Musical behaviours of primary school children in Singapore

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In this ethnographic study, the musical behaviours of 28 primary school children in Singapore were examined for their meaning and diversity as they engaged in the school day. A large part of these children's musical behaviours stemmed from their exposure to the mass media. Children's musical inventions emerged in the context of play, occasionally using musical play as an aid to academic learning. Instances of rhythmic play were more prevalent compared with melodic utterances. The children tended to motivate and encourage each other in their daily activities through the use of rhythmic play while melodic utterances seemed more prominently tied to expression and communication.

Introduction

Musical behaviours abound in much of children's everyday lives: at home, in school or in the playground. These multiple musical behaviours and expressions have been appropriately defined by Christopher Small (1998) as musicking. Children's musicking can range from short rhythmic figures to complete songs and compositions. The conception of music as humanly organised sound (Blacking, 1973) suggests a gamut of musical soundings that each individual child brings to his or her surrounds as a cultural and social being. Children's musical behaviours in many cultures has been an object of interest for ethnomusicologists (Mead, 1930; McPhee, 1938; Herskovits, 1944; McAllester, 1960; Blacking, 1967; Merrill-Mirsky, 1988), folklorists (Newell, 1834/1992; Opie & Opie, 1959, 1985; Knapp & Knapp, 1976; Sutton-Smith, 1999) and music educators (Harwood, 1987; Riddell, 1990; Addo, 1996; Marsh, 1997; Campbell, 1998; Tarnowski, 1994; Smithrin, 1997; Sundin, 1998; Young, 1995, 2000; Lew, 2005) for decades. The overarching concern in the various fields of study in children's musical behaviours seems not just directed at the music itself, but more significantly towards what music does for children and how it does it. There is genuine interest and concern for the use and function of children's musical behaviours and an acknowledgement that these musical behaviours are worthy of close consideration.

Purpose

Considering the limited number of research studies on children's spontaneous musical behaviours, particularly within the Asian region (Lew, 2005), there is a need to generate greater interest and research so as to better understand children's music and musical

behaviours within their own contexts in these specific geographical locations. There are few studies of children's spontaneous musical behaviours within the natural setting of school, which could provide an added dimension and insight into musical play beyond the home and playground spaces (Burnard, 1999; Kanellopoulos, 1999). From the perspective of a music educator working within the multicultural society of Singapore, an in-depth look at specific cultures of Singaporean children through ethnographic fieldwork holds the potential to unravel the particularities of children's musical lives in this urban locale in South-East Asia. Immersion within the realm of children's daily lives is key to the development of descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of their pertinent cultures. The multi-faceted musical behaviours of these children can be studied in this way, leading to a more enlightened and reflective discussion of music education matters. This study focuses on the musical behaviours of 28 primary one (aged 7) children in Pei Yi (pseudonym) Primary School, examining the meaning and diversity of these musical behaviours as they engage throughout the school day and the musical repertoire they sing and move to.

Method and design

In order to understand the distinctive character and meaning of children's musical behaviours, Bjørkvold (1990) stated that it is of 'fundamental importance to look at it in the light of its natural context, i.e. within the framework of the common codes of child culture itself' (p. 121). These common codes were sought by becoming familiar with the primary school children, and in deciphering the norms and values of their culture. In examining the musical behaviours that occur in the various physical spaces of the school in the daily lives of these children (with specific focus on the onset and offset of musical behaviours and their uses and functions), it was hoped that connections could be made to the micro- and macro-systems that surround the children, highlighting the complexity and diversity of their musical behaviours. Microsystem factors in this instance refer to influences that stem from the home, school, or neighbourhood whereas macrosystem factors relate to larger societal influences which can include government policies or mass-media influences. Observations of children's everyday activities in school, as well as interviews with children, audio and video recordings, material artifacts and other information gathered from teachers, parents, peers, siblings and other family members regarding children's musical behaviours and influences, are brought together in order to paint a holistic picture of children's musical cultures.

The study was conducted over a Singaporean school semester from July to November. The researcher was in school every day for the whole semester between 2–6 hours a day. Informed consent for the research was gathered from the principal, the vice-principal, the form teacher and the mother tongue teachers of the children in order to gain access to the various classes and special rooms (music room and computer lab) in which the children have their daily lessons and activities. I also gained permission from the teachers to conduct informal interviews with them, in order to talk about their own musical experiences and observations they might have of the children's musical behaviours.

The children involved in the study were initially informed of the intent of the research by the form teacher three weeks prior to the researcher's arrival; a notification of the research study was also sent home to their parents at this time. Informed consent and

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assent were then obtained from the children and parents, allowing the researcher to observe children in their natural classroom setting for the entirety of the school day. Audio (Sharp MD portable recorder IM-MT899) and video (DCR-HC32 MiniDV Handycam) recording equipment were used to record interviews, school programmes (like assembly and special celebrations) and musical behaviours of children. Informed consent for the use of audio and video recordings was also obtained from the children.

For the purpose of creating a rich description of children's lives as experienced in school, the techniques of ethnography were employed. This ethnographic study follows the procedures of taking and writing-up field-notes as proposed by Emerson *et al.* (1995). Audio and video recordings of pupils' musical behaviours were made and transcribed for analysis. The arrangement for observation days was such that the fieldworker could spend the remainder of the day transcribing (verbatim) the day's recording(s), weaving in field notes, reflecting upon any additional data still needed within the typed versions of the day's notes. The various sources of data collected were aimed as a reflection of the contexts that influence children's musical lives, providing in-depth description and triangulation of sources.

Analysis was an on-going process throughout the duration of the fieldwork. As data were collected, they were frequently combined with previously collected data as a process of working to reconstruct cultural understandings of the musical behaviours of the children. Analysis continued after the fieldwork period and was grounded in and reflective of intimate familiarity with the setting or events under study that generated many 'ideas, issues, topics and themes as possible' (Emerson *et al.*, 1995: 166). For the entire duration of the study, a total of 150 pages of field-notes were written, and 25 hours of video footage and 30 hours of audio information were collated. All audio information was transcribed verbatim. Selected video footage that was of interest to the study was also transcribed.

All field notes, transcribed audio and selected video recordings were used in the analysis process. Thematic coding that fitted into preliminary categories of form and function formed the basis of this report as the objective was to seek out meanings of naturally occurring events or moments in children's school experiences, a 'locally grounded perspective' based on the experiences of particular children (Graue & Walsh, 1998). The data analysis presented three main categories of children's musical behaviours: melodic utterances, creation and recreation of familiar songs, and rhythmic play.

Introducing the school setting and related context

Pei Yi Primary School is nested on a small hill at the edge of a Singaporean neighbourhood's community park. It is defined by a looming four-storey classroom block, a two-storey building, a library, and a four-storey administrative building comprised of the general office, a two-storey teachers' work room and meeting rooms. A large multi-purpose hall complete with parquet flooring sits comfortably above a mezzanine level that houses the school's dental clinic and the sports equipment room. At the bottom level of the multi-purpose hall is the cafeteria that is divided into two sections by a flight of stairs with four food stalls in each section that serve food and drinks ranging from snacks to full-fledged meals of local flavour. In the centre of these buildings is the parade square, a large open space tiled with hard cement blocks and two flagpoles that flank a podium. Beyond the

classroom block is a basketball court and a small field for outdoor activities. The concrete buildings are softened by the warm hues of the multi-coloured walls of green, blue, yellow and red. Throughout the school compound are many flights of stairs leading up and down and linking the various school buildings. Pupils could be found on stair landings from time to time, having their 'secret' meetings and get-togethers or playing games.

The Primary 1C classroom, one of six primary one classes, was situated at the ground level of the classroom block. It faced the two flagpoles on the parade square and was located between two other primary one classes. A long corridor outside the classroom led towards the cafeteria on one end and the special rooms on the other. This classroom, and its children and team of teachers, were the focus of in-school campus fieldwork. It should be noted that the classroom teacher was also the music teacher of the primary 1C pupils. Not having any background in musical training, the classroom teacher would randomly pick out songs she was familiar with and teach them by rote or through accompaniment CDs. These songs would comprise the entirety of music lessons for these primary school children.

The daily school lives of children

The school day for the Primary 1C children of Pei Yi Primary School began promptly at 12:30 pm. It was at this time they would gather in the multi-purpose hall, seated in rows of two, to read a book of their choice. At 12:50 pm, the teacher-on-duty would go on stage to make announcements over the PA system before giving instructions for all pupils to stand at attention, fist to their hearts, to recite the Singapore pledge in unison. At the end of the school day (6:30 pm), pupils would gather in the parade square for the flag-lowering ceremony, standing at attention, singing the national anthem as they looked toward the lowering of the national and school flags by student leaders. In addition to these daily routines, the school song was sung every Monday in the multi-purpose hall before the pledge-taking ceremony. The national anthem and the school song were thus used to express and communicate national and school identity, respectively. Through these set routines, the children in Primary 1C learned to identify themselves as pupils of Pei Yi Primary School and citizens (or residents) of Singapore. This use of music corroborates Folkestad's (2002) view of music, to 'strengthen the bonds within the group, and to make the members of the group feel that they belong to one another . . . (music is also used) to be recognised by others as being a typical member of one nation or particular group, and to make people outside the group identify the members of the group as such' (p. 156).

The Primary 1C classroom (*c.* 800 square feet) provided a unique space where children were within earshot of each other's interactions and able to hear each other's conversations and musical behaviours. Children's proximity to one another meant that the sound surroundings that each child experienced within the same environment were almost always experienced by any other child in the class, though not necessarily to the same degree of consciousness. Music lessons were held in the music room and physical education classes were held in either the multi-purpose hall or the parade square.

Pupils were given a 30-minute break-time each day between 3–3:30 pm during which time they could either stay in the canteen (where they could buy food from the various stall-holders) or play in the parade square, the basketball court, or the school field. Each

class was also assigned two specific benches and tables in the canteen where they could place their water bottles and lunchboxes. The class of Primary 1C typically stayed in the vicinity of these tables and benches, where they ate, chatted, played with each other, and engaged in playing with objects or at games. On occasion, some boys and girls would play in the parade square. At 3:25 pm, the school bell would sound and pupils would gather in the canteen and line up in twos, awaiting their teacher to bring them back to their respective classrooms.

Soundscapes of the school

From the multi-purpose hall to the classroom, from the canteen to the parade square, and at different times during the school day, the children were constantly engaged in musical play independently or in groups. The Pei Yi Primary School soundscape was defined by children's rhythmic play, melodic utterances, and songs. The familiar sounds of the school bell, the enthusiastic screams and shouts of children, the teachers' voices and the announcements over the school PA system, were also components of the school's sonic environment. In the section that follows, detailed examples of children's musical behaviours is described, categorised by the type of musical behaviours and sub-categorised by uses and functions.

Melodic utterances/creation and recreation of familiar songs

Campbell (1998) defined the fleeting songs, chants, and melodic segments of children's musical play as 'musical utterances', while Swanwick (1988) described these utterances as 'compositions in progress'. Melodic musical utterances were differentiated from rhythmic play by:

> the extent of pitch content in these expressions, which moves past the speech inflections of rhythmic play to the presence of sustained, sung pitches that run the gamut from very few notes to a full diatonic spread of pitches. Rhythmic movement may be present in these melodic musical utterances, but is less of a defining point than it is in rhythmic play. The accent in melodic musical utterances is decidedly on pitch content and its development (Lum & Campbell, 2007).

Singing full-out songs was another constant behaviour of the children, where they seemed to easily select out of the realm of possibility those songs that for them had 'staying power'. Even in kindergarten, they knew words and melodies to many songs, and their in-tune singing accuracy became more accurate with age (Welch, 1994). They appeared to enjoy a wide array of songs they learned from teachers, parents, friends and through the media. The next two sections will detail children's use of melodic utterances for purposes of dealing with: (i) restlessness, expression and communication and (ii) seeking attention.

Restlessness, expression and communication

Amidst the structured class time when Primary 1C pupils were engaged in written and group work, or there were teacher–student interactions, periods of teacher talk and other educational activities, pupils expressed musical behaviours independently or collectively.
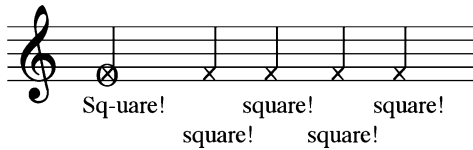
Fig. 1

Doo doo doo doo doo

Fig. 2

Musical behaviours were particularly noticeable when there was 'down' time, for example, when children had finished their work and were waiting for the next activity, or when the teacher was moving between one activity to the next, or when the children were left to themselves in the classroom as they awaited the next teacher to step in, or during teacher-designated 'free time'. Children could be heard humming fragments of familiar tunes to themselves as they engaged in reading or when they were just staring into blank space. These musical fragments also came as sound effects to accompany flying motions with rulers or imaginary battles between erasers.

Children expressed themselves using melodic utterances when they were excited about news (both good and bad) they had heard, or when they received a compliment (or adverse remarks) from their teachers. They would sing phrases of their favourite tunes as they skipped away to their seats. Frequently, their voices would move in a glissandi manner, rising rapidly from low to high pitches on nonsensical syllables to express joy or anger. Examples of children using melodic utterances to express themselves and communicate with each other in the classroom follow.

> Hamza was listening to some nursery rhymes using headphones at a personal station by the side of the classroom. As the volume was rather loud, the music could be heard through the earphones. Venus and Raymond, who were near to Hamza, heard 'Skip to my Lou' playing through Hamza's earphone and started singing out loud while Hamza bobbed his head back and forth with the music. Meanwhile, Qifa was playing with some Lego building blocks when he started humming to the tune of the opening to the fourth movement of Beethoven's 9th symphony (Fig. 1).

> Soon after, he started singing the tune to some Mandarin words[1] while Venus and Jackie, who were next to him, started to hum the tune along with Qifa.

> After completing a Math worksheet, Raymond suddenly sang in a sprightly voice the signature tune from the cartoon 'Scooby Doo and Friends' (Fig. 2).

> Qianhui sat next to Raymond, and joined Raymond in singing the motif for a second and a third time.

Fig. 3

ah   mi - ah   oh   ah   mi - ah   oh ...

Fig. 4

Seeking attention

Some children used melodic utterances to seek attention from the teachers and their peers, oftentimes singing or shouting repeated patterns of phrases until the teacher ordered them to stop or when their peers complained to the teachers. Several notable examples are described below.

> In hearing the school bell over the PA system, Qifa imitated it in pitch and rhythm as he sang, 'ding dong, ding dong!' (Fig. 3).

> He swayed his legs back and forth like a pendulum. During one particular lesson, Qifa decided that he would repeatedly sing the sound of the school bell ad infinitum. He sang from softer to a louder volume each time through the phrase, looping the melody repeatedly at a constant pulse. Even after the teacher had begun the lesson, Qifa sang until a hard glare from the teacher stopped him in an instant.

> When the teacher came up to Adrian and asked if he had completed his mathematical sums, Adrian answered, 'No!' He used his voice to slide from low to high back to low again, and followed with a melodic improvisation on nonsensical syllables. The teacher ignored Adrian and walked away to attend to other children in the class. In the midst of doing an English worksheet, Jackie raised his arms and started singing loudly and repeatedly until the teacher became irritated and stopped him from singing (Fig. 4).

Melodic utterances for these Primary 1C pupils were triggered in various ways by the story or the pictures from a book a child was reading, by toys and figurines that the children played with, by technology (CDs, videos) and the media, or simply by other melodic utterances from children or teachers within earshot. At times, children seemed to create melodic utterances unconsciously, summoning up musical fragments with links to their home environment, previous experiences with the media or their own unique creations. The melodic utterances and song improvisations also 'became an integral part of the mood' (Bjørkvold, 1990: 123) which the child was feeling at that moment.

Sq-uare!   square!   square!
square!   square!

Fig. 5

Rhythmic play

Rhythmic play is defined as a music-and-movement genre in which children are engaged in regular rhythmic movements frequently (but not always) accompanied by vocalisation in the form of a speech-inflected chant (Lum & Campbell, 2007). Rhythmic play could happen organically when children were reading and writing in the classroom or when they became restless after completing work and waiting for the next class activity to occur. Campbell (1998: 69) has termed these individual engagements in rhythmic behaviour, 'rhythmicking'. Children's rhythmicking was at times conscious or unconscious, as they swayed their legs, bobbed their heads to and fro, or tapped their pencils on the table in various rhythmic patterns. Musically entrained, these children move their bodies in synchronised fashion. Indeed, as DeNora (2000) has noted, the children are 'aligned and regularized in relation to music, they are musically organized, musically 'composed'' (p. 78). The following sections will detail children's rhythmic play as used in: (i) speech emphasis, (ii) motivation and encouragement, (iii) restlessness, expression and communication, (iv) chanting games and (v) learning facilitation.

Speech emphasis

One way in which rhythmic play was used consciously by the children was through speech. If the children had something exciting to say to their peers or the teachers, or if they wanted to be heard 'loud and clear', they would employ rhythmic play as an effective means of getting the message across to the listener. The following examples illustrate children's rhythmic speech.

> As Jackie was talking to me about a ferocious dinosaur from his picture book during a silent reading period in the hall, he started to stretch his hands in the air. He bent his fingers in the shape of claws, and swayed his body from left to right, snarling, 'Bah! Bah! Bah! Bah!' repeatedly. He stopped when he spotted the teacher-in-charge noticing his 'ruckus'. When the teacher was explaining to the children about the racial riots in the 1960s as part of a national education lesson, Adrian raised his hands eagerly and before the teacher could call on him, he shouted, 'There was a bomb. Boom! Boom! 1964 riots. Chinese and Malay fight'. Benjamin who was sitting next to Adrian picked up his prompt and started shouting in a similar fashion, 'Boom! Boom!'

> During a Math lesson when the children were working on a worksheet, Yanni turned to Venus and wanted to know how to spell the word, 'square.' In response, Venus chanted in a regular emphatic rhythm before spelling it out to Yanni (Fig. 5).
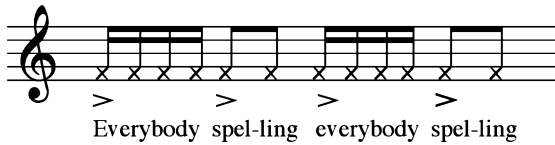
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Everybody spel-ling everybody spel-ling

Fig. 6

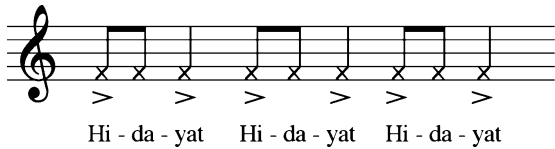Hi - da - yat   Hi - da - yat   Hi - da - yat
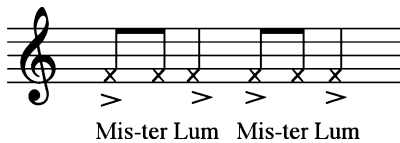
Fig. 7

Mis-ter Lum   Mis-ter Lum

Fig. 8

As the teacher announced to the class that it was time for their spelling test, Raghavan grew excited, remarking enthusiastically: 'Everybody spelling!' (Fig. 6).

The accented first pulse and the rhythm precision of the chant were aggressive and almost militaristic in character.

Motivation and encouragement

The children would also engage in rhythmic play when they wanted to encourage or motivate others to do something. They developed a kind of 'herd instinct' as they chanted in chorus, typically beginning with a leader who instigated the process. Examples of rhythmic play used for purposes of motivation and encouragement follow.

During a game of football during a physical education lesson, as Hidayat was dribbling the ball towards the goal post, some children watching the game started shouting (Fig. 7).

They punched their fists in the air and gestured wildly with their arms and legs until Hidayat took a shot for the goal. On a few occasions during break-time, as I observed the children with my video camera in hand, they would spring up to me and begin to chant (Fig. 8).

One boy circled me repeatedly as he chanted, which led other boys joining in the chant, circling, until I had to politely stop them as their chanting reached a feverish pitch. There were also times when girls from the class would join in the chant, and

Fig. 9
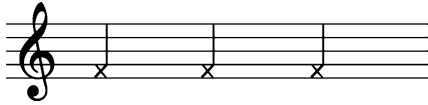
Fig. 10

even pupils from other classes. At one point, the chanting and circling caused a huge commotion in the canteen as I attempted to walk away from the circle, leading the children to form a train behind me, chanting my name and moving in rhythm as they followed me around the canteen. I must say that I felt embarrassed but perhaps that was the goal of the pupils, to show me that they were in control of the situation, an assertion of their power over an adult.

Restlessness, expression and communication

Just like melodic utterances, rhythmic play happened frequently during 'down time', between classroom activities, where projects were completed and new tasks had not yet begun, when children were feeling restless or feeling the need to assert themselves as individuals. There were countless examples of pupils engaging in varied ways of leg swinging, head bobbing, table tapping, finger snapping, chair rocking and all kinds of body percussion. In observing rhythmic play, it was clear that many were spontaneous and habitual, and many exuded the creative improvisation of children that defined their unique musical selves. The following examples illustrate children's creative rhythmic play as they express themselves and communicate with each other.

As Mrs Rani gathered pupils on the floor and began reading a big book to them, Angeline started to slap her hands on her thighs.

In response to Angeline, Alysia clapped her hands (Fig. 10).

Agnes clasped her knees with her hands and started rocking side to side to the beat of Angeline's and Alysia's rhythmic play. While waiting for the teacher in the classroom, Adrian, Yong Seng and Qifa decided to pretend play. They transformed themselves into 'ultramen',[2] posing in various stances with their bodies while using their voices to shout out a string of rhythmic syllables ('ah', 'hey', 'yo', 'ooh', 'tsch', for example) in their imitation of laser guns and the superpowers that they were battling. Oftentimes, the children would engage in a duet of rhythmic play as they communicated with each other. For instance, Yan Seng and Damian deliberated whose eraser it was on the table. They chanted in call-and-response, 'Wo de (mine), wo de' as they accelerated in speed and volume until their responses merged in unison, ending in laughter between

both parties. As pupils waited for their turns to bounce a basketball during a physical education lesson, Yan Seng and Raul, who were watching the movement of the ball as they waited in line, jumped in rhythm to the ball while others rocked in their chairs, swinging to the rhythm of the bouncing ball.

Chanting games

Children build their own culture and at times intentionally separate their culture from the conventional adult culture around them (Sutton-Smith, 1999). The range of play genres includes games and chants, insults, jokes and riddles (Marsh, 1999). Collectors of children's folklore (Knapp & Knapp, 1976; Opie & Opie, 1985; Merill-Mirsky, 1988; Riddell, 1990; Marsh, 1997) have documented multiple variants of playlore appearing within a single school playground and in geographically separate communities of children. The circle and handclapping games noted during the period of observation were rhythmic chants played by children during recess in the canteen or before the beginning of school in the hallways. Some of these games were introduced by the teachers in the classroom (for instance, 'Die Hua' (Butterfly flower)) and others were introduced by the children, who learned them from friends outside school or from family members. Examples of chanting games observed during the fieldwork period follow.

> 'Hei Bai Pei' (black, white, match) was initially introduced to the Primary 1C class by Venus. Venus is an avid television viewer, particularly of children's programmes shown on the local children's network. 'Hei Bai Pei' was a variation of the game 'Rock, scissors, paper', and was sung in Mandarin. Venus had learned the game after watching the advertisement of 'Hei Bai Pei' on the local 'Kids Central' TV channel. 'Hei Bai Pei' was the product name of a crunchy chocolate candy stick. The advertisement featured children playing the game while eating these chocolate sticks. Venus brought a packet of 'Hei Bai Pei' to school one day and started gathering a group of girls during recess to play the game with her. She invented a rule to the game whereby the winner would get to eat a stick of 'Hei Bai Pei.' The girls caught on to the game and started buying 'Hei Bai Pei' when they got home, bringing them to school, eating and playing the game for about a week or so before the craze died down.

As Suss *et al.* (2001) state, 'Even though media use most often takes place at home, it can also influence relationships outside the home . . . in the case of children and teenagers, media and media contents have many social uses, especially in peer group situations' (p. 30).

Notions of fashion and popularity gathered from the mass media are very much infused into children's playground games (McMahon & Sutton-Smith, 1995). Children do not merely imitate but creatively enter into 'a dialectic with the mass media and appropriate for their own use its materials and forms' (Mechling, 1986: 110). In other words, they made choices and transformations about what they wished to receive and reject into their culture of play. As observed by Marsh (1997) in a multi-ethnic inner-city elementary school in Sydney, 'the constant variation and strive for novelty is a characteristic feature of children's performance of the games' (p. 93).

Translation for Figure 11:
Green apple, green apple
Up up down down, Left left right right
Good boy good boy, very well done
Bad boy bad boy, got a slap!

Fig. 11

'Qin Pin Guo' (Green apple) was a movement chant which ended with a game of 'rock, scissors, paper' (Fig. 11).

Damian had learned this from a pupil in another Primary one class and brought it to his Primary one classmates. Agnes shared another version of 'Qin Pin Guo' which she learned from her 10-year-old cousin at home. 'Die Hua' (Butterfly flower) arrived in Primary 1C as a result of children watching pupils in another class who played it in the canteen.

Many of these games were in Mandarin and were played almost exclusively by the Chinese pupils. Yet pupils of other ethnicities played some of these games, and attempted to chant the Mandarin-language words, too. They knew the rules to the game and joined in the actions with much enthusiasm.

As the play spaces for the children were confined to the canteen and the parade square (and did not encompass a playground of swings and climbing structures), children were inventive in their use of space for playing familiar games. For instance, the game of 'Rock, scissors, paper' was played on a flight of steps in the canteen. Beginning at the top of the stairs, each time a player won, he/she would move one step down. The game ended when the winner reached the bottom of the stairs.

Learning facilitation

Children use rhythmic play to aid them in their academic studies, their solving of math problems, and their familiarisation with several languages in order to inject their studies with amusing rhythms.

During a math learning-support lesson, Jovies was given a string of addition and subtraction problems to solve independently. As he worked through each problem, Jovies counted aloud, using non-translatable syllables in a regular beat while his fingers kept track of the addition process. After the teacher wrote the word pyjamas on the

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board and pronounced it for the pupils, Raymond repeated the word in a rhythmic chant. He chanted 'Py-jamas, pyjamas!' repeatedly, trying to get the word into his memory. As he counted the number of animals in a math exercise, Damian spoke out rhythmically, '1 bird, 2 bird, 1 cat, 2 cats', rocking in his chair to a steady beat. When Mrs. Rani guided the class through their answers, she asked them how many goldfishes there were. Damian shouted out the answer, '2!2!2!2!' He was immediately joined by a chorus of his classmates, much to the annoyance of the teacher.

As illustrated, the uses and functions of rhythmic play and melodic utterances in the lives of these primary school children are many and varied. The significance of these musical manifestations have perhaps been underestimated and further exploration to the repertoire and meanings of these musical behaviours in the lives of children may reveal many more insights for music educators and educators at large.

Further thoughts

Merriam (1964) listed ten functions in defining the role of music in human culture. They include: emotional expression, aesthetic enjoyment, entertainment, communication, symbolic representation, physical response, enforcing conformity to social norms, validation of social institutions and religious rituals, continuity and stability of culture, and integration of society. In reflecting on Merriam's thoughts, Kaemmer (1993) pointed out that the functions are 'multifunctional', indicating that 'the same performance, the same event, or the same music complex can serve a variety of functions' (p. 143). Kaemmer also condensed Merriam's list, suggesting music's primary functions as: play, self-expression, communication and politics. In tracing the uses and functions of music in the musical lives of this Primary one classroom, it would seem that Kaemmer's proposed functions are apt (at least in terms of play, self-expression and communication) in describing the ways these children use music in their daily school lives. These observations pointed to musical play that, as Bjørkvold (1990) noted, serve an emotional function for the children in the 'solving of conflicts as well as to the releasing of individual tensions' (p. 133).

These Singaporean children used musical play as an aid to academic learning. This was made clear through the various illustrations previously discussed. Although children had already formulated their concept of music, as made manifest by their rapid naming of songs and other music that they had learned in the music classroom or elsewhere, much of their rhythmic play and melodic utterances were also replete with musical traits. Their musical inventions usually emerged in the context of play, where 'song, body movement, rhythm and words are one inseparable mode of expression' (Bjørkvold, 1990). Children's musical behaviours also occurred within specific contexts. As Waterman (1990) observed, children 'learn to interpret and produce musical sounds as part of a more inclusive process of orientation in time and space, within a given cultural universe of knowledge, value, and affect, and a constellation of social relationships' (p. 87).

It was interesting to note that there were many more instances of rhythmic play observed in this study of Singaporean children compared with melodic utterances or the creation and recreation of familiar songs. For instance, many of the 'singing' games that these children were engaged in, are speech chants, most of which are in Mandarin. Since the majority of the children in the class are Chinese, these chanting games are popular with them, while

pupils of other ethnicities attempted to join in after they figured out the rules to the game by means of observation and mimicking. The children also tended to motivate and encourage each other in their daily activities through the use of rhythmic play. Melodic utterances in this study seemed to be more prominently tied to expression and communication, which is also characteristic of the use of rhythmic play by the children.

Because free time is not in abundance within the school setting, spontaneous musical behaviours are seen more frequently during 'down' time, break-times, or when the children are engaged in their own work in the classroom. The duration of these musical utterances were thus correspondingly short as well. The geographical spaces of the school also defined the type of musical behaviours for these children in that they usually do not involve moving around large spaces but were creatively structured within their restricted spaces, be it in the classroom or their designated space in the canteen. Yet, within the confines of these limited spaces, the children have demonstrated what Kaemmer (1993) might have termed 'politics'. They are able to assert control over their local environment and in their relationship with others, in the instance of the children chanting around the researcher to assert their power over an adult or the melodic utterances that called out in defiance of their teacher.

A large part of these Singaporean children's musical behaviours also stemmed from their exposure to the mass media from cartoon characters (Ultramen, Scooby-Doo, Masked Rider, Gransazer) to jingles of commercial products (He Bai Pei). Thus, a study of the musical behaviours that occurs in the everyday life of these Singaporean children in school is useful for music educators to adjust their lessons to fit the musical knowledge and skills that are already prevalent among children. Tapping into these children's media interests could be a nice inroad to engage them in the music classroom. Expanding their repertoire of singing games in a wide variety of languages could also bring about a better understanding of other cultures and contexts beyond the more dominant Chinese population.

The children in this class carried with them a wealth of intuitive musical resources that never ceased to be deployed in their everyday interactions with their peers and teachers. As Paley (2004) so aptly wrote,

> Welcome or not, the children's thoughts run, flow, crawl, and fly into every corner of the classroom, marking out a pathway to learning … they are, after all, making up stories and establishing rules, just as we do now and as we used to do when we were children (p. 33).

Music educators need to consider children's musical behaviours and the music that children already know when designing and delivering instruction that takes them 'from where they are' to new realms of musical experience, catering to children's musical realities in their various expressive forms.

Notes

1 I found out later that Qifa knew the tune in the context of a Mandarin children's song 'Huan Le Song' (Happy hymn) which he learned in kindergarten when in Qingdao, China.
2 The boys were familiar with 'Ultraman' through the common television programme (English translated Japanese cartoon. In the same genre are 'Masked Rider' and 'Gransazer' that are also favourites among the boys and some girls in the class) that they watch at home.

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