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Waiting around the corner: Playing with songs in early childhood practice

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Singing in early years educational settings conventionally follows an adult-led model, in which the adult introduces and leads the activity offering little opportunity for children to become active contributors to song-singing. Taking two examples of three-year-olds singing known songs in their own way, supported by familiar adults, a description and analysis of how the children used the songs to position themselves in their own worlds of relationships is presented. This leads to a discussion of the purposes and aims of song-singing and ideas around the general theme of playing with songs. Some alternative principles on which to develop song-singing pedagogy in early years settings are offered.

Introduction

Naming songs in which young children are named – or can name – are part of familiar practice in early childhood music education. As with much early childhood music practice, pedagogical models for singing have evolved, not so much through research, analysis and theorising, but through observation of children's responses and gradual refinement of 'what works' in practice. These 'what works' versions of practice bed down to become accepted and consensual ways of doing things that are handed on between practitioners, often with little further thought as to underlying principles or what value they hold for the children.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to think more about the singing of songs in early years practice by taking two examples of song-singing by young children and discussing them in detail. Leading on from this analysis and linking with theory when relevant, I develop a key idea of singing play. The two singing events were collected as part of a project which sought to explore models of practice in a range of early years contexts and develop them through processes of action research (see Young, 2003 for more detail). Video and field notes were collected that could be later reviewed and reflected upon. The first singing event was collected on video, the second observed and recorded in detail in field notes.

Background

Before continuing, I will provide a background for the article and some more general thoughts about early years music education. Conventional practice in early years music education revolves around the adult-led singing of a repertoire of songs with a group of children. The songs will have been selected as suitable for young children. The topics will include songs about small animals, transport, toys and so on, reflecting a pastoral world of simplicity and innocence. Usually songs include actions, simple body percussion that may pick up rhythmic characteristics or actions that enact the songs, emphasising the lyrics and mini-story line. Typically too the songs may include activities with toys or small percussion instruments, often aimed at increasing interest. Such adult-led activity leaves little room for children's self-initiated and playful musical contributions. There may be

some small elements of choice for children around what songs to sing, how to sing them or movements to perform, but the children are, for the most part, required to participate in a conforming way.

We might compare this model of practice to the template and sticking of pre-cut shapes to make the greetings card which would be scoffed at in visual arts practice. In visual arts, practitioners make provision for children's self-initiated art play and value the outcomes of children's activity (often even more than the children, for whom process was all and the visual paper trails are less interesting). Visual arts practice is bolstered by a long tradition of researching and analysing children's self-made art which has, in turn, seeped in to expectations for practice. In music education, there are a few, fairly isolated studies of children's spontaneous and self-initiated music-making stretching back through the whole of the last century. But these studies have not had the impact on practice that the art field has enjoyed. It is the pedagogical approaches, often encapsulated in methods named after their 'pioneer' of music education – Kodaly, Dalcroze, Orff, Suzuki – that have had the most influence. Most of these hail from Europe and the early part of the last century. These methods are dedicated to the gradual development of specific rhythmic, singing, aural and performing skills associated with the practice of formal music in the European 'classical' traditions. Writing for a New Zealand audience, the European heritage strikes even more of a disjuncture with contemporary times.

Amongst general early years educators in the UK, music is often valued for its contribution to children's social skills, assisting children to become one of a group and participate in collective activity. For this purpose, collective song-singing with its built-in conformity to music's pulse and tune is ideal. The group time for story and song has become an accepted component of practice. Do not misunderstand me. I am not criticising the group performance of song-singing *per se*. My purpose is to dig under the surface of what is a taken-for-granted activity and, most importantly, by analysing some examples of children's singing to rethink why and how we include singing and imagine some alternatives. Let me continue with the examples.

Two three-year-old singers

Kim was purposely engaging Lucy, her three-year-old daughter, in some song play as part of the early years music action research project we were working on together. We were interested in how Lucy was learning these songs. Kim had set up a water tray with ducks in the garden and was introducing the well-known song 'five little ducks' to Lucy. Part way through the song mentions 'Mummy duck'. Here Lucy stopped the song and became concerned to position one of the largest toy ducks as Mummy duck on the corner of the water tray. Having done this, the song was further held up while another duck was chosen to be Daddy and given a place on the opposite corner of the tray, the other side of Lucy. She now converted the song into a version which could incorporate a reference to 'Mummy duck', whom she confirmed in place by touching during a mid-phrase pause and 'Daddy duck'. Including Daddy duck created a need for an additional short phrase to the song, causing the song to be stretched and altered. Daddy duck was similarly affirmed by the touch of a hand. Between both ducks stood Lucy symbolically flanked by her 'duck' parents.

Songs which can be adapted to incorporate their own names and those within their close circle seem particularly salient to young children. Doreen, three-year-old Sophie's keyworker in daycare had introduced a song called 'waiting around the corner' in which the words and mini-narrative could catch

up others in its naming patterns. Over the course of a few weeks Sophie worked hard to learn this song and once learnt, she used it frequently to name those around her. In Sophie's case this was a loose network of family and step-family members, friends and day-time carers with whom she had complex emotional and sometimes stressful relations. The repetition, while gradually gaining confidence with the song itself and extending its range of named people, seemed to be key for Sophie. It was affirming and reaffirming by virtue of repetition of a rhythmic, phrased structure which locked certain people in place and could hold them there.

For both Lucy and Sophie, these songs were about belonging and participating: in Lucy's case to a tight conventional family unit and in Sophie's to an extended, uncertain family and fluid network of carers. In both cases, the songs could capture and condense these relationships. Children try to actively manage and shape the very relationships that also shape them and songs provide a medium through which they might symbolically achieve this. In these everyday ways of playing with songs Lucy and Sophie were creating their own life-worlds and their own identities (Trevarthen, 2002). The songs, both structured and structuring, enabled the children to bring forth a world over which they had a measure of control, to name their families, to sing their world into shape. The songs were able to indicate shifting territory between my home and daycare and myself and those around me. Thus, children's sense of self, their experiences and their relationships could be delineated and securely encapsulated in one song. Mummy and Daddy duck were exactly fixed in position. For Sophie, endeavouring to manage a more complex and troubling set of family relationships, the song enabled her to sing these relationships over a number of weeks, sensitively supported by daycare workers who helped her to name each person mentioned in the song one by one.

To connect these ideas with theory, in the turn towards discourse (Harré, 1993) language is understood not simply as a tool for thinking, for reflecting the world as it is, but as a means by which we actively bring our social worlds into being, we enact our lives through language. Musicological theory has taken up a similar theme and music has been understood as a means by which we create our lifeworlds, our identity (De Nora, 2000). We only need to reflect upon our own experiences to recognise how we actively use music to do certain things for us; to support our sense of identity and of belonging to social and cultural groups.

It is the capacity of these songs as small-scale but highly structured narratives with easily remembered words and formal structures which provide a malleable medium for children to take a grip on their own experiences. And songs do very successfully 'get a grip'. But whose grip? More often than not it is the adults' organisational purposes that the songs are used for: to gather the children together, to join them in communal activity, to teach them the words, the rhythms, to clap and move together. Important and valuable sometimes these purposes for song-singing are, it denies children's own agency and creative contribution and the opportunity for learning how to use songs, playfully and meaningfully for their own purposes.

Learning to become a song-singer

Looking at children's own song-singing in self-initiated activity more generally, from a slightly different position, I have been interested in the way that young children of two, three and four often knew songs in their entirety. They could, if they wanted to, sing them through continuously and

accurately, and yet they rarely did this, unless at the behest of adults around them. It seems to me that songs were more useful and interesting to the children for their malleable properties, for the fact that they can be played with, changed, subverted, converted and made to do the other things they want. The children could stretch and pull or take just the useful bits of the song and use them for their own purposes. Lucy was more concerned to include Mummy and Daddy duck in her song, even though it awkwardly lengthened a phrase musically and then needed another phrase of her own making. She was more motivated to do this than to sing the song with equal length phrasing. Thus the interest is not in reproducing the song *per se*, but in using it to make a singing event that is meaningful to each child. Yet, it is the accurate reproduction of musical material in songs which has been the preoccupation of music education practitioners and researchers concerned with children's acquisition of skills, rather than how they play with songs in everyday life.

What is important to consider as well is how both these examples drew in the adults who knew the songs and were willing participants on the children's terms. Thus the songs provided flexible frames which could bring together both the adults there and – interestingly – also those who were absent. And this use of song, as a medium which can gather together and integrate what is normally disconnected and separated in time and space, is a powerful dimension of song-singing for singers of all ages. We only need to think of songs in our own lives to recognise this power. Songs are a means for reaching out to others, present or imagined. 'Sharedness' is built in to the essence of musical activity.

It is a pity, then, in my view, that in early years music education research and practice interest in children's singing of songs has almost exclusively been focused on their abilities to develop singing skills (see discussion in Young, 2003, 2004). How children might use songs as pliable tools for finding their way in the world has been less considered. There are some exceptional studies such as the Pillsbury studies lead by Pond (Moorhead & Pond, 1941/1978), a study by Bjørkvold of children's own song-making in Scandinavian nurseries (1989), a similar project by Sundin (1998) and Campbell's (1998), Kartomi's (1991) work that have looked at children's spontaneous song-singing and how it connects with their everyday lives and Celeste and Delalande's interest in vocalisations during play by young children in France (1997). I would like to add my own work on children's spontaneous music-making and spontaneous singing to that list (Young, 2002, 2003). Moreover, learning to become a singer has been assumed to rely on simple imitation of accurately given models, learning rote-style.

Following Vygotsky (1998, p. 42), I take learning (or 'becoming') to be a form of performance – theatrical in a way – concerned with heightened involvement in various life-relevant activities rather than concerned with the accumulation of skills or rational learning. Staying with the theatrical metaphor, the children are creating scripts or 'interactive formats' in everyday social situations in which the songs are embedded as meaningful moves. This is not mechanical copying of a behaviour but reappropriation into new contexts which have significance for the child. Drawing on these two examples again, we can see performance spaces, singing events between young children and their immediate carers, where participation in creative and social action – in other words, playing and playing with others with whom they have important relationships not simple imitation – is taking the children forward. Because Sophie was able to sing the song on her own terms, in her own way, at her own times, listened to and encouraged by the practitioners, she sung the song many times over, day-in and day-out over a

few weeks. Such quantity of repetition and motivation to practice on her own would be rare within group song singing sessions, even if they were daily. Learning as child initiated and extended through adult-child collaboration thus leads and generates musical development rather than vice versa.

Song-singing in the early years contexts

And there is one final discussion point to add here. In the example with Sophie, these were general practitioners who did not profess any specialist knowledge of music education practice. Singing in their setting followed the usual pattern of group song-singing at the conclusion of sessions, but somehow, unselfconsciously and easily, songs had infiltrated into everyday practice so that songs were sung to line up, to play on outdoor equipment, for routine care tasks, for mealtimes and any moments of waiting. These songs then spilled over into the children's singing and positive encouragement of the children's singing, often with new adapted versions and made-up songs. It was not something the practitioners had rationalised, it had just become part of 'what we do here': 'it makes the day go more easily and enjoyably' they said. The song singing had real intention even though that intention was not consciously articulated. That sense of intention and the unselfconsciousness of singing was caught by the children who could feel themselves as intentional, interactive singers – naming and being named, positioning being positioned and gaining a stronger sense of who they were.

We can also see how children's singing connects in environments which have been designed to foster what the community values and expects of its young children, how they want them to 'become'. Thus in early years settings space and equipment for free-choice play is provided, but nevertheless within what is ostensibly an environment for 'free play', there are often some implicit and quite tight restrictions that operate. In these environments there are usually expectations of controlled voice-use so that children's vocal play is narrowed in to certain specific, acceptable directions (Young, 2006). Again, I am aware that I may be generalising from the early years educational contexts that I know, and each reader might think whether what I say is appropriate to their own context. But in schooling systems that require children to listen and be docile, educating children to remain relatively silent and to control their voice use within narrow parameters is one of the tasks of the first years of kindergarten or formal education. As Kress says (1997), the culture of early childhood care and education determines what is available and what is available determines how and what children will do, including how they will use their voices, how they will sing and make music. Indeed, I have written elsewhere about early childhood education's focus on children as 'seen but not heard' (Young, 2006). Traditions of observation, a focus on play with the material objects external to the child, a focus on the development of basic skills all tend to mitigate against the recognition of the spontaneous, playful use of the voice in song and other forms of creative vocalisation – including in multi-modal activity such as dramatic and dance play. The current rise of interest in the anthropology of the senses is showing us how the Western idea of five senses, in which the visual with its emphasis on detachment and objectivity, has come to dominate, is certainly not universal. Aurally and kinaesthetically attuned cultures abound (Guerts, 2003).

Final words

And so to conclude. The adult-led traditions of group song-singing in early years practice are so deeply embedded in conventions of practice that they

are rarely questioned. From close analysis of Lucy and Sophie being able to sing songs in their own way and on their own terms, and to use those songs meaningfully in their own lives, I have suggested that we might reconsider the value of song-singing to young children in more than just social-behavioural terms (as is common for early childhood practitioners) or music-skill terms (as is common for early childhood music specialists). Handing agency to children as song-singers, allowing them to play creatively and flexibly with songs, allows them to develop a secure sense of themselves as song-users and singers. What's more, I would suggest that the higher motivation to sing, also results in greater gains in those very musical and social aspects that are the usual aims of conventional song-singing pedagogy. And adding another bonus, it requires a different set of skills on the part of practitioners to include song playing as part of everyday practice: less dependent on the formal skills to lead songs and music-skill activities that can be a source of anxiety to some general practitioners and more dependent on relational qualities of interaction, support, a kind of collaborative musicality (Young, 2005). This kind of collaborative musicality in my experience, is congruent with quality early years general practice, perhaps more so than with models of specialist early years music education practice, dependent as it is on knowing children well, on sensitive relational qualities and forms of intuitive human musicality.

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