



# Seeds Creative

Reflective Practice Projects

## Adding Music to the Process of Helicopter Stories

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## Background/rationale

As a regular music practitioner within Early Years, I try to be as child led as possible and encourage one to one story and song writing in our free musical play. I was lucky enough to attend two days of training on Helicopter Stories with Make Believe Arts, who deliver Helicopter Stories projects and training both nationally and internationally. Helicopter Stories is an extremely child led story telling practice whereby children's stories, told privately to the practitioner, are acted out by their peers in the classroom. When I learned about the process, I felt two things very strongly – firstly that I desperately wanted to have a try at leading a Helicopter Stories project, to put into practice what I had learned, but more importantly that I felt there was a very natural fit with child led music practice. I hoped that it would be possible to include elements of music into the children's story making and story acting which would add to the author's experience of ownership, and also the experience of the children joining in as story actors.

I am not the only workshop leader to see that there is a natural fit between the practices, and to be experimenting with the methodologies. I know that Esther Sheridan at Wigmore Hall worked with Isla Hill from Make Believe Arts with the help of supporting musicians, though there are not yet any published articles about that project. The difference was that, in this project, I knew I would be alone in the classroom apart from the staff. I designed my project knowing that any music added to the stories would come from me and them alone.

In a recent evaluation report of the MakeBelieve Arts Helicopter Stories project by the Open University, the author notes that: "while Helicopter stories tend to be seen as a verbal accomplishment, multimodal analysis illustrated the significance of communication across different modes (e.g. facial expression, gaze, body movement as well as verbal language). This was evident both in children's communication and in adults interacting with children." In many of the studies mentioned in the evaluation, the most notable progress and strongest communicative moments were made non verbally. I hoped that if we could add music in the right way, these moments would become hopefully stronger and more frequent.



## Design

My project took place at a Primary School in west London. I have a pre-existing relationship with the school as I run the Junior Choir, but had never worked in the Infants before. The school has no specialist music teacher but is a very strong singing school. Having met with the Head of Infants and the teachers, I knew that they really wanted the opportunity for both Reception classes to take part in the project. As a school in Zone 3, they rarely get the opportunity for visiting practitioners to work with the children in the classroom, and these particular children had not had a music or story workshop before.

I visited the classes once before the project, to observe their normal practice and to speak to the staff about what to expect during the sessions. I was slightly worried about one aspect, which was introducing Helicopter Stories practise for the first time, and then adapting it to include music, within three sessions. Working with two classes as requested was going to make timing quite tight – 1.5 hours each, each week, but retrospectively I am very glad we did it this way. The classes were very different, as classes often are, and I learned different things from the children's reactions in each class. Also, everyone was so excited to tell stories, that I think if we had had more time, we would have spent most of the morning story acting, which may have been too much for some of the children. If there had been more sessions, or the teachers had been trained in HS and were taking stories in the interim (it was completely new to them) then a whole morning would have been ideal. As it was, it worked fine and kept me on my toes trying new things on a schedule!

After each session I kept written notes, in addition to the children's stories, about what techniques I had tried to add music to the session, and observations of how particular children responded to them, as well as the group as a whole. I also spoke to the staff about what they had noticed in each session.

I was the only practitioner in the room apart from the class teacher and TA, all of whom were fantastic at joining in. One adult was clearly amazed at seeing her quieter children create such incredible stories, and praised the story authors and actors extremely naturally. Another, interestingly, joined in with any aspect of the story which was sung, which really endorsed the children to all join in too. The classes were very excited to contribute. I scheduled the morning by beginning with some singing and moving together, for around 5 minutes. Then we had our first acting session – the first week this was to learn to perform, the following weeks this was stories left over from the week before. This lasted around 20 minutes and I tried to introduce some of the techniques below, for adding music, straight away. After this we took private stories, then had a second acting session of some of these stories at the end of the session. Every child told a story at least once, with some coming back every 5 minutes to ask if they could tell another one.

Because there was no external music available (I didn't use recorded music at all this time) I experimented with several techniques to add music to the story acting:



- Singing together beforehand – songs with adaptable words and melodies.
- Using instruments to be a “band” for the action or characters.
- Suggesting snatches of song myself for moments in the drama.
- Asking for suggestions of songs in the story, from the whole room.
- Asking the author if there is a song in their story (this came from a child and was not part of my original design)!

As the project was only 3 90 minute sessions long for each class, these experiments happened in quick succession. The children created some incredible stories and songs, with wow moments ranging from the appearance of Donald Trump jumping into lava in one, to an apparently non verbal child creating an entire rap for her story.

As I was making observations about children, I invited parents to opt-in to give their written consent for me to include children in my notes. Children whose parents did not give permission were still able to join in the session but were not included in my notes. I do not feel that my presence created any ethical concerns for the children. In the Helicopter Stories book by Trisha Lee (2015) of Make Believe Arts, she speaks about maintaining a continuously open offer to tell a private story, or to act in one, but always accepting the answer “no”. Sometimes children are wary of engaging with a new adult, but I was careful to always offer the chance to join in, but accept a refusal and be ready to offer again the next time. I was working under the Creative Futures Practitioner Code of Conduct.



## Reflections

### **Singing together beforehand**

Partly to make myself comfortable as a practitioner, I decided to start the sessions as I always start every music session; we first establish how to perform together as an ensemble. Once the children understand how to follow drumming on the floor and stopping at the same time, the possibilities are endless – we use pitch and body to encourage vocalising and careful watching, use peer leaders to help establish a supportive atmosphere when it is someone's turn, and get used to watching and listening to each other's ideas. All of these elements I thought were also relevant when we would shortly be working together as an acting company.

I wanted to use two or three songs with the children so they would get used to using melody together rather than speech when speaking something all together as a group. I chose "Calele" because it is very successful at establishing a group tempo and can easily be adapted with other words. It is also very catchy.

Secondly, I chose "when I'm walking", partly for the same reasons – the catchy melody is easily used for other things and the second half has no words, only "la la la la". It is also a movement activity, which I noticed really helped their ability later to move with care of each other around the stage. I did not include this song in the first session for one class, and they were noticeably more aware of each other when acting after having performed it in the second session. Lastly, it has a listening element of different sounds on the djembe which correspond to different movements. I hoped that this would encourage them to hear how many different ways it can be played, to prepare them for playing during stories (read the section on using instruments as characters).

### **Observations of singing beforehand – pros and cons:**

- It helped me as a practitioner to feel comfortable that I knew the group dynamic and had the children's focus, before going into a different practice with which I wasn't so familiar.
- It helped the children to know the process of the session – we always began with these two songs, and after we moved for "when I'm walking" they would automatically begin making a large circle to mark out the stage.
- I think that it helped to unify the group, those who were less confident had already become involved, so when they were asked to act a role in a story, they were more likely to feel ready.
- The children were then very open to singing within a story – they accepted this without question.



- Possibly, choosing two catchy melodies limited the children's melodic suggestions later – a lot of their songs for stories were exact replicas of one of these songs or the other (see suggesting songs in a story).
- It used time in an already quite rushed session.

### **Using instruments to be a band for the action or characters**

The classes didn't have a great set of instrumental resources available – the teachers were willing to get some from the music room but in the end I brought some with me. I think this was relevant because the children weren't used to playing the instruments every day, as they didn't have them in the classroom with them available to use in their play. I brought a half sized djembe, several different shakers, bells of different timbres, claves and a guiro.

Looking back, it might have been an idea to play the secret instrument game, where matching pairs of instruments are played with one hidden for the children to guess. This would have helped the children to be familiar with the sound of all the instruments beforehand. However, we were very pushed for time.

I tried two different ways of handing out the instruments for band accompaniment. In Helicopter Stories, the parts are allocated as the children are sitting, in a circle. So I firstly tried, when asking a child to act "the dragon", I would ask the next child, or sometimes two or three, to come and choose whichever instruments they thought would make good background music for the dragon.

The major disadvantage of this technique is that it really works outside the fast pace of story acting. Inevitably, faced with such exciting choice, the child takes a while to select the instrument, during which time the other children, even the actors on stage, have nothing to focus on as nothing is happening on stage.

To speed things up, I simply handed the child an instrument as I was casting – "Could you be the dragon? Could you be the music for the dragon?" This worked much better in terms of pace but obviously removes the element of creativity in which instrument sounds, to them, like a dragon. Just like the freedom with which HS allows them to act the character in whichever way they like.

However, when they sat down again with their instruments, I tried to replicate the kind of question the practitioner would ask to a story actor. For example, the actor might be asked, "Could you show us how a dragon swoops around the stage?" I tried to ask the band member, "Could you play us how the dragon sounds when it lands/ stomps around/ breathes fire?"

My first findings on using instruments were that it is very hard for the child to be as specific, creative and correspond to characters as clearly with an instrument they have just met. Much harder than with their own bodies, which they inhabit and use for their play constantly. Many of my band members were so excited to hold the instrument (particularly the djembe, let's



be honest) that they played it at all times, however they wanted to, and not really corresponding to the character or action.

Just as the acting questions become more specific, though, for example: “Can you show me how the spider spins its web?”, the playing questions and requests also naturally became more specific. I asked one boy, L, to play his instrument whenever the dragon breathed fire. He immediately focussed into the dragon and watched her mouth very carefully. This encouraged the dragon to begin to play with L as her accompanist, and catch him out by breathing fire when he wasn’t expecting it, which made the whole class laugh and the quite scary story to take on a different comical dimension. This moment also endorsed the findings in the Open University evaluation about multi modal communication; one child was acting physically, and one playing an instrument – neither was speaking but the communication was intense and clear.

Quite often in children’s stories, a character disappears without having any more action – the story moves quickly and in random directions. I found as a first time practitioner of HS that you have to keep a careful eye on who is on the stage, whether they have more events, whether they come back etc. The story actor children do not know what is going to happen next, except the author, and if the stage is crowded, those who are not going to be in the rest of the story are happy to sit down and be in the chorus again. As mostly silent actors, this works absolutely fine – two puppies who are no longer relevant can sit on the stage in puppy pose watching the action from there, as long as it is not too crowded. However, if the puppies have two children instrumentally accompanying them, it is very hard for those children to notice that even though the puppies are still on stage, they are at present not relevant and so they don’t need any music. It is incredibly hard for a 5 year old to hold an instrument and not play it in the first place, and doubly hard to ascertain which character they are representing, and to hold back even if they are still on stage. I realise that I could take the instrument away when the character becomes irrelevant, but in practice it is very hard to be completely on top of every character’s journey – one story had 80 separate characters!

On the plus side, as soon as instruments were used, I noticed everybody was itching to use their voice to join in with specific sound cues, which led me to the next technique.

**Observations of using instruments – pros and cons:**

- The instruments are new and exciting – everybody wants to play them however they want.
- Playing a character on an instrument is quite a hard question and needs direction – do you play when they move? When they talk? On the fall of their feet?
- Choosing an instrument for a character or event takes time and interferes with the pace of the story acting.
- Sometimes the sound of an instrument can be distracting if the character has become irrelevant but the music still continues.
- Once the sound element of an instrument is introduced, everybody wants to join in musically, and music naturally becomes part of the story acting.



- A child can choose to interpret their character or event however they want on their instrument, just as they can choose to physically act their character however they want.

### **Singing in the story – suggesting myself and then asking the room**

I have previously done quite a lot of musical story making with groups of EY children, often with musicians to back up the practice. There are a lot of similarities with Helicopter Stories, but with some differences. The musical stories I have previously done tend to be very movement based, with all the children joining in with the action to form a kind of dancing choir. The ideas have been produced in the moment, with me asking in song “then what happened...?” or similar, with the answer often being given in song form too. I then take this snatch of melody and repeat it for the other children to join in and adapt. The disadvantage of this practice is that the confident children are often, if not always, the only ones who are comfortable enough to give an idea in the group setting, and sing it, so the story creation leaves out those who need a bit more support.

The difference with bringing in snatches of song to HS is that the story has already been written and finalised privately, with the author having complete ownership over plot, wording and character. Sometimes in a story there is an event which is repeated, or similar events are sequential. For example, in K’s story:

“One of the mums of the dogs came and ate the cat. Some monsters came and trolls. The trolls ate the dogs. Then the monsters ate the trolls.”

I asked the child playing the mum of the dog to show us how he would eat the cat. I suggested that we might need a song for everyone to sing while someone was eating someone else. I let that sit, and a boy said, “I’m gonna eat you, I’m gonna eat you, gon-na eat you UP!” It was a beautifully chanted rap, so without thinking I sang it back to him with a slight melody based on the inflection of his speech. The children immediately caught on and sang it, and without being asked, the mum dog ate the cat again. We were then able to sing the song again every time somebody was eaten.

Trisha Lee explains in her book how elements of one child’s story can be taken on by the next child and slightly transmuted until the class has a set of stories which contain trolls, but all in different contexts. I found the same with the snatches of song we created – the “I’m gonna eat you song” became relevant in another story, two or three later, and without me prompting it, the boy who created it started to sing it as soon as eating was taking place! Music became another way for the stories to be linked together.

I will admit that, as a singer, I love free singing with children and it is my favourite way of interacting. Therefore I may be biased when I say that I found the singing techniques to be the most successful ways of bringing music into the stories. I loved the way that it enabled the whole audience to become involved, like an opera chorus. The children sitting around



were carefully watching the action, ready to see a point where the song could be used again. I felt that it also lent a bit of gravitas to whatever was going on on the stage, and also allowed it to be repeated a couple of times if we were really enjoying it!

I felt like giving the children the melodic ideas at first was alright – in the first few stories they perform, the practitioner gives them a bit more help with how the action might be performed. Also, we don't begin with private story telling, we show the children how their stories will be acted, and demonstrate using other stories written by those of their age.

In the second session of acting, I began to simply say, "Is there a song here?" I would choose the moment, either a repeated action, a big plot point of the story, or a new or dramatic character. For example, in S' story:

"There was a rainbow floating in the moon, and it was shining on a second crocodile, and he ate the person that was writing!"

Reading the rainbow and moon, I asked, "Is there a song here?" Instantly, someone sang a beautiful snatch of melody, using the words "floating in the moon". We copied it, then continued singing it faster and faster while the crocodile appeared. The crocodile crept towards me, then when it ate me (the person who was writing) the children spontaneously did a snap noise, and stopped the other song. Not only was the song lovely, it added natural tension to that bit of the story, and allowed the children to work together to decide non verbally when the song would stop, the tempo of the song, etc.

I found this technique successful because, firstly, it doesn't slow the pace of the acting at all. If anything, the song creation is in my opinion part of appreciating the author's work and showing that it has been understood well enough to have a song written about it. The technique still relies on the confident children to suggest snatches of song. However, both teachers remarked to me that they were taken aback by who the children were who found it natural to contribute melodies to the story. They were not the children who normally suggest things in class when spoken ideas are requested. I did notice that it was the same 4 or 5 children who were already thinking in musical terms, but I don't think that diminished the achievement for the group. The story belonged to the author, whoever wrote the four note song which enhanced it.

The last point is that quite a few of the melodies suggested were similar or identical to the songs we had sung before the stories began, Calele or When I'm Walking. Again, I am not against this as it shows engagement with those songs, and an ability to adapt the words to what is creative. Interestingly, they were only ever suggested for moments of travelling or happiness, which suit the songs – any drama would not have used these melodies, which was completely unguided by me.

### **Using songs in story acting – pros and cons**



- Songs allow all of the children to be an active part of the story, even if it is not their turn to act.
- Songs also added interest and gravitas to the silent acting on stage.
- Sometimes the song creation took a minute, but then allowed the character on stage to really enjoy their moment.
- It did make some of the stories last a bit longer. As there were only three sessions, we were trying not to miss anyone out, and to perform every story which had been written, so that was a bit difficult.
- Asking for song suggestions allowed a different set of children to shine creatively.

### **Songs in private story telling**

Every child in both classes told me a story over the three sessions. I'm aware that HS is a process which improves with practise, so each child telling only one or two stories wasn't ideal, but we were pressed for time. I would love to return to try out Helicopter Stories and music again, over a longer period, to see what happens as the children got more comfortable. Many children were desperate to tell a third or fourth story by the final week but we simply didn't have time! Hopefully the teachers will continue the practice next year.

The final technique actually came from a boy, A. He was telling me a story in the final session. As I finished writing his sentence, he said, "And there's a song about that, it goes like this." He sang me the song, about the soldier jumping into space, fully formed. He had internalised what I had done in the story acting sessions, and had strong feelings about his own story having a song in it. Thinking on my feet, I did exactly what I would do with a sentence and repeated it until I had made sure I knew it. I was then able to teach A's song when we came to that moment in his story, and all the children sang it while he jumped into space (of course he was playing the soldier).

If there were lots of songs being suggested in private story telling time, there would need to be a dictaphone or similar as the practitioner's memory would have to be exceptional to remember one after the other!

After the experience with A, when private story writing, as well as asking "would you like to be in your story?" I asked "Is there a song in your story? Where is it?" Often they would tell me when in the story, and often spontaneously sing it too. I would have loved to have researched this further, but it only happened in the final session.

### **Private songs – pros and cons:**

- Lovely spontaneous moment with the child.
- Very hard to get them to repeat it the same, or at all. If you miss it the first time it is often gone.
- Difficult to remember them all, in order to teach them to the group – use Dictaphone or similar.



- Sometimes the songs are quite random, mostly spoken or not easy to follow. As I am used to singing with EY children, I mostly repeated back to them as closely as I could, sometimes slightly simplifying. Also there is nothing wrong with a spoken chant! However, this is a more difficult technique to translate to EY staff than the rest of Helicopter Stories, which is very inclusive and step by step.

### **Teacher feedback**

Both teachers agreed that the use of instruments, while fun, was less successful than adding song to the stories, which they both loved. However, Mrs S commented that just as you would accept any way in which a child physically played a dog, even if it is not how you would do it, it's important to accept how they interpret instrumentally playing the dog, which is a really good point. If taking instrument practice further, maybe we would need to have and practise a sign for "stop" which the children understood and followed, to avoid any band music being distracting to the story.

Miss W was surprised at some of her children, and how confidently they had expressed themselves in their story. She said it made her think about how many conditions were normally put on their writing and creativity. For example, one child, N, rarely if ever joins in with group activities, but was one of the first to tell a private story and have it performed. Without conditions on their creativity, the child was able to access much more language and the story was both long and intricate, where normally N is not heard at all.

Mrs S also commented that she was surprised who the children were who were suggesting melody – not those she would have predicted. I was delighted to hear this comment because this, for me, this is the main reason why I feel Helicopter Stories can and should have music added to it. Sometimes, music accesses different skills from spoken ideas and suggestions, and at this age, different children find that it seems clear to them what a song should sound like from those to whom it is clear what should happen next in the story. Having a sung aspect for their creativity allowed those children to be in charge, for a moment, of the class's achievement for that particular story's performance.

Mrs S described one story as "a milestone" for that child, who often does not speak out in class or enjoy spoken work. Interestingly, this story was one of the ones which translated most easily to having music added to it. This child had enjoyed the power of being transcribed without interruption or correction so much that there had been several cycles of repetition which ended up sounding like a rap. We were able to make a brilliant call and response song based on the repetition calls, and all the children whooped and applauded so much at the end of that story. The joy on the author's face was lovely to see.



## Conclusions

As with anything, there were some stories which worked better and worse for adding music to them. I enjoyed developing these techniques, and really enjoyed the stories with added songs and bands.

There were of course limitations to the project. I worked in only one school, and for only three sessions. I would have liked to work there for an entire term, and have a full scale training for the teachers so that they could continue the practice both between sessions and after the project had ended. It would be very interesting to see how the children developed their leadership in bringing the music in – perhaps they would have started suggesting song moments themselves during acting, or perhaps their stories would have become more sung in general during private story time. I would like the children to have the opportunity to play the instruments in class time, during free play, to experiment with the different sounds they can make, so that when they came to play them during story acting, their range of intention was greater and more purposeful. Perhaps there could be a book corner which includes instruments as well as story props, to make the connection between music and story more explicit.

The music which was added to the stories also became entirely ephemeral. I had pleasure in typing up all of the stories for the children to take home, at the request of the teachers, but the beautiful songs which went alongside them could not be recorded – they often live only in the moment, but they definitely added something to the experience. In future, we would need to ascertain ways for these to be recorded so that they can be remembered. Having said that, the major benefits of Helicopter Stories all occur in the moment, in the process, and in the doing of the story, rather than in what remains afterwards.

I hope that the teachers will continue the practice of Helicopter Stories this year. They both, in addition to their support staff, saw the benefits of the sessions clearly and made extremely pertinent observations. However, as they did not have the opportunity of a training session in the practice, and in any case I was changing it as we went in order to add music to it, I'm not sure how clearly it was communicated to them in terms of delivering it themselves. In a future, similar project, I would like to offer specific training in a step by step fashion of how to add music to Helicopter Stories. I have found over the years that it is more difficult to ask teachers to spontaneously sing than it is to encourage children's spontaneous spoken creativity, but I look forward to developing a method of communicating it to adults in a way that they are inspired to continue and learn.

It would be particularly interesting to follow, in a longer project where the teaching staff were able to be better supported in learning the practice, how the development of the songs added to the stories might reflect the shared repertoire which the children sing with their teachers. Just as we had several songs which contained echoes of Calele, their songs might contain



echoes of songs they are singing in class, in the same way as their stories often contain elements of stories they know.

In a longer project, I would also be very interested to see how the relationship between music and story developed in the children's free play, particularly in role play areas such as shops, home corners, etc. Would the relationship between character and music become strong enough to infiltrate other kinds of role play? In my general role as a music practitioner in the early years, I am always looking for the opportunity to add to music which is already being made by the children in their play. From the practice of Helicopter Stories, I will be adding to my own practice the idea of some things being private, and some group. Telling a story with no interruptions, one on one, is extremely precious, and I wonder whether by repeating back phrases in exactly the same way, with no qualifications, a song could be written. I wonder also whether there could be a two stage process – first the story, then the song, once the author is sure what is happening. In a group, I will be looking out for more opportunities to tell stories with a child in the author's seat, using the remaining children as their band.

Lastly, it was extremely interesting to compare the two practices while marrying them. My warm up section, the "dancing choir", really centred the children and made them ready to perform as a bonded group, in a way that I found Helicopter Stories did less so. However, Helicopter Stories allows every child to get up and contribute individually to the process of story acting, several times, and to be certain that their contribution is a valid part of the experience, in a way that group music alone does not achieve so quickly. I think that there is definitely a place for music in Helicopter Stories, and I will certainly be taking the idea of story acting into my music workshops.



## Bibliography

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