

Word-play and *musike*

Young children learning literacies while communicating playfully

Sophie Alcock
Victoria University of Wellington

Joy Cullen
Alison St George
Massey University

THIS PAPER EXPLORES YOUNG children's rhythmic, musical, humorous and playful communication in the context of empowering themselves to create meaningful curriculum during teacher-controlled routine morning-tea times in an early childhood education centre. The data, presented as 'events', formed part of an interpretive qualitative study exploring young children's experience of humour and playfulness in their communication. The ethnographic-inspired research methods included the researcher as a participant observer. Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) framed the methodology, and mediated activity was the unit of analysis. CHAT illuminated the tensions, contradictions and power patterns inherent in communicative activity. This paper illustrates how young children's rhythmic musicality serves both communicative and enjoyable functions, and argues that rhythm also forms the basis for young children's developing verbal communication and early literacy learning. The 'events' make visible literacy as social practice (Hamilton, 1999).

Introduction

THE ANCIENT GREEK word for music, *musike*, includes rhythm, movement, poetry, dance, drama and all the temporal arts. 'Music, language, dance, chant, poetry and pretend play all have a partly common origin' (Molino, 2001, p. 173). All are modalities for making meaning. They are languages involving representation, movement and interpersonal communication.

This paper explores an expanded understanding of language development and early literacy that emphasises the rhythmic nature of *musike*. It explores children's communicative and rhythmic play with words, sounds, music and movement. Rhythm is a basic component of both musical language and verbal language (Trevarthen, 2002), and this paper suggests that rhythm is also a basic element in young children's literacy behaviour. Non-verbal, verbal and musical aspects of communication are integrated as children create both (emotional) sense and (cognitive) meaning from words (Vygotsky, 1986). From a Vygotskian social-interactionist perspective, words carry both personal sense and social meaning. Words, with tone and rhythm, connect individuals as social beings. Some of the implications of this expanded view of literacy learning for teachers of young children are discussed.

Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)

Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) provided both the methodology and the paradigm for the wider study of children's communicative playfulness which this paper draws on (Alcock, 2006). Chaiklin (2001) has defined CHAT, which he prefers to call 'cultural historical psychology', as 'the study of the development of psychological functions through social participation in societally-organised practices' (p. 21). Essentially this means that individual learning and development is social and cultural.

CHAT, which has its origins in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of psychological development, emphasises systems of interaction. Therefore, rather than focusing on individual children, this research examined the relationships of children being playful together, with a specific focus on the artefacts which mediated these relationships. Mediating artefacts include both material and non-material representations of tools, signs and symbols (Wartofsky, 1979). Such a broad definition may include gestures, posture, gaze, sounds and words as mediating artefacts transmitting signals, and thereby connecting people. The rules, roles and community of children are other mediating components of the CHAT system (Engestrom, 1999).

The CHAT framework for analysis makes explicit how artefact mediation combines with other components of activity to form activity systems that dynamically connect, intersect and cross over time and space 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 system. A CHAT perspective can illuminate how the tensions and contradictions in these mediated relationships motivate the ongoing communicative activity, referred to as 'Discourses' by Gee (1996, p. viii).

Discourses ... include much more than language ... [They] are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiation of particular roles by specific groups of people, whether families of a certain sort, women or men of a certain sort [or early childhood institutions of various sorts].

In contrast to 'Discourse', 'discourses' as described by Gee (1996, p. 127) are 'connected stretches of language that make sense, like conversations, stories ... and so forth. So "discourse" is part of "Discourse" – "Discourse" is always more than just language.'

Rhythm, musicality and narrative in children's communication

A sense of narrative, or discourse (Gee, 1996), is integral to music. Just as words construct verbal narratives, so can music construct musical narratives using pitch, tone and rhythm to convey the storyline. Like discourse, narrative construction is both a primal way of making meaning and sense of the world, and a basis for literacy learning (Bruner, 1986; Nelson, 1996; Wells, 1999).

Musical rhythms, chants and gestures mediate children's communication and connectedness with each other and the world (Dissanayake, 2001; Trevarthen, 2002). Movement, music, sounds, words and gestures characterise young children's social playfulness. From a CHAT perspective music, movement and words are symbolic artefacts that mediate communication. Music, rhythm and movement expressed in sounds and words mediate and connect children communicatively.

Young children use many languages in their playful communication. The use of purposeful gestures in the communication of pre-verbal children has been referred to as 'proto language' by Halliday (1993, p. 96). It includes gesture, posture, rhythm and sound, and forms the basis for more sophisticated and complex dialogical language development. Unlike words, proto language 'cannot create information, and it cannot construct discourse' (Halliday, 1993, p. 96). However, pre-verbal proto language is also integral to verbal communication. Words do not stand alone. Rather, the rhythm and movement associated with proto language add sense to words. They contribute

to the Discourses (Gee, 1996) children construct as they play with both the sense and the meanings of words, and develop shared and generalised understandings of words and narratives that reflect the wider cultural, historical and social contexts of communication.

Early literacy and multiple literacies

Discourses of early literacy learning occur socially while children are engaged in everyday practices and routines. Literacy is learned via the sorts of social practices children are immersed in from birth onwards (Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2000; Makin, Jones Diaz & McLachlan, 2007). Literacy includes the use of socioculturally constructed symbol systems to represent and communicate values, ideas and feelings.

These communicative symbol systems are diverse and numerous; they include all the temporal and expressive arts and other languages. Kress (1997) refers to the diversity of communicative symbol systems as providing complementary 'modes' for creating meaning. In a similar vein, the New London Group (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, cited by Martello, 2007) have identified five literacy symbol systems, called elements, for making meaning. The five literacy elements are linguistic meaning, visual meaning, audio meaning, gestural meaning and spatial meaning. Multi-modal literacies consist of combinations of these elements.

From this multi-modal communicative perspective, learning to be literate involves much more than narrow print-based understandings of literacy (see Anning, 2003; Gee, 1996; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; New, 2001). It involves learning multi-modal literacies (Kress, 1997; Makin et al., 2007; Martello, 2007). This multi-modal perspective of literacy learning is also reflected in the growing literature which explores links between oral and print-based literacies (Dickinson & Neuman, 2006; Neuman & Dickinson, 2001).

Aside from multiple literacies, literature also stresses the importance of relationships between children, and between children and their teacher-caregivers for literacy learning (Ostrosky, Gaffney & Thomas, 2006; Pianta, 2006). An emphasis on relationships reinforces the importance of children having a sense of belonging as a pre-condition for engaged learning. While phonemic awareness and developing vocabularies are important in early literacy learning (Rohl, 2000), it is the emotional climate and nature of the relationships in the early childhood setting that impact most strongly on children's early literacy learning (Ostrosky, et al., 2006; Pianta, 2006). Dickinson, McCabe and Essex (2006), referring to progress in literacy learning, state that 'in such settings, children have the potential to make remarkable progress if they are taught by energetic and sensitive teachers who understand language, as well as cognitive, and emotional development' (p. 23). Part of being an outstanding teacher is having the capacity to use

musical rhythms, chants and gestures to mediate these literacy learning practices.

Literature also highlights the significance of sounds, rhymes and narratives for subsequent print-based literacy learning (Hamer & Adams, 2003). Referring to Rohl's review of research (2000), Hamer and Adams (2003) point out that 'the most accurate predictor of achievement in reading is an *explicit* awareness of the sound structure in language' (p. 102). Biemiller (2006) emphasises the strong link between vocabulary development and later literacy development. The ability to read-for-meaning requires knowledge of word meanings. Such knowledge is gained through word usage. It follows that early oral language which includes extensive practice and play with word sounds and meanings contributes to later literacy.

This awareness of the future benefits of word-play and other early literacy activities need not distract from valuing such activities for themselves. All the literacies, including music, visual arts and print-based languages, are symbol systems that express aspects of our identities and cultures, and as such are valuable in and for themselves (Makin & Whiteman, 2007). This paper specifically investigates young children's rhythmic and playful communicative literacies in an early childhood centre setting.

Method

The overarching research question for the wider study, of which this paper is a part, asked: 'How do young children experience humour and playfulness in their communication?' This paper specifically explores the role of word-play and *musike* in young children's playful communication.

The design of this study was inspired by the naturalistic and ecological field work methods of ethnographic research (Chambers, 2000; Tedlock, 2000). Three early childhood centres were involved in the wider study. This paper presents data from two centres: Northbridge, which the researcher visited on 25 occasions for a total of 50 hours spread over a year, and Southbridge, visited on 12 occasions over six months.

Ethical consent for conducting the research was obtained from a university human ethics committee. Signed consent for data-gathering was obtained from all staff, and from parents on behalf of their children. Where appropriate, children also gave verbal consent to being observed. For example, the researcher usually asked four-year-olds if it was okay to video them, while also ensuring that she did not interrupt children's play. The researcher was viewed as a friendly adult visitor by teachers, parents and children. She was not a regular teacher and took a passive reactive (Corsaro, 1985) participant observer role, engaging with children when they invited her, and on their terms.

Tools used for gathering and generating data consisted primarily of participant observation, mediated by technological tools including a small video camera, a laptop computer and occasionally an audio-cassette recorder. Note-taking alone was inadequate for capturing the complexity and spontaneity of playful interactions. The video camera was used to record body language as much as conversations. This reliance on technological tools was congruent with the researcher's developing awareness of the prevalence of multi-modal literacies in communication. These children were used to staff videoing them, so they were relaxed with the equipment and the transparent methodology. Children were also given opportunities to play with the video camera and laptop computer.

The original typed field notes, which included the video transcript notes, were divided into four columns: one for date, time, place and so on; another for 'objective' observations; the next for interpretation; and the fourth listed the material mediating artefacts. This list of material artefacts was important in using a CHAT model which prioritises artefact mediation.

The research observations of children playfully communicating were interpreted within narrative frameworks (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000; Ochs & Capps, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1988) called 'events' in this study. Bruner (1986) views narrative as meaning-making—as the experiential means by which we develop knowledge and understanding of the world and our place in it. He contrasts narrative ways of understanding with 'paradigmatic' ways of knowing (p. 26). Narrative is basically social. Stories are created socially.

The resultant events were further analysed using concepts associated with CHAT (Cole, 1996; Engeström, 1999; Leont'ev, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wertsch, 1998). This involved analysing how artefacts mediated relationships among various components of the event (Wartofsky, 1979). The researcher further interrogated these event narratives by exploring what and how tensions and contradictions emerged in these relationships and motivated the activity as a system. The three random events presented in this paper illuminate the pervasiveness of children's literacy practices.

Background context

The first two of the events presented here come from Northbridge early childhood centre. Northbridge was an all-day, mixed-age (6 months to 5 years) early childhood centre. Northbridge was structurally a 'good quality' centre, meaning that 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. These qualities of ratios, group size and staff qualifications were important reasons for selecting Northbridge centre. Combined with group

stability, they contributed to fairly secure relationships between children, staff and parents, allowing the centre to function as another 'home' or 'public family' for the children, thus enhancing the ecological validity (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) of the research observations.

The third event in this paper comes from Southbridge centre which, in contrast to Northbridge, was a sessional centre where most of the 30 children were four years old. Southbridge was also a 'good quality' centre, as all three teachers were qualified, and parent involvement during sessions contributed to the centre's public 'home-like' ethos.

Mixed-age eating together times were regular routines at mid-morning, midday and mid-afternoon times in Northbridge centre. The first two events presented here involve two morning tea times. These times consisted of children sitting around tables, eating and drinking together. The round tables seemed to physically connect the children in these teacher-controlled arrangements. The following episodes reveal that talking, chanting, singing, gaze, posture and other systems of communication strengthened the connections among the children.

Event 1: Chanting rhyming words with actions

The following song script is teacher-initiated and largely predetermined. However, the children add variation and complicate the script as, together, they attempt to create sense and meaning (Vygotsky, 1986) from the chanted words.

Fifteen three–four-year-old children sit, moving, jiggling while waiting, at two round tables—two teachers at one and one at the other. The researcher sits on a child-sized chair nearby, camcorder in hand, directed mainly at the table with two teachers. Four of the seven children are older, articulate, near-four-year-olds. Teacher Ali is in charge:

Teacher Ali: 'Okay.' [She begins the familiar, teacher-led, group chant that involves the children joining in and doing the body actions]

Teacher Ali: 'I can hear my hands go x x x.' [3 times clapping sounds]

'I can hear my tongue go x x x.' [3 times tongue-clicking sounds]

'But I can't hear my shoulders go x x x.' [silent shoulder-shrugging]

Olaf: 'I can.' (4 years, 9 months)

Tom: 'I can hear my shoulders go.' (4 years, 1 month)

[Teacher Ali ignores these comments and continues with more lines]:

'I can hear my lips go x x x.' [lip-smacking sound]

'I can hear my teeth go x x x.' [teeth-biting sound]

'But I can't hear my hair go x x x.' [head-nodding movement]

Olaf: 'I can hear my head going.'

Tom: 'I can, I can hear my brains going.'

The two teachers laugh, and Teacher Ali continues the chant:

'I can hear my feet go x x x.' [they stamp feet]

'I can hear my nose go x x x.' [snorting, breathing-in sounds]

'But I can't hear my eyes go x x x.' [blinking eyelids]

Three children (Tom, Olaf and Cheryl [3 years, 7 months]) in unison:

'I can', 'I can', 'I can.'

Anna, the oldest (4 years, 11 months), disagrees: 'I can't', almost siding with the teacher. Young Sally (2 years, 3 months), seated between Tom and Olaf smiles, seeming to agree that she too can hear her silent self. For a few minutes Tom continues shaking his head, shrugging his shoulders and listening to his own silent movements.

Power and togetherness

The musically rhythmic chant and sung rhyme connected children and teachers as a group (Freeman, 2001; Trevarthen, 2002). Communication was mediated by words and expressed in body language. Children 'spun off' each other, contributing feelings and thoughts. Together they influenced each other and created a shared consciousness. Initially only Olaf and Tom 'heard' their shoulders shrugging, but in the next round Cheryl also 'heard' and 'felt' her eyes blinking.

Almost in a reversal of roles and power, the teachers laughed at the humorous way the children had interpreted the meaning and rules of the words. The younger children watched and imitated the older children as they listened intently to the feelings of their internal body movements and sounds; concentration was visible in the tight facial expressions that showed them thinking about the meanings of the words they chanted and feeling the movement of their bodies as they listened.

This developmental process whereby children learn about word meanings from initially sensing the feelings of word sounds has been described by Vygotsky (1934, 1986):

The relation between thought and word is a living process; thought is born through words. A word devoid of thought is a dead thing ... the connection between thought and word ... emerges in the course of development, and itself evolves' (p. 255).

Olaf, Tom and Cheryl asserted considerable peer group agency in thinking about the meaning and feeling of the

words (Corsaro, 1985, 1997). Together they disagreed with the intended meaning of the words of the rhyme. They seemed to mix hearing and thinking with feeling. By disagreeing with the meaning of the song they challenged the accepted rules of the teacher-determined *status quo*, a brave initiative for relatively powerless children. Yet they did this without antagonism or divisiveness so that the group togetherness was not threatened. The teachers laughed, showing appreciation and enjoyment of the children's thinking and feeling-based questioning.

Such layers of meanings and relationships all added to the mosaic of group cohesiveness. Contradictions—expressed, for example, in the children challenging the word meanings by comparing their feelings—illuminated both the power balance and developmental differences in word usage between teachers and children, and between children and children. Most of the younger children felt the sense in the words, while the oldest child, Anna, like the teachers, thought about word meaning. These contradictions in children's understandings of meaning and feeling made explicit, with words, how contradictions motivated the continued playful involvement of both children and teachers in the activity. However, the communication involved more than word sense and meanings. It included the proto-linguistic rhythmic movements that seemed to physically connect the group. Less visible, but no less important, layers of historical and cultural conditions around the eating-together activity also contributed to the group communication styles and cohesiveness. These conditions included power-perpetuating rituals around the etiquette of eating together, such as waiting to be served, turn-taking and table manners. Children were learning the Discourses, including the tacit theories around reciting rhymes and eating together in an early childhood institution.

The following event involves children playing with the form and function of words as objects without teacher involvement. Words are wonderfully transformative playthings, or toys, as explained by Cazden (1973).

Event 2: Aesthetic word-play

Eight children (aged 2 years to 4 years, 8 months) and one teacher sit at a round table. A bowl of fruit is being passed slowly around the table. The three older children are semi-seated next to each other and across the table from the teacher and the fruit. They move a lot, messily in time and in tune, with each other. Chairs, mugs and feet scrape surfaces and the atmosphere is busy and noisy. Tom (4 years, 3 months) stands in front of his chair, rolling his empty water mug on the table. His body moves with the mug, never still. Zizi (4 years, 8 months) and Peta (3 years, 10 months) rock their chairs precariously.

Looking at the teacher, Tom spontaneously begins to

sing-chant:

Tom: 'Please pass the wee-wees.'

He gets no response and repeats the chant. As he still gets no response, he changes the chant:

'Please pass the trai-ain.'

Zizi rejoins: 'Please pass the trai-ain.'

The teacher had earlier made train noises while gently pushing the plate around the table.

Zizi: 'Please pass the fru-uit.'

Tom: 'Please pass the fru-uit.'

Zizi: 'Please pass the lollipop.'

Tom: 'Please pass the banana pop.' [sound unclear]

Zizi: 'Please pass the orange pop.'

Peta: 'Please pass the ice-block' ...

Tom and Peta: 'Please pass the ice-block' ... [in unison]

Tom: 'Please pass the pop-pop.'

Musike mediating word-play

These children improvised collaboratively and playfully, and in the process they practiced early literacy skills while creating a cognitively complex rhyming narrative. Physically constrained by chairs and tables, the children's bodies, imaginations, voices and the only available objects (mugs, chairs, table) mediated their playful communication as they improvised this chanting rhyme. The rhyme tells a story on several levels. The melodic chanted tone with its repetitive rhythm conveyed feelings of chaotic repetition, representative of many ritualistic eating-together times in early childhood centres. The to-and-fro playfulness in their chanting seemed to connect children as if the words were extensions of their bodies. The rhyming words were, in a sense, connected to their bodies as being food names.

The children used the language of *musike* to communicate and represent their ideas and feelings. They chanted and moved musically, dramatically and poetically. Like actors, they performed playfully for themselves, for each other and for an audience. They listened and looked at each other while moving and chanting rhythmic poetry. The word-play combined real fruit objects with rhyming food words. The imagined and exaggerated word associations were all with playful party food; lollipops and more pops. Varga (2000) has also noted over-the-top wild exaggerations as a feature in young children's play with words. As in a well-formed narrative, this event concluded positively, with pleasurable party-like images of lollies and ice blocks.

The improvised narrative chanting connected the children as together they created rules around the

rhyme and form of the chanting. The meanings of the chanted words ranged from subversively challenging the rules of social etiquette by referring to bodily functions as 'wee-wees' (talk of urination was taboo in the morning tea context), to accepting the importance of saying 'please' with 'pass'. Corsaro (1997) has referred to this process of children re-creating culture by assertively resisting adults' rules and authority as 'interpretive reproduction' whereby '... children create and participate in their own unique peer cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns' (p. 18). These children played creatively with words and the rules of etiquette. The initially subversive word-play helped create the tension that motivated their continued play with rhyming food words.

In this and other events (Alcock, 2006), playfulness seemed to free up thinking, enabling these children to practice and improvise within a joint zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), transforming words and meanings while creating new rhymes. From a sociocultural perspective the repetitive rhyming word-play, like repetitive pretend play, facilitated the internalisation process whereby children develop and internalise understandings through imitation and repetition (El'konin, 2000). Words are thus re-created anew. The children in this event were practicing, improvising and creatively learning about the structures (including phonics, rhyme, rhythm and form), the functions and the aesthetics of language in communication. They were both transforming and reproducing words as culture (Engestrom, 1999).

The following event involves children using words with rhythm to co-construct narratives and some dialogue from their monologues.

Event 3: Incongruity in tricks and magic

Background:

Southbridge, outside, sunny morning. Researcher sits on steps near the sandpit. Sandy (4 years, 2 months) and Flo (4 years, 3 months) come over, sit down beside her and initiate a conversation.

Sandy: 'We're doing tricky tricks.'

Researcher: 'What sort of tricks?'

Sandy: 'Lots, I've got a roly-poly slide at my house.'

Flo: 'And I've got a [unclear] slide at my house.'

Sandy: 'We were doing tricks at the tricky house; it's invisible. We go in there and shut the door and then it's invisible, it's a fold-up one.'

Researcher: 'A fold-up house?'

Flo: 'No, a tent that's got wings.'

Sandy: 'If someone comes to my house I'll trick them by getting them to go into my tree-house and

then they'll jump so high that they'll fall down and hurt themselves. And then I'll tell them to jump in the house and they will and they'll jump down from the tree and hurt themselves. Because I want to trick them.'

Flo: 'I got a magic wand at home; I got a slide at home.'

Sandy: 'And then when they fall they'll fall into a dungeon. There was a piece of string on top of the roof and then the string, the string will undo and they'll fall down.'

Flo: 'And I've got a fairy at home but she's not real; she did break once but we had to fix her.'

Sandy: 'The dungeon's going to be down at the bottom of the tree. I trick people by taking things away and putting them where people can't see, in a different place.'

Researcher: 'What does your wand look like?'

Flo: 'It's very beautiful.'

Sandy: 'I have two wands at home and I share a room with my brother.'

Flo: 'My wand is pinkish-purple. I got it from Spotlight [a shop]. I made it, I brought all of the stuff that I had to make it from Spotlight.'

Sandy: 'We'll go and do some other tricks now.'

Nearby, teacher Jo sings along to music playing on the radio.

Flo [to teacher Jo]: 'I know one about fairies.'

Teacher Jo: 'Can you sing it?'

Flo: 'No, it's a magic song and it only works on magic days.'

Talking, thinking

This serious dual conversation about tricks and traps had elements of the incongruity and double-thinking that characterise joking humour. The conversation was dual, in the sense that both Flo and Sandy constructed stories and explanations; these sometimes overlapped, but were also independent. Ochs and Capps (2001) describe how conversational narratives can help narrators develop 'frameworks for understanding events' (p. 2). The researcher, sitting alongside the children, mediated this talk by being passively present, yet listening and asking a few questions to clarify the thinking framework.

Young children's conversational narratives exhibit a variety of styles: simple, complex, short, long, finished and unfinished. All have in common the concept of meaning embedded in the situation, in the social, cultural, historical context of the individuals involved. We bring our unique and shared experiences to our interpretations of words as utterances, which express

meaning and feeling. Ochs and Capps (2001) write:

All narrative exhibits tension between the desire to construct an over-arching storyline that ties events together in a seamless explanatory framework and the desire to capture the complexities of the events experienced, including haphazard details, uncertainties and conflicting sensibilities among protagonists (p. 4).

In this scenario the story explanations served to hold together relationships, between both the concepts in their stories and the story-tellers. Sandy and Flo used words as tools to assist thinking. Thus, Sandy's explanation of the invisible tree-house became increasingly complicated in the telling. The words she used seemed to mediate her thinking. Flo embellished her powerful 'magic' wand with descriptive words. Asserting her autonomy and imbuing words with magic power, she cleverly explained why she would not, or could not, sing the magic song because, 'it only works on magic days'. Overlapping themes of magic and tricks coordinated their monologues as dialogue, and towards the end of the conversation wands briefly became a shared interest. It was their experiences in the wider community beyond the early childhood centre that stimulated their conversational monologues. In this way, children's individual prior experiences and current shared monologues facilitated their shared imaginative thinking; the process is similar to the distribution of cognition described by Salomon (1993). As a mediating listener, the researcher felt she was simply fitting in with an adult listener role that the teachers in this community seemed to value. She had observed them doing likewise.

Discussion

This study emphasises the pedagogical value inherent in everyday centre practices such as morning tea routines and casual conversations. This has implications for teacher awareness of early literacy as social practice (Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2000; Makin et al., 2007) and of the complexity in children's communication. Children's rhythmic and expressive play with words (including narratives) in these events engaged them socially, emotionally and cognitively.

The events presented in this paper illuminate the interplay of aesthetic, emotional, social and cognitive dimensions of communication, and the overlapping nature of *musike* in young children's communication.

The events presented here and in the wider study (Alcock, 2006) show young children adding rhythm, tone and rhyme to words in order to communicate, be empowered, express ideas and feelings, create narratives and have fun together. The implicit rigidity in the very concept of rules around language and routines seemed to invite playfulness; this is a way of exploring and creating flexibility around rules and playing with power patterns,

while simultaneously developing understandings and internalising the meanings of specific rules.

The lack of direct teacher involvement in children's word-play is apparent in these events and was also a feature in the wider study. Everyday routines are valuable occasions for developing children's early literacy learning by encouraging their play with words and rhythm. In this study children physically constrained by being seated around a table together did communicate, playfully and subversively, by using words and rhythm. They actively empowered themselves, not as individuals, but rather as members of a peer group (Corsaro, 1997). Teachers were seldom included in the children's narrative word-play. Teachers were seldom observed playing with words as objects. These events and the wider study suggest that teachers may be missing out on extending and enjoying young children's musical, rhythmic, communicative play with words and narratives, and hence missing out on extending important aspects of oral and early literacy, such as children's phonemic awareness and vocabulary development (Biemiller, 2006; Hamer & Adams, 2003; Makin & Whiteman, 2007; Rohl, 2000).

A CHAT focus on mediating artefacts illuminates the contradictions and tensions in children's narrative and word-play. Contradictions, tensions and discontinuities characterise communication generally (Fogel, 1993). Playful communication is not smooth and linear. In this study, tensions and contradictions emerged out of the playful actions of children, and motivated and sustained the activity. In all of these events tensions and contradictions emerged in the power play between the roles and rules in children's rhythm- and word-mediated communication. 'Togetherness', expressed in the creation of peer group subcultures and the development of related Discourses (Gee, 1996), seemed to be the motivating aim for children's shared activity in these events, as well as in other communicative events in the wider study (Alcock, 2006).

Conclusion

Words, integrated with rhythm, music and movement, stand out as mediating artefacts in these events. Words are tools for playing, and meaning arises in the use of words. Words are also the ultimate tool for thinking, learning and making sense and meaning of the world. As Vygotsky (1978), referring to Dewey, writes: 'He defines the tongue as the tool of tools, transposing Aristotle's definition of the human hand to speech' (p. 53). In these and other playful events in the wider study, children's words were tools which functioned as if the words were extensions of bodies that rhythmically chanted and moved with the words, which were in turn, embedded in discourses and Discourses (Gee, 1996).

Referring to the changing developmental links between the sense and meaning of words, Vygotsky (1986) wrote:

The connection between thought and word, however, is neither preformed nor constant. It emerges in the course of development and itself evolves. To the biblical 'In the beginning was the Word,' Goethe makes Faust reply, 'In the beginning was the deed'. The intent here is to detract from the value of the word, but we can accept this version if we emphasise it differently: In the beginning was the deed. The word was not the beginning – action was there first; it is the end of development, crowning the deed (p. 255).

In this sense, action (the deed or activity) includes all the temporal communicative arts. Rhythm is integral to these arts. The rhythm that was expressed musically, in word-play and poetry, drama and movement, was a dominant theme in the larger study of children's playfulness (Alcock, 2006). Such word-play contributes to early literacy development in several ways. These include expanding children's vocabulary, assisting the development of phonemic awareness and laying the foundations for a love of words that is both aesthetic and functional in enhancing children's developing communicative patterns. Above all, word-play can empower children as active members of a community able to transform and re-create words, sounds, meanings and feelings anew.

Acknowledgements

This research is part of a doctoral study conducted by Sophie Alcock at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand, and supervised by Joy Cullen and Alison St George. The research was reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (ref. Tolich, 11 February, 2000).

References

- Alcock, S. (2006). *A socio-cultural interpretation of young children's playful and humorous communication*. Unpublished PhD. Thesis. Palmerston North, New Zealand: Massey University.
- Anning, A. (2003). Pathways to the graphicacy club: The crossroads of home and preschool. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 3(1) 5-35.
- Barratt-Pugh, C. & Rohl, M. (Eds.). (2000). *Literacy learning in the early years*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Biemiller, A. (2006). Vocabulary development and instruction: A prerequisite for school learning. In D. Dickinson & S. Neuman (Eds.), *Handbook of early literacy research (Vol. 2)* (pp. 41-51). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cazden, C. (1973). Play with language and meta-linguistic awareness. In J. Bruner, A. Jolly & K. Sylva (Eds.) (1976), *Play: Its role in development and evolution* (pp. 603-608). Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books.
- Chaiklin, S. (2001). The institutionalization of cultural-historical psychology as a multinational practice. In S. Chaiklin (Ed.), *The theory and practice of cultural historical psychology* (pp.15-34). Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press.
- Chambers, E. (2000). Applied ethnography. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 851-869). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Clandinin, D. J. & Connolly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cole, M. (1996). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Corsaro, W. (1985). *Friendship and peer culture in the early years*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Corsaro, W. (1997). *The sociology of childhood*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Dickinson, D., McCabe, A. & Essex, M. (2006). A window of opportunity we must open to all: The case for preschool with high-quality support for language and literacy. In D. Dickinson & S. Neuman (Eds.), *Handbook of early literacy research (Vol. 2)*, pp. 11-28). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Dickinson D. & Neuman, S. (Eds.) (2006). *Handbook of early literacy research (Vol. 2)*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Dissanayake, E. (2001). Antecedents of the temporal arts in early mother-infant interaction. In N. Wallin, B. Merker & S. Brown (Eds.), *The origins of music* (pp. 389-410). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- El'konin, D. B. (2000). The development of play in preschoolers. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, 37(6), 31-70.
- Engestrom, Y. (1999). Activity theory and individual and social transformation. In Y. Engestrom, R. Miettinen & R. L. Punamaki (Eds.), *Perspectives on activity theory* (pp. 19-38). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Fogel, A. (1993). *Developing through relationships: Origins of communication, self, and culture*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Freeman, W. (2001). A neurobiological role of music in social bonding. In N. Wallin, B. Merker & S. Brown (Eds.), *The origins of music* (pp. 411-424). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Gee, J. P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses (2nd edn)*. London: Palmer Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1993). Towards a language-based theory of learning. *Linguistics and Education*, 5, 93-116.
- Hamer, J. & Adams, P. (2003). *The New Zealand early childhood literacy handbook*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press.
- Hamilton, M. (1999). Expanding the new literacy studies: Using photographs to explore literacy as social practice. In D. Barton, M. Hamilton & D. Ivanic (Eds.), *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context* (pp. 16-34). New York: Routledge.
- Kress, G. (1997). *Before writing: Rethinking the paths to literacy*. London: Routledge.
- Lankshear, C. & Knobel, M. (2003). New technologies in early childhood literacy research: A review of research. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 3(1) 59-82.
- Leont'ev, A. N. (1978). *Activity, consciousness and personality*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Makin, L., Jones Diaz, C. & McLachlan, C. (2007). *Literacies in*

childhood: *Changing views, challenging practice (2nd edn)*. Sydney: MacLennan & Petty.

Makin, L. & Whiteman, P. (2007). Multiliteracies and the arts. In L. Makin, C. Jones Diaz, & C. McLachlan, *Literacies in childhood: Changing views, challenging practice (2nd edn)* (pp. 168-182). Sydney: MacLennan & Petty.

Martello, J. (2007). Many roads through many modes: Becoming literate in early childhood. In L. Makin, C. Jones Diaz, & C. McLachlan (Eds.), *Literacies in childhood: Changing views, challenging practice (2nd edn)*, (pp. 89-103). Sydney: MacLennan & Petty.

Molino, J. (2001). Toward an evolutionary theory of music and language. In N. Wallin, B. Merker & S. Brown (Eds.), *The origins of music* (pp.165-176). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Neuman, S. & Dickinson, D. (Eds.). (2001). *Handbook of early literacy research (Vol. 1)*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Nelson, K. (1996). *Language in cognitive development: The emergence of the mediated mind*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

New, R. (2001). Early literacy and developmentally appropriate practice: Rethinking the paradigm. In S. Neuman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of early literacy research (Vol. 1)* (pp. 245-262). New York: The Guilford Press.

Ochs, E., & Capps, L. (2001). *Living narrative: Creating lives in everyday storytelling*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ostrosky, M., Gaffney, J. & Thomas, D. (2006). The interplay between literacy and relationships in early childhood settings. *Reading and Writing Quarterly*, 22, 173-191.

Pianta, R. (2006). Teacher-child relationships and early literacy. In D. Dickinson & S. Neuman (Eds.), *Handbook of early literacy research (Vol. 2)* (pp. 149-162). New York: The Guilford Press.

Polkinghorne, D.E. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Rohl, M. (2000). Learning about words, sounds and letters. In C. Barratt-Pugh & M. Rohl (Eds.), *Literacy learning in the early years* (pp. 57-80). Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.

Salomon, G. (Ed.). (1993). *Distributed cognitions: Psychological and educational considerations*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Tedlock, B. (2000). Ethnography and ethnographic representation. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 455-486). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Trevarthen, C. (2002). Origins of musical identity: Evidence from infancy for musical social awareness. In R. MacDonald, D. Hargreaves & D. Miell (Eds.), *Musical identities* (pp. 21-38). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Varga, D. (2000). Hyperbole and humour in children's language, *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 14(2), 142-151.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner & E. Soubberman (Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Wartofsky, M.W. (1979). *Models, representation and the scientific understanding*. Dordrecht, Germany: Reidel.

Wells, G. (1999). *Dialogic inquiry: Toward a sociocultural practice and theory of education*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Wertsch, J. V. (1998). *Mind as action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

SCHOLARSHIP

JEAN DENTON & LILLIAN DE LISSA SCHOLARSHIPS COMMITTEE

THE JEAN DENTON MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP

(up to a maximum of \$16,000: tax exempt)

This scholarship fund was established by the Kindergarten Union of South Australia in 1977 and is now administered by the Jean Denton & Lillian de Lissa Scholarships Committee and the Public Trustee.

Applicants are invited for the Jean Denton Memorial Scholarship. The purpose of the scholarship is to advance knowledge in early childhood education. The scholarship is available to any person or persons working in Australia.

The scholarship is for postgraduate studies or advanced research either within or outside Australia, the purpose or the benefit of which will be applied in the early childhood area within Australia. The scholarship is granted for a one year period.

**APPLICATIONS MUST BE MADE
ON THE APPLICATION FORM**

Enquiries and application form requests can be directed to:
Carol Thompson
Email: carolt@senet.com.au
Telephone: 08 8337 7195

**Closing date: Close of Business
3 October, 2008**
No extensions will be given.

Copyright of Australian Journal of Early Childhood is the property of Early Childhood Australia and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.