from free play at home or in playgrounds. The development of basic musical skills in singing or playing instruments, some basic knowledge acquisition in music, and music appreciation were the music related benefits mentioned by the participants. Spending quality time with the children, brain and motor skills development were also benefits discussed during interviews. Joanna was looking forward to enrolling her daughter in our class for infants at the age of 8.5 months, although our classes at that time were designed for babies starting at the age of 10 months. She explained why:

To assist her brain development and to make her more musical. I was sure that it would also help her in developing fine motor skills, an issue that many parents worry about. I was planning to take her to school around the age of two and a half or three, so I wanted her to be around other children to develop social skills. Besides, I wanted to do something pleasant with my baby. (Joanna)

Similarly, Carol decided to enroll her daughter in the music classes because “it would help in Christine’s brain development” believing that “she would get various stimuli, musical and non-musical.”

It was interesting to see that there were some mothers who knew precisely what to expect from the music classes, and they indeed expected a lot, whereas others just thought it would be a nice activity to do with their children and they did not consider the potential for specific benefits. Vicky, a musically talented primary school teacher who had been teaching music regularly for the past seven years, captured the various perspectives reported by our participants with regard to the expected benefits:

I thought of all the benefits early childhood music education could have for the children: it helps in their concentration, it builds their confidence and has an important role in their emotional world, in social skills. Music also helps them become independent in some aspects, as well as learn to collaborate with other children. It helps them in body coordination. Also, all those music-related reasons... Music is pleasant, children enjoy participating in music activities. Since I was involved with music, I wanted my children to be involved with music as well (Vicky).

“Surprises Along the Way” – The Perceived Benefits

Besides identifying the reasons that brought the participating mothers with their toddlers to the classes in the first place, it was also important for us to investigate mothers' perceived benefits as a result of spending at least one year within the program. Were their expectations met? Were there any surprises along the way? Did they see additional benefits as a result of participating in these joint parent-toddler early childhood music classes? Did they see their child developing in other areas besides the ones they had expected?

Through the analysis of data, a total of 21 different benefits were identified by the mothers and are listed in Table 2, ranging from the most popular to the least number of responses in the interviews.

Table 2*Perceived benefits of ECME classes*

Non-music related benefits	N	Music related benefits	N
Enjoyment	12	Musical concepts- vocabulary	10
Quality time with their children	12	Singing skills	8
Concentration	10	Performing with instruments	6
First structured/ organized activity	10	Improvisation/creativity	5
Social skills	9	Repertoire- musical preferences	2
Confidence	9		
Skills for smooth adjustment in school	9		
Language and communication skills	8		
Self-Expression	8		
Patience	8		
Brain Development	4		
Motor skills/Body coordination	4		
Rules/Instructions	4		
Calmness	3		
Discipline	3		
Memory	2		

During the analysis process, the aforementioned benefits were grouped into four broader categories: Social-emotional benefits, Cognitive/Educational benefits, Physical/Motor-skills benefits and Musical benefits. *Figure 1* illustrates these benefits.

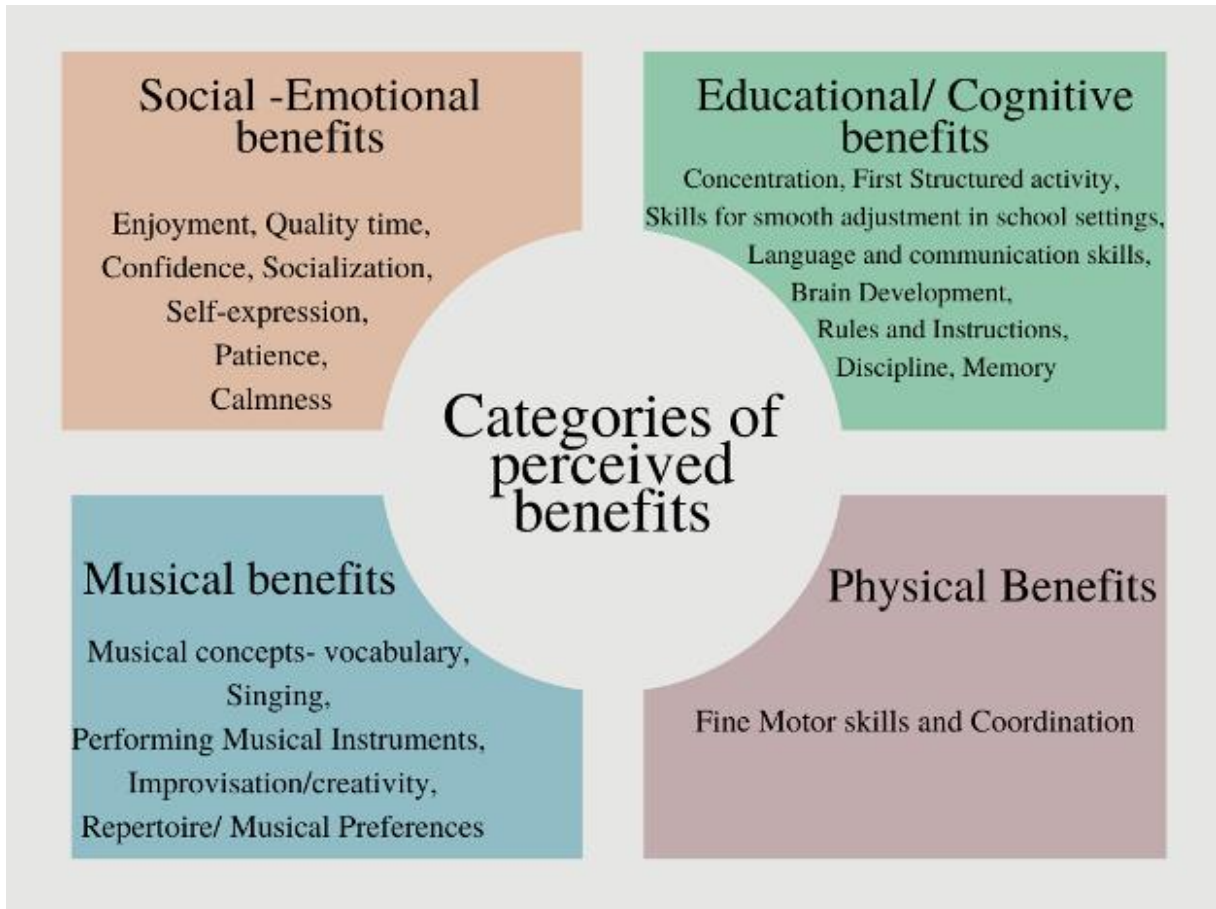


Figure 1. Categories of Perceived Benefits

Social-emotional Benefits

Enjoyment and quality time with their toddlers were two of the most common benefits identified and discussed by all participating mothers. Aria, for example, viewed the music classes as an “opportunity for the parents to spend quality time with their baby.” She considered important that “you are there 100% with your baby, you have fun together. You leave everything behind and you're really there, singing... dancing. Like real detoxification.” Mothers repeatedly highlighted the opportunity afforded by the classes to bond with their baby, the joy experienced by the toddlers when they played together with

their mother. Carol described it as being similar to having a “holiday time” for herself and her daughter, something that they both looked forward to. In general, watching their youngsters enjoying the classes and the prospect of looking forward to the lessons were common themes expressed by the parents. Kate described how her baby “asks every single day if it is Thursday, when we have our class” and stated that, for her, “the most important thing, besides the music knowledge, is that he has, well... we have, a great time.” Bonding with their children and giving them 100% attention through musical play and interaction was also highlighted.

It is quality time with your baby. Andreas is happy I am singing and dancing and playing instruments with him. He likes showing me how to do it correctly. I “become” a child, with him. (Andrea)

Mothers were impressed with their toddlers’ gradual development of their socialization skills in the lessons and shared various examples of such progress such as: a child giving their hand to another parent during the circle dance, smiling at other mothers who spoke or smiled at them, or running to us (the tutors) for a hug when they entered the room. Moreover, they saw their children becoming more disciplined, more patient, waiting for their turn in the activities, passing over the instrument to another child, or as in Mariam’s child’s case, “accepting the red scarf from the teacher although they have a strong preference in blue.”

Developing social skills and patience, as well as building confidence, were benefits highlighted, especially in those cases where the toddlers did not participate at all during the initial lessons but just sat next to their mothers.

I did not expect to see so much progress and change in John’s participation. He was so shy, and I thought he would come and do nothing. I remember at first he did not get to dance at all. Now he dances with other children, he sings, he even comes alone in the circle and improvises on the xylophone in front of ten children and ten parents. (Kate)

Another benefit identified by the participants, both during the classes and at home, was the gradual nurturing of self-expression through music. This occurred through the various opportunities provided to listen and respond freely to music, to improvise rhythms on musical instruments, to find different ways to play the instruments, and through movement, vocal or instrumental improvisations.

Educational / Cognitive Benefits

The interviewees referred to various benefits which we categorized under the umbrella title of educational/cognitive benefits. Bearing in mind that the majority of the children in our babies and toddlers' classes cannot communicate verbally when they enroll (usually around 10 months old), language development and the enrichment of vocabulary were common benefits discussed by the mothers. They attributed the repeated singing of the songs in the class over a period of time as helping the children enrich their vocabulary in a pleasant way and in enhancing their memory, initially learning a variety of words and expanding to complete sentences and songs later on. As Joanna explained, they even learned to say words that normally they would not be expected to learn at this age:

Nicole could sing before she could even speak. This was so strange to realise. She would sing parts at the beginning and then the whole song.... And she surprisingly said the word "epikroustiras" (mallet) so early (laughing). (Joanna)

It was very interesting to hear from four mothers how their children could make connections between what they had learned in the classes with experiences outside. Andrea described an incident whereby her son, Andy, saw an elephant on TV and immediately started singing the song "A little elephant" and dancing, following the movements he had learned in class. Others mentioned that their children started tidying their toys at home following the same process that we follow in the lesson and singing the same song.

Children's improved concentration span was also a topic that was raised in the interviews. Carol pointed out that "it was a new way of playing for them, following some guidelines and rules." Noticing an improvement in toddlers' concentration who, at the beginning, were unable to stay still or follow guidelines, or who were easily bored and distracted, proved to be pleasant surprises for the parents. Two of the participants also referred specifically to how music activities helped their toddlers learn various colours, to identify shapes, to count up to 10, as well as understanding the meaning of words like up, down, in front, behind etc.

Musical Benefits

Musical benefits were also observed by parents, including: a knowledge of musical concepts and terminology, singing skills, and performing with instruments. More specifically, participants mentioned the importance of the ability to distinguish between loud and soft, slow and fast, and high and low through listening to music and then to apply these to singing, playing musical instruments, moving, and improvising.

I could never imagine that my daughter would play the drum softly, loud, fast, or

slow. They learned to identify and show musically opposites like high and low, or loud and soft, or fast and slow. (Carol)

According to the mothers, the development of singing skills was impressive and stressed that they observed their toddlers' voice changing, moving beautifully up and down and sounding more "musical", as one mother noted. Stephanie commented:

I love it when I see David going up and down the chimes and bells from Do to Do, singing at the same time the do re mi... He is only two. And he sings so nicely, and he plays the instruments with such concentration. (Stephanie)

Rhythmic skills, such as learning to keep a steady beat and creating their own rhythmic patterns were also discussed. In addition, parents observed that children demonstrated a growing familiarization with musical instruments, both in terms of recognizing their sound, as well as playing percussion musical instruments and, as already noted, showing an understanding of various musical concepts through performing.

Physical Movement and Coordination Benefits

Another important benefit mentioned in the interviews focused on parents' observation of their toddlers' development of motor skills, especially in relation to fine motor skills, body coordination, and eye-hand coordination. They also discussed how these skills were transferred to other areas of the child's everyday life. They believed that the opportunities provided to the children through dancing, improvising, following choreography, responding to rhythmic patterns, walking to a steady beat, responding with movement to music with contrasts, identifying the different ways one needs to play on a drum to achieve soft or loud sounds, practicing motor control, and participating in 'freeze' games, all contributed to the improvement in their gross and fine motor skills, the development of locomotor skills, and body coordination. This is illustrated in the example given by Joanna:

The development of fine motor skills was so supported through music classes. She could, from a very early age, get the mallet and play the chime right in the middle. This definitely has helped her... I can see that on how well, for her age she holds the pencil or the scissors. (Joanna)

Discussion

Parental motivation and goals regarding their child's musical development may vary according to different educational settings and cultural backgrounds. Our results confirm findings from previous studies reported at the beginning of this article, that highlight the

factors that motivate parents to enroll their young children in parent-toddler music programs include both musical and non-music related benefits. The data gathered from our participants provides further insight regarding what parents value and how their beliefs and experiences inform and shape these values.

In relation to the musical benefits, many of the participating mothers admitted that what had prompted them to consider enrolling in an ECME class was their observation of what they believed to be some innate musical ability in their child and/or notable enthusiasm and enjoyment when engaged with music. It is interesting to note that recent research by Buren et al., (2021) proposes that our understanding of musicality in young children needs to be multifaceted and should include a recognition of a child's enthusiasm for and enjoyment of music (Buren et al., 2021). The mothers repeatedly stressed that they observed a development in their toddlers' singing skills, performing on instruments, improvising, moving, and dancing. They also commented how their children communicated their preferences (verbally and/or non-verbally) for musical repertoire or in relation to specific activities, during classes or at home. Echoing the findings of Ilari et al. (2011) that mothers repeated class activities at home, we also found that the repertoire and the activities we practiced in class were incorporated into family musicking at home. We were even told by one of the interviewees that her daughter imitated us and ran the session at home, with other family members sitting in a circle following her guidelines. What we enjoyed in our conversations and was for us a pleasant 'unexpected outcome', was seeing how our participants also valued their own musical skills development, especially in relation to singing and rhythmic development, as well as learning playful ways to interact with their toddlers at home, with or without music. It is noteworthy to mention that in our study, only five out of the 21 benefits identified are directly related to music.

As highlighted earlier, a benefit frequently discussed in our interviews was the positive impact on children's socialization. For many toddlers in our classes, the music group was their first "community" outside the home, since it was their first opportunity to interact with other children of the same age. Similar to findings in previous research, this aspect was cherished by participating mothers in our study (Barrett & Welch, 2021; Koops, 2011; Pitt & Hargreaves, 2017b; Rodriguez, 2019). A related benefit was a similarly positive impact on the mothers' socialization; a number of participants mentioned how they enjoyed going out and interacting with other mothers who shared similar everyday experiences, challenges, and concerns.

Our mothers frequently stressed the opportunity to bond with their child which was continually facilitated through the joint musical activities, a finding which resonates with Kawase and Ogawa (2020) and Barrett and Welch's (2021) research. Enjoyment, which

was among the most popular perceived benefits in the current study, is a benefit identified in several studies investigating student motivation for joining ECME classes (Koops, 2011; Pitt & Hargreaves, 2017b; Rodriguez, 2019).

The transfer of knowledge and skills acquired and developed through the music classes was something that most mothers commented on. Examples include: learned routines such as tidying up the musical instruments in the box after the activity finished, were subsequently applied when toddlers were playing with their toys at home; words and vocabulary like high, low, fast, slow, soft, and loud, which were introduced in classes, were also used in their vocabulary throughout the day; fine motor skills developed through performing with instruments were observed being used in other contexts at home.

Language development, learning to follow instructions and routines, and discipline were also discussed during the interviews. Concentration was among the most important perceived benefit, and the mothers were happy to observe their toddler's improvement in this function. Resonating with Savage's (2015) findings in Australia, a growing confidence, the advantage of preparation for school, and a more comfortable adjustment to organized musical and non-musical settings, are benefits also identified in our study. Looking at the findings of current research in early childhood music education reported earlier in the article, as well as our own findings, we could suggest that parents make decisions regarding their babies and toddlers' activities based not only on how enjoyable they are, but also on whether they will prove to be useful in the future.

It is also worth mentioning that the mothers in this study recognised a greater range of benefits as a result of having participated in the parent-toddler classes than they had initially expected. It would be interesting to investigate further in order to better understand why mothers consider certain findings so important for their children.

Lessons Learned for Early Childhood Music Educators

What we have gained from this study as ECME program designers and music teachers is the opportunity to look at our classes from a fresh perspective. We learned more about the impact the classes have on our young students in their home environment and in their interactions with other family members. We had meaningful conversations with the parents, listened to their views and opinions, and gained a deeper insight into their experiences of the music lessons. The study gave us the impetus to pay greater attention to the mothers' perspectives regarding the value of early engagement with music and to find better ways to enhance our support during lessons and in matters they consider important. These include: suggesting alternative ideas for repeating the activities at home, explaining more often how a musical activity supports their child's development; enriching our lessons with even more activities that can support the perceived benefits; creating spaces where this

interaction and exchange of ideas between the teachers and the students is facilitated; having a better idea of our students' home musicking activities and finding ways to make connections between these in class; and supporting parents in developing their own musical skills through the music classes.

In addition, the findings reinforce the view that focusing on developing toddlers' musical skills and helping them to acquire musical knowledge when developing material for early years' music classes is just part of what should be considered. Other, non-musical skills, attitudes, and behaviors should consciously be taken into account as well, as parents consider these to be important and useful for the children.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research

There are a number of limitations associated with this study. Firstly, it is a small-scale study with just 12 participants, all of whom were selected according to purposeful sampling. Secondly, the study took place in a very specific educational context in an early childhood music center in Cyprus and the findings are context-specific and not necessarily generalizable. A further limitation stems from the fact that the researchers were also the teachers of the music classes. In such cases there is the danger that the researcher/ teacher power issue may affect the direction of conversation during the interviews. The potential for researcher bias is also acknowledged.

This study selected mothers who had been committed to our ECME classes for at least one year. In future studies it would be interesting to investigate the perspectives of mothers who dropped out of our program or mothers who continue to come to the lessons with their children but do not seem very committed or engaged during classes. In addition, the findings from this study may form the basis for a larger survey and act as a research tool that may contribute to the early childhood music education field in Cyprus and beyond.

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