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## Young Children Being Rhythmically Playful: creating *musike* together

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**ABSTRACT** This article explores young children's rhythmic, musical, aesthetic and playful creative communication in an early childhood education centre. Young children's communication is musically rhythmic and social. The data, presented as 'events', formed part of an ethnographic-inspired study conducted by the researcher as a participant observer. Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) framed the methodology, with mediated activity as the unit of analysis. Critical and related aesthetic theory inform the data analyses, providing open ways of appreciating diversity in young children's aesthetic experience. The collaborative nature of young children's rhythmic musicality is explored and the article suggests that rhythm pervades young children's creative and communicative playfulness.

### Introduction

This article explores links across play and culture as represented and expressed in the temporal arts and children's aesthetically rhythmic playful communication. The 'events' presented in this article are examples of musically aesthetic narratives, full of moving bodies, rhythm, noise, and sometimes word sounds. The 'events' functioned as units of activity inviting further analysis using aspects of cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) as the research methodology. The complexity and underlying themes in these 'events' have implications for how learning, teaching, the arts, aesthetics, and play are positioned in early childhood education.

The *arts* are cultural, communicative and social languages that involve diverse ways of representing and experiencing images and relationships. They include a wide range of different ways of knowing, and of representing thoughts and feelings, culturally, critically and discursively (Grierson & Mansfield, 2003). In his classic overview of play, *Homo ludens: a study of the play element in culture*, Huizinga (1949) proposed that art is like play. Both connect people with culture and involve making meaning. Furthermore, socio-cultural theorists such as El'konin (1972, 2000) and Vygotsky (1978) have suggested that young children re-create their cultures in their play.

All three terms – *culture*, *play* and *art* – defy neat definitions. They all have *aesthetic* dimensions which Guss (2005, p. 234) describes from an early childhood perspective as 'the sensory, sensual, mind-body connection that goes into imagining, forming and enacting roles and dramatic situations'. Aesthetics can involve seeing and feeling the mundane in new ways.

This article focuses on those temporal arts which are encapsulated in the ancient Greek word for music, *musike*, which includes poetry, dance, drama, and music. These temporal arts involve time and movement experienced and represented aesthetically in musical pulse – the rhythm which underpins *musike* (Alcock et al, 2008). *Culture* as used in this article refers to 'a shared way of life' (Eisner, 2002, p. 3), with a specific focus on the aesthetic dimensions in this sharing.

As Lindqvist (1995, p. 53) points out, 'Play has an aesthetic form and it is largely the aesthetic emotions which influence its course.' 'Playfulness' is also an attitude – a disposition – that frees up thinking and feeling by fostering open-mindedness; such dispositions are integral to creativity and

aesthetic experience. For the purposes of this article, children's rhythmically playful communication is positioned as connecting *play*, *culture*, and *art-musike*.

Children's body movement is a stand-out feature of children communicating playfully, and body movement is very likely the first form of knowing, feeling, and being in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Infants and young children in all human cultures move and make music in various rhythmic and communicative ways (Young et al, 2007). Rhythm is a basic component of not only verbal but also gestural and musical languages. A sense of rhythm may be understood as innate and biological with evolutionary origins which prioritise communication, cooperation and the unity of groups (Dissanayake, 2001; Molino, 2001; Trevarthen, 2002). From this perspective music supports groups coming and staying together.

As well as being a stand-out feature in children's playful communication, rhythm is also an underpinning component in the development of the intersubjectivity that characterises early infant-caregiver relationships (Trevarthen, 2002). This early dance-like sharing of subjectivities is expressed in the ability to anticipate and synchronise rhythmically with key others. The development of such synchronicity requires infants observing and repetitively imitating the gestures of their caregivers. This repetitive infant imitation may be explained as the activity of mirror neurones firing as infants recognise specific patterns of behaviour (such as tongue protrusion). This explanation demonstrates the interaction of both biologically inherited and culturally conditioned behaviours (Parker-Rees, 2007). It follows that the innate, biological sense of rhythm is also social and cultural.

Furthermore, Dissanayake (2001) suggests that early rhythmic communicative musicality underpins the development in humans of artistic and aesthetically creative ways of thinking and being. Poetry, dance, drama, and music –*musike* – all involve communication and symbolic representation mediated by body movement, sound, and rhythm.

Rhythm, gesture, pitch, and tone combined – the basics of music and *musike* – can create scripts that are musical narratives. Instead of words, rhythm expressed in gesture, pitch, and tone conveys the emotional feelings of the storyline. Narratives, musical and/or verbal, are socially and culturally constructed and their construction and interpretation is a primal way of making sense and meaning (Bruner, 1990; Nelson, 1996). In this article musical narrative (including *musike*) is an aspect of the narrative scripts which are presented as 'events'.

## **Method**

The overarching research question for this article asked: 'How do young children experience humour and playfulness in their communication?' This article explores the rhythmic nature of children's observed experienced communicative playfulness in two 'events'. These 'events' are one way of representing and attempting to get closer to understanding others' subjective and intersubjective experiences (Jackson, 1998).

The design of this study was inspired by the naturalistic and ecological fieldwork methods of ethnographic research (Jackson, 1998; Chambers, 2000; Tedlock, 2000). The researcher took a passive reactive (Corsaro, 1985) participant observer role, engaging with children when they invited her, and on their terms. This article presents data from one centre, called Northbridge, which the researcher visited on 25 occasions, for a total of 50 hours spread over a year. Northbridge was an all-day, mixed-age (six months to five years) early childhood centre. The staff were all qualified and the centre had above-average adult:child ratios, with a small group size of up to 23 children and between five and six staff on duty at all times.

## **Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)**

Cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) framed this research as both methodology and paradigm, and is informed by the work of Leont'ev (1978), Vygotsky (1978, 1986), Cole (1996), and Engeström (1999). Chaiklin (2001) has defined CHAT as 'the study of the development of psychological functions through social participation in societally-organised practices' (p. 21). The societally organised practices presented in this article are playful 'events' observed in early childhood centres.

From a socio-cultural CHAT perspective, culture is mediated – transformed, internalised, externalised, created, and re-created – via artefacts. All interactions are mediated by artefacts. Music, sounds, words, narrative scripts, rhythm, and movement may function as mediating artefacts that connect children communicatively. From this perspective artefacts include both material and non-material representations of tools, signs, and symbols (Wartofsky, 1979). Artefacts may therefore include bodies and gaze, for example, and all the signs, symbols, and tools which connect children and mediate their playful activity in the events presented in this article. Events are artefact-mediated systems of activity, and the two ‘events’ in this article are treated as the basic unit of analysis.

The ‘events’ position children as members of communities. Children assume roles, follow rules, and transform both. These transformations and the dynamics inherent in activity add tension to the activity as a whole. Tensions and contradictions between the components of activity propel and motivate ongoing activity. Analysis involves exploring the tensions and contradictions in these relationships.

Wartofsky (1979) has proposed three overlapping levels of artefacts to emphasise how their representational role mediates activity. The first level of primary artefacts describes material objects as they are used directly. Words, a large tarpaulin cloth and silver foil mediate playfulness at this primary level in the events presented in this article. Secondary artefacts include symbolic representations of primary artefacts with the addition of a historical dimension. The norms and routines of the early childhood centre, mediated by words and outlined in centre rules, such as timetables, are examples of secondary artefacts.

The narrative scripts presented as ‘events’ in this article are examples of tertiary artefacts (Alcock, 2007). Tertiary artefacts include ‘a class of artefacts which can come to constitute a relatively autonomous “world”, in which the rules, conventions and outcomes no longer appear directly practical, or which, indeed, seem to constitute an arena of non-practical, or “free” play or game activity’ (Wartofsky, 1979. 208). Tertiary artefacts are symbolic and, with the addition of imagination, they mediate how we perceive and represent the world. An awareness of ‘events’ as tertiary artefacts may be particularly pertinent for deepening understandings of aesthetics in the curriculum.

Rhythm, which is a focus in this article, exemplifies the complexities of interactions by representing and complexly connecting all three levels of artefacts. The following events became tertiary artefacts as children playfully, rhythmically and aesthetically created the *play-drama* (Guss, 2005) scripts (Cole, 1996; Nelson, 1996). This collaborative script creation was mediated by the children playing imaginatively with primary and secondary artefacts.

The CHAT framework for data analysis makes explicit how artefact mediation combines with other elements of activity (such as the rules, roles and community) to form activity systems that dynamically and dialectically connect, in a multiplicity of ever-expanding interconnected activity systems (Engeström, 1999). Analysis involves looking for tensions and contradictions in these mediated relationships and identifying the motivating aims of the activity as a system. A CHAT analysis illuminates how the tensions and contradictions in these artefact-mediated relationships motivate the ongoing communicative activity of the system as a whole. Thus, rather than focusing on individual children, this article examines systems of relationships and considers the artefact-mediated (Wartofsky, 1979) nature of young children’s communicative and complexly connected, rhythmic playfulness.

### **First Event: waterspout play**

Context: windy, outside, summer. The age span of children is wide, from two years, two months to four years, nine months. Over half an hour (the time of the event) the number of children involved in the play grows from three to six.

A large blue plastic tarpaulin cloth and a dome-shaped climbing frame mediate the play as primary artefacts. The previous day the teachers had covered the dome with the tarpaulin and the younger children (two- to three-year-olds) had fun, playing hiding games, inside and outside the tent-like covered dome (‘our house’).

Zizi (four years, seven months), Dani (four years, nine months) and Sally (four years, eight months) are together pulling a large blue tarpaulin over the dome-shaped climbing frame; they make 'ooooo' sounds in unison, imitating the wind, intersubjectively in tune with each other, and connected by the tarpaulin. They laugh together as it blows off. The activity involves them coordinating their moves while crawling, climbing and pulling the tarpaulin up and over the dome, against the wind. The wind blows it off again and they laugh.

They leave for a few minutes then return to the task. This time teacher Rae offers them pieces of string to fasten the tarpaulin. They cover the frame but don't use the string as they don't all want to make a fixed tent-house.

*Teacher Rae:* Well you'll have to negotiate ... are you using your words Dani?

*Dani:* No, no, no Zizi no no ... (Zizi has pulled too much to her side)

*Oscar* (four years, nine months): Well I want to build a house. (joining in)

Another gust of wind takes the tarpaulin off the frame. Laughter, glee and a lot of movement; they battle the wind with the tarpaulin.

Younger children drift over towards the action, Eliza (two years, two months), and Milly (three years, two months) (six players now). Oscar picks up bark chips from the ground, where he stands and drops them on his hat. Eliza, seeing this, also picks up bark chips; she drops them on the tarpaulin (imitating). Dani climbs to highest point on top of frame and tarpaulin, while Eliza busily picks up more bark chips and smiling, throws them onto the tarpaulin (repeating). At this point the play changes direction.

#### *Pause for Analysis and Discussion*

*Mediation: houses and windy weather as artefacts.* This house re-creation is an example of how the broader socio-cultural context provides motivation for and mediates children's collaborative play. Houses and shelter are important aspects of the adult world; in trying to make a 'house' the children intended to re-create a 'pretend' version of the adult 'real' world (El'konin, 1972, 2000). As material artefacts, the tarpaulin and the dome-shaped climbing frame mediated their imaginative house construction. The transformational qualities of both the artefacts and the imaginations of the children steered this event. Children used their imaginations to collectively transform the climbing frame and the tarpaulin into a tent-like house. Later the blue tarpaulin is imaginatively and playfully transformed into water falling down inside the dome frame. The windy weather was a powerful natural rhythmic force mediating and influencing the course of the play. Together the windy weather, laughter, and assertively negotiated agendas added tension to the activity, thereby connecting the players with each other and with their surroundings. These rhythmic tensions in both the wild windy weather and the children's exuberantly physical rhythmic movements sustained and motivated the ongoing play. Repetition and imitation also connected the children, particularly the younger ones, who watched, imitated and repeated the playful movements they'd seen.

Event continues:

The play turns as Dani falls through the frame, with the tarpaulin beneath, carrying and holding her; she laughs and screeches with glee. The tarpaulin falls in folds through the gaps in the dome frame as she sits on it. Zizi, Sally, Dani laugh and scream, like fire engines, under the tarpaulin,

Zizi explains excitedly to the watching researcher: 'We jumped down the waterspout, we're going down the waterspout.'

The blue plastic tarpaulin becomes a visual metaphor for the concept of water as the children purposefully fall through the gaps in the dome frame and slide down the tarpaulin waterspout (waterfall).

Oscar: I came down again. (to Zizi, Sally, Dani)

Zizi: We've got two waterspouts. (excitedly, to researcher)

Oscar: Zizi, in here, in here.

Sally beside Oscar, laughs a lot and watches the others. Dani is all activity, totally absorbed. Elli follows the older ones and drops through the dome, hanging by her arms, teacher Rae rescues and lowers her. Zizi and Oscar lie next to each other in a hammock-like structure.

Teacher Rae: Sunhats on!

Oscar: Woweee, here's the doorway.

Zizi: Lets play hide and seek Rae (teacher).

Teacher Rae: Well I know where you all are. Okay, what shall I count to?

Zizi: 10.

Teacher Rae: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10.

Zizi: Shut the door, shut the door.

Teacher Rae: Mmm I wonder where they could be?

(Screeches of laughter from inside the tarpaulin water spout)

Teacher Rae: Oh here you all are, hiding in the water spout, woweee, here's the doorway.

Oscar: That's the water spout. (to teacher Rae)

Teacher Rae: Are you wet?

Oscar: No.

Teacher Rae: Why not?

Oscar: It's a dry waterspout.

Zizi: Come into the waterspout.

Zizi: Sophie you count. (to researcher)

Zizi: Hide, everyone hide, Sophie count.

Oscar: Zizi, in here, in here.

Researcher: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. I wonder where the children are?

Screams of laughter as the waterspout 'door' (the waterspout still has some house-like attributes; the door is the overlapping edges of the tarpaulin) opens and six children emerge laughing wildly, almost falling, tumbling over each other.

(Northbridge, 21 January 2000)

### *Analysis and Discussion*

*Distributed imagination: distributed playfulness: improvisation.* These children laughed, screamed, chanted and giggled while their bodies moved and danced rhythmically, excitedly, with enthusiasm, highly motivated to have fun together. The rhythmic play connected the children. At times the synchronous movements and speech of children having fun together seemed like a spontaneously improvised dance. Signs overlapped and boundaries between children became blurred in the rhythm of the activity.

Spontaneity, improvisation, imagination and rhythm stand out as features of children moving playfully and creatively together, as in this event. Sawyer (1997) suggests that this sort of improvised group collaboration has important implications for children's developing creative abilities because creativity involves both improvisation and collaboration. Children improvising and performing together may also be practising and learning through repeated play with sounds, rhythm, movement, words, feelings, and meanings. In a sense every action is improvised because nothing is ever repeated or imitated exactly. The children in this event improvised and performed both for themselves and with each other. The ancient Greek concept of *musike* includes the performance dimensions of drama, poetry, dance and music, which were all present in this event; it felt and looked like a performance to the researcher.

Children's use of their imaginations, sense of rhythm and their playfulness became distributed across the group in this event. The symbolically created waterspout became a central mediating artefact in the collaborative improvisational play of these children, yet it was initially imagined by

just one child, Zizi, and was probably unfamiliar to most of the children. The waterspout name is poetically appealing (with possible allusions to incy wincy spider in the children's nursery rhyme) and the falling blue tarpaulin did convey moving images of waterfalls, waterspouts and whirlpools.

In this event rhythm became distributed via playful improvised communication around artefact-mediated activity, creating a drama – a play – in which the actors were also the audience. The older children directed and mediated the rhythmic play with chants, words and bodies, while the younger ones immersed and enmeshed themselves in the tarpaulin, imitating others, repetitively throwing bark chips, transforming and re-creating the previous day's house play in new ways. Roles were imaginatively transformed as Zizi, for example, assertively directed both the teacher and the researcher in counting and taking useful roles in the play.

Rules also underwent changes as children's prior experiences with words and the world added tensions that motivated the continued play (El'konin, 1972, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). For example, Zoe began directing the adults like an adult, and Oscar cleverly added his world experiences, by referring to the construction as a 'dry waterspout', a contradictory tension-producing concept, because water is wet. 'Waterspout' blended both meaning and feeling in a word and the original house was transformed into a waterspout. This combination of words, sounds (ooooo), the climbing frame, the tarpaulin, wind, children's imaginations and physical bodies all mediated children's shared rhythmic playfulness. These different types of mediating artefacts also represented the complexity and diversity in the activity.

Using their imaginations, the children metaphorically re-created their earlier experiences (Lindqvist, 1995). They re-created a narrative script with adventurous themes of hiding and being found. This script functioned as an imaginative tertiary artefact (Wartofsky, 1979) mediating the contradictions that motivated the continued play. The adventure script was also a dramatic artistic performance of rhythm-dominated play. Guss (2005, p. 235) has described such dramatic playing as '*play-drama* – a drama performed in the cultural context of children's playing'.

Children's mediated activity communicated collaboration and synchronicity. The youngest children, Eliza and Milly, didn't speak. Neither did Sally, who spoke very little English, having newly arrived from Sweden. However, these three, like the others, showed their understandings of the play, by using their bodies rhythmically to communicate ideas and feelings and relate to each other intersubjectively and in tune with the play (Ruthrof, 2000; Dissanayake, 2001).

Children used their bodies purposively and intelligently (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Ruthrof, 2000), almost in unison, climbing up and falling down, getting caught in the tarpaulin, hiding and being found and repeating everything. Their body movements became rhythmically centred on the image of a waterspout that they were either in, on, or some part of, though they had to imagine what a waterspout might be like. Playfulness seemed to relax and free up children's thinking. In anticipating and repeating the actions, with slight variations, children internalised the associated feelings. Thus each child experienced the same waterspout play uniquely and personally. In this way the diversity in their individual experiences became distributed across the group, emerging as apparently chaotic, yet rhythmically unifying activity.

The artefact-mediated, rhythmic, individually initiated yet socially distributed nature of this spontaneously improvised play-drama event is an example of how mundane and common play may evolve as an aesthetic experience. The performance involved children becoming engaged in new ways of seeing and being together. Thus, the performance was the play process, rather than an end product.

The following event also illuminates the artefact-mediated, rhythmic and distributed nature of playfulness. This playful performance is initiated by a very young child. Eliza is almost two years old. Hiding is again a narrative theme. Perhaps significantly, traditional visual arts materials are used, but in non-traditional ways, to mediate aesthetically rhythmic playfulness.

### **Second Event: playing with silver foil wrap in the art-space**

Context: Northbridge: 8.30 a.m. (arrival time), all children are indoors.

Teacher Sue is seated on a child-sized bed in the family play area, reading (a book of traditional rhymes) to Frank (two years, eight months) who sits beside her; Eliza (one year, eleven months)

arrives with a large piece of shiny silver plastic wrapping foil wrapped around her. The researcher stands nearby, observing.

*Eliza:* Bboooo! (jumps while exclaiming to researcher)

Teacher Sue says something (inaudible) to Eliza about loud noises

*Eliza:* Grrrr, brrrr. (responding as she moves towards teacher Sue)

Teacher Sue pretends to be frightened and hugs Frank, who's holding the book.

*Frank:* Grrrr, brrrr. (to Eliza)

*Teacher Sue:* That was so funny. (to Eliza)

*Eliza:* Lala lala lalaa. (jumps with glee, smiling all over)

Eliza wraps the silver foil around her shoulders like a scarf and moves to the nearby painting area.

*Eliza:* Paint, me paint, paint. (pointing to the painting easels, which are occupied by other children)

A child finishes and teacher Rae puts an apron on Eliza, who becomes engaged in painting.

Pete (three years, six months) approaches teacher Sue and sits beside her on the bed. She teaches him an old action rhyme.

*Teacher Sue:* Knock on the door, and peep in, chin chopper, chin chopper, chin chin chin.

Pete repeats the actions on teacher Sue's face and vice versa, three times. Frank, still sitting on the bed on the other side of teacher Sue, watches.

Eliza finishes painting and returns to teacher Sue. Eliza laughs as teacher Sue recites the same rhyme and does the actions on Eliza's face.

Teacher Ali arrives and Eliza rushes up to her, with the wrapping foil. She hides her face behind it.

*Eliza:* Grrrr ... (laughter)

*Teacher Ali:* (laughs crouching down to Eliza's height)

Teacher Ali gently throws the wrapping foil up in the air. Eliza copies this action and becomes interested in the floating quality of the silver foil. Eliza laughs at the floating foil. She smiles and laughs a lot.

Charlie (three years, six months) catches the falling foil and runs off with it, Meg (two years, eleven months) joins in and follows him. So does Albert (two years). Eliza tries unsuccessfully to retrieve the foil.

Later in the morning Charlie leads Eliza in cutting the silver foil up and pasting it on paper, in the art area.

(Northbridge, 6 November 1999)

### *Analysis and Discussion*

*Improvisation and power in communication.* As well as rhythm and *musike* (the temporal arts: poetry, dance, drama, and music), this event also involved improvised joking humour initiated and performed by a very young child, Eliza, and directed towards an audience of adults/teachers. Eliza's initial joking peek-a-boo humour was an aspect of the overall playfulness that united both teachers and children in power-sharing relationships.

The usual teacher–child power positioning was reversed when teacher Ali allowed Pete to do the finger rhyme on her face and teacher Sue crouched to the same height as Eliza while playing with her. Eliza had started the event by jokingly hiding behind the silver foil wrap. The researcher, taking a passive reactive role (Corsaro, 1985), simply smiled. However, teacher Sue responded more positively by commenting on loud noises. This provoked a growling playful response from Eliza and Frank towards the teacher. Playfulness seemed to empower the children and teachers towards improvisational and therefore creative ways of responding in their play.

As Fogel (1993) explains, communication is not smooth. This exchange of reactions was not as linear as it appears in the transcript; it was chaotic and multi-layered with a huge amount of physically expressed communication by rhythmically coordinated moving bodies (Ruthrof, 2000). For example, while growling, Eliza, almost lion-like, crawled towards Frank, who simultaneously leaned his body towards her. A lot of the playfulness was expressed in energetic and rhythmic movement, in laughter, jumping, and happy body language. In these (and other) examples, playful communication seemed to open the players up to different ways of being and expressing themselves.

*Artefact mediation, rhythmicity, transformation, and motivation in communication.* In focusing on the joint activity of children being rhythmically playful together, questions arise as to what motivates this rhythmicity and playfulness.

Rhythm is a core component of communication, of much aesthetic experience, and, according to Dissanayake (2001), rhythm is implicit in all the creative arts. The children in these events actively empowered themselves, not as individuals, but rather as group members using rhythm, expressed in movement, sounds and words, as *musike*, to communicate, have fun, and express ideas and feelings imaginatively and aesthetically. The play-drama events involved children in relationships connected to each other and the environment via mediating rhythm. Rhythm was a dominant feature in both these events.

In these events the motivating aims of the playfulness seemed to clearly involve sociability, relationships, and togetherness. According to activity theory the aim of activity is bound up with the motivation for the activity (Leont'ev, 1978). Play is complicated in that one ludic aim of play is the play itself (Hakkarainen, 1999); as playfulness is a sub-category of play, the aims for children being playful are just that, to be playful together. However, on the basis of the events presented in this article, this explanation seems too simplistic and circular.

Rhythmically aesthetic playfulness mediated children's developing relationships, including how they experienced communication, on several levels simultaneously. Wartofsky's (1979) classification of artefacts acknowledges the complexity involved in the artefact-mediated process of representing ideas and feelings and the importance of recognising that non-material semiotic signs and symbols are also mediating artefacts. Thus the play-dramas (Guss, 2005) in the events presented in this article are examples of tertiary artefacts; these play-drama scripts aesthetically, rhythmically and playfully mediated *musike*, and connected children communicatively.

Just as artefacts are multi-faceted, so too do individuals have multiple goals. These goals are not static; they change, and this movement motivates the ongoing activity. Some goals become dominant group goals, thereby providing ongoing motivation for the activity and becoming a force in themselves, not owned by individuals, but distributed over the group (Salomon, 1993). Thus the house play was given up, not as an individual's conscious decision, but in response to several mediating factors, including the wind. The more important group goal of being playful together sustained and transformed the play, and the waterspout play became a group goal, enabling the further development of playful relationships. Wertsch (1985, p. 212) writes: 'The motive that is involved in a particular activity setting specifies what is to be maximised in that setting. By maximising one goal, one set of behaviours, and the like over others, the motive also determines what will be given up if need be in order to accomplish something else.'

In these events the dynamic, transformational and aesthetic process of artefact-mediation seemed to provoke the ongoing motivation for the activity. From the perspective of CHAT, transformation is at the core of growth, creativity and learning. Transformation – re-creation – is integral to cultural and aesthetic processes, including children's rhythmic play. In the events



presented in this article the climbing-frame house became a waterspout, the silver foil was used in various ways. Words too were rhythmically and aesthetically poetically transformed.

Like the tarpaulin, which changed from forming a house to being a waterspout, the silver foil too was transformed as it mediated activity in several ways: by hiding Eliza, by floating and being chased, before finally being cut up and pasted as collage art. Enveloping materials of various fabrics were frequently observed as mediating artefacts in young children's playfulness. The silver foil shared similar skin-like qualities with the plastic tarpaulin in the waterspout play. While the large tarpaulin seemed to hold the children together in a chaotically noisy and playful way, uniting them as they clambered under, over, and inside it, the much smaller size of the metallic foil material in the second event restricted Eliza's enveloping hiding play to her alone. However, the playfulness in both events was essentially rhythmic and social. Eliza did seem to be performing for an audience.

When activity involves playfulness and rhythm, boundaries around artefact use can become playfully fuzzy, flexible and open to improvisation; rules for artefact usage are not fixed and rigid. For example, Eliza improvised and used the foil in several ways that did not include wrapping up parcels, which was its manufactured use. She moved rhythmically with the foil which mediated her dancing and hiding. When children can play freely with artefacts, the mediating (transforming, internalising and externalising) process is likely to be a meaningful aesthetic experience for them, as this experience seemed to be for Eliza.

It is in using artefacts that children develop understandings of the ways they may be used. In these events fabrics were used to cover, to create houses and waterspouts, to hide under, and to otherwise envelop in many playful ways. Children imitated, created and adapted rhythmic patterns of behaviour and scripts (Cole, 1996) as play-drama artefacts. These artefacts affected children's developing shared consciousness rhythmically, reciprocally, and aesthetically. 'Children are basically, theatrical, or dramatic, and in play they can create meaning – a conscious world' (Lindqvist, 1995, p. 59). Referring to this use of artefacts on developing consciousness, Wartofsky (1979) writes: 'It is in the use of such representations that a characteristic mode of praxis is preserved, and comes to be transmitted; and in this lies the germ of cultural evolution ... (Thus, I say in another paper, the artefact is to cultural evolution what the gene is to biological evolution)' (p. 205).

As artefacts, play-drama scripts can mediate young children re-creating and learning their cultures creatively and aesthetically. According to El'konin (1972), elaborating on Vygotsky's 1920-30s Russian writing, play is the leading activity for young children's learning. However, play involves more than learning (Guss, 2005). Imitation, imagination, and improvisation are all aspects of play; when combined with collaboration they can make play an aesthetic experience as well as a learning experience. The children in these and other events may have experienced a range of feelings and thoughts from their shared involvement in common playful activities. But being playful together enabled these children to practise and learn the skills and attitudes of being flexible, improvisational, connected and creative people. Rhythm pervaded this social connectedness.

Contradictions, tensions and discontinuities characterise communication generally (Fogel, 1993), and playfulness thrives on contradictions. In these events contradictions emerged out of the actions of children engaged in playful activities. They also emerged between the roles and rules of the early childhood centre community, the wider community, and the peer group community engaged in the activity when children challenged rules and norms playfully. As in music, these contradictions motivated and sustained the rhythmically playful activity by creating tension.

## Conclusion

Children in the events presented in this article used sounds, words, narrative scripts and bodies to mediate and contradict, collaborate, communicate, and playfully express and experience ideas and feelings rhythmically and aesthetically in activity. The CHAT framework for analysis emphasises the systemic and connected, complex and dialectical nature of this activity by prioritising the artefact-mediated and motivating nature of the relationships that create and sustain the activity.

These events illuminate the interplay of aesthetic, emotional, social and cognitive dimensions of communication, and the overlapping ways in which the temporal arts mediate young children's playful communication. The ancient Greek word *musike* aptly combines the temporal arts of dance,

drama, music, poetry and song. These arts are expressed in rhythm or pulse, tone, pitch, gesture, and narrative (Trevorthen, 2002), all of which are features of children's playful communication, as well as being tertiary mediating artefacts (Wartofsky, 1979).

These young children communicated, represented, learned, created and re-created ideas and feelings by experiencing and practising *musike* – the temporal arts – rhythmically. Thus they were engaged in being and becoming, living and learning, enjoying, playing and experiencing the world aesthetically and collectively.

The aesthetic dimension in young children's education tends to be overlooked; instead there is an almost exclusive psychological and sociological focus on 'learning potential' in the early childhood curriculum. A pedagogical focus on aesthetic experiences involving *musike* can enrich the early childhood curriculum by enhancing diversity around ways of knowing, experiencing, and communicating. A focus on aesthetics – on experiencing, feeling, being and becoming in the present moment – can enrich children's learning and living.

This focus on rhythm is also likely to have positive spin-offs for teachers and for the curriculum, simply because rhythm, a foundational aspect of *musike* – the temporal arts of dance, drama, music, poetry – is also such a fundamentally connecting aspect of social communication and culture. From a purely pragmatic perspective a pedagogical awareness of rhythm in *musike* and all the arts (Dissanayake, 2001) means acknowledging that children (and teachers) have multiple ways of communicating, expressing, experiencing and representing ideas and feelings, rhythmically, playfully and aesthetically. With this awareness teachers can support children's rhythmic and multi-aesthetic expression by ensuring that children have choice and are encouraged to communicate and express themselves in a range of rhythmic ways that include the elements of *musike*.

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