

Original Research Study

Researching Children's Musical Learning Experiences within a Learning Story Framework

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Abstract

This paper reports on a research project undertaken as part of an on-going research interest in the musical experiences and competence of children in early childhood settings. This research draws on socio-cultural theory and the work of Carr (2001) in documenting children's learning through Learning Stories. One aim of the research was to observe and record what music children were experiencing during the everyday program. Learning Stories as a tool of socio-cultural theory were used to document and analyse the children's experiences. Three examples of learning stories are presented, including examples of incidental and planned experiences. The paper explores the use of cultural activity theory and affordances to elaborate and enrich the potential of these learning stories as an interpretive strategy to support the research method. Different types of music experiences are described and theorised.

Introduction

This paper reports on a research project undertaken as part of an on-going research interest in the musical experiences and competence of children in early childhood settings. The study draws on socio-cultural theory, including cultural activity theory (Bruner, 1990; New, 2007; Rogoff, 2003) and on the work of Carr (2001) on documenting children's learning through Learning Stories. The concept of affordances is used to elaborate and enrich the potential of learning stories as an interpretive tool (Carr, 2000; Needham, 2007).

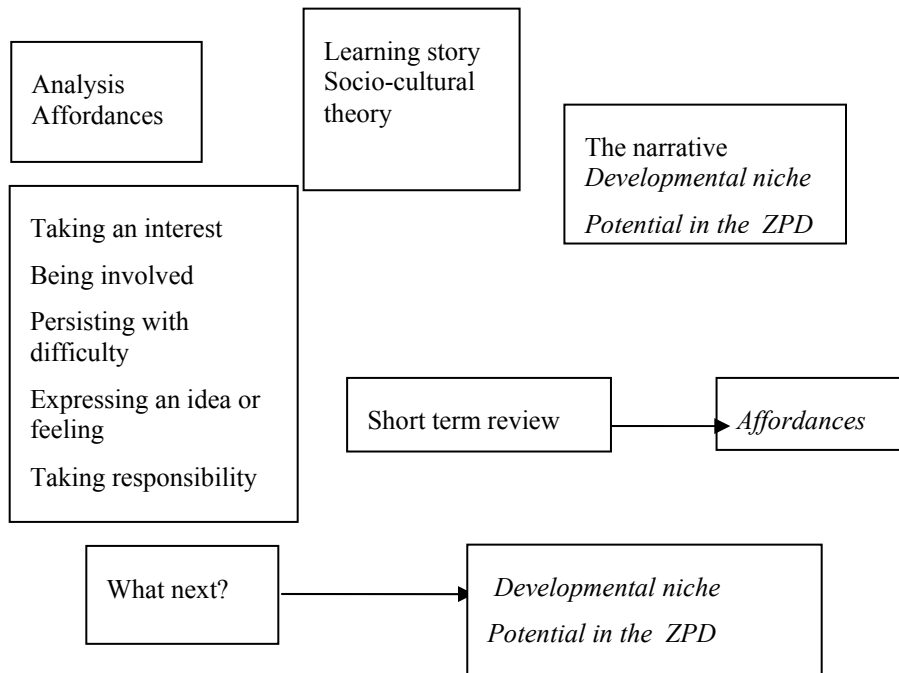
The paper first describes the research project. Second, it explains learning stories and their use as both an assessment and analytic tool. Third, it gives a definition of affordances and applies this theoretical construct to example observations of two and three year-old children engaging in music in a variety of situations in a group setting. The observations include children working together as a group, using chairs to create a space for singing, moving and storytelling as well as observations of individual children. Individual observations involved a child in a symbolic play situation, pretending a block was a guitar (Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998), and a child communicating with an adult in a 'teachable moment' (Katz, 1999) using improvised melody to explore a story pattern in a book.

Finally, discussion involves an examination of the learning stories presented within the frame of socio-cultural theory. Data was collected by naturalistic observation, recorded as learning stories. Analysis incorporates cultural activity theory and the concept of

affordances. The learning stories are unpacked using Carr’s learning disposition categories of levels and quality of interest, involvement, persistence, communication and responsibility. The focus of the final two headings in Carr’s learning story framework are “the short term review” (what learning took place) and “what next”, (directions for future planning). It is these two sections that we reinterpret, using the idea of affordance to examine the learning that took place, and as a possible guide to directions for future planning. The use of affordances in these two categories does not change the story dramatically but the perspective is somewhat different. Adding the affordance concept to the “short term review” helps to move beyond an iteration of existing abilities of one or two children, broadening the interpretation to include the group and future possibilities. By revisiting the “what next” category, which tends to reflect the children’s present interests, the idea of more active participation can be added that includes the competence of the group, their use of the environment and the potential of the learning culture. In Vygotskyan terms the developmental niche (Super & Harkness, 1986) consists of the social, physical, cultural and historical aspects of experience. Language, including music, is a major mediator of learning and accomplishment. As we observe children’s participation within the context and record and interpret their activities as learning stories we are able to comment on children’s “changing participation in the socio/cultural activities of their communities” (Rogoff, 2003, p.52).

With the addition of affordances, as an interpretive tool, the learning story frame would look something like this:

Figure 1 Learning story frame



The Study

Theoretical Approach

Young (2008a) reminds us of the myriad everyday music experiences children enjoy in the technological world of today and puts forward the argument that it is within the context of everyday experience that the extent and breadth of the musical activity of children can be observed. Using Rogoff's concept of guided participation (2003), theories of the role of culture and ideas of scaffolding experience (Ratner & Bruner, 1978) the paper explores children's everyday engagement with music in a childcare centre.

In keeping with a socio/cultural theoretical frame, researchers undertook naturalistic observations and documented as learning stories (Carr, 2001). Learning stories, or learning narratives, were developed in New Zealand to support the connecting strands of the *Te Whāriki* curriculum (Podmore & Carr, 1999) and Carr (2001) derived the concept from Bruner's notion of narrative to record and analyse children's emerging stories about their own learning. Carr (2000) stated:

... the label 'learning narratives' has been employed because, as Bruner (1996) argued, they add the deontic (this is what you're usually supposed to do) and the possible (this is what you could do if the occasion is right) to the epistemic (this is what you do here) quality of a script. They are dispositional, and less local. But, like scripts, they provide one way of mapping the terrain between the individual and the sociocultural environment of the early childhood setting or the classroom, the mediated action, and thereby help us to better both the individual learner and the learning environment. (p.62)

This idea of socially mediated learning dispositions leads to a study of affordances, a concept that was developed in the 1970s (Gibson, 1979), that is finding fresh currency in recent years (Needham, 2007). Affordances are viewed as a sub-set of activity theory (Leont'ev, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978): activity is seen as being mediated through culture and language and learning occurs in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). To extend the socio/cultural structure of the learning story the paper unpacks the children's experiences using Carr's focus on children's dispositions and then extends the concept to include affordances to examine what learning took place.

In this research music is viewed as a language of childhood and expression of culture which has a unique place in human experience. Campbell (1998) suggests that music "may be the rich repository of children's innate thoughts and sentiments" (p.5). Blacking's (1995) view that music, or 'musics', must be understood as a universal and fundamental human capability, a "species-specific set of cognitive and sensory capacities in social and cultural contexts" (p.225), supports the notion that children have the right to be offered opportunities to participate in musical activities as a part of the experience of being human.

Campbell and Lum (2008) point out that for young children music is a fundamental part of their environment and life. They suggest that young children, (whether or not music is included in their curriculum), will engage in music because of its intrinsic attraction for them:

It is a human phenomenon to make music and to respond to it...Children will always be drawn to music for its power and provocative way of bridling their energy, of captivating their thoughts and feelings, and of

providing them with a safe haven from the worries that may beset them. Music enhances their play and may be an important means for them to learn about their world. (p.327)

This research aimed to articulate children's own competence in discovering musical elements in the environment, to highlight their joint awareness of the role of music in group ventures and how music can be a subject and object of the imagination.

The Participants and Context

The participants in this research were the two and three year-old children attending the toddlers' room in a childcare centre, and the staff involved in their program. There were usually 14 children in the room, with three and sometimes four staff. The researchers were external to the centre but are familiar observers who had a relationship with this centre for a number of years. The project had University ethics approval.

The centre was a community-based, federally-funded long day-care centre, catering for families in a growth corridor in outer Melbourne. The researchers consider that it was a 'mainstream' centre, to the extent that it had no significant advantages in terms of funding and staffing. The centre suffered from the common problem, in Australia, of constant changes in staffing (CSMAC, 2003). Content, like music for example, was included in the program according to the skills and interests of individual staff. In this instance, the teacher in charge of the toddlers' room happened to be a skilled dancer and dance educator, with an interest in singing, movement, drama, and dance.

Data Collection

The data for this study involved naturalistic observations of children in a specific group context, such as stories and singing games. The researchers were also participant observers in that they interacted spontaneously with the children and responded to any approaches made by the children. Recorded data took the form of photographs, field notes, discussions with staff and the recording of children's comments. Notices and a photographic display in the foyer were used to introduce the parents to the research. Because the data recorded was not predetermined it was only during retrospective examination of the everyday events that meanings were identified. This data was then written up for staff and parents as learning stories. Discussion with staff often took place after they had read the learning story. The phenomenon being observed was the type of activity and participation that was characteristic of children's musical experiences and understanding of musical elements.

In this paper we present three examples of learning stories that provide information about the children's experience of music across the day. As the potential of learning stories as an analytical research tool is being explored here, we have extended our examination of the last two sections of the learning story format, 'short term review' and 'what next?'. This allows us to add a discussion of the concept of affordances. The three examples are:

- Ben's guitar: self initiated experiential learning
- The Wheels on the Bus: a group activity providing a teachable moment
- I'm hungry: an event where an adult scaffolds a situation

Analysis

Learning Stories

Analysis is based on three methods of recording and interpreting experience within a narrative inquiry framework. These are learning stories (Podmore & Carr, 1999; Carr, 2001), seen through the lens of cultural activity theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Leont'ev 1994) and interpreted using the concept of affordances (Gibson, 1979; Forman, 1994; Carr, 2000; Needham, 2007). The connection between the affordance, perception, and a planned, or mediated, activity, has also been explored (Carr, 2000).

The framework of learning stories was developed in New Zealand as part of a project to implement the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Podmore & Carr, 1999). This New Zealand project was designed to appraise the implementation of learning stories as a theoretically consistent approach to assessment and evaluation within the socio/cultural approach adopted within the strands of *Te Whāriki*. The project team used the work of Black and Williams (1998, cited in Podmore & Carr, 1999) to propose essential elements for assessing children's learning experiences. These were: quality of interactions; encouraging children to be actively responsible for their own learning and the importance of developing a lifelong disposition for learning (Podmore & Carr, 1999). The project team considered that using learning stories was a tool for exploring the meaning of learning in its broadest sense. Therefore emphasis was on dispositions for learning, the analytical focus of the stories and the significant role that assessment has in a curriculum frame. Podmore and Carr (1999) cite Bredekamp and Rosegrant (1992) in suggesting that "assessment is the tail that wags the curriculum dog. If we want to see real curriculum reform we must simultaneously achieve reform of assessment practices" (p.29).

The New Zealand project resulted in learning stories becoming widely accepted as a way of recording children's experience within a contextual frame and helping to make children's understandings, existing knowledge and learning visible. Learning stories have also become an emerging research tool that can be applied to both the documentation and the analysis of data (e.g., Carr, 2000; Needham, 2007).

Cultural activity theory and affordances – Examples from observations and literature

The concept of affordances was first offered by Gibson (1979) as an alternative to the information-processing paradigm that was popular in psychology in the 1970s (Greeno, 1994). Affordances concentrate on what information is constructed by actors in relation to constraints or enabling elements that are present in an environment (Greeno, 1994). Carr (2000) and Forman (1994) discussed the idea of technological affordances and discussed the notion that certain activities and/or materials offer differing potential for children to explore, experiment and to express knowledge of the world. Albrechtsen, Andersen, Bodker and Pejtersen (2001) argue that affordances have two dimensions. The ontological dimension of affordances refers to whether they exist independently of a person perceiving the affordance, while the epistemological dimension involves how the person perceives the affordance and their decision to plan an action in relation to the affordance. Therefore, it is through action that children perceive their environment (Needham, 2007).

To further explain the relevance of the above concepts, examples of children's engagement with music as a cultural activity are discussed. It is widely assumed that very young children are responsive to music; that musical experiences have cultural importance and that music is valuable for children in all areas of development, especially for language development (Weinberger, 1995). Hamilton (2005) cites Suthers (2005) as saying that music "is one of

the things that makes us human” (p.14). In the following example of affordance, a young child of two years was sitting on a couch listening to a CD of children’s songs. As the songs were being played he bounced up and down enthusiastically. He was feeling the music. An educator waved to him to sit quietly and he sat very still with little expression on his face. Noticing the effect her intervention had on the child, the adult suggested he should dance to the music. The child leapt off the couch and jumped up and down to ‘The Camptown Races’. The next song was ‘Daisy, Daisy’ and a perplexed look went across the child’s face as he found he couldn’t jump in time to the music. The child was unable to find the pulse of the music in his own body when the beat of the music changed to moving in threes. This is partly developmental, as bouncing is a movement that precedes swaying in young children. This is an example of one song having more affordance for the child to actively respond to its musical elements whilst at the same time providing him with a sensory experience of the power of musical elements (in this case metre). The adult’s sensitivity in noticing what she had done is also an affordance.

Another and more universal, example of affordances is the use of cultural artefacts such as songs. In this paper we use lullabies to support our discussion of children appropriating cultural artefacts and re-interpreting them through object-oriented action (Vygotsky, 1978). Lullabies help to facilitate the communicative act and provide opportunities for emotional expression that is soothing and satisfying; hence this use of music can lead to meaning-making, guided participation and joint accomplishment. They are usually legato (smooth) in nature, have predictable patterns, tend to resolve in a descending melodic line, and are often sung by a single, unaccompanied voice. The lullaby has particular relevance in assisting in communication. By age three children have become competent users of the musical elements of the lullaby in their play. The lullaby is a suitable example of joint activity as it also appears to be universal in many of its characteristics.

Lullabies have affordances in that they are a social and cultural interaction, reciprocal in nature, a means for emotional communication, encourage affective attunement (Stern, 1985) and can be used as a communicative mediator. In this instance the lullaby shapes the way the actors interact. The meaning created in the external environment will become internalised and have the potential to transform relationships. An example often used in Australian preschool settings is “Rock-a-bye-baby” (Barratt & Sinclair, 1984) where teachers will encourage children to rock and calm down at the end of group times. This is also a song that in the Anglo-Celt community is intergenerational and children will often use it in doll play. In song collections designed for use in early childhood settings (eg. Hoermann & Bridges, 1988) the genre is represented by songs such as ‘Sleep, Sleep’ Do, Do, l’Enfant Do (p.174), ‘Starlight’ (p.177) and ‘Suogan’ (p.180).

In summary, we have presented an approach for examining experience – the Learning Story format interpreted through a socio-cultural lens. This is consistent with Te Whāriki as a curriculum framework as well as being inclusive of the notion of language, including music, as a major mediator of cultural activity. The following section presents examples from the data.

Examples from the Data

The following learning stories present observations with accompanying analysis, and discussion of the potential of interpreting everyday events through the notion of affordances.

Learning Stories

Table 1. Ben’s Guitar

<p>Ben’s Guitar: self initiated experiential learning</p> <p><i>Observation:</i> The following observation took place during a morning indoors play session. The children were moving at will between provided activities. Ben had been playing on his own in the block corner.</p>
<p><i>Learning story</i></p> <p>Holding a double block unit horizontally in front of his body Ben made strumming movements with one hand while singing “down, down, down”. A nearby teacher asked, “Are you singing?” and she started singing a Christmas song. Ben stopped singing and walked away with the block. He walked to B. (research visitor) who asked if the block was a guitar. He said, “Yes, a big one. It’s wooden.” The teacher then called for the block to be returned to the block corner. Ben took the block back and when he heard a comment about the block as a guitar he took it off the shelf again and showed it to J (research visitor). Ben then walked across the room with the “guitar” and two teachers called out for the block to be returned to the block corner. He turned, accidentally hitting another child in the face with the block. He immediately said, “Sorry” in a soft voice and put the block back on the shelf.</p>
<p>Ben’s Guitar – interpretation using the learning story focus categories</p>
<p><i>Taking an Interest</i></p> <p>Ben initiated symbolic play using the block as a guitar Had his own idea of what he was playing He had his own view of what the guitar looked like Wanted to continue playing his guitar but was compliant</p>
<p><i>Being Involved</i></p> <p>Went to find the block (from behind a curtain) Trusted others: confident to sing his own song in front of others Was happy to share when asked about the guitar</p>
<p><i>Persisting with Difficulty</i></p> <p>Set up the task himself Rejected the suggestion of a Christmas song by walking away Got the block out a second time when he sensed interest from another adult</p>
<p><i>Expressing an Idea or Feeling</i></p> <p>Used a variety of strategies – oral language, body language, movement, prosody and symbolic use of materials</p>
<p><i>Taking responsibility</i></p> <p>Chose the activity Planned to use the block as a guitar Spontaneously said sorry to the child he accidentally hit</p>

Revisiting the “Short term Review” Category using Affordances as an Interpretive Tool

Using a learning story interpretive framework the ‘short term’ section tends to be a reiteration of existing abilities. Adding the concept of affordances broadens this interpretation to be more inclusive of the group and helps guide future action.

Table 2. Ben’s Guitar: Review of the Learning Story

Short term Review: what learning took place?	Short term review using affordances as an interpretive frame
Demonstrated that he knew how a guitar is played, and that you use it to accompany your own singing Knew he could make up his own songs Seemed to use a model: used repetition – sound and beat; used ‘down’ as onomatopoeia.	It was challenging to persist with the activity because of the curtain indicating block play was not available and the use of space – segmentation of time and space Self initiated experimentation occurred in a socially isolated context (looking to share) Self initiated, awareness of some musical elements, and without environmental scaffolds difficult to know if he was in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Revisiting the “What Next?” Category

Using a learning story framework tended to reflect present interests of the individual. By concentrating more on active participation this category is enriched by taking into consideration the competence of the group, their use of the environment and the potential of the learning culture.

Table 3. Ben’s Guitar: Second Review of the Learning Story

<i>What Next?: Learning Story framework</i> Acknowledge the existing interest Add a microphone to the block corner Observe his knowledge of different types of music and his preferences Have a ukulele or small guitar available, correctly tuned that he could explore with a more competent member of the centre’s community	<i>What next?: Enriching the interpretive frame</i> Perceived possibilities for action in the learning environment: Rethink space as the 3rd teacher – curtain use (Kritchebsky, Prescott & Walling, 1991) Time is perhaps the forgotten dimension of the curriculum (Lock, 1980) Learning stories encourage the observation of children’s activities within the group Revisit the role of music in the programme
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In the following two examples, affordances are integrated into the learning story framework

Table 4. The Wheels on the Bus

<p><i>Example 2: “Wheels on the Bus”: a group activity providing a teachable moment</i></p> <p><i>Observation:</i> This example took place during a morning indoors play session.</p> <p><i>Learning Story</i></p> <p>The children had arranged the chairs in a single line in their room. Two children were playing near the front of the line of chairs. Anna (teacher) approached the children and asked, “Where are you going? Is it a bus?” They answered, “On a train”. Anna improvised a train song and it gradually turned into a song-story resembling The little red engine. All the children in the room were now interested and joined in, sitting on the chairs to go up and down hills on the train. The children joined in with Anna, singing fragments of the song. Anna has a tuneful voice with a suitable pitch range for the children to match. The song then became the ‘Wheels on the Train’ and Anna further developed this into “Where are we going?” and “What will we do there?”. Children were helped to decide where they wanted to go, with scaffolding from Anna. They decided to go to town to buy</p>

presents. The singing finished when it was time to go outside and Anna suggested they could buy hats at the hat shop. The children collected their sun hats and went outside.	
“Wheels on the Bus” - interpretation using the learning story focus categories	
<i>Taking an interest</i> The impetus came from the children re-arranging chairs and Anna associating this with ‘The wheels on the bus’. This was recognising the familiar and the children changing that format to a train. Anna says she often spontaneously sings with the children, following their leads and interests. This reaction from Anna might have even been expected. The reaction of the other children indicated strong interest. These children already had some awareness of tempo, pitch and duration, and used this knowledge to support the story Children helped improvise on a familiar song to support their chosen narrative	
<i>Being involved</i> The children showed sustained interest throughout the various iterations of the song. One altercation about chairs did not spoil the interest. The song and game engaged the whole group spontaneously. The adult brought the game to a halt because of the daily schedule for outside time. This was built into the game and at the end one child still sat on the chairs wanting to continue on the train.	
<i>Persisting with difficulty</i> The children arranged the chairs and insisted this should be a train and therefore initiated the task and framework of the game. They followed through on Anna’s leads so the game went from the train going up and down hills (tempo), to changing songs and tooting (pitch) and then considering possible destinations and activities at the journey’s end.	
<i>Expressing an idea or a feeling</i> This activity involved many expressions of ideas, feelings, emotions and excitement. The children initiated the group activity which contained music, story telling, dramatic gestures and in the instance of the chair altercation some social negotiation The children used body actions to show what happens when you go around corners – mass, gravity, direction and centrifugal force	
<i>Taking responsibility</i> This was initiated by two children and the adult assisted in the carriage of the idea so it became a whole group event. All children participated voluntarily and followed Anna’s leads in a collaborative way offering lots of ideas about where to go and what to do. Their joining in on elements of the music was most enthusiastic and required no prompting. The children accepted the ending of the story with good humour, indicating self-regulation.	
<i>Short term review: Learning Story framework</i> The children: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • engaged, as a whole group, in shared activity where all participated • accepted ideas from another and helped develop them • showed understanding of a story line. • responded to active scaffolding 	<i>Short term review using affordances as an interpretive frame</i> Voluntary participation by whole group due to the activity’s impact on the environment Activity encouraged sharing of ideas Activity invited children to share their competence in the art of story telling Skilled scaffolding based on knowledge of children, these children and the stories within the culture
<i>‘What next? Learning Story framework</i>	<i>What next?</i>

<p>Observe opportunities for voluntary participation in whole group activities that are child initiated and adult assisted</p> <p>Be alert to opportunities to foster small and whole-group participation in stories, dance, music, and dramatic play</p> <p>Encourage a culture of active sharing through shared story telling</p> <p>Build narrative skills through the use of words, music and movement</p> <p>Deliberately seed the environment with clues for the initiation of such events</p> <p>Build children's musical skills</p>	<p>Perceived possibilities for reflection and action in the learning environment:</p> <p>Rethinking how decisions about use of time and space are made and who participates in the decision making (Valsiner, 1987)</p> <p>The adult learner can impact on reflective practice and therefore greater awareness of opportunities offered through children's spontaneous invitations to activity</p> <p>The notion of 'languages of childhood' acknowledges the importance of story-telling as part of the human experience and children as story-tellers</p> <p>Curricular dimensions based on concepts of levels of freedom, relationships possibly rights (Valsiner, 1987)</p>
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Table 5: I'm Hungry

<p><i>Example 3. I'm hungry: an event where an adult scaffolds a situation</i></p> <p><i>Observation:</i> This took place during the same morning play session as the example above.</p>	
<p><i>Learning Story</i></p> <p>J. (research visitor) was asked by Alice to read Rod Campbells' (2006) I'm Hungry, a 'touch and feel' book with a repetitive stanza format, ending each stanza with "I'm a hungry rabbit and I like eating....." J. 'sang' the book waiting for Alice to add the last word. By the end of the book Alice was singing the word. Jill sings; "I'm a little Rabbit. I like eating..." (she pauses and Alice sings) "carrots. When other children were called to the mat Alice wanted to continue exploring the book and did not want to sit down.</p>	
<p><i>I'm hungry - interpretation using the Learning Story focus categories</i></p>	
<p><i>Taking an interest</i></p> <p>Used the book to introduce herself to J. and therefore interested in the visitor in the room Chose the book, the joint activity and created the joint attention by her choice of a book</p>	
<p><i>Being involved</i></p> <p>When J. developed the joint activity in a music direction Alice followed and maintained interest throughout, gradually joined in as she realised the possibilities of her involvement Did not want to stop when asked to join the others on the mat.</p>	
<p><i>Persisting with difficulty</i></p> <p>N/A</p>	
<p><i>Expressing an idea or feeling</i></p> <p>Alice verbally approached the visitor, sat down and expressed an interest in exchanging names and then engaging in a joint activity together The chosen activity included narrative language, senses (touch and feel book) and joining in the singing gradually as she realised how the music was being used to enhance the story.</p>	
<p><i>Taking responsibility</i></p> <p>Initiated the interaction and the subject of the exchange Responded to a tacit invitation to extend the story with song.</p>	
<p><i>Short term review</i></p> <p>Alice was able to establish an interaction with a visiting adult</p>	<p><i>Short term review using affordances as an interpretive frame</i></p> <p>The book's construction, with the repeated</p>

<p>She was able to choose a suitable joint activity Was able to pick up on a tacit suggestion to extend the activity with music and then find her voice and part.</p>	<p>line, “I’m hungry” as a chorus, suggested this activity. J added pitch and rhythm, within A’s Zone Proximal Development, creating an affordance.</p>
<p><i>What next?</i> Look for opportunities to incidentally emphasise the prosodic nature of language Books of songs Sound stories – spontaneous music making activities</p>	<p><i>What next?</i> Perceived possibilities for reflection and action in the learning environment: Using music concepts to relate to creation of meaning using particular symbols like pitch. Symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934)</p>

Discussion

Discussion of these examples has two main elements. One is the use of learning stories to document and analyse children’s ways of learning and knowing and the other is to note how music is manifest in this centre. All three events described occurred spontaneously with two becoming collaborative child and adult activities. These observations and patterns might be useful for adults designing practices that support music as an active part of the curriculum.

The frame of the learning story led to the categorisation of the different types of interactions that occurred during these observations. One was a whole group activity inspired by a few children and the entire room joined in, another was a spontaneous play situation and the child singing through the book, *I’m hungry*, was seen as an example of a teachable moment.

The learning stories presented here have provided interpretations of seemingly small events to indicate how children do use their knowledge across contexts and show considerable awareness of music, sounds and patterns in a range of ways. The last two steps of the learning stories were reviewed under the category of affordances, a suitable frame for looking at the potential of a particular context. In the first learning story, under affordance, we were able to move from a summation of what the child knew, (and he was very knowledgeable), to speculate on the temporal arrangements within the context itself as scaffolds or constraints. We challenged the use of curtains to close off space to send a message to the child that the space is no longer available, (in this case a curtain across the block cupboard). The segmentation of time and space is often an issue in institutions (Greenman & Stonehouse, 1997). With a more supportive environment, for example the blocks being available across the whole day and more flexible use allowed, it would have been easier to ascertain the learning potential of this event. In the same observation, thinking about the story from a cultural viewpoint, there is a question about the use of curtains and space but also an emphasis on close observation of children within the group and a rethinking of the role of music. Young (2008b) has studied children making music collaboratively and suggested that non-verbal language may be more meaningful in this context. She suggests that “a tendency to import language-derived versions of collaboration as templates for understanding children’s collaboration has obscured processes intrinsic to the act of making music” (p.3). This point supports the use of learning stories as a method of observation so that children’s communicative acts, in whatever form, can be studied and interpreted.

That observation of non-verbal acts may be particularly important for music is a suggestion that is worthy of further exploration. Certainly, in each of the three observations reported here, elements that were noticeable were not descriptive language but the acts themselves: imagining the block as a guitar, lining up the chairs, singing and moving and exploring the

structure of a story using the prosodic quality of pitch. From our observations of the three incidents came ideas about use of space and time, children's knowledge and the presence of music in their world, levels of choice and freedom within the context and the ability of very young children to creatively explore abstract concepts. While none of these ideas are new to early childhood, if applied to music there may be an opportunity to re-visit the idea of music in the early childhood curriculum, particularly in acknowledging children's prior knowledge and experience. Recording, interpreting and interacting with children's existing knowledge may present exciting opportunities and a responsive environment for exploring and experimenting with sound.

Conclusion

This paper has examined some examples of music experiences in one centre. We wanted to explicate children's own knowledge, knowledge that they brought to the learning situation. We also explored what was happening with, or without, scaffolding from adults and others within the environment. The emphasis on music comes from the position music holds in the early childhood curriculum. Whilst considered important it is often not resourced in any systematic way and staff and children's own experiences are the only mediators into this language. This means that the affordance of music as a cultural language may be very limited in some instances. As suggested earlier affordances relate to constraints or enabling elements present in the physical and social environment. Music experiences were recorded as Learning Stories and this format was also linked to cultural activity theory. On a paper on Reggio Emilia and cultural activity New (2007) discusses aspects of practice that support the concept of cultural activity theory. Three elements she draws on are the idea of making learning visible, teachers as researchers and curriculum as long term projects. By using Learning Stories and concentrating on the last two aspects of the interpretation we have emphasised the Learning Story as a tool to support activity theory. Learning can be made visible; the format provides an interpretive tool for the teacher researcher and the insights gained can potentially transform the curriculum into a long term approach as well as assisting in the meaningful use of music as one of the most significant symbolic languages in the culture.

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