

Singing and Literacy: An Initial Investigation in St. Vincent and the Grenadines

Martha A. Gabriel and June Countryman

University of Prince Edward Island, Prince Edward Island, Canada

Abstract

This paper describes an initial exploration of the informal singing culture in one school/community site in a small Caribbean nation, St. Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG). The first author's collaborative work with teachers in SVG on literacy pedagogy provided the opportunity to explore the oral culture practices in which SVG children engage, and to think about the potential these informal practices might hold for children's literacy development. Current research into connections between children's musicking and their literacy readiness and literacy development supports our understanding that embodied experiences with rhythm, metre, phrase, rhyme, language play and sound play are of vital importance to both musical and literacy development. We describe several examples of SVG oral culture singing, graciously shared by various culture bearers. We posit that a respectful awareness of the significance of oral traditions and of children's oral culture practices is essential for literacy educators.

Introduction

In this paper we describe an observation/collection project that one author conducted in St. Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG). We are teacher educators from different specialties, literacy education (MG) and music education (JC), involved in collaborative research as part of the Advanced Interdisciplinary Research in Singing (AIRS) project, a SSHRC-funded MCRI research program. We are investigating relationships between children's informal and formal singing practices and the connections between children's oral culture and their literacy development. The project we discuss here is an initial exploratory study within that program of research.

One author, MG, spent a number of weeks on three separate occasions in 2009-2010 facilitating literacy workshops for teachers at a school in St. Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG) and mentoring student teachers in their international practica. She noticed children in the schools in St. Vincent singing in classrooms and making music on the playgrounds and wondered about the extent of teachers' interest in the potential of singing to support their students' literacy learning in this culture. As a teacher of language and literacy she has seen the power of rhythm and rhyme in helping children learn, remember, and express themselves. She used music and singing in her elementary classroom to facilitate children's learning, and continues to use singing in her work as a literacy teacher educator. Invited back to St. Vincent to facilitate another set of literacy workshops in 2010, MG determined to explore the school children's musicking in a more organized fashion.

Theoretical Moorings

Conceptual frameworks

We ground this SVG study in two conceptual frameworks: Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 2005) ecological model of human growth and Small's (1998) notion of musicking.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model

Urie Bronfenbrenner proposed a theory describing the growth of humans in the context of a person's lifespan (1979). Within this model, Bronfenbrenner, a developmental psychologist, proposed a variety of influences that impact individuals, while providing a strong indication that individuals also exert an impact on their surroundings. He conceptualized human relationships as taking place within nested systems of influences (2005), and proposed that individuals developed in relation to parents and family, to the community, to society, and to the world.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model has become the basis for a range of approaches to studying human growth and development, particularly within the fields of education and psychology.

Bronfenbrenner's nested ecological model, well-known to researchers and educators, provides an over-arching framework for our work. This view of human development has been well-documented and applied to a wide range of human endeavours. We find this a useful model to help conceptualize children's language and musical learning as developing within microsystem (home and family), mesosystem (relationships among home, school and neighbourhood), exosystem (government policy and media) and macrosystem (dominant culture influences) (see also Campbell, 2011).

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) proposed that “. . . child development takes place through processes of progressively more complex interaction between an active child and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate environment” (p.996). Children's engagement with singing, listening and moving to the musics they learn from family, the community and their peer groups is well documented. This constant musicking illumines how, as children appropriate influences from other circles of the environment, they also exert influences on those nested circles of their environment.

Musicking

Small's (1998) argument that music is a doing rather than a product is profoundly influential for music educators. Small posits that *musicking* is a vehicle for exploring the nature of relationships (both sound relationships and people relationships), for affirming those relationships and for celebrating the social cohesion that musicking creates. This sociocultural view (DeNora, 2000; Finnegan, 2003; Keil & Feld, 2005) frames musicking as a resource for constructing self and social identities. Musicking makes a difference to people's sense of themselves and their possibilities. “We explore and celebrate our sense of who we are to make us feel more fully ourselves” (Small, 1998, p.142). Musicking can allow us to feel completely alive in the world, to experience “participatory consciousness” (Keil & Feld, 2005, p. 20). Small's assertion that “all musicking is serious musicking” (p. 212) reminds us of the significance of children's informal music-making. Recent scholarship (Campbell, 2010; Kanellopoulos, 2010; Woodward, 2005) is taking children's musicking seriously as well. In our research we seek to increase our understanding of the influences that children's musicking might have on their literacy development. If the voice is “the central locus in the production of social and cultural being” (Feld et al., 2004, p.334), what educational implications might this suggest?

Research on children's informal musicking

Musicking – singing, playing, moving and listening to music – is a human activity deeply rooted in who we are as people. Blacking (1973) proposed that “musicmaking is an inherited biological predisposition which is unique to the human species” (p.7). Scholarly interest in children's

informal musical practices began with a different orientation. Nineteenth century collectors in the English speaking world (Gomme, 1894; 1898; Newell, 1883) documented children's singing games and chants from an adult-centric, culturally hegemonic viewpoint characteristic of the cultural evolutionary theory prevalent at that time. These collections were undertaken as studies in folklore, and as McCarthy (2010) clarifies, focused on the

. . . origins of children's repertoire and the need to preserve folk cultures. Repertoire was typically collected from adults, there was an emphasis on text and historical context, but not on living practices and context, and an effort was made to create categories and taxonomies of cultural behaviour through analysing the repertoire. (McCarthy, 2010, p. 2)

In the early 20th century researchers began to collect songs directly from children. Peter and Iona Opie's work in the UK (1959; 1969; 1985) is seminal. Later in the 20th century perspectives from ethnomusicology began to influence the field of children's folk culture, particularly with Blacking's (1967) work with Venda children in South Africa. Other international studies examining children's musical play include Hopkin's collecting in Jamaica (1984), Dzansi's (2002) work in Ghana and Gaunt's (2006) analysis of African-American girls' musical games.

The most recent research into children's aural culture (Ackerley, 2007; Bauer & Bauer, 2007; Campbell, 2010; Marsh, J, et al., 2011; Marsh, K. 2008) confirms that children in the United States, New Zealand, Australia, Norway, South Korea and the United Kingdom are still using rhymes and songs in their spontaneous play in robust and diverse ways and that most of this cultural expression exists "under the radar" of the adults who share their lives. These researchers note how children integrate traditional folkloric material with pastiches from media culture into their informal play, manipulating what Minks (2002) calls "the contradictory forces of stability and change in children's music and language" (p.380).

Each generation of researchers into children's informal musicking has worried that the traditions of musical play are dying. In the 19th century it was national schools and the coming of the railway that were blamed, and then in the 20th century movies and comic books and television were the culprits, and now it is video games and the Internet that seem to threaten spontaneous musicking among children. In K. Marsh's (2008) longitudinal study of school playground games (in Australia, Norway, the UK, the USA and South Korea) school staffs at every school she visited, with the exception of one in Norway, assured her that the students did not engage in musical play on the school playground. In contrast to this commonly-held belief, in every instance Marsh collected multiple examples of musical play.

Studies of children's musical culture (childlore) have gradually changed from the idea of collecting artefacts to the notion of folklore as performative and communicative acts, leading to "a focus not only on the social, developmental and educational, but also on the cultural, expressive and aesthetic" (Bishop & Curtis, 2001, p.7). Current music education researchers, including Campbell (2007, 2010) and McCarthy (2010), consider the field under-researched. They urge more interdisciplinary studies of children's musicking – studies that honour children's experiences and give voice to their insights. Our responsibility in researching with children is to understand that they are "agents in creating their own cultures" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 10) while they are simultaneously "under the influence of powerful media that have become a sound track in their everyday lives" (p.10).

Theoretical Question: Links between Musicking and Language

We begin our collaborative research with some experiential understandings about connections between music-making, both formal and informal, and language development and literacy readiness. We believe that children need multiple experiences with singing, chanting rhymes and playing singing games, incorporating such activities as moving to the beat while chanting or singing, completing phrases of songs, singing the response pattern in call/response songs, clapping a song's rhythm while inner-hearing the song itself, playing with the rhymes and alliterations and improvising word and sound patterns in musical contexts. We believe these experiences are important for children's aesthetic pleasure, their social interactions and their cultural identity development as well as their musical and language development. Does the research literature confirm our beliefs?

Examining current literature devoted specifically to probing connections between music and language development, we find strong support for our assumptions. In Hallam's (2010) review of studies that produce empirical evidence of the effects of active musicking on children's intellectual, social and personal development, she notes:

Overall, the evidence suggests that engagement with music plays a major role in developing perceptual processing systems which facilitate the encoding and identification of speech sounds and patterns: the earlier the exposure to active music participation and the greater the length of participation, the greater the impact. Transfer of these skills is automatic and contributes not only to language development but also to literacy. (p. 272)

A primary goal of literacy educators is to enable learners to communicate clearly and effectively. Educators support their students as they develop a range of literacy skills—reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing and representing—on a continuum. We believe that children's out-of-school communication practices, spoken, chanted and sung, are vital contributors to their successful literacy skill development. Indeed we understand these oral language and music skills as contributing to multimodal literacies, which Heath and Street (2008) define as "systems of representation that include written forms that are combined with oral, visual, or gestural modes" (p. 4).

As Kuhn, Schwanenflugel and Meisinger (2010) summarize, reading fluency requires both *automaticity* (word recognition) and *prosody* (the musical aspects of language). Prosody deals with complex interrelationships of rhythm (duration, stress) and pitch. Sensitivity to the sound structures of language is enhanced through musicking.

The SVG Project

Research questions

Literacies are rooted in communication and making sense of messages sent through different modes, including, for example, auditory-oral, visual-oral, digital and multi-modal communications. What might a better understanding of children's aural/oral culture and their communicative competences contribute to formal educational practices in both language arts and music? These broad questions fuel our current research initiatives.

The study we describe here is an exploratory investigation into one small island's aural/oral musical culture as experienced in one school community site. We recognized that MG's third trip

to SVG offered an opportunity to investigate this aural musical culture within the context of her work in literacy education, drawing on the participants' "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 1992). It also enabled us to begin to refine the research questions that drive our collaborative work on children's informal and formal musicking and the connections between musicking and literacy. In this specific study we ask:

- What could various actors within a particular educational community in SVG teach us about the local aural/oral musical culture?
- To what degree do SVG elementary teachers consider children's aural cultural practices important in influencing their literacy development?

Research method

We rooted our project in a qualitative approach with the intent of deepening our understanding of the culture of children's musicking in school playground contexts (Chambers, 2000; Patton, 2002). As mentioned earlier, children's musicking as expression of their culture has been investigated by researchers such as Campbell (1998, 2010) and J. Marsh (2011). We wished to build on the prior findings of these researchers, while exploring the sociocultural environment of children's play. Tedlock (2000) suggests that "ethnography involves an ongoing attempt to place specific encounters, events and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context" (p. 455). MG invited children and adults who indicated interest to share their music, in the hope that this sharing would allow us to place rhythms, rhymes, and prosody into a fuller context of musical communication and literacies.

We chose to use an ethnographic design because we believe, as LeCompte (2002) suggests, that ethnographic design has "made a significant contribution to our understanding of how educational processes work..." (p. 283). Heath and Street (2008, p.120) differentiate between ethnographic studies *in* education, conducted by education researchers, and ethnographic studies *of* education, which are more anthropological in scope. In this study we use ethnographic tools—field observations and video-recordings—to collect data and facilitate analysis of that data.

The video recordings were made in several different locations. On the playground and on the front veranda of Mango Mountain School, MG recorded children and teachers singing and playing ring games. In the grade three classroom after school, three elementary teachers shared a variety of Vincentian folksongs. In another classroom, with the students present, the grade six teacher shared songs from her homeland, Guyana. Another location was a nearby pre-school, where Auntie Maureen used song and ring games to engage and teach the four-year old children. And finally, MG recorded some of the "old songs" sung by a parent after dinner at a private home. All of the recordings were made with a Flip camera, with results that were crisp and clear, and resulted in excellent field recordings.

To analyze the data, we reviewed the video recordings numerous times, and then chose a number of musical texts to transcribe. Our focus was on preserving the idiosyncratic nature of the informal and formal musicking that children and adults shared with us. We then reviewed the transcribed texts to ensure that they accurately shared the flavour and musicality of the original event.

Song Collecting in SVG

Setting

St. Vincent and the Grenadines is an island nation in the Lesser Antilles chain in the Caribbean Sea. It consists of the largest island, St. Vincent, and 31 other islands and cays of the Grenadines which extend over 45 kilometres towards Granada. This island nation was settled over time by successive waves of indigenous peoples from South America. St. Vincent's more recent history saw a struggle between England and France for possession of the islands; the nation changed hands several times in the 1600s and 1700s, with the British ultimately successful. St. Vincent and the Grenadines became an independent nation in 1979, though it maintained membership in the British Commonwealth of Nations. The language spoken here is English, with a small percentage of the population speaking French patois.

The geology of the islands is volcanic, and there is an active volcano in the northern portion of St. Vincent that last erupted in 1979. The volcanic substrate results in very fine drinking water throughout the islands. There are still banana plantations here, and a number of Vincentians are employed in agriculture. Fresh fish are caught in the waters off St. Vincent and the Grenadines daily. The majority of the working population is employed in service industries such as tourism, retail and government services.

Mango Mountain Elementary School (all names are pseudonyms), where MG conducted literacy workshops and collected singing examples, is a non-denominational, coeducational private school a short distance outside of the capital, Kingstown. The school was founded in the 1980s by two North American teachers, and the school follows the curriculum of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (taught in all SVG schools) with a North American educational approach. It was parent and teacher familiarity with this teaching approach that resulted in the principal's invitation for MG and a colleague to provide professional development workshops in current literacy practices for the teachers at Mango Mountain School.

The school itself is small, with approximately 70 children in grades pre-kindergarten to grade 6. Eight teachers, a non-teaching principal, a school secretary, and a custodian are the staff members of the school. Parents pay a tuition fee for their children to attend the school, and there are several scholarships that are made available for students who would otherwise be unable to attend. The school facility is rented out to community groups on weekends to augment the school's income.

Mango Mountain School is recognized locally as offering more progressive schooling than the public schools. MG's visits to several public schools confirm this claim. The curriculum provided for the children includes language, mathematics, science, social studies, technology (computers) and physical and health education and the arts. There is a dance teacher who comes weekly and provides lessons after school, and a science teacher who provides science lessons for the children once a week during school hours. Other components of the curriculum are taught by individual classroom teachers: for example, teachers take their students to the computer lab when they have a particular project to complete, and teachers lead their students in singing songs of the teachers' choosing.

Ethical considerations

MG received approval from our university's Ethics Review Board to undertake a music collecting project within the Mango Mountain School community. The school's principal was delighted to cooperate and gave permission for MG to engage with the children and adults in her

elementary school community. The principal organized a meeting to coincide with the parents' initial visit to the school in August, when they picked up their children's uniforms and the lists of required school materials. At this parent meeting MG explained the purpose of the collecting project and asked for their permission to video record their children singing and playing. She received permission from all 23 parents in attendance. The teachers at the school and one teacher at a nearby childcare centre also gave MG written consent to be recorded sharing songs with her.

We acknowledge an important issue here. MG is a dominant culture academic visiting a particular educational setting in SVG in a teacher educator capacity. She took great care to communicate her genuine interest in SVG musical culture and she expressed (the recordings confirm) excitement and gratitude to each singer who participated. Nonetheless we recognize the potential for this work to be misread as colonialist. We emphasize that each participant knew that the purpose of the research was to gain some understanding of SVG aural musical culture and to investigate whether an awareness of children's aural culture practices could be useful to teachers' literacy pedagogy. Further, the whole literacy professional development project was framed and conducted as a knowledge-sharing experience in which all participants were both teachers and learners.

Issues in collecting children's informal singing

Unlike MG's first two visits to SVG (August, 2009 and April, 2010), during which she heard much playground singing, on her third (August/September 2010) trip it proved difficult to observe the children musicking. MG went out in the school yard during recesses and lunch breaks, but did not witness the children engage in chants or songs or claps or rhymes. Was this because of her presence? She was an adult in their small play area, a teacher carrying a video recorder, and a relative stranger to the children. Also, her time was short: two weeks of playground observation, particularly at the beginning of a new school year, was not long enough for the children to learn to ignore her presence. As is the case in many parts of the world (Marsh, 2008) the adults in the Mango Mountain School community were not aware of the children's informal musicking.

Four sources of Vincentian singing

MG indicated her interest in hearing examples of Vincentian singing from various adults in the Mango Mountain School community. She explained that her curiosity about local songs and singing resulted from her belief that music-making, a communicative literacy, can contribute to formal literacy development. MG video recorded each of the participants whose singing we describe below. We revisited the video recordings many times to become familiar with the nuances of performing style.

1. Maureen: Formal Preschool Setting

Auntie Maureen, an early childhood educator, agreed to be video-recorded while she led a regular group singing session with the four-year old children in her care. Auntie Maureen is the acknowledged "expert" at this childcare centre in terms of singing, leading, and teaching children songs. When other teachers forget the words to a song or need a song to suit a particular occasion, they turn to Auntie Maureen.

The morning routine that Auntie Maureen follows is similar to that of early childhood teachers in North America, with calendar, children's show-and-tell and so on. She places a

major emphasis on engaging her students through singing. She moves effortlessly from one song to the next, and the children follow her into each new song within a measure.

Auntie Maureen exudes confidence and joy as she sings and the children sing with gusto right along with her. Olsson (2007) alerts us to the sometimes paradoxical distinction between formal and informal musicking. Here, the setting is formal, but the way singing is learned is informal. Auntie Maureen moves from song to song without verbal introductions. Count-ins and starting pitches are not provided, songs are not broken down into teachable chunks and lyrics are not queried.

We describe two of the songs that Auntie Maureen sang with the children:

Happy Happy Day

This song sounds like a typical adult-composed song for little children, one you might hear in any English-language preschool or Kindergarten setting. As is often the case when adults sing with children, Auntie Maureen sings this song in a low range. The recurring **sl -d** pattern (in A Major) sits well below the singing range of most young children. The children chant-speak the parts of the song they cannot reach and confidently singing the higher parts.

We notice two features that are atypical of Kindergarten or preschool singing sessions in Canada. 1) Auntie Maureen claps, in a full-bodied, physical style on almost every beat of the song. She also subtly moves from side to side. This self-assured movement, in tandem with her eye contact and cheerful facial expressions seems to draw all the children in. 2) One boy accompanies the singing by playing the beat on a small tambourine. In the second verse he switches to a more complex rhythmic pattern: playing the beat on 1 and 3 and quarter/eighth triplet on beats 2 and 4. He continues to sing along with his teacher and classmates. This accompaniment appears to be student-initiated, and elicits no comment from Auntie Maureen. We surmise that there is a church gospel music influence to the performance practice: MG frequently witnessed sacred music being sung in various school classrooms and got the sense that church-going was an important part of the lives of many of the families at Mango Mountain School.

Jesus Loves Me

This Christian hymn dates from the 1860s. It was written in the USA (words by Anne B. Warner, 1860, and melody added in 1862 by William B. Bradbury) and is familiar throughout the English speaking world.

Again Auntie Maureen claps on almost every beat and the little boy keeps a pattern on the tambourine throughout the song: a sophisticated syncopated rhythm that this 4 year old maintains flawlessly. Auntie Maureen's clapping and the child's tambourine pattern create a more rhythmic version of the hymn than we typically hear. Auntie Maureen sings this in Ab Major. Most children seem able to negotiate the pitches except for the Ab below middle C.

2. Ruth: Adult Informant

One of the most frequent means by which children's folk songs have been collected in the past has been through *adult reminiscences* (Fine, 1999, p.122). In St. Vincent this proved to be a still-viable source. Ruth, the parent of a child at the school, hosted MG for a weekend. She knew that MG was interested in the songs sung by the people of St. Vincent, and so agreed to sing some of what she called the "old songs". She even contacted her mother and her sister to ask them to help her remember some of the songs they had sung together as a

family. We have not been able to ascertain the degree to which these songs, or variants of them, have currency on the playgrounds in St. Vincent and the Grenadines today. We suspect, though, that the situation is similar to that documented in the UK, Australia and elsewhere (J. Marsh et al., 2011; K. Marsh, 2008), where children's musical culture continues to be a kaleidoscopic mixture of traditional and contemporary sources.

Ruth wanted to share her songs in a relaxed *al fresco* setting at her home. Occasionally in the recording Ruth's husband added a clapped rhythmic accompaniment. Ruth said that these songs ". . . are more like ring plays that the old folks used to sing, like about moonlight and stuff like that. They would get in the yard and sing songs and tell stories to one another. . . ." She shared a number of song fragments at the dinner table that night, noting that her family used to sing many more songs, but that she could not remember them.

Gypsy in the Moonlight

Ruth sings in a low alto range and the low Ds are out of reach. The words here suggest a traditional circle game where "it" is in the centre of the ring and must choose a partner to join her/him. The distinct rhythmic character of Caribbean music is evident even in these simple children's songs, with subtle implied triplets on key words. A close variant of Ruth's version of *Gypsy in the Moonlight* appears on the 1978 Smithsonian Folkways album, *Caribbean Songs and Games for Children*.

Sandy Girl

These lyrics are related, we think, to the singing game *Little Sally Walker*, which we know from Edith Fowke's (1966) collection of Toronto playground songs. *Sally Walker* is a ring game with African American origins, as Leadbelly's recorded version helps to confirm. Ruth's husband starts clapping that characteristic rhythmic pattern halfway into this performance!

3. Teachers at the SVG Elementary School

Several teachers at Mango Mountain School also shared some traditional Vincentian songs. MG had observed one teacher leading her students in singing in the classroom during her previous trip six months earlier. This teacher (Josie) led her students through a large selection of songs, many of which had spiritual references. She sang a cappella, and her students joined in, singing enthusiastically.

Josie persuaded two colleagues to join her in sharing some Vincentian folk songs with MG on this visit. The three teachers, all Vincentian, sat together in a classroom after school was over for the day, and sang songs that they remembered from their own childhood. The teachers had conferred in advance, deciding that they would sing songs they enjoyed from a volume entitled *Come to St. Vincent and the Grenadines: A Collection of Vincentian Folk Songs*, a government-published songbook (Sutherland, 2003). One of the teachers had brought this book from home so that all three would be able to see the words.

Dampiana

The teachers are clearly self-conscious singing and they rarely look up from the printed songbook as they sing. The others look to Josie to begin the song, which, after some hesitation, she does. After a few bars she tries to get that characteristic rhythm pattern going

by tapping the back of the songbook. Establishing this familiar “feel” seems to increase the singers’ confidence level: they start to smile and to move a bit.

Comparing the notated version of *Dampiana* with the version the teachers sing we note that the tunes are quite different. We assume that the score helps them to recall the lyrics, and perhaps provides a comfortable visual focus. Unlike our other recorded examples of Vincentian singing the performance here is rhythmically “straight”, despite the attempt to maintain the quarter triplet quarter triplet pattern. It is interesting that this informal session of song sharing took on a distinct formality.

Another classroom teacher, Harriet, was confident enough to allow MG to record her singing for her Grade 6 students. Harriet is from Guyana and she explained that she did not know any Vincentian songs, but that she did enjoy sharing with her students songs from her Guyanese culture. Manuel (1995) proposed that Guyana has an overwhelmingly Caribbean orientation, and that it is best regarded “not as a South American nation...but as a mainland appendage of the West Indies (p. x). Harriet provided a wonderful example of how songs help define cultural identity and how they can facilitate cross-cultural sharing.

Bamboo Fire

There are versions of *Bamboo Fire* on YouTube, complete with steel drum accompaniment, confirming that this Guyana folk song continues to thrive in contemporary Caribbean culture. Harriet maintains a syncopated pattern during her singing, a different pattern from that favoured by the SVG singers. Harriet’s pattern, tapped mostly with one foot, creates a reggae feel with its empty down beats.

4. Elementary School Children

Daily strolling in the playground yielded no examples of children’s informal musicking, as we indicated above. One teacher, aware of MG’s quest, helpfully offered to organize a group of children to demonstrate some of the (formally taught) singing games the children knew. Reviewing the video recording of this event is a helpful reminder of the distance that can exist between formal and informal musicking. The children are persuaded to play *Miss Mary Mack*, a game Gaunt (2006) describes as “the most common hand-clapping game in the English speaking world, and the most familiar in the black repertoire” (p.63). The children go through the motions, but do not display the spontaneity and kinetic energy that MG had witnessed on her earlier trips. K. Marsh (2008) tells a very similar story about her collecting work in Australia.

The teacher’s presence considerably affected the performance practice. All of the children were initially required to demonstrate the games, regardless of their interest or the regularity of their playground participation in them . . . I resolved to avoid doing any further recording under teacher supervision. (p. 47)

We learned first-hand the problem with involving adults in collecting children’s musicking. The children, directed to perform for the visitor, did so awkwardly and with minimal personal investment. When adults try to formalize children’s informal practices the music no longer belongs to the children. We echo Campbell’s (1998) assertion that the music that children own should not be dismissed by adults, and also that it should not be taken over

by adults (p. 180). The agency children have with their aural culture practices is clearly one of the factors that keeps it alive and meaningful.

Our Learnings

On the research questions

In terms of the first research question, *what could various actors within a particular educational community in SVG teach us about the local aural/oral musical culture*, MG's intent was to honour that culture in her literacy pedagogy work and to sensitize teachers to the contributions that aural musical fluency can make to literacy development. From earlier personal experience she knew that the playground at Mango Mountain School was alive with spontaneous musicking, but once able to collect examples of this musicking, it became elusive.

Some of the teachers generously shared songs that they considered "local". It was clear that they had not thought about these songs as being important to pass on to the children. (Harriet is an exception in that she knows the origin of her songs and takes pride in sharing her Guyanese cultural heritage with her students.) MG found no articulated awareness of the importance of nurturing cultural identity at Mango Mountain School. The school is, according to its mission statement, *committed to educate every student by providing the skills, knowledge and values necessary to be capable and concerned participants in a global community*. This emphasis on preparing globally competitive citizens reflects the current social and economic realities of the Caribbean nations, which are challenged to both overcome "educational deficits that are the postcolonial legacy" and deal with "the promise and the peril of globalisation" (Jules, 2008, p. 204).

Our second research question is *to what degree do SVG elementary teachers consider children's aural cultural practices as influencing their literacy development*. This question, in retrospect, reflects our first-world privilege: the sophisticated academic discourses we enjoy and the meaning-making excursions (both figurative and literal) we are able to pursue in our professional lives. While Mango Mountain teachers may share North American teachers' challenges to raise literacy and numeracy results, other aspects of their professional context are very different. Many have not had the luxury of sustained professional dialogue that emphasizes the importance of cultural literacy and identity construction or that considers the broader contexts within which literacy develops.

On the realities of education in the English Caribbean

Hickling-Hudson (2004) describes the education systems of the English Caribbean as "underdeveloped in terms of the quantity of provision and maldeveloped in terms of its stratification and unevenness of quality" (p. 295). We understood, going into this project, that education systems in the developing countries of the Caribbean do not enjoy many advantages that we in North America take for granted. In SVG, for example, universal secondary education, Grades 7-12, was only instituted in 2005 (Marks, 2009). Being cognizant of challenges such as low literacy levels, authoritarian school cultures, poverty, social stratification, lack of universal access and shortages of well-educated teachers, we still made one big assumption: that nurturing an SVG cultural identity, or a broader Caribbean identity, would be an important aspect of the school curriculum. While references to developing "the ideal Caribbean citizen" are found in policy statements such as the CARICOM education strategy (Jules, Miller & Armstrong, 2000) it is clear that at the school level the major focus is on improving literacy and numeracy (in

preparation for government testing at grade six). The type of professional development activities provided for teachers confirms this assumption..

Hickling-Hudson (2004) calls for a socio-political approach to the concept of literacies in English Caribbean education, in which all students are offered quality education across four domains of literacy: academic, humanist (narratives of cultural and gender identity), technical and sociopolitical. She indicates the enormity of the problem of creating equitable access, when “most Caribbean countries have GDPs which are only a fraction of those of the wealthy ‘North’” (p. 298). Marks (2009), referring to problems with student motivation to attend school in SVG, notes that psychological factors associated with motivation—competence, belonging, usefulness and potency—must be addressed. Such analyses support our contention that recognition and nurturing of multiple cultural identities is an educational necessity, and that one way to do this is through celebrating the aural culture children bring to school.

On musicking in SVG

We learned about performance practices in SVG through experiencing Auntie Maureen’s singing style, Harriet’s reggae ostinato and the pervasive, instinctive urge to accompany all singing with a lilting quarter triplet quarter triplet rhythmic pattern. We are reminded that these aspects of performance style are not conveyed through music notation and that they reside as embodied knowledge with the singers. We really must hear and see the culture bearers’ musicking, making their songs come alive through the physicality of their performance. We find it significant that our participants apply this performance style to all songs, not just to the songs of Caribbean origin.

Conclusion

Educational researchers intend their work to make a positive difference. The results of this exploratory study, although limited, do point to potential benefits in the future. The audio and video data indicate that the adults involved in the study (both teachers and parents) were interested in and receptive to the emphasis that a literacy educator placed on orality. It is reasonable to think that they might view their children’s and their own musical practices more purposefully as a result.

Funding is necessary to continue this project at Mango Mountain School. When it becomes available, our next step will be to enlist the children as co-researchers in interviewing and recording their peers’ informal musicking, copying the excellent initiative of the UK research project *Children’s playground games and songs in the new media age* project (Burn, 2009), a part of the multidisciplinary research program, *Beyond Text*.

The study provided us with the opportunity to view our own reality—our theoretical assumptions, our research questions, and systemic issues of education—with greater clarity. Despite many differences between St. Vincent and the Grenadines and our Canadian context in terms of the economic, political and sociocultural factors that shape formal education, there is one similarity. Elementary educators in both contexts are so consumed with meeting the demands of external testing that they do not have time and space to experiment with broader notions of literacy development. The idea that play and education are oppositional and the vision of schooling as future-oriented instead of present-oriented (Robinson, 2009; Small, 1980) are deeply entrenched attitudes in both locations.

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