

# The Musical Playground as a Vehicle for Community-Building



JUST SIX  
QUESTIONS  
RESEARCH  
SUMMARY

*“The [Music Box Village] teaches children how to rethink or re-approach play itself. ... it creates a discourse in the community that educates both directly and indirectly ... a space that fosters creativity and educational development” (p. 149-150).*

## 1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research explores a key tension in education and the creative arts: *structured learning* (adult-led activities with rules and set goals) versus *unstructured learning*, often referred to as ‘**free play**’ (youth-led activities with fewer rules and more choice).

The author uses the Music Box Village in New Orleans as a case study, [a space “where play, imagination, experimentation, collaboration, community, and hard work come together as a whimsical village of artist-made interactive ‘musical houses’.”](#) In doing so, the author examines whether a *musical playground* can support creative expression, music learning, and community building, in response to the ways that highly-scheduled and structured activities can reduce opportunities for free play – recognizing that being overscheduled can increase stress for some children and youth, contributing to depression and compromised mental health and wellbeing.

## 2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

The research took place at the Music Box Village in the Bywater neighborhood of New Orleans, Louisiana, supported by the organization New Orleans Airlift.

## 3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about the experiences of people connected to Music Box Village, specifically **22 adults** and **75 elementary school-aged children** (approximately 50 grade four students and 25 grade two students from two different schools in New Orleans).

## 4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

The study used an **instrumental case study**: the project focused mainly on the one site (Music Box Village), allowing for a real-world, in-depth exploration using multiple data sources. The data came from **interviews, direct observation** of children’s play in the space (supported by audio and video recordings), and **secondary materials**, such as programming documents and existing audio-visual media about the site.

The researcher used **qualitative content analysis**, which involves identifying patterns and themes across interviews, observation notes, recordings, and documentation. The analysis was **inductive**, allowing themes to emerge from the data, and the researcher compared themes across data sources to strengthen credibility.

## 5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

The findings describe the site as **supporting exploration, improvisation, and composition** through its aesthetics and design, and as **celebrating free play, physical and musical risk, and unstructured learning models**.

The learning environment is referred to as a “third teacher” (p. 149), emphasizing that children learn from adults, other children, and their physical environment; the musical playground, as an alternative music education space, “teaches children how to rethink or re-approach play itself” (p. 167), with little to no guidance.

The overarching theme of **radical collaboration** also emerged, describing how artists from different backgrounds who had not met before were routinely brought together, resulting in opportunities for experimentation and exploration and for fostering new relationships. The site reduced social barriers and created a safe space for important and sometimes difficult dialogues across differences, including a lecture series on topics such as education, not-for-profit models, arts and culture, and Black spirituality. Grade four teachers described the experience as opening up “a different side of music making” (p. 101) for students; one teacher shared that this “helped ground and focus kids who I know had behavioral challenges” (p. 143). A parent visitor described the benefits for her children as “peace of mind” (p. 102) and described how children “get to learn about their culture” (p. 102) in the space.

In these ways, the author concludes that a musical playground like Music Box Village can **positively impact creative expression, music education, and community**, acting as a “co-composer” (p. 214), third teacher, and **conduit for social change**.

## 6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

Creative spaces designed for exploration can support unstructured play and creative expression. The musical playground approach can **offer an alternative** to traditional music education, and **youth workers can consider these approaches** in their work with children and youth, rather than relying solely on structured or rule-based activities.

The research demonstrates how free play can benefit young people, including students with behavioral challenges, and how arts-based community spaces can **reduce social barriers, support dialogue on challenging topics, and connect people across differences**, fostering **belonging and community connection**.

🔍 Marsella, R. (2021). [\*The musical playground as a vehicle for community-building\*](#) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto]. TSpace.