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# An ABC of drumming: children's narratives about beat, rhythm and groove in a primary classroom

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*In this paper, I use a bricolage of arts-based research and writing practices to explore narratives by Grade 4 children about their experiences in a drumming circle called 'Bam Bam' as represented in a text they created with me called An ABC of drumming. The term 'narrative' is used here in a contemporary sense to simultaneously invoke a socially and musically situated and constructed story (Chase, 2005 p. 657); as an 'account to self and others' (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009, p. 7) about drumming in a particular place, with a particular group of children during a particular set of events; and, to explore narratives of drumming as the 'shared relational work' of myself as a drummer, teacher, researcher and 'story-teller/story-liver' (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 12) alongside the children. In synchronicity with the ABC of drumming produced by the children, the paper itself is framed and written creatively around letters of the alphabet and variously includes poetry and data or research poetry; ethnographic 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) of our drumming circle; and, visual and textual expressions by the children. By doing so, my aim is to move collectively from 'narrative as a "story-presented" to narrative as a "form of meaning-making", indeed, a form of "mind-making"' (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009, p. 10) about the children's experience of drumming and the drumming circle itself. The central question underpinning this paper then is, what makes children's experience in a drumming circle meaningful, and how do they make sense of such meaning?*

## **I is for Introduction**

'ABC, it's easy as 123, ABC, won't you come and drum with me!' I remind myself softly under my breath. It's my first drumming circle workshop at Kensington South State School<sup>1</sup> and I am more nervous for this gig than I ever am preparing to walk into a university lecture theatre. I stop and breathe in and out, trying to remain calm. 'Life is rhythm', I breathe in. 'Rhythm is life', I breathe out. A million questions provide the backbeat to this mantra. What do the children know and think about drumming? Do they want to drum? What are they going to say when they see the drumming circle is actually a set of colour coordinated and semi-tuned plastic buckets? How am I going to convince 22 Grade 4 children aged between 9 and 10 years old that drumming is having fun and learning all at the same time? How will I explain to them that a drumming circle opens up locations of possibility, and life-long, meaningful and exciting pathways to learning in, around, between and through performance of rhythm?

In this paper, I use a bricolage of arts-based, narrative and autoethnographic research and writing practices to explore the drumming circle experiences of Grade 4 children

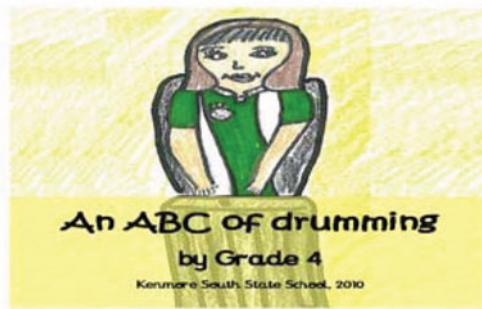


Fig. 1 (Colour online) *An ABC of drumming* (front cover) by Grade 4 children at Kensington State School

as represented in a text they created with me called *An ABC of drumming* (see Fig. 1).

As an example of arts-based research, *An ABC of drumming* is at once research text and aesthetic expression which, as Barone and Eisner attest, ‘uses the arts as a foundation for expressive forms that enlighten’ (2012, p. 9). The term ‘narrative’ is used here in a contemporary sense to simultaneously invoke a socially and musically situated and constructed story about drumming in a particular setting (Chase, 2005, p. 657); as an ‘account to self and others’ (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009, p. 7) about drumming in a particular place, with a particular group of children during a particular set of events; and to explore narratives of drumming as ‘shared relational work’ which takes place between myself as a drummer, teacher, researcher and ‘story-teller/story-liver’ (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 12) alongside the children. In synchronicity with the *ABC of drumming* produced by the children, the paper itself is framed and written creatively around letters of the alphabet and variously includes poetry and data or research poetry; ethnographic, ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1973) of our drumming circle; and visual and textual expressions by the children which aim, as Barrett and Stauffer (2009, p. 10) suggest, to move collectively from ‘narrative as a “story-presented” to narrative as a “form of meaning-making”, indeed, a form of “mind-making”’. The research and writing method employed in this paper brings narrative approaches and arts-based research together with ‘creative analytic process’ or CAP ethnographic research as performed by autoethnographer Laurel Richardson (1997). CAP is intended to be all at once engaging and deliberately provocative to challenge the ‘dinosaurian belief that ‘creative’ and ‘analytic’ are contradictory and incompatible modes’ (Richardson, in Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 962). Barone and Eisner similarly hold that the ‘borders between art and science are malleable and porous’ (2012, p. 7) and suggest that arts-based research is concerned with the creation of an expressive form to ‘secure an empathic participation in the lives of others and in the situation studied. In a certain sense, it is like a travel card, something one can use to get somewhere’ (2012, p. 9). I am inspired by the potential of arts-based research and CAP to construct valid and desirable representations that ‘invite people in and open spaces for thinking about the social [and musical] that elude us now’ (Richardson, in Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 962). The central question underpinning the ‘somewhere’ in this paper then is, what

makes children's experience in a drumming circle meaningful, and how do they make sense of such meaning?

### **W is for why this research and why this researcher?**

Before I began drumming with children, my knowledge and experience of music teaching and learning in the context of a drumming circle was limited. My tertiary training as an ethnomusicologist had led me to explore broad conceptual aspects of rhythm in the context of African drumming, largely through the work of Kwabana Nketia (1992) and John Blacking (1967, 1983). Everything I knew about African drumming was 'book' learning and as a result I had not considered offering an intensive percussive musical experience such as a drumming circle for young children. My involvement in drumming circles in schools began as a parent. Upon finding out that I had a musical background and experience working as a performer with primary children, my son's teacher asked if I would like to teach drumming to the class. Fully aware that my percussive teaching and performance knowledge was in need of some serious upskilling, I agreed and immediately put on my researcher's hat to look for scholarly and practical resources on children and drumming.

Research on children and drumming can be found across a variety of disciplines and focuses on an equally broad range of topics. From the historical and contemporary archives of ethnomusicology we learn about children's drum performance in largely non-Western musical cultures and the ways that young children acquire the musical skills necessary to fully participate in the everyday and ceremonial life of a specific cultural group (e.g. Blacking, 1967, 1983; Johnston, 1973; Shehan Campbell & Teicher, 1997; Zapata, 1998). Other studies can be found within the context of childhood behaviour and development and often in relation to the acquisition of motor skills and coordination (e.g. Phillips-Silver & Trainor, 2005; Brakke *et al.*, 2007; Zentner & Eerola, 2010). In the field of music education, research has variously explored the musical characteristics of children's drumming in early childhood and/or more generally, the development of rhythmic capability (Young, 1995, 2003; Paananen, 2006; Whitcomb, 2010). Crossing over into the area of intercultural and multi-cultural education, there are a growing number of studies in music that explore how children's drumming experiences can promote racial tolerance, social justice, reconciliation and peace (e.g. Skeef, 1999; Slachmuisjlder, 2005; Silverman, 2009; Hess, 2010; Perkins & Halcrow, 2012).

Of interest to this paper are those studies that seek to understand the phenomena of children learning together *in* and *through* a drumming circle. Skeef's writing highlights the socio-musical benefits of children performing together as teachers and learners in a circle. He tells us that

The circle is a time-tested paradigm of equality. Each person in a circle represents a coordinate equidistant from the nucleus. Each person has a clear view of everyone else. We are all equally exposed. The circle encourages those who form it to unveil themselves to each other (1999, p. 333).

In a teaching guide on drumming circle facilitation, Stevens similarly suggests that it is significant that a circle rather than a diamond or a square is used for group drumming and writes, 'For thousands of years humans have gathered in circles to create community

and to connect. Circles have no beginning and no end, the formation of a circle takes away hierarchy, and enables each and every person to experience equality' (2003, p. 16). From the work of Kirschner and Tomasello (2009), Sebanz *et al.* (2006) and Overy and Molnar-Szakacs (2009) we know that being together in 'joint drumming', the 'joint action of drumming together' or 'being together in time' stimulates the desire for children to cooperate, to synchronise and to share emotions, activities and experiences with others. These researchers tell us that when children participate in a joint drumming activity such as a drumming circle, they develop the capacity to learn with and 'through other persons and to collaborate in collective activities' (Kirschner & Tomasello, 2009, p. 312). Importantly, Overy and Molnar-Szakacs (2009, p. 490) suggest imitation, synchronisation and shared experiences or SAME (Shared Affective Motion Experiences) are key human musical behaviours that lend themselves to learning and remind us that there are *good* educational reasons for engaging in a shared musical activity such as a drumming circle,

We can share a narrative of call and response, synchronisation, prediction, interruption and imitation. We can use this musical, social, playful, and imitative learning environment to learn to take turns, learn to listen, learn to lead, learn to count, learn songs in a new language, or simply learn to be together in a group. (Overy & Molnar-Szakacs, 2009, p. 495)

The positive effects on learning, cognition and physical and mental development through participation in group musical activities, indeed, experiencing music in general, are well-documented in brain functioning and psychological research (cf. Menon & Levitin, 2005; Bengtsson *et al.*, 2009; Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn *et al.*, 2011), and research by Skeef (1999), Gold *et al.* (2004), Overy (2008), Maschi and Bradley (2010) and Ho *et al.* (2011) also provides sound evidence for the provision of musical activity and group drumming circles as music therapy to improve and sustain children's and young adolescent mental health and well-being (e.g. children with learning disabilities, children at risk; cf. Winkelman, 2003; Woodward, 2005; Flores, 2011; Ho *et al.*, 2011; Faulkner *et al.*, 2012). There are overwhelmingly *good* holistic reasons for providing children with joint drumming musical experiences as integral to their learning. The lasting message I took away from my reading about children's participation in drumming circles was the potential it holds for changing the 'traditional' teaching, learning and cultural dynamic at play in classrooms into a space where the 'fluid, interactive exchange of information and transmission of knowledge' (Skeef, 1999, p. 337) becomes possible through music. It was time for the drumming to begin.

### **B is for a drumming circle called Bam Bam**

'Bam Bam' is the name of a drumming circle I have been running with Grade 4 children at an inner south-west primary school in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. Bam Bam classes happen in regular school time, in addition to their regular half-hour weekly classroom music lessons, and take place in the school assembly hall. There are 22 children in the Bam Bam drumming circle – 9 boys and 13 girls. The majority of the children come from white-middle-upper class families, the three exceptions being a child of Korean background, a newly arrived child from Pakistan, and my own child who identifies as

Aboriginal Australian. In an already crowded curriculum and the current era of ‘testing’ in Australia, it can be difficult to justify spending *extra* time on music; however, the classroom teacher has successfully positioned and justified Bam Bam sessions within the *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2005).

Bam Bam is based on the bucket music programme developed by Oliver Cutz (2003) where plastic buckets are used as drums. Typically, a bucket drumming circle includes three different sized drums to produce three different pitch ranges. In Bam Bam, a 60 litre black bucket forms the bass section, a 20 litre white bucket makes up the alto section, and a small 10 litre blue bucket is used to create the soprano section. The buckets are played with drumsticks or by hand and drummers are taught to hit the side, rim and top of the drum with both hands. Playing plastic buckets as percussive instruments might be considered by some to be a less than ideal musical drumming experience; however, in a public state school with few resources for programmes such as this, it becomes an affordable and achievable music programme to run.

Bam Bam is all about engaging in, experiencing and embodying music, and for this reason we do not use any written music notation to learn patterns or pieces. All of the rhythms we play are learnt by listening, imitation and repetition and enact my belief in embodied knowledge as a valid experiential and intellectual way of knowing (cf. Mackinlay, 2006). One of the primary goals in our drumming circle is to achieve ‘entrainment’. Ethnomusicologists Clayton, Sager and Will explain that the word ‘entrainment’ refers to a ‘process whereby two rhythmic processes interact with each other in such a way that they adjust towards and eventually “lock in” to a common phase and/or periodicity’ (2004, p. 2). Stevens similarly describes entrainment as a ‘law of synchronization that causes two separate rhythms to naturally line up when placed near one another’ thus creating a ‘natural flow’ (2003, p. 14). In the Bam Bam drumming circle, we often use Keil and Feld’s term ‘groove’ to try and capture what the term entrainment means for us. They suggest that ‘groove’ or ‘entrainment’ is the experience of ‘being together and tuning up to someone else’s sense of time’ (1994, pp. 22–23) and immediately evoke a socio-musical and embodied process of music-making. Blacking (1983) referred to this phenomenological sense of ‘being together’ in the moment of performance as ‘bodily resonance’ which in and of itself has the potential to increase ‘fellow feeling’, emotional connection and social identification. Overy and Molnar-Szakacs similarly use the phrase ‘being together in time’ to highlight that ‘music is clearly not just a passive, auditory stimulus, it is an engaging, multi-sensory, social *activity*’ (2009, p. 489) whereby awareness of the presence of another human being, their actions and their emotional state conveys a sense of agency through interaction (2009, p. 494). Being together, entrainment, groove, and bodily resonance in music-making can also be linked to Csikszentmihalyi’s well-known concept of ‘flow’ whereby enjoyment is experienced not merely as pleasure, but as novelty, accomplishment and transformation (1990, p. 46; 1997).

To make sure we have every possibility of finding ‘flow’ and ‘groove’, there is very little talking in our drumming circle and we aim to immerse ourselves completely in rhythm for the duration of the 40 minute lesson. The classroom teacher and I both play alongside the children and by becoming participants with them we aim as much as possible to create a space where we are all teachers and learners together and where equality is always a potential. It is not a drumming circle without some boundaries for behaviour – we are

all expected to stop playing when asked, to not play another person's drum, to keep our drumsticks and our hands to ourselves, to treat each other with respect and without ridicule, and to bring our whole person responsibly into the rhythm of the drumming circle. One of the biggest messages of Bam Bam is that drumming is for everyone and that you can never make a mistake – each drummer is positioned as a priceless and irreplaceable player in the music we are creating.

### **R is for researching ourselves as drummers**

After drumming together for 6 months, Bam Bam evolved and became not only a drumming circle but a research project conducted between the students, the classroom teacher and me during term 4 of 2010.<sup>2</sup> I would like to be able to say that researching our experience as drummers in the drumming circle was the children's idea but our collaborative work began because I wanted to know more about how the children were experiencing drumming. I wanted to know whether or not they were enjoying drumming together as much as I did and whether that enjoyment was being translated into engagement, understanding and transformation. Just as Patricia Shehan-Campbell (2010) was eager to ask children themselves about 'the songs in their heads', I wanted to enact the kind of critical pedagogical belief about student voice suggested by Cook-Sather (2006) whereby space is made for the Bam Bam children's words and knowledge about drumming to be listened to and heard. How could I come to know what the experience of drumming was like for children if I did not include the knowledge children have of themselves? (Jones, 2004, p. 114; Shehan-Campbell, 2010, p. 5.)

There are a number of tensions inherent in this paper between myself as a researcher wanting to explore my own experience of drumming with children, and the experiences of the children themselves. The experiences of drumming in Bam Bam belong both individually to each of the drummers, to me as a drummer alongside them, and to all of us as a collective group. The challenge of sustaining the conviction that children have 'unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling; and that their insights warrant not only the attention but the responses from adults; and that they should be afforded the opportunities to actively shape their education' (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 359) and at the same time disentangling my voice from this experience so that the voices of the children can be heard above and beyond mine are immense. Certainly, the practical difficulties, ethical dilemmas and moral risks associated with researching with children, and further, involving children as researchers, are well documented (Jones, 2004; Farrell, 2005; Veale, 2005; Davis, 2009). As I write, I can hear Jones (2004, p. 114) gently reminding me that egalitarian agendas in research with children are unrealistic and Greene (2009, p. 95) calling me to remember that 'we cannot negate the fact of power' in education. My face turns red as I reflect and realise how idealistic words like 'equality' and 'voice', and the phrase 'teachers and learners together', sound in this context where there is absolutely no doubt as to who holds the most power and authority in this performance space – whether I like it or not (cf. Fielding, 2004, p. 300). This asymmetrical relationship exists in our research collaboration also and the way I chose to negotiate this was to become, as Greene advocates, 'a person among persons' (2009, p. 95) – critically and reflectively attentive to the theoretical and methodological assumptions behind the research process and my agenda at all times.

A further ethical dilemma and tension is that *one* of the children in the Bam Bam drumming group and this research project was and is my son. While I did not set out to enact a 'parent-researcher' paradigm of the kind that Edmiston (2008) and De Vries (2010) speak of, it was an unavoidable consequence of my involvement. As a parent, should I have said yes to act in the role of teacher when asked to play in a drumming circle with my son's class? As a teacher and a parent, should I have ignored my researcher's desire to know about the experience of drumming for children? How did my identity as a parent affect my relationship with the children as drummer and researcher? How did my presence affect the drumming experiences of my son? I would like to think, as De Vries (2010, p. 26) advocates, that there were distinct advantages such as 'role immersion as researcher, access to the research participant and co-researchers world' but I do not have the answers to these questions and for now they linger uneasily and unanswered.

With these thoughts in mind, the following 'playlet' (Lather, 1991, pp. 146–150; Ellis & Bochner, 1996, pp. 13–48; Stewart & Mackinlay, 2003; Mackinlay, 2009) attempts to recreate the dialogue that took place between me, the classroom teacher and the children as researchers over a number of days about the aims, direction and research methods in our project<sup>3</sup> (see Table 1 for a summary of the data collection process):

Liz: Grade 4, how would you like to participate with me as researchers on a drumming project?

Jasmine: What do you mean Professor Liz?

Liz: I mean, often adults assume a lot about what children think and know, but they don't often ask them. I wondered whether you might like to generate your own understandings, think about your own ideas, and dig deep into your own thoughts to explore the who, where, how, what, and why of drumming for you.

Sam: Sure! Let's start! Wait a minute – where do we start?

Luke: I know, let's brainstorm all of the things we would like to know about drumming as well as all of the things we do know as questions on the board!

Liz and the classroom teacher busily scribble on the board as questions and statements are suggested (see Figure 2).

Liz: What an amazing collection of questions and ideas? What do you think we should do with these now?

Mrs Jones (the classroom teacher): Well, can anyone tell me the unit of work we are doing at the moment in our studies of society and environment?

Felicity: Miss, you're teaching us how to ask questions and interview one another.

Perri: (speaks in an excited voice) I know – we can ask each other questions about drumming and then we could record them on the video [see Figure 3] and Professor Liz could teach us how to do it.

Mrs Jones: (laughing) Yes of course! That's exactly what we'll do!

Liz: But what will we do with the interviews then? I mean, it's great that we will have all of your thoughts and ideas on video but what happens next?

Amanda: Well, on the TV and in newspapers the reporter usually puts together a kind of story about the topic or the person they are interviewing. Maybe we could make a story about drumming, something that tells people how we do it and why!

Michael: We could bring together everything that we say so that it makes sense.

Mrs Jones: And what kind of genre in writing and literature do we normally find 'how to' books? What would you call it?

Peter: A manual?

Obi: A guidebook?

Liz: Yes, they all tell you how to do something, but I'm thinking of something else – something that's as simple as . . .

Harry: Ooh! I know! ABC!!! We could make an ABC of drumming – I saw an ABC of pirates in the bookshop the other day and it was awesome!

Lyza: And we could all choose one letter and write a sentence that says something about drumming – with as many words that start with that letter as possible included of course.

George: But I think first we would need some really BIG lists of words for each letter wouldn't we? [see [Figure 4](#)].

Finally, the ABC of drumming is complete (see [Figure 1](#)). It is as insightful as it is beautiful and the children are pleased with their arts-based research work.

Hamish: What are we going to do with it now Mrs Jones? Do you have any ideas Professor Liz?

Liz pauses. She hadn't thought of what might become of their ABC, but then she smiles.

Liz: Well, I was thinking, that as a way of saying thank you to you all for being such great researchers partners on this project, maybe I could make it into a little book and that would be a gift to you from me?

Sam: What, do you mean just photocopy it and staple it together? That's nothing special.

Mrs Jones: Sam, don't be rude!

Liz: No it's OK – I'm glad you mentioned that Sam because I was thinking more about sending it away to a professional printer and making it look like a real book – one that you would find in a library or in a shop.

Hamish: Oh that would be awesome!!! Mum and Dad would be so proud of me! We could give to our Gran as a present too!

The class begins to chatter amongst themselves about the ABC of drumming as a real book. Mrs Jones looks at her watch.

Mrs Jones: We've been talking about drumming all morning and now it's time to actually do some drumming – the buckets are all set up in the hall waiting for us – let's get drumming!

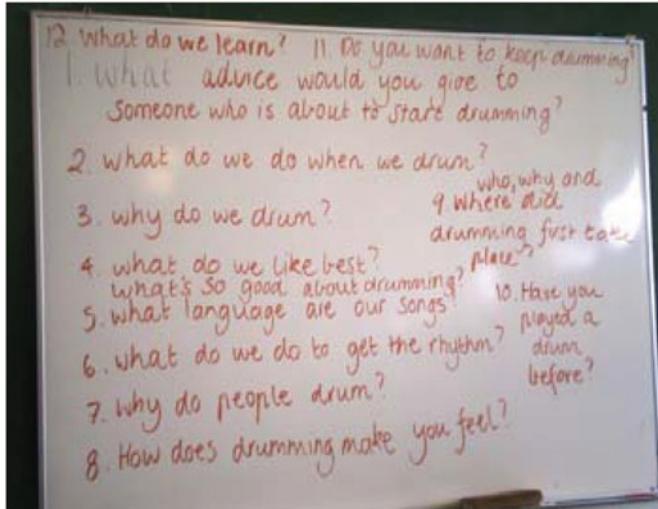


Fig. 2 (Colour online) The results of our drumming brainstorm



Fig. 3 (Colour online) The Bam Bam drummers practise interviewing one another

### **N is for narratives of drumming**

As I thumb through the pages of the *ABC of drumming*, I imagine myself in an art gallery. This art gallery is special though – it has a ‘G’ rating because it’s an art gallery for children’s work only. As I walk through the glass doors at the entrance to the gallery, I see a huge sign informing visitors that the current exhibition is by a group of artist’s called the ‘Bam Bam drummers’. I am met by Lawson, one of the Bam Bam drummers. He smiles broadly at me. ‘Hello Professor Liz! Fancy seeing you here! Welcome to our exhibition. I will be your guide for today and it’s my pleasure to show and share some stories with you about the drawings in the ABC of drumming collection. Come this way please’. Lawson steers me towards the left hand side of the room. He waits a moment for me to take in the sight of the musical alphabet hanging on the walls around me. ‘Each work in the exhibition employs the mediums of pencil, crayon and text on white card to create a pictorial narrative of

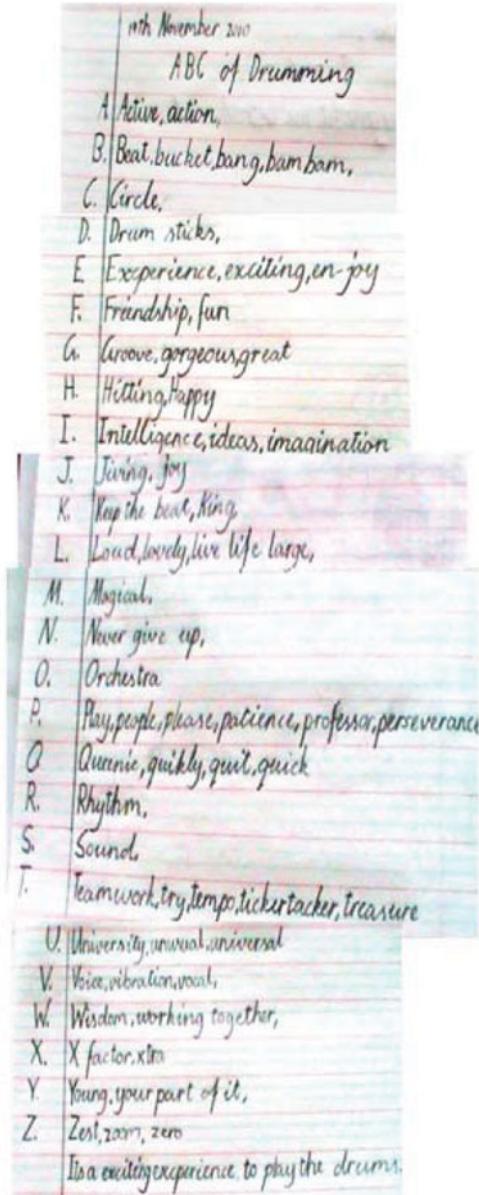


Fig. 4 (Colour online) An example of the drumming word list from a child's workbook

drumming. But, before we begin, let me explain how and why this collection of drawings by my friends and me in Grade 4 came to be here. First, have you ever wondered what it would be like to drum? In this exhibition, the children from Kensington State School share with you in words and images why they are drummers for life'. A crowd of people are now starting to gather around Lawson as he speaks. 'The exhibition of the pages from our book

Table 1 *Bam Bam research project data collection*

Term week	Data collected	Collection method	Rationale
1	Set of research questions formulated by the class about drums, drumming and drumming circles	Brainstorming session on the board with me as the facilitator. The questions were documented by the students in their writing books and photographed (see <a href="#">Figure 2</a> )	To set the parameters and framework for our collaborative research project
2, 3	Student interviews	Each student chose three of the questions from our brainstorming session and interviewed a partner. The students practiced first and took notes as they were interviewing. Each pair then interviewed one another and filmed the interview (see <a href="#">Figure 3</a> )	To gather a set of ideas and understandings from the voices of students themselves about their experience of drumming
4	“Letter” brainstorm	Each letter of the alphabet was written on the board. Students then brainstormed with me what words we could add to each letter which started with that letter and said something important about the experience of drumming (see <a href="#">Figure 4</a> )	Our work on the <i>ABC of drumming</i> book begins. The aim of letter brainstorm was to generate a word list which could be used to create alliterate sentences about drumming

Table 1 *Continued*

Term week	Data collected	Collection method	Rationale
5	Alliteration sentences	Each student randomly chose a letter from a hat. They were then asked to right an alliteration sentence around their chosen letter using the words generated from last week for that letter to describe their experience of drumming	To provide children with a structured but creative outlet to explore the meaning of drumming and what the experience of drumming is like in words. These words would then become the text for our <i>ABC of drumming</i>
6	Drawing drumming	Each student created a picture to illustrate the ideas and sentiment behind the meaning of their alliteration sentence	The drawings each child made were intended for use in the <i>ABC of drumming</i>
7	Rhythm web	We created a rhythm web using different coloured balls of wool. The class sat on the ground in a circle and a ball of wool was rolled gently across the circle from one child to another. As each child received the ball, they read a sentence which they had written about rhythm. These sentences then became connected and string together through the ball of wall to create a poem about rhythm (See <a href="#">Figure 5</a> )	To keep on 'turning around' our ideas and thoughts about drumming in new and exciting ways. To link our understandings of drumming with rhythm, and better understand the way in which we all connect to one another in our drumming circle
8	Final production and presentation of the <i>ABC of drumming</i> book (see <a href="#">Figure 1</a> )		



looks at his audience. 'Are you all aware of what those phrases mean?' He wants to make sure that we understand that these words are not just nonsense, they are the ways in which the drummers vocalise specific rhythmic patterns – the first presents a syncopated rhythm, and the second, a series of semi-quavers or quarter notes. 'We have a particular catch cry in our drumming circle – if you can say the rhythm, you can play the rhythm – and do you know, it really works!' The audience stands still, absorbing the shape, colour and sentiment which resonate from the images. I see the person behind me smile as she mouths the words Elizabeth (the artist of drawing number three) has written to capture the beat.

*Narrative 2. Join the jolly bucket drumming*



The smiles of the audience continue as we move along to look at Narrative 2 entitled 'Join the jolly bucket drumming!' Lawson picks up on the sentiment and explains, 'There is nothing written anywhere that says learning has to be boring. In fact, if we're not having fun in our drumming circle, then we're not learning, isn't that right Professor Liz?' He looks at me for confirmation and I hear the words of many critical pedagogues echo in my ears – Bell Hooks and Ron Schapps asserting that learning does not have to preclude the possibility of joy (2004, p. 154); Hoffman-Davis insisting that 'the arts in education excite and engage students, awakening attitudes to learning that include passion and joy' (2008, p. 76); John Dewey's (1934/2005, p. 64) simple but powerful statement that any act of expression in education is an expression of excitement; and Barnes (2012, p. 239) asserting that learning activities which make our eyes sparkle – experiences Csikszentmihalyi would call 'flow' inducing – are remembered as happy times. 'Professor Liz?' Lawson's voice brings me back to the present moment and I realise the question is directed at me. I grin back at him. 'Absolutely! 'Excitement could [and should] co-exist with and *even* [italics mine] stimulate serious intellectual and/or academic engagement' (after Hooks, 1994, p. 7)'.

*Narrative 3. Drumming to be me*



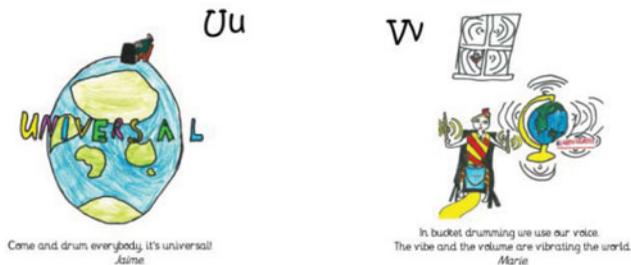
‘Now, moving on . . .’ Lawson gestures for the crowd to step to the right to look at Narrative 3. ‘One of the most important things we experience as drummers in Bam Bam is the feeling that we can do anything’, he smiles shyly. ‘We can achieve anything we want to, be anyone we want to be, and feel good about ourselves because each one of us can simply be. That’s the self, self-worth and self-esteem we walk away from drumming with that these three drawings represent’.

*Narrative 4. Being together in time*



Lawson pauses a moment before explaining the drawings represented in Narrative 4. ‘What is significant about these drawings is the way the children have expressed the concept of ‘being together in time’. Each child has drawn attention to the group dynamics and wider sociality associated with drumming. Drumming makes space to form social relationships, to join together as one large group of learners, and to work together for a common purpose’. He smiles. ‘Not only is it fun be in ‘flow’ together, it’s FUNtastic!’

*Narrative 5. Drumming to be more than me*



The group moves onto the fifth set of drawings. ‘A larger than life sound is created by Bam Bam as we drum’, Lawson explains. ‘This is shown quite clearly in the drawing and words which accompany the letter V’. He moves onto the next picture. ‘Here, in the letter U, the student is describing her understanding that in a drumming circle we are engaging in a musical process where the ‘whole is much greater than individual parts’ (Overy & Molnar-Szakacs, 2009, p. 495). This drawing illustrates awareness that drumming circles have been used in all cultures, throughout all times There is a sense among us that we are creating music which is age old and transcends time’.

Narrative 6. *Drumming with body, heart and mind as one*



I play the drums with passion and I practice a lot. *Joel.*  
If you pick bucket drumming, you will put your mind to drum. You can make your own project. *Jinil.*

‘And last but not least, we arrive at the final drawing in our exhibition’, Lawson proudly announces. I can hear several people in the whisper and gasp in appreciation. ‘Yes, I completely understand your response to this beautiful picture’. He stops speaking and simply lets us our senses absorb the imagery in front of us. It is not so much the words which accompany the drawing, but the drawing itself which has us so captivated. Lawson breaks the contemplative silence. ‘Playing together in a drumming circle, we want to create locations of possibility for teaching and learning to happen. Not just any kind of teaching and learning – but teaching and learning which beats with heart to the call of the drums and the rhythms of the arts. It is almost something that is hard to put into words but when ‘the rhythm is right you feel it with all of your senses; it’s in your mind, your body, in both places’ (Hart, 1990, p. 231).’ People in the crowd nod in agreement while Lawson continues, ‘This drawing depicts the intercorporeality that Hart alludes to. Isn’t it one of the most powerful emotional experiences we can have, in this case as drummers in a circle, but equally as teachers and learners in a classroom-when all of us are knowing, being, and doing with our hearts *and* minds in the same groove all at once?’ As I look at the picture drawn by the young heart, mind and hands of a nine-year old boy, I marvel at his capacity to link intellect, emotion and spirit with experience and wonder if he is in fact John Dewey in disguise. ‘As we manipulate, we touch and feel, as we look, we see; as we listen, we hear’, Dewey wrote (1934/2005, p. 51) and through such experiences, a person comes to know (1934/2005, p. 56). This image illustrates his understanding of feeling, doing, being and knowing in our drumming circle. If Maxine Greene were to see this picture, she would undoubtedly liken the experience of drumming to ‘awakening imagination’, something that has ‘brought our bodies into play, excited our feelings, opened what have been called the doors of perception’ (1995, p. 28). As he finishes speaking, Lawson winks at me and gives the audience thumbs up. ‘And that my friends, is all I have for you today. Until next time – the beat goes on!’

**A is for And the beat goes on . . .**

‘A written document appears to stand still; the narrative appears finished. It has been written, character’s lives constructed, social histories recorded, meaning expressed for all

to see', write Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 9). Even though Connelly and Clandinin wrote these words over twenty years ago, they hold an undeniable and long held anguish about writing and research to which we can all relate, that is, how do we bring closure to the research story knowing that the 'narrative insights of today are the chronological events of tomorrow' (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 9) and that once written our story can and will only ever be an unfinished 'partial truth'? Indeed, as Bunzel wrote, 'there are many paths to the partial truths' (1952, pp. xiii–xiv) researchers write and in concluding any story, there are multiple possible endings to choose from. In bringing this paper to a close, it is tempting to write what Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 10) call a 'wellness' ending using the technique of 'narrative smoothing' (after Spence, 1986, in Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 10) whereby the illustrations and text created by the children in *An ABC of drumming* operate as both research and art to re-story their stories of meaning making in and through the experience of playing together in a drumming circle. In this version, I would conclude that the children in Grade 4 at Kensington State School have learnt to play music on drums; they have learnt to listen attentively, respond and work together as a group; they know what it feels like to be part of something that is bigger than yet central to their sense of self; and they understand through their own inter-subjective embodied experience that music, as Blacking would suggest, is that which truly makes us human (1973, p. 89). An optimistic and rose-coloured glaze is painted over everything to do with *An ABC of drumming* in this ending – the research process and the research product, the positive experience of drumming per se for all of us, the children's re-telling and my re-telling of that experience, and the extra/musical learning gained as a result – such that the authenticity, validity, success and/or benefits of children drumming in a circle cannot be in any doubt. It is my hope that this paper has come close to this particular kind of narrative 'somewhere' but I know that hope alone cannot account for such competency in completion.

An alternative ending would be to ask critical questions about what this paper has or has not been able to achieve. In this version, I might follow Barone and Eisner's criteria for judging arts-based research (2012, pp. 148–154) and ask questions about the 'incisiveness' of the paper – does it get to the heart of how children make meaning about self, other, music and the world around them through drum circle performance? What about the 'concision' employed – is the paper too thick or too thin in terms of providing enough detail and direction to take you into the experience of the drumming circle? Perhaps I might be concerned about the 'cohesiveness' of the narrative story itself – does it 'hang' together as a bricolage of autoethnographic writing, conversational dialogue, children's drawings and moments of more formal academic writing? Does the paper give you 'legs' (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 152) as a reader, to take the general from the specific presented, and shed light on an aspect of music education, children's performance, drumming, research methods and/or narrative that you had not considered before but which resonates with another aspect of your own lived experience? Have I avoided slipping into triviality with my insistence that drumming together in a circle means something to children but not quite articulating its social significance? Is it, as I declared at the beginning, a paper which is 'thick with feeling' in terms of its capacity to evoke and illuminate? Once I had answered these, I might follow with more questions which seek to interrogate the messy nature of my relationship with the children as teacher-researcher-parent and the tensions inherent within

this untidiness which point to issues of power, privilege and persuasion. Whose voice are we really hearing, seeing and reading in *An ABC of drumming* and this paper?

While perhaps either or a combination of these endings might suffice, they both seem a little *too* easy. Throughout the paper I have drawn up Barone and Eisner's (2012, p. 9) term 'somewhere' to talk about the process of researching and writing lived experience in and through narrative and arts-based practice. How might this conclusion be written if it were to become as 'alert to the stories not told as to those that are' (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 10), that is, to think about the 'other-where' not included in this somewhere? Other-where is the space of Barrett and Stauffer's (2009) 'troubled uncertainty'; it sits on the borders between narrative inquiry, arts-based research and creative-analytic processes to remind us 'it is simply not enough to reproduce things the way things are' (Greene, 1995, p. 1) and we must be prepared to step outside to 'express meanings that otherwise would be ineffable' (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 1). Other-where overflows with capacity for disturbance, imagination, resistance, inventiveness and surprise (after Greene, 1995, p. 15). Other-where is a location of belonging, being and becoming found by experiencing music and which cannot be expressed anyway else. It represents the vacancies, the roads not travelled and the vistas not seen that Maxine Greene speaks of, and acknowledges that 'the search must be ongoing; the end can never be quite known' (Greene, 1995, p. 14). Other-where holds those stories which remain untold and unsaid in this paper. What of the classroom teacher, Mrs Jones, in this story? Apart from her inclusion in the dialogue about the research itself, her place in this story and the meaning making she drew from the experience of drumming has gone relatively unnoticed. What about the children's regular classroom music teacher? How did she think and feel about another coming in to teach music without her involvement in a style and form very dissimilar to her own? Did she notice a change in the musical learning and experience of the children outside the drumming circle inside her classroom? Did she talk to the children, her colleagues and friends? Would she have liked to be given the opportunity to tell her story? How would the stories of the classroom teacher and the music teacher conflict, compliment and or/change the narrative lines presented here? Other-where also evokes exclusion – not only of words unspoken – but of agency and action. The children played in the drumming circle because Mrs Jones and I decided they would. With broad smiles on our faces we told the children about Bam Bam and they smiled broadly back at us – this is how we expected them to act and they did as they were told. Would they all have played in the Bam Bam drumming programme if they were given a choice? Each week every child played in the drumming circle but I am sure that not every child wanted to and neither did they smile all of the time. This story is not told here because I did not ask the children to talk about the dark side of drumming and I am not sure they would have told me anything if I had, keeping in mind that the drumming circle had become part of their classroom curriculum. Having highlighted that *An ABC of drumming* from start to finish this was a collaborative research project between the children, the classroom teacher and me, who was in control – when, how and why? How were the teaching and learning dynamics mediated between the classroom teacher and myself and how did this impact on the experience of learning and meaning making in and through drumming for the children? The answers to these questions remain, at least for now in other-where – as 'narrative secrets' (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 10) in relation to *An ABC of drumming*. For us as music educators, thinking about the

other-where(s) in our research stories might prompt us to consider further the necessity of stepping *beyond somewhere* in order to arrive *at somewhere* in relation to the narrative telling and re-telling of the lived experience of music.

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### Notes

- 1 The name of the school used in this paper is fictional.
- 2 All university and state education ethical procedures were followed in the Bam Bam project, with informed consent received from all student participant researchers, the classroom teacher, and the school principal for the inclusion and publication of individual data and images gathered during the research in this publication.
- 3 The names used in this fictional dialogue are pseudonyms and are used to protect the identity of participants.

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