

Exploring the Lives of Songs in the Context of Young Children’s Musical Cultures

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This paper provides an overview of a study of the processes through which new songs become part of young children’s existing musical cultures. The study combines creative work and field research, employing a mixed methods design to follow the “lives” of original songs created by the researcher, and shared with three- to five-year-old children in a childcare center in Sydney, Australia. The methodology was derived from practice-led research in the arts, ethnography and *portraiture*. Three key concepts underpin this research, linking the creative and fieldwork phases: relationships, reflection, and reciprocity—and all three are facilitated by music. These concepts are the tools employed to explore the development of a set of six songs, metaphorically represented as a human life cycle. Findings show that communication and interaction are at the heart of young children’s relationships with songs.

Introduction

During many years of singing with children as an early childhood educator I have been part of the process by which songs attain, as composer Michael Tippett says, “a life of [their] own” (1974, cited in Swanwick 1987, 3). More recently, in writing my own songs, I have gained a new perspective, that of a creator, on this process, which is akin to a life cycle. This experience inspired me to undertake ethnographic research to understand how songs acquire such a “life.”

The resulting project explores the lives of six songs within the cultural context of an early childhood educational setting. It incorporates creative work—tracing the writing of the songs—and fieldwork, where these songs are shared with children aged from three to six years. The two aspects combine to present a picture of the life cycle of the six songs from their creation to their becoming part of the musical culture of one early childhood community.

Background

The proposition that humans are innately musical beings and that music is a necessary part of life (Blacking 1976; Dissanayake 2006; Malloch 1999/2000) underpins this research. Recent study of the protomusical behaviors of infants supports this view, as it shows the central role that these behaviors play in early emotional, social, and cognitive development (Cross 2003; Malloch & Trevarthen 2009). Young children’s innate musicality is often expressed through singing (Campbell 1998; Whiteman 2001), and their songs play a role in the cultures of most early childhood educational settings. Though styles and contexts may vary, songs are commonly an integral part of the young child’s day.

This research adds to current knowledge about song as a form of meaning-making, communication, and culture, building on the precept that music is understood more fully as a social and cultural practice (Middleton 2003). While there has been much research on children’s singing, there are still some aspects that have not been widely explored. Music education researchers have studied technical aspects of singing such as pitch awareness and singing voice development (Rutkowski & Chen 2000; Flowers & Dunne-Sousa 1990). Ethnomusicologists have investigated the styles and functions of children’s songs in a range of non-Western cultures (Blacking 1967; Merriam 1964). However, there is scant research on what songs and singing mean to children, and how they influence the musical cultures of early childhood educational settings. There is also little research on the musical and linguistic qualities of children’s songs.

In the last ten years, the study of children’s musical identities has become a growing focus in music education research (Campbell 2002; Young 2007). Findings indicate that music educators should find ways to incorporate the music that is part of everyday life into music education curricula (Campbell & Lum 2007; Young 2007). Given that music is commonly a central part of early childhood education, educators of young children can play a key role in integrating children’s family and community musical cultures into their curricula. The development of a deeper understanding of young children’s relationships with songs can assist early childhood educators in this process.

Knowledge of the musical development of young children has significantly influenced both the song writing and fieldwork phases of this research. Welch (2002) provides a view of young children’s musical development that supports an ecological perspective on children’s music making because it encompasses music in terms of life and culture, as well as in terms of education and development. According to Welch, we respond to music through perception, cognition, emotion, and behavior. He describes the musical behavior of both children and adults as being influenced by “basic biological potential, maturation, experience, opportunity, interest, education, family, peers, and socio-cultural context” (2002, 114).

Just as contemporary research into child development now focuses less on the individual child and recognizes that wider social and cultural influences contribute significantly to children’s development and learning (Rogoff 2003), so music education research is now beginning to focus on those wider influences. There is a growing body of literature on children’s music making that is crossing discipline boundaries and focusing on sociocultural influences such as technology, mass musical cultures and peer musical cultures (Arthur 2005; Holloway & Valentine 2003; Young 2007). Those involved in this research draw on ethnomusicology, sociology, and anthropology to broaden the perspectives of music education research (Young 2007).

The increased interest in researching children’s music making from a sociocultural perspective corresponds with changing perspectives and approaches to researching other aspects of children’s lives. Many researchers are now recognizing that children’s perspectives can best be explored by consulting the children themselves. Increasingly, researchers are recognizing the need for children’s voices to be heard and for children to be seen as participants in, rather than subjects of, research (Christensen and James 2000; Pole 2007). In the research presented in this article, participatory techniques were used to encourage children’s collaborative involvement in the generation and interpretation of data about their singing.

The view of children as active agents in creating their social cultures, through a process of “interpretive reproduction” (Corsaro 2005, 4), provides an important framework for the interpretation of data in this research. Corsaro sees children as being active producers of culture through their peer interactions and relationships. This view of children is enshrined

in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and underpins the growing body of research into children’s understanding of aspects of their lives and communities (Christensen & James 2000; Fraser, Lewis, Ding, Kellett, & Robinson 2004; Green & Hogan 2005).

In keeping with *portraiture*—a narrative research technique that combines the rigors of qualitative research with the aesthetics of creative writing (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis 1997)—the literature and theories underpinning the research can be understood as a metaphorical ecology (Bronfenbrenner & Evans 2000). This research portrays one small ecology or culture—a childcare community—which, in turn, is a blend of several other ecologies or cultures (Rogoff 2003): family and neighborhood cultures, national and international cultures. Within each ecology are intertextual and intercultural relationships between elements to be explored.

The theory of *communicative musicality* (Malloch & Trevarthen 2009), from the discipline of music psychology, is one such element. It provides a framework for understanding children’s musical responses, viewing them as arising from the fundamental human instinct to communicate with others. Malloch and Trevarthen offer the term “communicative musicality” to define the musical characteristics of the vocal interactions of infants and mothers/carers. They cite Blacking’s definition of musicality: “the innate human abilities that make music production and appreciation possible” (Blacking 1969/95, as cited in Malloch & Trevarthen 2009, 4), and view musicality as the “expression of our human desire for cultural learning, our innate skill for moving, remembering and planning in sympathy with others” (Malloch & Trevarthen 2009, 4). Communicative musicality is characterized by infant and adult sympathetically synchronizing pulse and vocal quality in their interactions as they create shared narratives.

Social, cultural and educational factors are also key influences on young children’s singing and relationships with songs. Ethnomusicology presents a perspective on the role and function of music in the lives and cultures of individuals and communities. Sociology and sociocultural theories, in particular the sociology of childhood (Corsaro 2005), add force to exploration of the social nature of children’s music making. Music sociologist De Nora has explored the varied ways that music influences and controls aspects of our lives (2000). In contemporary Australia, songs are often used in early childhood centers as a means of social control, aimed at teaching children about appropriate behavior. Many centers have a song for tidying up toys, for hand washing, for sun protection procedures, and songs for greetings and farewells.

The question of whether songs reflect, or contribute to the creation of culture, an issue on which ethnomusicologists are divided, is considered in this research. Nettl’s (1983) view is that songs and music, generally, reflect culture. In contrast, researchers in early childhood such as Corsaro (2005) and Rogoff (2003) believe that children actively create their cultures.

One ethnomusicologist who has addressed this issue is Slobin (1993), who argues that music serves both functions. He used ethnographic research methods in a range of cultural situations in the USA and Europe to explore the intersections and blending of cultures in the contemporary world. He categorized several levels of cultures, terming them super-cultures, sub-cultures, inter-cultures and micro-cultures. In relation to young children’s songs, a super-culture can be seen as a global view of contemporary mass media-driven popular musical culture. It also relates to the popular musical culture of contemporary Australia. Sub-culture can be seen as children’s musical cultures within this defined super-culture. The musical cultures of the children and staff at the field site can then be defined as a micro-culture, but also as an inter-culture, as the influences of community musical cultures blend with global cultures and childhood cultures.

A significant contribution to a broader understanding of children’s singing was made by Bjørkvold (1989), whose research traversed the disciplinary boundaries of music education, child development and ethnomusicology. At a time when most investigation of young children’s singing focused on classroom behavioral research, he used ecological theories to explore children’s singing in the context of their play and child cultures in several countries: Norway, USA and Russia. Bjørkvold (1989) likened young children’s singing to *ngoma* (an African word for music making that is interactive and incorporates dance, drama and story). His research resonates with my findings in a previous study (Niland, 2005), which highlighted children’s playful responses to songs. The recognition that children play with songs accounts for their multimodal totality of engagement—vocal, physical, linguistic, cognitive, and emotional. Bjørkvold saw singing as having a functional purpose for young children as they make meaning of their world and develop their self and cultural identity.

In contemporary urbanized societies such as Australia, young children spend a lot of time in early childhood education and care settings with other children of similar ages. In these settings, children actively construct their cultures and identities together with their peers. Corsaro (2005) has shown that young children’s peer cultures do not just reflect adult cultures, but are created by children through interpretive reproduction. Children use knowledge gleaned from their experiences and, through this, they construct new understandings together, thus contributing to building their own cultures.

Corsaro provides a way of interpreting the social interactions that are central to young children’s singing. In keeping with Bjørkvold’s (1989) analysis of singing as a form of play, an inherently social activity for preschool aged children, Corsaro’s perspective supports Bjørkvold’s concept of *ngoma*. Through playful singing together, young children are exploring their world and constructing their childhood peer cultures. Corsaro defines peer cultures as “a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values and concerns that children produce and share in interactions with peers” (Corsaro 2000, 92).

Young children’s lives and musical experiences are significantly influenced by the ubiquity of electronic media (Christakis 2009; Lee, Bartolic & Vandewater 2009). The average Australian preschool aged child spends at least two and a half hours every day viewing TV programs and DVDs at home (Pitman 2008). Recorded music is often playing in the background in homes, childcare centers, cars and shopping centers. Therefore, digital media is strongly evident and influential in young children’s peer and musical cultures.

The commodification of children’s cultures is visually obvious through the merchandise that is part of most children’s lives in Australian communities. These products, which are often of great importance to children, tend to reinforce the music to which they relate. Barrett describes such items as “reminders of the legitimating force of the electronic media in shaping what it is to be a child” (2003, 196). Electronic media, popular music and musical commodities were significant influences in the lives and musical cultures of the children in this research.

Methodology and Design

Ethnography was used in both the creative and fieldwork phases of this research to trace the life cycles of the six songs. The story of these life cycles begins with their creation. This, in turn, begins with the story of the songwriter. My song writing is a product of inner creative thought processes, which are influenced by life experiences and knowledge, professional, cultural and personal. Therefore, the narrative portrait of the songs contains elements of auto-ethnography. This approach enabled portrayal of the lived experience of writing songs in

relation to my professional self (early childhood educator, musician and researcher), and placement of the songs within the social and cultural contexts of the fieldwork setting (Reed-Danahay 2009).

Extract from journal (Song: *Space is a really big place*)

Revisiting field notes reminded me that the process of creating a song around the play interests of the Eager Beavers had arisen from my observations of some children’s interest in numbers and size. So I decided to incorporate mathematical language at the start of my space song and to focus on quantity and size. Hence the first line: “There are millions of stars...in space, ‘cause space is a really big place.” The line “space is a really big place” is repeated often in the song. The internal rhyme in this line is one of its strengths, as children seemed to find it easy to remember and musically satisfying to sing or say.

Space is a really big place

Amanda Niland

Moderate ♩ = 120

Voice

There are mill-ions of stars in space, 'cause space is a

real-ly big place; there are mill-ions of stars in space, 'cause

space is a real-ly big place; so put on a space suit, jump in a rock-et,

put on your seat belt, start the count-down, [10,9,8,7,6,.....] then we're

zoom-ing a - long in space, 'cause space is a real-ly big place.

Ethnographic researchers are urged to aim not for objectivity but for reflexivity. The importance of a reflective approach, where the researcher continually analyses her interactions in the field in conjunction with the data generated, is also stressed by those undertaking participatory research with children (Christensen & James 2000; Clark & Moss 2005; Jenks 2000). Reflexivity and reflection are highly valued in contemporary approaches to early childhood pedagogy, such as that used in the preschools of Reggio Emilia in Italy (Rinaldi 2006). Reflexivity, a common thread linking ethnography, participatory research

and early childhood pedagogy, as well as practice-led research in the creative arts (Barrett 2007), was central to this research.

To emphasize this research as praxis (practice as research), and in keeping with its cross disciplinary nature, the techniques of a social science narrative approach known as *portraiture* (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis 1997) were used. This methodology aims to break down the barriers between art and science that exist in traditional approaches to research. *Portraiture* aims to “capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences” (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1997, 3). In this approach, the researcher is termed the portraitist—one who uses words to paint a portrait. As with a painter, her portraits will reflect personal skills, values, knowledge and experience, and her relationship with the subject[s] of the portrait[s].

The research questions, which are set out below, were developed to integrate the two aspects of the research through focusing on processes and relationships. They allowed investigation of the creative processes of song writing as well as of the building of relationships between the songs and their singers that was explored in the fieldwork.

Main question:

- How do new songs become part of young children’s musical cultures?

Secondary questions:

- How can the musical culture of the early childhood educational setting be defined?
- How does this musical culture influence the children’s engagement with new songs?
- How do social interactions, peer relationships, home culture and gender influence children’s relationships with new songs?
- What aspects of the new songs composed by the researcher/songwriter are most engaging for children?

Field Site and Participants

Fieldwork took place at a community-based (not for profit) long-day care center in a lower middle class suburb, approximately 50 kilometers west of the center of Sydney, Australia. Data were generated over eight months, during which time I visited the center twice weekly for five months and once each week for the final three months. The participants at the research site represented a small sample—approximately 30 children aged from three to five years, who belonged to the Eager Beavers room at the childcare center.

During visits, I interacted with children during free play, routine times such as meals, and structured group times. I adopted a reactive, *least adult role* (Corsaro & Molinari 2000; Mandell 1991) as much as possible, waiting for the children to interact with me, and allowing them to lead our interactions. If invited, I joined in their play. Children quite often asked to play my guitar or *djembe* (drum), which meant that many of our interactions were musical. However, I also read stories, dug deep holes in the sand, built block structures, assisted with puzzles, poured drinks and tied shoelaces. Through engaging in a diverse range of interactions with the children, we got to know each other well and developed friendly relationships.

Extract from journal

One day in November, a few weeks after the writing and introduction of “The little pigs’ chorus,” I was running out of pages in my current notebook. So when two of the older girls wanted to write in it I asked them to make sure they left me a few pages. “I need to write things about your singing and your favourite songs,” I said to them.

“My favourite song is..... [pausing to think]...the piggy song,” said Lola, and proceeded to sing the song while she drew some flowers in my notebook.

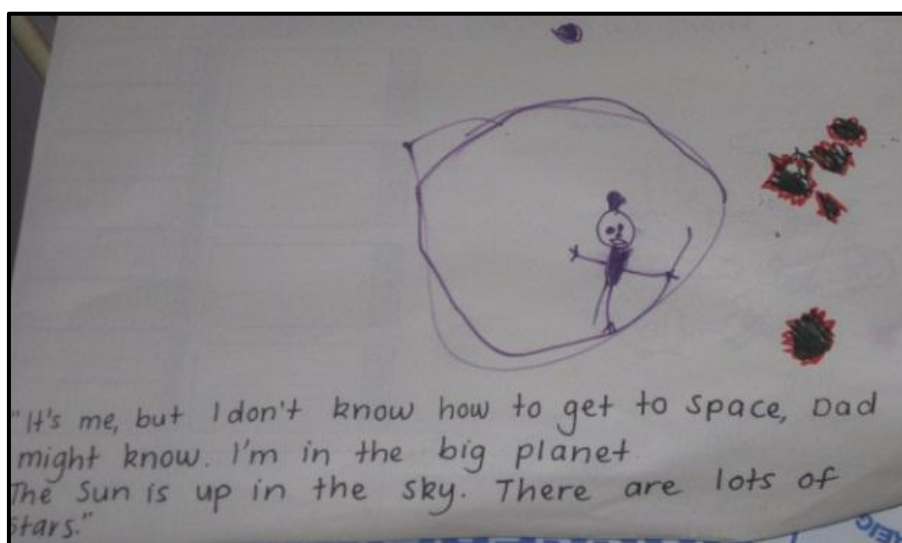
Role of Researcher/Portraitist

I adopted several roles in this research. During the song-writing phase (which for most songs preceded fieldwork) my role was auto-ethnographic, simultaneously that of researcher and researched (Du Preez 2008). During the fieldwork phase, I was predominantly a participant observer (Macionis & Plummer 2005), a temporary member of the community of the early childhood center. My participation in the life of the center included the role of singer. Singing interactions were influenced by my role as creator of many of the songs we sang. Therefore, I was again functioning as researcher and researched. Both reflection on, and interpretation of, data were influenced by each aspect of these multiple roles and identities, as well as by my knowledge of research literature relevant to each identity.

Data Generation during Field Work

During fieldwork, reflective notes on the data generated from field notes and digital records (audio, photo and video) were written after each visit. Some data were documented for staff and families of the center, so that they became part of the center’s curriculum records; some were presented on DVD for sharing with the children, as a way of stimulating reflective conversations; and some were shared with the children in the form of song books, using their photos, drawings or clip art with the song lyrics. These books were used as a tool for reflective conversations and as a stimulus for informal singing of the six songs.

Look around at the colours, look, look around,
Look around at the colours, look, look around;
There are so many colours that can be found,
Look around at the colours, look, look around;
Can you find any **red**?



Children’s drawings and scribed Conversations such as this influenced writing of the song *Space is a really big place*.

The range of data generation techniques was aimed particularly at allowing the voices of the children to be authentically represented. The use of multiple styles and sources of data generation, in keeping with *portraiture* and the *Mosaic approach* (Clark & Moss 2001), was crucial. Clark and Moss have extensively researched young children’s perspectives on aspects of their lives and learning environments; they advocate the use of a variety of data generation techniques to accommodate children’s diverse communication styles and abilities. They liken data generation and analysis to the assembling of a mosaic using a range of

media. In my research, a combination of strategies such as “conversational interviews, oral and written journals, drawings, reflections and digital photographs” (Dockett & Perry 2005, 507) was helpful in gaining valuable research data.

The Lives of the Six Songs: Dominant Themes

Data analysis, undertaken reflectively both during and after the field research, was used to create narrative portraits of the life cycle of each song. These portraits created an overarching portrait of the life cycle of six songs. The metaphorical life stages are defined in Table 1, below. While the life cycle of each song unfolded chronologically, the stages listed below were not necessarily synchronous between songs. For four of the six songs, the conception and gestation stages occurred before fieldwork. However, two of the songs, *Space is a really big place* and *The little pigs’ chorus*, were written for the group of children who participated in the research, so that their conception and gestation took place during fieldwork. The lengths of time involved in the life cycle stages of each song also varied, as these depended on factors in the children’s interactions with the songs.

Table 1 Stages of the life cycles of the songs

Conception	The original idea for each song, its origins and rationale.
Gestation	The creation of music and lyrics, processes and rationale.
Birth	The initial sharing of the song with children and adults.
Infancy	Singers’ initial engagement with the song as they become familiar with the melody and lyrics of the song.
Childhood	The song becomes well known, singers begin to take ownership and play with the song, perhaps adapting or extending it.
Maturity	The song becomes an ongoing part of the musical culture of the early childhood setting.

Three dominant features of the center’s musical culture became evident as data were analyzed: the children’s interest in loud and fast music making, in social musical interactions, and in performance in front of an audience. The early identification of these key features provided a structure of emergent themes to explore further over the months of field research. Underpinning these themes were the children’s strong interest in movement as a response to music and singing, and the pervasive influence of popular music and electronic media.



Spontaneous performer/ audience play, a regular occurrence

As the children formed relationships with the songs and gradually integrated them into their existing musical cultures, they adapted the six songs in a variety of ways (Campbell 2002). The birth, infancy, and childhood stages of the songs’ life cycles reflected the influence of the dominant themes discussed above.

The children in the Eager Beavers group sang many songs, including the six songs that were the focus of this research, as loudly and as fast as they could. These musical responses can be viewed as instances of interpretive reproduction (Corsaro 2005), where the children used elements of familiar musical cultures to actively influence the ways in which the six songs became integrated into the musical microculture (Slobin 1993) of the Eager Beavers. Instances of interpretive reproduction in the life cycles of the songs show how the children’s responses were influenced by existing musical cultures, while, at the same time, these cultures were extended by their interactions and adaptations.

The portrait of the life cycles of the six songs portrays extensively the children’s instinct for communicative musicality (Malloch & Trevarthen 2009). The unconscious synchronization of pulse and vocal quality and the communication used to create shared narratives convey an impression of the development of the songs happening in the context of the relationships at the center—between peers, between me and the children, and between children and staff.

Extract from journal (Song: *Look around at the colours*)

After lunch, Lola and Gemma started to sing the colours song together, facing each other. Their communicative musicality was very evident. They maintained eye contact and sang in time and in pitch with each other. Gemma took the lead and chose a colour for Lola.

Look around at the colours

Amanda Niland

Moderate ♩ = 85

Voice

The image shows a musical score for a song titled "Look around at the colours" by Amanda Niland. The score is written for voice and is in a moderate tempo of 85 beats per minute. It is in the key of D major (indicated by two sharps) and 4/4 time. The score consists of five staves of music, each with a corresponding line of lyrics. The lyrics are: "Look a - round at the col - ours, look, —", "— look a - round, look a - round at the col - ours, look, —", "— look a - round, there are so man - y col - ours that —", "— can be found, look a - round at the col - ours, look, —", and "— look a - round. Can you find a ny red?". The score ends with a double bar line.

Look a - round at the col - ours, look, —

— look a - round, look a - round at the col - ours, look, —

— look a - round, there are so man - y col - ours that —

— can be found, look a - round at the col - ours, look, —

— look a - round. Can you find a ny red?

Engagement with the six songs was often influenced by the interest of children and staff in staging performances for an audience, both formally and informally. Performer and audience play was regularly observed in the children’s spontaneous music making as well as in structured, adult-led music experiences. One of the six songs, the *Little pigs’ chorus*, was created during fieldwork, in collaboration with some of the children, to accompany an end of year performance for families.



A rehearsal of the *Three little pigs* play

Extract from journal (Song: *The little pigs’ chorus*)

During October, preparations for the graduation of the oldest Eager Beavers were in full swing. On my next visit to Schubert Road after Dana (educator) had agreed that a song would make a good finale for the children’s performance of ‘The three little pigs’, I watched a rehearsal during group time and videoed it so that I could revisit it. I chatted with some of the older children over lunch, telling them how much I’d enjoyed the play and asking if they thought it would be a good idea to have a song at the end. Gemma, Jessica and Ethan said they’d like to sing a song.

I asked them what the song might say and Ethan chanted “Hooray, hooray, hooray, the wolf has gone away,” in a strongly accented 6/8 meter.

Gemma said, “Yeah, hooray the big bad wolf is gone or something like that.” Jessica said “Yeah that’s good.”

On the way home in the car I sang Ethan’s lines, experimenting with rhythm and melody. While I was singing, trying different combinations of lyrics and melodies, I thought about how to make the song catchy. The lyrics would need to be logical and simple, but just a little bit musical or poetic and not completely predictable. I decided to make the lyrics dialogue for the pigs to sing, but for other children to join in with as well. This would integrate the song into the play, enabling the actors to sing in their roles, but would also allow for audience participation.

The little pigs' chorus

Amanda Niland

♩ = 120

Voice



Hoo - ray, hoo - ray ___ we're glad to say ___ that the big bad wolf has
gone a - way; ___ hoo - ray, hoo - ray ___ we're glad to say ___ that the big bad wolf has
gone a - way. ___ He huffed and he puffed, but we wouldn't let him in,
not by the hairs of our chin - ny chin chins; hoo - ray, hoo - ray ___ we're
glad to say ___ that the big bad wolf has gone a - way. ___

Reflections on Findings

Research projects such as this provide an alternative perspective on young children’s singing to empirical studies, which view children as individuals and seek to test a hypothesis or measure aspects of singing behavior. The research presented here is instead based on an image of children’s development occurring in, and being shaped by, social and cultural contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Evans 2000; Geertz 1973; Walsh 2002). Theories of cultural psychologists, following on from the work of Vygotsky (1978), now show that children’s development occurs through interaction, communication, and relationships.

The main question posed in this research was: How do new songs become part of young children’s musical cultures? The life cycles of the six original songs showed that the children developed relationships with the songs through interaction with influential adults and peers within the cultural context of the early childhood setting. The narrative portrait of the metaphorical life cycles of the songs painted a picture of the children using their innate instinct for communicative musicality (Malloch & Trevarthen 2009) to synchronize pitch and vocal quality with each other as they interacted to create shared narratives through and with the songs. Features of the musical culture of children and staff at the center, representing a blend of musical cultures from family, community, and media (Slobin 1993) were evident in the children’s styles of engagement with the songs.

Peer interactions and friendships influenced the children’s engagement with the songs. The portrait showed many instances of interpretive reproduction (Corsaro 2005), as the children used knowledge and ideas from their life experiences and collaborated to shape,

adapt, and extend the songs, and gradually to incorporate them into their existing musical cultures. The study showed the children using singing and songs as vehicles for communication, social interaction, and meaning making. It also showed that play was central to the children’s singing and to the relationships that they developed with the six songs. Findings support previous research into young children’s singing (Barrett 2006; Bjorkvold 1989; Niland 2005; Whiteman 2001). They show that the children were most engaged in singing when it was approached through play, as play allowed them agency in guiding or leading the interpretation of a song. Findings also show that, when singing, the children sought opportunities for communication and social interaction with adults and/or peers, using their instinct for communicative musicality (Malloch & Trevarthen 2009) to synchronize pulse and vocal quality with fellow singers.

Extract from journal (Song: *If a dinosaur came to your house*)

After we had sang about hiding under the bed quite a few times Molly suggested hiding “up in a cloud.” That gave me a really good idea for ending the song. “Do you think the dinosaur will find us up there?” I asked the children.

“No,” many of them replied.

“How will we get there?” I asked.

“We need wings,” said Charlotte. So we pretended to use wings (our arms) to get to a cloud, and that was the end of the song. I didn’t think fast enough to improvise a melodic narrative for this, I just used speech: “So the dinosaur couldn’t find us anywhere.”

If a dinosaur came to your house
Moderato Amanda Niland

Voice

If a din-o-saur came to your house what would you do? If a
mf

din-o-saur came to your house what would you do? You could run, you could hide,
pp

un-der the bed, be ver-y qui-et, be ver-y still and lis-ten;(spoken) oh - oh!

stomp! stomp! stomp! stomp! stomp! stomp! stomp! stomp!
mf *f*

Implications

The findings of this research have implications for early childhood educators in relation to song selection and ways of singing with children. They show that children’s engagement is enhanced by the provision of opportunities to participate in shaping songs through choices of lyrics and styles of response. They point to the value of linking songs with children’s play interests, and including songs in free play as well as structured group situations. They point in particular to the power of songs as tools for building relationships between peers and between children and adults.

Young children are naturally drawn to music, especially songs. For music educators the challenge is to find ways to use this natural interest to actively engage young children with songs so that developmental musical goals may be achieved. The findings of this study are relevant for music educators in that they provide insights into song features and styles of singing interactions that are most likely to engage children. Music education textbooks often provide guidelines for song selection and singing based on the musical attributes of a song, with little or no attention given to engaging the children’s interest (Forrai 1988). The findings of this study support contemporary approaches to early childhood curricula that highlight the importance of meaningful learning experiences that connect to children’s contexts and life experiences (Commonwealth of Australia 2009; NZ Ministry of Education 1996).

The responses of the children of the Eager Beavers group to the six songs provide insights for songwriters into the centrality of communication, social interaction, and play in children’s engagement with songs. The implication for songwriters is the value of creating songs that have the potential for these styles of engagement. Children may gain aesthetic pleasure in listening to songs that are musically familiar and are about topics of interest to them. However, they will form the strongest relationships with songs that allow them to interact and communicate playfully to shape the way the song comes to life.

Conclusion

Singing and songs add richness and pleasure to all our lives, even though they are more often listened to than participated in. Contemporary research into the foundations of musicality (Cross & Morley 2009; Dissanayake 2009; Malloch & Trevarthen 2009), as well as research in ethnomusicology (Blacking 1976) and music therapy (Baker & Wigram 2005), show that music is a necessary part of life, for children and adults. Research such as that presented here provides evidence of the centrality of communication, relationships, and play to young children’s singing, and, by implication, the centrality of singing and music to children’s lives.

The key purpose of any research is to bring new information or perspectives to other researchers and practitioners in relevant fields. However, research can and does bring about change and reciprocal benefits for the participants themselves (Beaudry 1997). Ethnographic research such as this, which focused on an exploration of relationships and aspects of life within a naturalistic setting over a long period, has many professional and personal benefits for all participants. The children and staff with whom I worked were able to participate in singing and music making that led to changes in the center’s musical culture. For me, the experience of participating in the life of an early childhood center was a pleasure and a privilege. The relationships formed and insights gained had a profound effect on me as a researcher, songwriter, and educator, giving me valuable insights into young children’s music

making in the context of their social and cultural relationships. The greatest gift of the research was portrayed by Ethan’s greeting to me one sunny spring morning:

Extract from journal

The children were playing outdoors when I arrived. I sat down on the verandah near some children and waited to see who would approach me. After a little while Ethan came running up and stopped behind me. He draped his arms around my neck, placed his chin on my shoulder and gave me a hug. “Did you bring your guitar today?” he murmured in my ear, “because I REALLY need to sing a song.”

I went to get my guitar and he had a long turn, strumming while I held my fingers on the fret board in the position of an E major chord, then taking over and using his fingers on the fret board in imitation of me. He strummed, moved his left hand and sang/ chanted with perfect synchronization of pulse. A group of children gathered to listen to him. “Sing your dump truck song,” his friend Cory asked him. “Yeah, dump truck song,” echoed Phil. Ethan looked at the circle of expectant, upturned faces, grinned proudly and began his song.



Ethan sings his song to his friends

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