

# Young children and music: Adults constructing meaning through a performance for children

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## Abstract

The research described in this paper was carried out in an Australian early learning centre providing pre-school programs for children aged three years to six. The centre has specialist programs embedded and one of these is a music program led by a musician. A recent project, consisting of a staff singing group, was aimed at integrating the specialist music program with music initiatives occurring in the separate classrooms within the centre. The study culminated in a staff performance for the children.

Participant observation was the main method of data collection for this qualitative study and observations were recorded as field notes, photographs, interviews and recordings of music practice sessions. The singing group, formed by the staff, was viewed as a collaborative activity and in this paper, the performance, which became a focus of the singing group project, has been used to interpret the shared musical experiences of the staff and the children.

**Key words:** early childhood, music, staff singing group, performance

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## Background and introduction

This paper reports on research carried out in an early learning centre for pre-school children where arts programs, delivered by specialist teachers, are included in the centre's program for all children. In this research the children's music sessions were the main focus. The status of music in the early childhood curriculum has become increasingly problematic so in this introduction we discuss music in the early childhood setting to give context to the present study.

Music has a unique position in the suite of arts introduced in the early childhood curriculum in that it does not seem to be as easily accessible

to general practitioners as other art forms such as the visual arts and literature (deVries, 2006; McMahon, 1967; Suthers, 2004). In Australian early childhood programs it has been common practice to use generalist staff for all areas of the curriculum. Play, music, visual arts, language and literature have, in the past, featured as curriculum content in most under-graduate training and education programs for early childhood staff. There has been, however, a diminishing emphasis on music skills in under-graduate studies in recent years (Nyland & Ferris, 2007). This has had the effect of undermining the confidence of generalist teachers in the provision of musical experiences, with a resulting disappearance of

musical activities in many centres other than the use of pre-recorded music and songs. To try to alleviate this situation some researchers (e.g., deVries, 2006), have even focused on how staff who lack confidence (Suthers, 2004), or musical knowledge (Wiggins & Wiggins, 2008) may use CDs and DVDs to enhance their presentation of music experiences. Pre-service teachers have also researched their own experiences. In one study pre-service teachers reported on being taught about the 'arts' and found the education to be both enabling and constraining (Miller, Nicholas & Lambeth, 2008). Miller et al., (2008) found that their university course did not allow for what they brought with them from their own experience. These pre-service teachers also commented that space for critical reflection of the arts and its place in education was haphazard. Their undergraduate program contained a generic arts subject and they did not mention music as one of the 'arts' covered in their course.

This situation has led to a rise in the number of centres organising specialist music programs for children (e.g., *Mini Maestro* classes) or employing teachers with expertise in music, as was the case for the early learning centre (ELC) where this investigation took place. The phenomena being explored in this study was a staff singing group that had been established with the aim of integrating the specialist music activities with incidental music being undertaken by generalist teachers in the children's classrooms. The singing group project was designed as practitioner research and the study culminated in a performance by the staff for the children. This performance raised strong emotions from the staff, who recorded their experiences and feelings in interviews after the concert. The children also reacted strongly to the teachers sharing of their music experience through the performance. The children were not used to being identified as the audience in the ELC context. To be informed that this was an adult performance and they were the audience was an unusual situation.

This use of performance was designed to be the end point of the singing project. The main objective of the collaborative singing was to examine the role and impact of the specialist programs within the centre (there were a number consisting of music, sculpture, painting, drama, literature and Italian) and to use the project to focus on the music program. The music program was one where there had been much discussion and there seemed to be less cohesion with events occurring in the everyday. Music sessions took place in a special designated space and therefore were physically separated from the children's other areas of activity. There was a sense that the teachers perceived the music specialist as an expert and were shy, or unwilling, to actively participate in music sessions and so took the role of bystander. Timetabling of the music sessions made it problematic for the music teacher and the early childhood teachers to share their plans and experiences. The music teacher commented on lack of time to visit the rooms. Given this situation two subsidiary aims were to explore the role of the specialist music teacher and to study the impact of the singing group as a means to develop a more collaborative music program across the centre, involving both generalist and specialist staff.

The performance became a focal point of the singing group initiative and the effect of the actual performance on performers and audience had not been envisaged. In this paper we therefore describe the event of the performance using the response of both the teachers and the children to discuss the use of this strategy and the unintentional consequences. In a paper on the arts and education Eisner (2004:6) discusses Dewey's concept of "flexible purposing". The aftermath of the performance suggests that this was a moment when unexpected results emerged and relationships were in a state of flux. This was a moment that held potential, or could be lost. In this paper we describe the research and the data surrounding the performance. Literature

considered includes research on the role of performance in early childhood music programs, children as audience and the idea of “flexible purposing”. This is a concept similar to the idea of the ‘teachable moment’ (Katz, 2009) and Carr’s (2001) ideas of analysing children’s learning with an emphasis on dispositions to learning and levels of engagement (Carr, 2001). The research is described and the data is illustrated by a number of example photographs. We conclude with a discussion of the possible implications for this singing project on the children, the staff and the potential to enhance the music activities within the centre by making them more integral to everyday experiences.

### **The literature**

Performance has always been a difficult issue for early childhood practitioners, especially when the children are expected to perform. This has created tensions with music teachers who have tended to see performance as part of the skills being acquired while many early childhood teachers have wanted children’s activities to be playful and self-selected (Miller & Almon, 2009; Welsch, 2008). Young (2006), however, points out that practice in most early childhood centres resembles the performance model more than a spontaneous play construct, as music is often done in a whole group with children learning and practising repertoire. These are complex issues that have been explored in the literature which has tried to explore differences between the rhetoric of the importance of music in early childhood and the reality (e.g., Sims, 1999). For early childhood educators the concept of play, as the desired learning medium, is an historical stance. Play and self-expression have taken precedence over the development of skills in much of the literature (McMahon, 1961). Indeed there is an early childhood discourse that has supported the idea that, if children have quality experiences and the opportunity to experiment,

skills and techniques “will naturally fall into place” (McMahon, 1967, p. 23). That children should not be expected to perform under adult direction is a position that has found advocates across the years (McMahon, 1967; Wakefield, 1962; Young, 2006). In a 1965 paper Ford, referring to Christmas celebrations in the kindergarten, warned that:

*It is important to avoid too much teacher-direction in the presentation of Christmas music and stories. We need to follow the same principles observed in planning the daily program for children in kindergarten by providing opportunity for creative activity and spontaneous expression though language. This is especially necessary in relation to the dramatisation of Christmas stories. The suggestions for any form of dramatisation should come from the children and anything in the way of rehearsed plays should be avoided (p. 20).*

Another side to the discussion of children as performers has been an exploration of the child’s role and potential learning when the children are the audience (Robinson, 1965; Suthers, 1993; 2008; Meiners, 2005; Schiller, 2005). Increasingly other areas of the arts, like the visual arts, where children can be practitioners and audience, are beginning to focus on children as audience (e.g., Savva & Trimis, 2005). In this research the design of the project culminated with a performance with the ‘teacher as performer’ (Prendergast, 2008:16). The teachers were seeking, through performance with a particular audience with whom they shared relational space, a way to share space, interpret curriculum, critically interact with and examine the existing culture and context of music in the ELC.

In the arts domain the nature of ‘performance’ or ‘presentation’ is essential; art works need someone to pay attention to them. Small (1998, 1999), in a significant re-positioning of performance in the relationship of the roles of composer, performer and audience, insisted that music is essentially about the *activity* of music-making. Reflecting this view, he coined the verb ‘to music’: ‘to take part, in any capacity,

in a musical performance (1999, p. 12). The musical performance includes not only what we usually consider the performance – the final presentation to an audience – but all aspects of the performance process including rehearsals, discussions about repertoire, setting up the performance space, and, of course, listening to and responding to the music. This view of ‘musicking’ suggests that performance creates the possibility of a kind of truly communal experience of music making as a joint enterprise, not suggested by the usual physical appearance of a performance space, with ‘performers’ separated in stance and physical positioning, and in their level of active involvement, from the ‘audience’. It is seen as a social enterprise and as an active enterprise for all concerned. Small claims that the act of musicking:

*brings into existence among those present a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act of musicking lies. It lies not only in the relationships between the humanly organised sounds that are conventionally thought of as the stuff of music, but also in the relationships that are established between person and person within the performance space (1999, p. 4).*

Small’s ideas would find resonance with socio/cultural activity theory (Carr, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978; Welch, 2007) where relationships, reciprocity and mediated learning within a particular cultural context are emphasised. This is a methodology and method that frames this research and Small’s ideas have been used to complement this theoretical approach and give depth to the discussion of the performance.

## The research

The research project took place in an early learning centre (ELC) characterised by the use of specialist staff to provide separate programs for the children. One of the specialist programs (the music sessions) was the focus. The singing group was an initiative by staff to explore the

connections between the specialist program and separate daily programs. The singing sessions were also used as a way of developing relationships between staff with differing roles, generalist and specialist teachers and to link back to the children through performance.

### The site

Both the practices and performance were held in the music room in the ELC. The event observed was a teacher’s singing group. Weekly practices were held for five weeks and the performance took place at the end of term with children as the target audience. The space is inviting, has suitable fixtures for high quality sound production, as well as being well-equipped and aesthetic. These aspects of the space are desirable but also helped to create the impression of music being separate from everyday activities. Within the ELC context there was not a strong connection between music in this space and music in the children’s home rooms.

### The participants

The participants consisted of the centre Director, the music specialist, other specialist teachers, classroom educators and two external researchers. All were volunteers and not all staff in the centre chose to take part. There were approximately 14 participants at each singing practice. The time commitment was substantial and some thought they would not find joining the music activities enjoyable. Some of the non-participants commented afterwards that they regretted this decision (Director’s post performance interview). The external researchers had previously been engaged in research at the centre and were invited by the Director to document the singing project. To encourage a relaxed atmosphere for the observations only one researcher attended the singing practices and decided to participate in the singing. The post performance interviews were semi-structured.



*The music room in the ELC*

### **Methodology and method**

The research was influenced by beliefs about music as a cultural language and children's right to experience music as a language of childhood (Vuckovic, Nyland & Ferris, 2008). The theoretical approach was socio-cultural in that the children's and teachers' understandings that grew out of the initiative were constructed within the project itself. Group feelings, culture, relationships and collaborative joint action were the phenomena being explored. In other words the music was a cultural artefact, used to create shared meaning amongst a specific group within a particular context. We have therefore drawn on activity theory (Edwards, 2005) to try to explain the role of the performance in this enterprise. In her interview the Director reported she had been influenced by the *Choir of Hardknocks* and the fact that, in New Zealand, in early childhood centres, at educators meetings and at conferences, singing is used in a strongly ritualistic way to develop feelings of connectedness and belonging. The music

specialist said her inspiration for the group came from her experience in community singing. She believed singing could bring a feeling of health and well-being and had introduced this idea to the staff. These influences are consistent with the design of the project, the data collected and the approach taken to analysing and discussing implications of the singing group. The initial aims were also imbued with the concept of context and relationships. Ethics clearance was gained from the sponsoring institution of the ELC and the researchers' own institution.

### **Aims**

- To explore the role of the specialist music teacher and
- To study the impact the singing group, as a joint venture, on teachers' plans to develop a more collaborative music program.

### **Description of data**

The data for this paper consisted of field notes of singing practices, the recording of the practices



*Participants practising*

and the performance, interviews with the teachers after the event and photographs of singing group practices and the staff and children at the performance.

### *The singing group*

A voluntary singing group was established in the ELC with the music specialist agreeing to conduct practices. These were held once a week, for one hour, from 5 until 6 o'clock. At the end of a five week period the group planned to sing for the children at the end of term assembly. Songs were largely chosen by the music specialist though others also made suggestions. The music specialist had a background in community singing and this was evident in the material presented. Repertoire included an African song, 'Ume-lay-la', 'This body lie down' (a spiritual), a song adapted from a cartoon by Australian cartoonist Leunig – 'Let it go', as well as a poem 'Diamond dust', that the music specialist had adapted for the children to sing to fit in with a

project on the Antarctic, and a folk medley of companion songs.

The performance took place on the last day of term. The Director clearly framed the object of the performance and explained the differing roles to the children. She also invited them to move between the roles of performer and audience if they wished.

*Today ... we have a special treat. We are performing today. When a performance occurs it means people share something they have organised and practised. We are the performers and you are the audience today and L. is going to lead us. We will start with a song you know first so if you feel you want to join us feel free to. (From transcript of the recording of the performance)*

The day of the performance very much supported Dewey's idea of flexible purposing. The result could not have been predicted. The levels of feeling were high and performers and audience formed a unit to share an evocative moment. The results of the planned performance were surprising and there were potentially many



*The teachers at the performance*

lessons for future centre activities from this event. Some of the teachers admitted to feeling surprisingly nervous. They stood in a line to face the children and this made some of the performing staff feel vulnerable. One reported she had not been able to get the beginning note because of this formation. The body language suggested that the singers tried to keep themselves open to the audience by facing them and using their hands in a manner that invited audience participation. An adult in the audience encouraged the children to clap with the singers. As the concert finished, the children stood up to join in and a number of children were clapping.

### **The interview**

Members of the staff singing group were interviewed after the performance and a question relating to the performance was: "How did it feel to sing in public at the end of the term assembly?"

Table 1 sums up the reactions of the participants to actually performing. One of the

most common observations was the formation of the group for performance. At practices staff had stood in a circle, or number of circles if it was a song with parts. The teachers were also surprised by the strength of the children's responses to the performance.

Some quotes from staff members:

*Looking at the children. In the group we sing in circles and look at each other. Singing in a line, kept looking to see if we were still there. Mandalas – singing in a line. Watching the children clapping. Standing up at the end. Changed the word performance for me. Funny in the morning. No warm up. Didn't get the first note. No one noticed. Thought this was great. Bit nervous. OK because everyone else was there. Can hear when we sing together it doesn't sound too bad. L was there. It felt good. Like to watch the children's faces. Some disturbed, some joined in.*

*It was all right. Mainly because I didn't like all the songs. But you're part of a group and we expect the children to do that.*



*The teachers at the performance*

There was also a question in the interview about the children and their role. The staff were asked the question; "To what extent is it important for the children to see the teachers singing?"

Staff comments on the children:

*Not an ounce of fidget. They were transfixed. Children don't see adults doing enough child oriented things. It adds something quite special – a special part of the culture – seeing everyone embracing singing*

*as a part of life.*

*The teachers singing in assembly had quite a profound effect on the children.*

## Findings and discussion

The drivers and designers of this project had always intended that it would culminate in a performance at an assembly. Initially this was intended as a way of bringing the project to a conclusion; the singing group would practice

**Table 1. Experience of performing at assembly for children**

<b>Director and music specialist</b>	<b>Other specialist teachers (4)</b>	<b>General classroom teachers (7)</b>	<b>Children</b>
Perceptions of the staff experience: Both positive Director particularly positive using words such as heart warming, joyful, bonding, getting to know people at a different level	3 nervous One 'not phased' 2 didn't like the straight line 2 noticed and enjoyed the children's reactions One worried about treading on the children because she felt it was crowded	2 were confident 4 were nervous 3 didn't like performing in line 2 mentioned being aware of the reactions of the children	During the performance the children were: Surprised Very interested Very attentive Group participants used strong emotional words such as: disturbed, transfixed, laughing, smiling, didn't look, hid face, flabbergasted (2)



*The children watching the performance*

across the term and would perform at the end of term assembly for children and parents. This was an acknowledgment that the enterprise was not to be a permanent feature of staff activities. The performance itself took on a life of its own and became an important event.

The aims of this research project were concerned with a specialist music program and its relationship to general early childhood everyday activities in an early learning centre. The Director and the music specialist were the protagonists in this venture and although their roles were pivotal, the resulting performance, as a culmination of the initiative, subsumed individuals into a highly charged situation that included staff and children in a surprising way. What did emerge from the research was how seriously all involved took this enterprise and the power of the emotions that existed between the performers and between the performers and their audience on the final day of the project.

The children were aware of the teachers practising the songs during the term. When a

teacher sang to a couple of the children one day they responded with, "we heard you in the gallery" (i.e., the dedicated music space). The teachers were doing something in the children's space that the children would usually do. This helped create an atmosphere of expectancy. On the day of the performance the children's response, as audience, was strong. The staff, as performers, were aware of the children as a special audience with whom they shared daily activities, and some could not understand their own nervousness. During interviews staff commented that standing in a line during performance was uncomfortable, as this cut across the physical and musical support that was provided in rehearsals by singing in a circle. These uncomfortable emotional reactions were main aspects of the experience that staff reported in the post performance interviews. At the same time most reported enjoying performing.

Participants joined the singing group with a range of expectations of the experience. All

appeared to understand the possibilities of useful professional outcomes for the group as a community engaged in a collaborative educational project. Some, with negative memories of formal choir experience, felt some trepidation, while others, with more positive experiences of informal and community singing, were enthusiastic. The data suggests that the experience of the singing group at the centre was unexpected; none of the various expectations prepared participants for the level of emotional involvement many reported. It seems reasonable to speculate that this group, having focussed on the business of learning repertoire and the challenges of singing together, along with the experience of performing for an audience in what turned out to be a fairly formal performance space, had stumbled on what Small calls 'musicking'. Small (1999) claims that the act of musicking creates a web of relationships between performers, audience, the music itself and the performance space (p. 4). The data indicates that the participants experienced performance in the broadest sense described by Small, reflecting in their interviews on those social, emotional and aesthetic aspects of the experience rather than the music content.

This suggestion is supported by the findings that related to the performers' reported heightened awareness of the children-as-audience response. The data shows a sensitive relationship between the teachers performing in the singing group and their audience, most particularly the children. These adult performers were in the habit of paying careful attention to the children's responses in their care. Similarly, for the children, the relationship with these particular performers was unusual by virtue of the existing professional relationship; the children, as members of this audience, were not in the same relationship with these performers as they would be with musicians on TV, CDs, or with other live performances they may have experienced. The photos show the range of responses from the

children during the performance, suggesting amazement, fascination, embarrassment, even amusement. In turn, the teachers' singing group, noting the children's responses, themselves experienced a range of reactions.

The intention of the project was to find stronger connections between the specialist music program in the centre and the work of the music specialist, and the general program in the centre and the teachers' day-to-day work with the children. The data does not indicate any strong findings that this has occurred in the immediate aftermath of the singing group but this is not to say that, in the long run, there has not been a potential developed. To an extent the data appears has been subsumed by the unexpected responses to the experience of the performance. In this paper we have therefore chosen to report on the data as was originally designed and a further round of interviews, some time later, will be instigated to provide insight into the long-term results of the singing group project in regards music and the role of the music specialist in the centre's overall program.

At this time many of the participants felt the experience of relating to their colleagues in this event was powerful; this was not unanimously a positive response, but it is reasonable to see the testing and stretching of relationships among the group members as being important and generally a positive result. The Director reflected that perhaps those who had chosen not to participate in the group may have regretted it, and further, that the project may in fact have inadvertently been divisive for this reason.

Part of the complexity of the performance experience may lie in the disjunction that occurred, apparently inadvertently, between the style of the rehearsals and that of the performance. In rehearsal the group habitually worked in a circle, with a great deal of laughter and chat. The music specialist's leadership style was skilled both musically and pedagogically, and while it was authoritative it was in no

way authoritarian. This was a sensitive and informal way of working with colleagues likely to be conducive of positive musical and social relationships. On the other hand, when the group sang for their audience, more by accident than by intent, they stood in a line, so close to the children that they needed to be careful not to tread on anyone. This marked disjunction between the physical and emotional relationships that the group had become accustomed to in rehearsal and the way it was in performance caused discomfort for some group members, and may have served to create a sense of a formal 'performance' not necessarily intended. The audience, accustomed to a different kind of relationship with their teachers, perhaps were therefore more challenged than was intended. Certainly, for whatever the reasons, this was not a neutral experience, and the children, in spite of the way the performance space was configured, or perhaps because of it, were active participants, their response eliciting a reciprocal response from the performers.

Eisner (2004) remarks that, in arts matters, the form and the content are inextricably mixed; how you go about undertaking a musical activity is as significant as the music itself. Like Small, he does not see the arts content as isolated from those involved in it. The data from this project supports this notion. Indeed, the participants' reflections show that the experience itself was more immediately important for them than the skills developed in singing or than the song repertoire itself. Music is an art form that is seen as 'doing' (Eisner, 2004; McMahon, 1967). It is ephemeral, sound in time, but also an intensely social activity because if it is done privately and not shared its very existence is questionable. Perhaps this is one reason why the singing group was taken so seriously and the performance gave it shape. The teachers shared an intuitive understanding of the importance of music in the program and were prepared to pursue a challenging and unusual project. The moment of the performance was powerful enough for the early childhood

educators to unpack this concept when exploring ideas of music in the program in interview.

In this paper we have seen the 'teacher as performer' and the 'child as audience' in a combination that could not have been planned; what Katz (2009) would call the unreturnable moment. To be able to seize and record the moment was a valuable experience that could have the potential to enhance the musical culture within the centre. We conclude with Small's concept of 'musicking' introduced earlier. Small (1999) asks: "[w]hat does it mean when this performance takes place at this time, in this place with these people taking part?" (p. 13). The response to that question has relevance to the ways in which educators – both early childhood educators and those who specialize in music education in early childhood centres – might think about the role of performance of any kind in the centre's program. This would apply to children's performances such as those traditionally undertaken at this centre's end-of-term assemblies, performances by the teachers in the context of their day-to-day work with the children in their groups, or by visiting musicians presenting a specific performance for the centre.

Given this discussion by Small it is worth considering the nature and significance of performance. Were these teachers 'articulating' a human relationship (p. 20) and if so it was certainly not neutral but 'infused in a rich texture of meanings' (1999, p. 15). The teachers, certainly the Director and music specialist who were designers of the project, had not thought about the performance as musicking but perhaps this was the dominant element in the exercise.

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