"The Children's Creative Voices Project:" Using Collaborative Ethnographic Songwriting to Express Musical Agency and Imagine New Worlds

Kate Reid

This article has been peer-reviewed.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to discuss findings from a sub-project that grew out of a previously established research collaboration with a non-profit agency that provides settlement services to newcomer, refugee, and displaced families in Ontario. As a Postdoctoral Fellow on that larger project, I piloted a small-scale, music-based research study with three children whose families were accessing services from the aforementioned non-profit settlement agency. In the sub-project discussed in this article, I utilized a participatory research creation method I developed called "collaborative ethnographic songwriting" (CES). To develop CES, I have drawn on my background in professional songwriting, recording, and performance, social justice education, and academic research. In this article, I focus on how the process of CES engaged an underserved, minoritized newcomer child to actively participate in co-composing and recording a song about her life. I discuss how, with no previous songwriting or recording experience, she demonstrated musical agency (Karlsen 2011; Wiggins 2015a) in collaboration with me to weave together a musical story that while based on a fantasy relationship with a character from one of her favourite novel series, also incorporated her own lived experiences.

The research question that guides my analysis is: How does collaborative ethnographic songwriting open up space for newcomer children to express musical agency and narrate their own stories?

Context and Theoretical Framework Literature Review

Children's voices, perspectives, and musical activity tend to "remain low on the scholarly hierarchy" (Young and Ilari, 2019, p.1). However, a relatively recent focus in ethnomusicology and music education research recognizes the value of engaging children in participatory research about their musical lives and the pivotal role that children play in sustaining and redefining musical cultures in agentic and creative ways (Barrett 2010; Campbell 2010; Campbell & Wiggins 2013; Emberly 2013, 2014, 2019; Marsh & Dieckmann 2017; Minks 2013). Young children's music-making is a form of meaning-making (Barrett 2003; Campbell 2010), evidence of their creativity (Burnard 2013;

Marsh 2008) and sociocultural and musical agency (Barrett 2003; Dean 2019; Wiggins 2015a) and has communicative significance (Malloch & Trevarthen 2018; Trevarthen 2002). Indeed, children "absorb, transform, and adapt [music] and through these processes imbue it with their own meanings and purposes" (Young and Ilari, 2019, p.15).

Musicking (Small 1998) has numerous positive impacts on newcomer, refugee, and displaced children. Research demonstrates that engagement with musical activities and music-making promotes a sense of well-being and belonging (Howell 2018; Marsh 2013, 2017; Reid, 2021); aids recovery from psychological trauma providing a sense of agency and socio-cultural integration (Akoyunoglou-Christou 2016; Güney et al. 2018; Harris 2007; Jones et al. 2004; Marsh 2012, 2015a, 2015b; Marsh & Dieckmann 2017) and builds self-esteem and resilience (Howell 2011). Engaging with music also nurtures the capacity of children to express and regulate their emotions (Enge & Stige 2021; Zapata & Hargreaves 2018), narrate their experiences, opinions, and needs (Enge 2015). Finally, music-making processes also facilitate relationship-building and cross-cultural understanding across differences (Akuno et al. 2015; Anderson & Campbell 2010; Schippers 2009; Lenette & Sunderland 2016; Raanaas et al. 2019); and provide opportunities to explore issues related to identity, acculturation, and anti-racism (Baker & Jones 2006). From the literature, it is clear that engaging in musical activities positively impact newcomer, refugee, and displaced children in a range of ways. Yet, there has been limited research conducted that actively involves newcomer and refugee children in collaborative songwriting on themes of their choice.

Musical Agency

"Children are active agents in choosing the music they listen and respond to, and create, and to the music they choose to preserve, reinvent, or discard" (Campbell and Wiggins, 2013, p.1). When supported and given the opportunity to do so, children without any prior experience in songwriting initiate, experiment with and create music in a range of remarkable ways. Capacity to take initiative requires personal agency—a belief in the self, a sense that one has the capacity to engage, initiate, and intentionally influence one's life circumstances

(Bandura 2006). The ability to engage in music-making and initiate musical ideas requires both personal agency and musical agency. Wiggins (2015a) defines children's musical agency as "their sense that they can initiate and carry out their own musical ideas and ideas about music" (para. 6). From this perspective, which builds on literature in psychology, musical agency is the internal sense and confidence that individuals have in their musical knowledge and vision, enabling them to instigate, play with, and create music.

Embedded in the idea of musical agency is an individual's belief that others in shared musical situations will interact with them in validating ways that respect and take seriously the ideas they initiate (Wiggins, 2015a). Wiggins reminds us, "children's belief in their own capacity for initiating and carrying out musical ideas can serve as the basis for further music learning" (para. 3). When children are encouraged to trust that they have the capacity to create music and to express that capacity, they can develop and build on this understanding of themselves as musicians. "In teaching children music, Burnard (2013), Marsh (2008), and Wiggins (2015b) believe in "engaging music learners deeply in musical experiences in the context of music-learning situations that foster and nurture their musical and personal agency" (Wiggins, 2015a, para. 2). Burnard (2013) also argues that supportive music-learning contexts "fill children with a sense of agency [and] endow them with creativity, motivation, courage, and belief in their own capacity as musical thinkers, makers, and creators" (p. 2). Building on DeNora's (2000) sociological approach that music is a tool that encompasses musical and social agency, Dean (2019) defines concept of musical agency as "the capacity to act in or through music (p. 110). That is, "to act *through* music, using music as a tool for social or personal agency, is as much an aspect of musical agency as being able to act *in* music for purely musical goals" (italics original, 110). Dean stresses that "being-in-the world" is an important aspect of musical agency. Musical agency enables individuals to make sense of and manage their personal and social experiences and to participate in social worlds. This parallel's Small's (1998) notion that musicking is a social act. He writes, "music's primary meanings are not individual at all but social" (p. 8). This paper centers on children's ability to express musical agency and narrate their stories as they "develop their place in the world" (Dean, 2019, p. 110) as social beings.

Methodology

There has been a relatively recent trend in academic research that recognizes children as active participants in meaning construction (Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2009; Cheney, 2011; McTavish, Streelasky, & Coles, 2012). Shamrova and Cummings (2017) define child participation as "the process of sharing decision-making and participation with young people, especially those under 18 years of age, on the issues which affect them and their communities" (p. 400). With the goal of conducting child-centered research and producing child-led knowledge (Groundwater-Smith et. al 2015; Holland et al. 2010; Horgan 2017; Kim 2017; Punch 2016) within and for newcomer communities in Ontario, this study positions young people as inventive composers and competent co-researchers who take a dynamic and meaningful role in the co-construction of musical and lived knowledge during the processes of songwriting and recording. It demonstrates how childrens' active participation in the creative *process* of songwriting provides fertile ground for musical agency to occur, and how expressions of that musical agency culminate in a final *product*—a song written from the perspective of young newcomer girl

Collaborative ethnographic songwriting (CES)

To carry out this research, I utilized a robust, participatory method called "collaborative ethnographic songwriting" (CES). CES follows research creation methods and listening methodologies I have employed in other scholarly, arts-based inquiries (Cherry-Reid 2020; Hauge & Reid, 2019, Goldstein et al., 2018; Reid & Goldstein 2021). CES is an applied method for writing songs in collaboration with other people—typically people who are not songwriters or musicians—to creatively narrate some aspect of their lived experience in song. It also enables me to collect, analyze, understand, and disseminate the knowledge, language, practices, and social worlds of marginalized populations within a range of contexts and cultures, while providing creative means for them to voice their experiences, represent their musical lives, and be active agents in research and dissemination (Emberly & Davhula 2016; Hauge & Reid, 2019; Rodriguez-Jimenez & Gifford 2010). Drawing on Goodson's (1998) notion of storying the self, CES enables individuals to be "authors of their own musical lives and histories" (Regelski, 2008, p. 10).

Following the critical ethnographic tradition, (Madison 2012), CES begins with an ethical responsibility to address the unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain (Madison 2012). A critical ethnographer is responsible for being accountable to the ways in which they support others in representing themselves and their own stories, because how someone is represented *matters greatly* and all people—including children and youth—need to have a say about how they are represented in research processes and outcomes. A critical ethnographer is also compelled to use the resources, skills, and privileges available to them to make accessible the voices and experiences of research participants whose stories are restrained and otherwise unheard and inaudible (Madison, 2012). Utilizing CES and my background in music and education, and access to musical networks, I work to conduct CES with care and accuracy, acknowledging that

not only are researchers the transmitters of the information, stories, and lived experiences of research participants, but that research participants themselves *can and should* transmit their own information, stories, and lived experiences through research processes—in this case, songwriting and recording.

Methods

Participants

As previously mentioned, this sub-project was carried out within a larger research project exploring how children maintain connection with diverse musical cultures around the world. One community research partner of that larger project was a not-for-profit newcomer settlement agency in Ontario that delivered a musical program for children and youth. Through fun and educational music activities in diverse languages, the young participants in this music program were provided free, weekly tailored musical activities, as well as other forms of art education. Three members of the program—Suhana, Kagami, and Amisha (all pseudonyms), ages 7, 9, and 11 years old, respectively—took part in this sub-project that I led as a part of this larger, pre-established research collaboration with this particular settlement agency.

Data Collection

Typically, I conduct CES sessions in-person. However, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, I expanded this method to collect data and co-compose music with these three participants online. Throughout February-May 2021, I facilitated 15 individual songwriting sessions on Zoom with Suhana, Kagami, and Amisha. With each child, I began the process of CES by conducting a semi-structured qualitative interview, which were audio and visually recorded on Zoom. I used these interviews to build rapport and get a sense of each child and some of their lived experiences. After each interview session, I transcribed each interview and coded each interview for key themes and stories that stood out at possible songwriting topics, as well as for key phrases and words that might be useful as lyrics. In the second session with each child, I reviewed their interview with them. We discussed the key themes and stories that stood out, and if anything in each interview stood out to them as a possible songwriting topic.

Our songwriting processes followed this general format. Once each songwriting topic was determined, each child and I brainstormed songwriting topics using the Whiteboard in Zoom. On the Whiteboard, we wrote any related ideas to their chosen topic and also drew related images. I also set up a page with the headings *Verse, Chorus, Verse, Chorus, Bridge, Double Chorus*, following a standard pop/ country/rock song songwriting format to help organize our ideas into the frame of a song. Using the ideas from each Whiteboard, each child and I brainstormed how to lyrically represent those ideas. As we worked

out the lyrics, we discussed the kind of melody and "feel" each child wanted for their song. Based on these discussions, I developed three versions for potential songs for each child combining acoustic guitar chords and vocal melodies. I then performed the three versions I composed for each child during our individual songwriting sessions and asked for their input on which version they preferred. This process took several sessions with each child because we made adjustments to each song based on their ideas.

After finalizing a rough draft of each song with lyrics, vocal melody, and guitar chords, I recorded a "ghost vocal" and the acoustic guitar tracks for each song in Garageband. Then, I emailed them each a copy of their song and song lyrics and in the following songwriting session with each child, we went over the song and lyrics and made any edits and adjustments they wanted. Recording the ghost vocals for each song allowed each child to rehearse along with the recording at home before going into the studio to professionally record their song. Then, I booked individual recording dates with a sound engineer and studio musicians based on the instrumentation each child chose for their songs. In the studio, each child then sang along with my ghost vocal during the recording of their song after which time, my vocals were removed, leaving each child's vocal recording as the lead vocal. Throughout the songwriting and recording process, I engaged in ongoing checking with each child to make sure we were telling their story and developing their song in a way that felt right for them.

Analysis

I focus my analysis here on one participant in this pilot project, 7-year-old Suhana.. Suhana was a bright, creative, and confident young person who took a lot of initiative during our sessions together. She decided to compose a song about Hermione Granger, the precocious and somewhat snobby character from the famed *Harry Potter* novel series.

The discussions that took place during my online and songwriting sessions with Suhana, as with the other two children, were emergent and often unpredictable. Ringrose and Renold (2010) might call these discussions "ethnographic conversations" (p. 578) because these sessions were "unstructured, informal, exploratory" and "often took off in some quite unexpected directions" (p. 578). I balanced following Suhana's lead with keeping her focused on our songwriting tasks. In some of our initial sessions, following her lead meant looking at *Harry Potter* memes and short clips from various *Harry Potter* films on YouTube. Initially, it didn't occur to me that looking at *Harry Potter* artifacts online while brainstorming ideas for Suhana's song would prove useful. But, these forays into the digital fan world of *Harry Potter* gave us ideas for our song and re-familiarized

me with the novel series and films. I was reminded of Schultz's (2003) work around what it means to take a "listening stance" in the classroom. Schultz argues that this approach to working with students "suggests that teaching is improvisational and responsive to students. It requires confidence to enter into teaching as a learner as well as a knower" (p. 8). By leading me into the online world of *Harry Potter,* Suhana was making connections to the songwriting task, while also helping me make my own. Being improvisational and responsive during these sessions was also key in helping me build rapport with my young co-composer.

Following Suhana's lead also meant changing one step of the songwriting process I typically utilize. Instead of using the Whiteboard function in Zoom to brainstorm ideas and lyrics, as I did with the other two participants, we used a Venn diagram, an idea initiated by Suhana, to help us generate similarities and differences between her and Hermione. A visual organizer with two overlapping circles, a Venn diagram represents a relationship between two concepts and their similarities and differences. As she drew a Venn diagram on the Whiteboard, Suhana insisted that her technique would help us better organize our ideas. From that day on, we used a Venn diagram during all our songwriting sessions.

On our Venn diagram, we drew many comparisons as well as some differences between herself and the young witch from England. For example, some of the differences we cited were Hermione goes to a school for wizards; Suhana goes to a school for muggles; Hermione only speaks English, while

Suhana speaks English and Nepali. Suhana also made the following comparisons between them: they are both smart, organized, and they both dislike the protagonist in the Harry Potter series, Voldemort (who I learned is also known as, "Tom Riddle"). We turned many of the ideas we generated together on our Venn diagram into lyrics for her song.

Below, on the next page, is a portion of our final songwriting session where we worked on completing the final verse for "Hermione and Me." For this final verse, I suggested that we project into the future and focus on their friendship as adults. Leading up to this moment in the session, I asked Suhana what she and Hermione would be when they grew up. She responded that she would be an architect and Hermione would be a professor who specializes in teaching about and making potions. At this point in the session, we had composed half of the last verse: "When we get a little older, I'd be an architect / When we get a little older, she'd be a professor / I'd paint every room in her house gold / She'd teach me how to mix potions." Then, we discussed other possibilities, grounded in Hermione's magical abilities, about what they would do together as friends. It's important to include a portion of our songwriting dialogue here so that Suhana's ideas, voice, and creativity is acknowledged in this paper. (see highlighted box next page)

Discussion

With my support and songwriting facilitation skills, 7-year-old Suhana consistently expressed musical agency as a competent and creative social agent who collaboratively produced
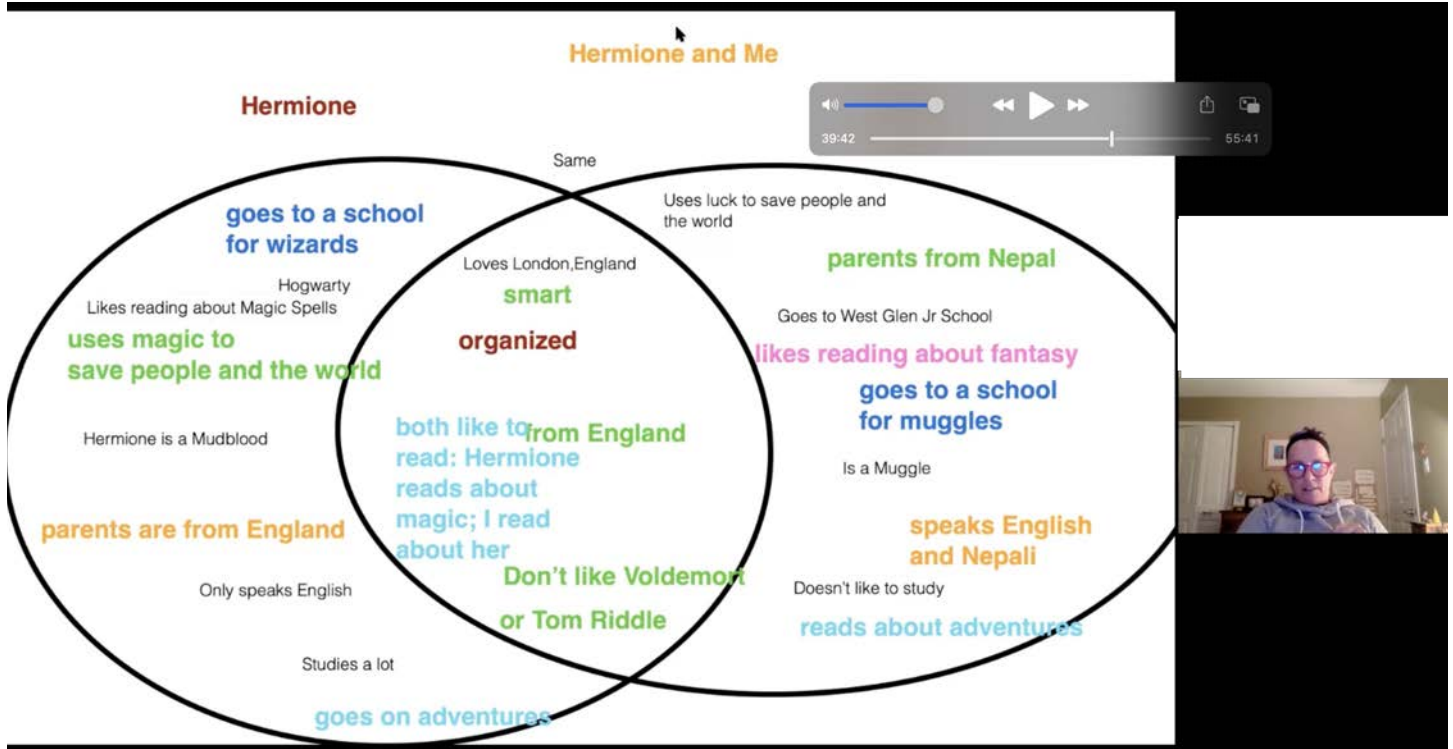

Figure 1. A screenshot taken from our songwriting session on Zoom where we used a Venn diagram to brainstorm songwriting ideas. To protect her anonymity, Suhana's real name has been removed from above the circle on the right-hand side of the diagram and the image of her face has been removed.

a story about a fictive relationship with the fantasy novel series character, Hermione Granger. Suhana demonstrated not only creative imagination and ability but an ongoing and engaged enthusiasm throughout our hour-long sessions together as we pooled ideas, generated, edited and revised lyrics, and made her fantasy relationship with Hermione Granger come to life in song. Relying on a sense of musical agency and a belief in herself as a musical individual, Suhana was willing to share her own ideas and listen to mine as we talked, sang, and wrote our way to crafting the song, "Hermione and Me." (see Appendix A - next page)

CES provides a platform for young people to create new worlds in music. It has been found that songwriting allows individuals to identify, emphasize, and celebrate their commonalities with others (Yoeli et al. 2021), enhances their socio-emotional experiences (Madsen 2019), and provides a way for them to project themselves into the future by constructing identities to which they aspire (Ahmadi & Oosthuizen 2012). Using CES to compose and record "Hermione and Me" allowed Suhana to enhance the socio-emotional experience of immigrating to a new country by constructing a future identity for herself and document her commonalities and invented friendship with a fictional literary companion. Suhana relied on her musical agency to enhance her own life experiences of settlement into an empowered, invented story of magic, companionship, and joy. Her own musical agency and imaginative creativity allowed her to build on her storytelling and music-making skills to craft lyrics that represented a world in which she wished to live. Suhana projected herself, an aspiring architect, into the future, and with the help of her friend, Hermione, a budding potions professor, she triumphed

Kate: Like, how would you say that? (pause) Maybe like you just fly around the world, like helping people? I don't know—what do you think?

Suhana: Yeah, yeah, yeah! Ok! Let's do it! I'll put in on Hermione's side because she has more space (on the Venn diagram) Like something like this? (hums the chorus while typing)

Kate: Yep, it's good to sing while you're making words.

Suhana: (types out "We'd fly around the world helping people too")

Kate: Great! Let's try it! (picks up guitar, plays chords and sings) We need one more line and there and then, we're done! (pumps fist in the air) What else would you do, flying around the world? I like that one, it's a good one. I love it. What else would you flying around the world besides helping people? Or, what would you help them to do? What would you help them with? It's a nice thought. If *you* needed help, what would it be?

Suhana: I think they need help with their homework.

Kate: I love it! (laughs) That's perfect! Because you're both smart and you like studying and you like going to school so that makes a lot of sense, you know? (pause) How about, instead of saying "helping people" do you want to say "helping kids?

Suhana: (excited) Yeah!

Kate: (laughs) Ok, why don't you type in there? Type in something about helping and homework and I'll play it and see what it sounds like.

Suhana: Oh, ok! So, let's go to text. I'll write on the very top of the Venn diagram. (singing lyrics as she types "We'd fly around the world helping kids")

Kate: Oh, it's so good, Suhana. I love this new verse. (sings "We'd fly around the world helping kids with homework") (plays chords and sings new lyrics, hums the last line of the verse that doesn't have lyrics yet) Ok! We're getting really close because we have to fit it into that frame, right? So, "we'd fly around the world helping kids with homework and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah!" What can we say at the very end?

Suhana: Hmmm, maybe I could help them take care of their bruises since professors, you know, professors can make some, like, potion medicine if it's really bad and you don't have the money to go to the hospital and stuff like that.

Kate: Yeah! So how would you say that in a short little line? (laughs) That's the trick. We've got to squeeze it into a little, few words. (picks up guitar and sings "We'd fly around the world helping kids with homework, and—")

Suhanna: Argh! I can't think of a line! (pause) Oh yeah! I can do the medicine one, I totally forgot about it. (hums) (sings "da, da, da, da and we'd help people with their injuries if they ever get hurt") (typing lyrics) Injuries. (types "And we'd help people with injurys (sic) and take them to the hospatal (sic) and pay for them") Ok, this is really long!

Kate: "And we'd help people with injurys and take them to the hospital and pay for them." (laughs) That's a lot of words to fit into one last little line. I like it! How can you shorten it? I like it. It's a good idea. Maybe, what about, "help them when they're hurt?" Like, that's a lot shorter.

Suhana: Oh yeah! Because "injuries" like—I'm going to "annotate"—and "we'd help people when they're hurt—" (crosses out "with injurys")

Kate: Or, "when they get hurt?" Let's try it. (picks up guitar and plays chords)

Suhana: (sings) "And take them to the hospital and pay for them." Oh my god! (types "when their (sic) hurt")

Kate: "When they get hurt?" Or what about "we'd fly around the hospital, helping kids with homework and hug them when they're hurt?"

Suhana: Oh yeah, that's a good one!

Kate: (sings "When we get a little older, I'll be an architect. And when we get a little older, she'd be a professor. I'd paint every room in her house gold, she'd teach me how to mix potions. We'd fly around the world helping kids with their homework and hug them when they get hurt. Hermione and me, like friends across the sea, a Mudblood and a Muggle, a witch like her I would be)

Suhana: (joins in on chorus) Hermione and me, like friends across the sea! (yells, laughs)

over an evil-doer and flew around the world caring for children in need. CES opened up a space for her to creatively narrate these fantasies and provided a context for her to have "a musical say" (Davis 2013, 2014) in bringing her fantasies to life through music. In these ways, Suhana used CES as a world-making endeavor.

Conclusion

This study produced insights about how supported, collaborative music-making can open up a space for children to express musical agency and co-construct meaning, resulting in the production of imaginative child-centered songs. Through shared music-making and recording, CES amplifies the _literal voices_ of children (Hill 2006; James 2007, I'Anson 2013) rather than focusing on adults' interpretations of children's lives.

Building on literature on the importance of music in the lives of newcomer young people, arts-based research, community music programming, and music education that allows children to experiment with music and express musical agency continues to be crucial in supporting newcomer children who face the challenges of immigration.

According to the Ontario Ministry of Education Curriculum Grades 1-8, The Arts (2009), Education in the arts is essential to students' intellectual, social, physical, and emotional growth and well-being…the arts provide a natural vehicle through which students can explore and express themselves and through which they can discover and interpret the world around them. (p. 3)

As a participatory, child-led method, CES research supports children's intellectual, social, physical, and emotional growth and well-being by inviting them to generate knowledge about themselves (Alderson & Morrow 2011; Greig 2013). In this study, CES actively engaged this newcomer child to narrate her fantasies in song using her own voice, in her own words, on her own terms.

CES holds much pedagogical potential for classrooms. An innovative approach to documenting, highlighting, and studying the creativity, imagination, and internal worlds of children and youth, I suggest that children can use CES more broadly to enhance their everyday experiences within the classroom, bridging curriculum with their own lived, local knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009). For example, combining music education and performance studies, students could compose songs related to some aspect of their culture or lived experience related to a shared topic and organize a public performance of their work. This could be extended to incorporate drama curriculum and photography studies using photovoice. Photovoice is a participatory research method that invites participants, through photography and shared dialogue, to document and reflect on their lived realities in relation to a community concern or social justice issue. Students could collaborate on a multi-media theatre production that includes a theatre script supported by originally composed songs and photovoice images.

In addition, because CES can support interdisciplinary learning and is transferable across classroom contexts, it can be utilized in non-music classrooms. Teachers who possess songwriting skills could enhance student learning by inviting students to make personal connections to a range of curricular content using CES. For example, in Language Arts, students could compose songs interpreting a chosen character's role in a novel while making personal connections to that character. In relation to Social Sciences and Humanities, students could investigate various issues related to equity, diversity, and social justice, examining topics such as racism, ableism, fatphobia, classism, femmephobia, homophobia, and transphobia. In the context of Health and Physical Education, students could use CES to develop social-emotional learning skills by composing songs that focus on issues relating to mental health and wellbeing. They could also use CES to do identity work and build social-emotional learning by exploring issues related to relationships, gender, sexuality, race, class, and ability.

More and more, it is vital that, as music educators, we hear directly from young people about what matters to them. Young people have much to say about the world and their active participation in it. Wiggins (2015a) reminds us, "it is essential for music educators to understand and respect the musical knowledge and experience that learners bring to music-learning settings, be they classrooms or studios" (para. 6). CES holds great potential for young people to co-construct knowledge and learn through active, meaningful, and creative participation. It provides a space for them to work co-operatively, engage in personal reflection, express themselves, articulate and document their stories, and develop skills in the arts, which can deepen and extend their learning in other areas of school curriculum. An innovative and intimate method for inviting them to have a musical say in how they learn, CES allows students to bring themselves and their own local knowledge into classrooms.

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