Teaching, learning and celebrating the diverse musical identities of young children: Accountability to whom?

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Background

Regardless of the finely-tuned ethos that underpins our practice as early childhood professionals, it is agreed that we need to move away from the traditional, teleological view of the "universal child" who proceeds to predictable adult maturity (Canella & Bailey, 1999), and contribute to authentic curricula that acknowledge multiple pathways and systems of growth and development (Lambert & Clyde, 2000). For early childhood music education, we need to turn to the children's musical cultures to locate the most appropriate foundations for such a curriculum. In Australia, this means burrowing beyond the "Australian" superculture (prominently displayed in the recent past through occasions like the Olympic Games, the Centenary of Federation, public debate surrounding Australia's future as a Republic or Constitutional Monarchy, and annual Australia Day celebrations) and focus on the varied musical subcultures and identities co-constructed by the children, families and communities.

Drawing on data collected as part of a larger study of early childhood musical identities undertaken in Australia and Hawaii, this paper reports on the emerging singing identities of young Australian children in three disparate areas of the state of New South Wales.

Aim

The aim of this Australian segment of the study was to investigate the singing cultures of young children aged 3-8 years in the state of New South Wales. Specifically, the study sought to explore:

1. where young children sing;
2. with whom they sing;
3. the sources of their songs, and
4. the place of and attitude towards singing in the children's families.

Method

Setting

Data were collected in three areas in the state of New South Wales, Australia. "Downtown" (an urban area), is an inner-city area of Sydney. Approximately 4.5 million people live in Sydney, but the population of Downtown is 92, 249. Most people live in apartments or terrace houses and have a median weekly income of $500-$599. The majority (51%) were born in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002a). "Ruraltown," a regional service town is approximately 3 hours drive north-west of Sydney. Ruraltown's 29, 858 people, live mainly in houses and earn between $300 and $399 per week. The majority of the population (87%) are Australian-born (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002c). "Outbacktown" is situated in an isolated part of the state, 9 hours drive from Sydney. Most of the town's 2060 residents were born in Australia (91%), live in houses and have a median weekly income of $300-$399. English is the main language spoken in most homes (92%), with only 0.34% of the population reporting Indigenous Australian languages as their main language, despite 54% of residents being of Indigenous origin (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002b).

It is important to note that data and conclusions cannot be generalised beyond the specific sites mentioned above. However, these locations are representative of three common types of communities in New South Wales and while disparate in many ways, reveal some surprisingly similar themes in relation to emerging singing cultures.

Participants

Participants were children 3-8 years and their parent/s or primary carer/s (hereinafter referred to as adults), recruited through local schools and children's services, with equal numbers of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families invited to participate. For various reasons, everyone who agreed to participate did not attend the interviews. For some families, unforeseen illness precluded involvement, while unexpected commitments with other children or work meant that they were unable to attend scheduled interviews. No families withdrew from the project for reasons other than this. When lack of personal transport proved problematic, interviews were rescheduled at a more convenient place or time, or local community services provided transport for participants. Table 1 summarises the distribution of families who did attend.

Table 1. Final participants.

Location	Background	
	Aboriginal	Non-Aboriginal
Downtown	1	4
Ruraltown	4	5
Outbacktown	4	2

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected in the form of semi-structured interviews, recorded on videotape. Children and adults were interviewed separately unless child or adult demonstrated a desire for both to be present at the child's interview. Some adult interviews were undertaken with the child playing contently in another part of the room, (child care was not available for most participants) but not actively involved in the interview.

Children's interviews were based on questions about their favourite song (including an invitation to sing it), where and with whom they sing, what they sing and where they learnt the songs. Interviews with adults were similarly based, with the addition of discussion about reasons for singing with children, musical background and heritage, and the importance of singing with children. With children and adults, prompts and probes were utilised to assist participants to expand their responses or provide deeper explanations where necessary.

Interviews were transcribed and transferred to qsr *NVivo* software for coding and analysis from a phenomenological perspective. Coding was undertaken in a recursive manner; interviews were initially coded according to a protocol derived from the interview schedules and research questions, with finer details added as the documents were further explored in subsequent readings.

3

Partners and sites

Children in all three areas sing with a variety of partners. Sometimes these activities involve singing along with recorded music; at other times, songs are sung a capella. Regardless of whether songs are sung with recordings, the children's key singing partners are drawn from their family. Parent(s), grandparent(s), sibling(s) or other close family members were frequently referred to when discussing who the children sing with. Stories of singing with family members were recounted with verve and enthusiasm:

> *He's like that; shy. But if his brothers were with him, you wouldn't shut him up.*
> (Claudia, Indigenous Mother, Ruraltown).

Although peers and even inanimate partners like dolls were reported as teaming up with the children in singing, the frequency and spirit with which these references were made rendered them seemingly insignificant in comparison to family members.

Singing sites were readily reported by children and adults alike, the main sites being at home (in general, or in some cases, specifically named areas of the home, such as bedroom, bathroom, loungeroom or kitchen), in the car, at school and at church. Singing in the car is an activity that was readily and enthusiastically related by participants in all areas with Colleen's comment below a recurrent theme:

> *Oh yeah. We'll sing along in the car. We do a lot of driving together because we live at Ashfield and drive to here. And then going up, when she was little, we always played the Playschool tapes, just the music, or we would just sing. We sing lots of songs now while listening to the radio, or we, Isabel will just make up her own songs* (Colleen, Non-Indigenous, Mother, Downtown).

Interestingly, Ruraltown is the location where singing in the care is pursued more regularly. Downtown families recounted singing in the car to a lesser extent, while Outbacktown participants seldom reported involvement in this activity. It seems likely that this is a result of circumstance. Ruraltown families are more likely to spend extensive time in the family car: public transport is scarce and distances between families and social activities can be too far to travel efficiently by means other than a car. Downtown's public transport is often more efficient (and cheaper) than using cars to ferry children substantially smaller distances. The Outbacktown families live in town (as opposed to the neighbouring large farms), have very small distances to move and often walk. It is hardly surprising that the Ruraltown children are extensive in-car singers. It is the car that is generally the site of the aforementioned singing with recorded music, with a capella and improvised material reported less frequently.

Repertoire and sources

When asked about their favourite song, children in all locations most commonly named traditional Anglo-Australian nursery rhymes or songs composed for children. Some children were unable to articulate a reason for their choice:

> *Mmm ... I don't know* (Alex, Non-Indigenous, 6 years, Ruraltown)

while others offered very broad reasons:

> *Because it [the melody] sounds good* (Kyrieta, Indigenous, 7 years, Rural town).

> *'Cause it's fun* (Sophie, Non-Indigenous, 7 years, Outbacktown)

Not all children could remember (or explain) where they learnt their favourite song. Those that could, offered a range of sources including preschool, school, radio/TV and CD. Interestingly, home or family members were not generally seen as sources of these songs, despite most of the children's singing being undertaken with them in a home environment.

The importance of singing and musical heritage
Singing with children is important to all adults in the study, even when a reason for this stance was not forthcoming. The development of musical skill was not seen as the central motive for singing with children. Overwhelmingly, adults expressed socially-based rationales for undertaking these activities:

> *Yeah, and maybe it's part of being a family, you know, those daggy songs that no-one else knows, but …* (Jane, Non-Indigenous, Mother, Ruraltown).

This locus was extended beyond the immediate family into Bronfenbrenner's (1997) outer strata when Aboriginal adults rationalised singing due to its "cultural" significance and function, a view noticeably absent from discussions with non-Aboriginal participants:

> *Because they learn a great deal from them [elders] and singing* (Margaret, Indigenous, Mother, Outbacktown).

Singing was sometimes seen as empowering or providing opportunities for children and their futures, or as a means of equalising an apparently disproportionate inclination towards "the sciences" in Australia. Some adults did rationalise singing in terms of musical skill development, but this was still seen as part of broader education.

Most non-Aboriginal adults agreed that imparting attitude, emotion and dispositions towards singing is more important than repertoire, pointing out that there is apparently no readily identifiable "Australian" musical heritage. While not devaluing the importance of attitudes, emotions and dispositions, Aboriginal adults readily identified rich heritages that included singing, but generally lamented a personally perceived inability to pass this to the children due to lack of experience, the demise of the traditional cultures or the politics of ownership and complexity of negotiations to use traditional repertoire.

Implications in the age of accountability
While teachers in prior-to-school settings in New South Wales are encouraged to teach on a basis that acknowledges children, families and communities as co-constructors of cultures (Stonehouse, 2001), school-based music education is ruled by state-mandated outcomes (Board of Studies NSW, 2000) that can easily override diversity of musical identities with a skills-based superculture. This raises serious questions of accountability.

Music in schools

On the surface, school teachers are held accountable to a teleological system that often discourages the celebration of diversity and reduces music to a skill set rather than a powerful social semiotic. The primary (elementary) school years in New South Wales are divided into four Stages:

Early Stage 1 (Kindergarten)
Stage 1 (Years 1 and 2)
Stage 2 (Years 3 and 4)
Stage 3 (Years 5 and 6)

Teaching and learning in State Schools is divided into six "key learning areas," of which Creative Arts (including music) is one, each with a State-mandated Syllabus document. The Creative Arts Syllabus and associated documents divide music into broad areas of Performing, Organising sound, and Listening, and a series of Outcomes and Indicators for each Stage. The following definitions are provided in the Syllabus for teachers:

> "Outcomes
> Syllabus outcomes are specific statements of the results intended by the syllabus. These outcomes are achieved as students engage with the content of the syllabus. They are arranged in stages. The outcomes are statements of the knowledge and understanding and the skills expected to be gained by most students as a result of effective teaching and learning in the artforms at the end of a stage.
>
> Indicators
> Each outcome in this syllabus is accompanied by a set of indicators. An indicator is a statementof the behaviour that students might display as they work towards the achievement of syllabus outcomes. Indicators are most effectively used in relation to intentions of units of work and when assessing student worksamples" (Board of Studies NSW, 2000, p. 29).

So, teachers will teach according to outcomes, assess by keeping records of indicators, and do this all within content set down by the syllabus documents, which are arranged according to years of schooling. Despite being charged with the inclusion of diversity and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, teachers are bound by a top-down, teleological model that offers little scope for acknowledgement of diversity, let alone the value that children as symbol users and creators can bring to the music education arena. It seems that the school-aged framework is well situated to focus on exactly the opposite of what the children and parents in this study see as the value and importance of singing. Teachers are held accountable to a system, rather than to those who engage in singing particular repertoire in particular places, with particular partners, for particular purposes.

Music in children's services

On the other hand, teachers in prior-to-school settings are empowered to teach from a generative perspective that assists in the development of diverse musical identities and impels the progress of music as a social semiotic system. Accountability in this sector is more localised and accepting of difference.

Services for children 0-5years (e.g. Long Day Care Centres, Preschools) are not strangled by State-mandated syllabus documents. Instead these services are supported by a Curriculum Framework (Stonehouse, 2001), the adoption of which is voluntary. This framework was developed in close association with the profession, children and families, and seems to be underpinned by a philosophy almost antithetical to that of its school-aged counterpart. The framework consists of four core concepts:

1. Communities of learners that exist in the interest of children's well-being and learning;
2. Decisions, judgements and choices made by professionals are the major contributors to children's experience;
3. Curriculum is the intentional provisions made by professionals to support children's learning and well-being;
4. A framework both provides definition and supports uniqueness (Stonehouse, 2001, p.15)

In addition, the document outlines the major obligations of professionals working in the field:

1. Promote and support respectful life enhancing relationships
2. Practise in ways that acknowledge the child as capable and resourceful
3. Strive for meaning and connections
4. Honour diversity(Stonehouse, 2001, p.15).

Finally, early childhood professionals are presented with the essential qualities that must be brought to their practice:

1. Empathy
2. Respect
3. Perseverance and resilience
4. Passion for learning leading to growth (Stonehouse, 2001, p.15).

So, teachers will teach according to the emerging needs and interests of children and their families, focus on relationships and dispositions rather than skills, acknowledge children as co-constructors of cultures, and include all stakeholders (including children) in the assessment of teaching and learning within those cultures. Content will be locally driven and rationalised, and (music) teaching and learning will be viewed within a meaningful sociocultural context. In other words, teachers in children's services in New South Wales are well placed to acknowledge that through singing practices, sites, partners and repertoire, children and families bring a whole raft of important aspects to early music education cultures, and in so doing, form the first line of accountability for teaching and learning.

The children and families who participated in this project seem to have clear ideas of what it means to sing and to be a singer. It seems that embracing the notion of music teaching and learning as making meaning with music in a social context, rather than a decontextualised array of mechanical skills for narrow use in symbolic representation, will assist with defining excellence and clear lines of accountability in young children's music education. We should be accountable first to the co-constructors of children's musical identities and cultures and only then should more generic, systemic perceptions be considered, if at all.

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