

Contributions of playground singing games to the social inclusion of refugee and newly arrived immigrant children in Australia

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Background

Several major approaches to primary school music pedagogy are based on the desire to emulate aspects of children's play. Carl Orff, whose Schulwerk has been highly influential in the international development of music pedagogy in the primary music classroom, stated that

Musical instruction for the child does not begin in the music lesson. Playtime is the starting point. What is important is that the child be allowed to play, undisturbed, expressing the internal externally. Word and sound must arise simultaneously from improvisatory, rhythmic play. (1932/2011, p. 68)

Similarly, Zoltan Kodály, the initiator of another classroom methodology that has been widely disseminated, utilised the songs and singing games of Hungarian children as the basis of his pedagogy, partly because it had a strong appeal to children, noting that "this is the music that belongs to children; it is their own . . . it is never too difficult for them, so they participate with great energy" (Farkas, 1990, pp. 103-4). He proposed that there was an interdependence between what was taught in the classroom and what happened in the playground:

The simple song does not hinder the action of play, rather the opposite; it makes play more attractive, more interesting. The limited time available for musical education of the child can thus be extended on the playground without diminishing the time for other activities. (Kodály cited by Kraus, 1967/1990, pp. 79-80)

The study of children's musical play is therefore of continued significance in contributing to our understanding of what is important to children musically, what attributes characterise their own music making and what implications these attributes have for play-based music activity in educational contexts in a changing world.

Contexts of musical play in situ

In recent decades there has been burgeoning interest in children's musical play. Initially, the focus was on children's playground singing games, those that are related to an ongoing oral tradition of children's play that has frequently been tapped by music educators seeking repertoire for the classroom (see, for example, Davies, 2005; Jones & Hawes, 1972/87; Kenny, 1975; Lomax, Elder & Lomax Hawes, 1997). From the mid 1980s until the present (following earlier landmark studies, e.g., Blacking, 1967/1995), music educators, ethnomusicologists and scholars working in the fields of childhood studies and folklore have undertaken research into children's playground games (Bishop & Curtis, 2001; Burn & Richards, 2014; Campbell, 1991; Countryman, 2014; Emberly, 2013; Gaunt, 2006; Harrop-Allin, 2010; Harwood, 1998a, 1998b; Harwood & Marsh, 2012; Marsh, 1995, 1999, 2006, 2008, 2016; Marsh & Bishop, 2014; Marsh & Young, 2016; Merrill-Mirsky, 1988; Minks, 2013a, 2013b; Opie & Opie, 1985/1988; Pieridou Skoutella, 2015; Riddell, 1990; Willett, Richards, Marsh, Burn & Bishop, 2013). This research has unpacked the musical and social characteristics of children's playground games and explored the ways in which children teach and learn the games in their own environment.

More recently, scholarly attention has been drawn to more varied forms of naturally occurring musical play that permeate children's lives. In her groundbreaking work, *Songs in their Heads*, Campbell (1998, 2010) outlined the many ways that children engage in playing musically, for example, by improvising songs in the sandpit, listening to music at home or with friends, tapping a rhythm on a tabletop, singing along with others on the school bus or in the family car, playing with musical toys, or joining in with family musical activities that may involve the passing on of familial or cultural traditions. As musical technologies continually advance, children as individuals or in small groups may also participate in improvisatory play interactions with electronic devices such as smartphones, iPads, karaoke, Xbox, Playstation or Wii

at home (Brooks, 2015; Lum, 2008; Lum & Marsh, 2012; Young, 2007).

Additionally, television, the Internet and video sharing websites such as YouTube provide numerous sources of repertoire and avenues for disseminating playground games and other kinds of musical play (Bishop, 2014; Bishop & Burn, 2013; Lill, 2014; Marsh, 2013; Willett, 2014).

In this way the contexts for learning and forms of musical play engagement are ever widening and evolving. Combined with new technologies, the exponential growth of travel and global population movements have contributed to the connectedness of children with their peers' and adult-generated music from many geographical and cultural sources, in both real and virtual musical worlds.

Global population movements and contexts of musical play

The place of play in developing and maintaining forms of social and cultural connectedness has been brought to the forefront very recently by the large increases in numbers of children involved in forced migration, supplementing those children whose families have voluntarily migrated. Over the past year there have been almost unprecedented global migration flows, driven largely by flight from conflict but also by economic inequity and many other factors. The most recent UNHCR figures (June 2016) put the number of refugees and migrants arriving in Europe via boats and across land routes by the end of 2015 at more than one million people, as opposed to the 216,000 people who crossed the Mediterranean and entered Europe by such means in 2014 (UNHCR, 2016). Worldwide, the total number of populations of concern to the UNHCR in 2015 (including refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people and others) totalled almost 65.3 million people, the highest number of forcibly displaced persons ever recorded (UNHCR, 2016). Significantly, children under 18 years of age constitute more than half the world's refugee population, 51% in 2015 (UNHCR, 2016).

For refugee children, trauma may ensue from exposure to conflict, habitation of conflict zones, arduous journeys to places of refuge and years of displacement en route to places of final settlement. In their final place of settlement, both refugee and newly arrived voluntary migrant children must adapt to a new country and culture,

despite culture shock, possible language problems, changes in family structure and roles, racism and social isolation (Berry, 1997, 2001; Fazel & Stein, 2002; Frater-Matheison, 2004; Hodes, 2000; Loughry & Eyber 2003; Machel, 2001; Rutter, 2006; Stewart, 2011). Psychosocial assistance provided by adults is thus seen to be a necessary requirement for resettlement, in order to enhance social inclusion and other forms of psychosocial adjustment.

Music educators working in school and community settings may act as facilitators of music programs that aim to assist young forced and voluntary migrants with managing resettlement processes. However, while such support is undoubtedly necessary and welcome, more recent research has indicated that children and young people who are refugees or voluntary migrants are also agentive social actors, capable of employing strategies that actively help to meet their own emotional and social needs (Hart, 2014) and able to autonomously utilise music for such purposes (Marsh, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, Marsh & Dieckmann, 2016). Musical play provides a particular mechanism by which children can achieve psychosocial adjustment. This paper discusses refugee and newly arrived migrant children's engagement in and uses of playground musical play in a primary school in Sydney, Australia, a culturally diverse city in which people from more than 100 different birthplace groups reside.

Context of play at Farmeadow¹ Primary School

Research into play at Farmeadow Primary School (PS) was undertaken as part of a larger ethnographic multi-case study of the role of music in the lives of refugee and newly arrived voluntary migrant children and young people in Sydney². Fairmeadow PS was selected as a case because at the time of data collection it had the highest population of refugee children in the state of New South Wales (NSW) in which Sydney is located. Of the 619 children in the school, 90% had language backgrounds other than English and 60 different languages were spoken by members of the school community. The majority languages were Arabic and Assyrian, reflecting the large

¹ For ethical reasons, all names of schools and people within this paper are pseudonyms.

² Ethical approval for this project was granted by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee and approval to conduct research in schools was obtained through the SERAP process of the NSW Department of Education.

number of Iraqi children who constituted the most significant refugee group in the school at that time (26% of children). Other children with refugee status originated from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Afghanistan, Sudan³, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Uganda, Liberia, Iran, East Timor, and Burma. Vietnamese was also a language spoken by a substantial group of children in the school, indicating the lengthy history of migration of Vietnamese nationals into this area, initially as refugees in the 1970s following the Vietnam War. The school therefore had been catering for large numbers of refugees for many years, and had many programs in place, for example to assist with language development, including English as a Second Language new arrival classes and programs, and community language classes in Arabic, Assyrian and Vietnamese.

Children at Farmeadow PS were observed both in classroom and extra-curricular music, dance and other performance experiences provided by the school, including a choir, dance group, classroom singing and movement activities, and rehearsals and performances associated with end of year presentation ceremonies (see Marsh, 2013). In addition, children were observed in the playground and were interviewed informally in the context of their play and also, for those wishing to further discuss their play and out of school musical activities, formally in quiet locations during recess and lunchtimes. A number of children of different ages and cultural backgrounds were selected by school staff for formal interviews on their musical practices. Sixty-three children were closely observed (and informally interviewed) in the playground and 17 of these children were also formally interviewed. Video recordings were made of observations and informal interviews, and video and audio recordings were made of formal interviews. Table 1 shows the total numbers of closely observed children and their countries of origin.

³ Most children identified as Sudanese were Dinka children from what is now South Sudan. However, the study took place prior to South Sudanese independence. For purposes of clarity, I will refer to these children as South Sudanese wherever this is now a more accurate designation.

Table 1 Countries of origin of closely observed children

Country of origin	Number of children	Comments	Formally Interviewed
Bosnia	5		1
Democratic Republic of Congo	1		1
Fiji	1	Of Indian descent	
India	3	Speaking Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu	2
Iran	4		2
Iraq	22	17 with specific Assyrian identifiers; 1 born in Australia	6
Liberia	1		1
Samoa	2		
Serbia	2	1 born in Australia to migrant parents	
(South) Sudan	6	5 with specific Dinka identifiers	3
Syria	1		1
Tonga	1		
Turkey	1		
Vietnam	2		
Unconfirmed	11	7 with Arabic-speaking families	

The following sections outline aspects of children's musical play as interpreted from observations and interviews with the children.

Musical play as shared community

As previously outlined, the school had a strong ethos of support for refugee and newly arrived migrant children with well-developed assistance programs permeating formal aspects of school life. Within these programs, classroom and extra-curricular musical activities for children were provided, with the intention of enhancing opportunities for language acquisition, development and maintenance; social integration; and musical and emotional expression. However, these were delivered with varying amounts of success. For example, the choir, though well-attended, involved learning by rote repetition of repertoire that had limited connection with the lives and cultural backgrounds of the children. In discussion, children expressed less enthusiasm for this choir, though other extra-curricular activities such as a dance group that drew on movement ideas proposed by the children were very popular (Marsh, 2013). In

contrast, the sharing of popular music repertoire and playground singing games initiated by the children was always keenly supported. During a one-month period at the school we recorded 95 game performances of 28 game genres. However, it must be noted that in interview and specific game sharing sessions with the children, there was a seamless movement from singing games; popular songs; songs and dances learnt in the classroom, choir or dance group; and religious songs. Divisions between these forms of repertoire were not strictly maintained. Perhaps this was because of the demonstrative (and performative) nature of these elicited sessions but it may also indicate that these divisions of forms of musical engagement were not important to these children and, as has been shown in many other situations, children draw on whatever is in their musical environment for their play (Marsh, 2008).

For many children, play of varying kinds provides a means for engaging with their physical and social environment. Jarvis, Newman and Swiniarski (2014) note that

peer collaboration in play-based activity is crucially important in the intricate interconnectedness of children's social, emotional, intellectual and linguistic development. In such activity, children develop an ability to contribute, which in turn produces an emergent sense of competence and, within members of a highly social species, feelings of 'belonging', 'usefulness', and subsequent well-being. (p. 56)

While many of the children from this school brought playground games from their homelands and continued to play them in the new location, this was mainly done in language-specific groups and, with few exceptions, such games were observed intermittently. Eleven games from homeland countries, mostly performed in Arabic by refugee children from Iraq, were witnessed in the playground or in elicited sessions during the research period, as shown in Table 2, though there were many other forms of musical expression derived from the homeland that were shared by refugee and newly arrived immigrant children, including popular songs, religious songs and dance songs, as previously mentioned.

Table 2. Singing games from refugee and immigrant children's homelands

Game name	Country of origin	Language	No of performers	No of times observed	Cultural diversity of performers
Airrom ⁴	South Sudan	Dinka	4	1	Dinka, Sudanese
Ani La Lingi	Iraq	Arabic	2	5	Assyrian
Anina	India	Telugu	2	1	Tamil, Muslim Iraqi ⁵
Asphor Nayeeam	Iraq	Arabic	2	2	Assyrian
Fatimah	Iraq	Arabic/ Assyrian	3	3	Assyrian
Layla	Iraq	Arabic	7	1	Assyrian, Iraqi
Mama Zamenha Geahy	Iraq	Arabic	2	1	Assyrian
Minimini Seely	Iraq	Arabic/ vocables	2	2	Assyrian
Okos Bokos	Bosnia	Bosnian/ vocables	5	2	Bosnian, Iraqi, Vietnamese
Sheda	Iraq	Arabic	7	1	Assyrian, Iraqi
Swedish game (related to Sarmakadora)	Sweden	Swedish (numbers)	2	1	Assyrian

Almost entirely the belonging that such games evoked was to the home culture, with memories of all that this entailed, both in peace and war. Such games also had the capacity to assist with the processing of traumatic events, where symbols of fear and threat could be verbally disempowered by ridicule and actions that embodied control by the players (Marsh, 2016; Marsh & Dieckmann, 2016).

However, the most frequently observed games, particularly performed by multiethnic groups of players, were those that had texts composed either entirely of vocables (non-meaningful syllables) or of vocables in combination with limited English vocabulary, as shown in Table 3. All of these games were found throughout the playground.

Table 3. Most frequently observed games at Farneadow PS

⁴ The children's orthography of game names has been adopted here, though it might vary from a standard orthography of the designated language.

⁵ The term "Iraqi" or "Muslim Iraqi" has been used to distinguish Arabic speaking Muslim Iraqi children from Assyrian Iraqi children, even though this is not a designation of ethnicity.

Game name	Linguistic attributes	Kinaesthetic attributes	No of times observed	Cultural diversity of performers
Slam yak yak	No text except for initial opening formula	Additive clapping movements steadily increasing complexity of each iteration	10	Assyrian, Muslim Iraqi, Dinka, Swahili (DRC), Bosnian, Liberian, Fijian, Tongan, Serbian, Vietnamese
Sisilala	No text except for initial opening formula	Groups of 2-4. Clapping movements with players on right, left, over and under other players' hands	8	Liberian, Dinka, Swahili (DRC), Muslim Iraqi, Assyrian, Vietnamese, Serbian
Ole' Mella	Vocables, name/s plus English (movement instructions)	3-beat clap, rapid rhythmic clap own hands, change direction, freeze challenge	8	Assyrian, Muslim Iraqi, Serbian, Samoan, Vietnamese, Dinka, Spanish speaker, Iranian
My Aunty Anna	English	3-beat clap, splits	8	Assyrian, Iranian, Muslim Iraqi, Bosnian, Gujarati, Marathi, Serbian, Dinka, Anglo Australian, Vietnamese
Sarmakadora	Vocables	Clap passed around circle or between partners on beat , rhythmic tapping, elimination hit.	7	Dinka, Bosnian, Gujarati, Marathi, South Sudanese, Iraqi, Vietnamese, Serbian.

Children from multiple cultural and linguistic backgrounds were able to participate in such games because of a number of game characteristics. These are outlined in the following section.

Playground game characteristics enabling participation by refugee and newly arrived immigrant children

Not surprisingly, the lack of importance of semantic content of game texts, enabled participation by children who had limited understanding of English. This was a common experience of the majority of children in this school. The two most frequently observed games during our research period, *Slam yak yak* and *Sisilala*,

both only used a single phrase (by which the game was identified) which had no semantic import (ie consisting of “nonsense” words, not attributable to any language) to initiate the game, after which the ensuing game was entirely comprised of movements. Games that utilised text for the duration of the game (such as *Sarmakadora*) had all or some component of the text which were “nonsense” words, or words that had an easily identifiable association. These might be names, such as “Ole’ Mella” or instructions that had associated movements, for example “turn around” or “freeze” so that the words and modelled movements could be easily learned. The game which was an exception, in terms of this linguistic characteristic, was *My Auntie Anna*, which had a text entirely in English (“My Auntie Anna plays the piano 24 hours a day”), but possessed another attribute contributing both to game popularity and equal participation by children from diverse backgrounds, namely, the focus on kinaesthetic challenge provided by the ever-widening “splits” movement at the end of each iteration of the game.

The favouring of kinaesthetic proficiency in playground games, in this school as in others in many international contexts (Marsh, 2008), meant that English competence was not essential for participation in the games. It was evident, therefore, that kinaesthetically proficient children could demonstrate mastery and alternative forms of competence that would enable them to become valued members of the group, despite a lack of communicative ability in English. Kinaesthetic adeptness was required for *Slam yak yak*, which had additive movements so that the movement sequences became steadily more complex as the game ensued. *Sisilala* required the players to clap to their right, swiftly turn to clap to their left, then clap in turn above and underneath the hands of another pair of players. It was notable in one performance of this game that a recently arrived girl from the Democratic Republic of the Congo who was generally very withdrawn, was empowered by her superior facility with game movements to laugh and point out the movement errors of one of her playmates, though the inherent kinaesthetic challenge that was integral to the game performance meant that children took such jibes with good humour.

Another trait of playground singing games in this playground was the formulaic nature of the movements. As observed in many contexts, playground singing games are composed of formulae, short fragments of text, music or movements that are

derived from game traditions or from songs, dances, and textual elements observed in children's environments, either in the playground, classroom, home or via multimedia sources (Marsh, 2008). Kinaesthetic formulae in playground games in the new host country might already be familiar from other games played in refugee or newly arrived immigrant children's homelands (or transit countries). These children were therefore able to participate almost immediately in the game movements, thereby joining the community of practice of the playground.

Similarly, game formulae in this playground could be learned by observation and gradual joining in as familiarity was developed, using what has been termed "legitimate peripheral participation" (Harwood, 1998a; Harwood & Marsh, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Children could easily "pick up" modelled movements, partly because they were repeated multiple times in the course of games. Typically, they might watch on the side of the game and join in as they felt more confident. However, different levels of competence and participation were also accepted by playing groups, so that newly arrived children could be accommodated within the tenets of standard game practice.

Another linguistic feature of the games also operated as a mechanism for inclusion of newly arrived children, even when the texts were in English. High levels of textual repetition, alliteration and assonance, functioned as mnemonic devices that assisted learning of text and also created a sense of security and familiarity for these children. For example, the text of *Ole' Mella* contained all of these mnemonic devices, in addition to mimetic actions that also facilitated learning and ease of participation.

Ole' Mella
Kiss a fella
Lazy boys
Ping pong
Ole' Mella, Kiss a fella
Lazy boys, Ping pong
Turn around, touch the ground/[turn around]
[Push a friend], Freeze!⁶

⁶ As usual, there were multiple variants of game texts and movements within this playground. Two variant texts are included here.

What is linguistically playful therefore invites and enables participation in these forms of communicative musicality, the communication entailing rhythmic synchrony (entrainment) of vocal and movement formulae to enable the games to proceed.

Minks (2013a), reporting on the singing games of Miskitu children on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, observes that similar poetic and kinaesthetic features of games in this intercultural context operate as a mechanism for social inclusion of children of varying ethnicities and cultural origins:

The poetics and pleasure of singing games make them mobile and adaptable across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The singing game performance is an example of interculturalism in practice, because it shows how diverse resources for communication are integrated in a context of interaction. The children used different languages according to their preferences and alignments, but they also demonstrated common competencies through comprehension of each other's speech and coordination of the singing game. (p. 228)

It is notable that the game that she describes here is *Ron Macarón*, a variant of what was called *Sarmakadora*, one of the most popular games in the Farmeadow playground. The capacity of this game for inclusionary practice and intercultural transmission has led to its appearance in many international localities (Marsh, 2008).

Conclusion

As an intercultural and intertextual activity, musical play in the playground creates a space where refugee and newly arrived immigrant children can find a place to belong. In discussing his extensive work with internally displaced and refugee children in post-conflict situations, Osborne (2009) draws attention to its enormous value with this population:

The psychosocial benefits for children of musical...achievement – in terms of self-esteem, trust, identity, hope and social cohesion – are self-evident and supported by an increasing body of research, particularly in the domain of

education. This is not to forget more practical benefits in spatial awareness, motor skills, concentration and general cognitive development. (p. 345)

The attributes of children's playground singing games contribute equally to the benefits of various forms of music described by Osborne. Through promotion of collaborative musical activity that acknowledges and incorporates these attributes in the classroom, such benefits can be more broadly encompassing of refugee and newly arrived immigrant children within a whole school environment.

Play-based musical collaborative activity can provide a mechanism for enabling refugee and newly arrived immigrant children to forge connections between home and host cultures, between isolated selves and new individuals and communities within a global environment where such interchange is facilitated both by face to face musical contact and contact over the Internet. It can promote social integration, self-expression, and dissipation of fear and trauma and can be enacted by young people themselves or with the assistance of adults in educational settings. Where educators work collaboratively to enhance the social and creative musical capabilities of young refugees and immigrants, rather than impose or direct them, the potential for successful outcomes is augmented.

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