

REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE | PEER REVIEWED

What Happens When the Sun Comes Out?

Reflection on Therapeutic Songwriting Practice with a Hong Kong Dyslexic Child

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Abstract

This article reflects on the author's work with Chun Yip (pseudonym) as an example of adopting therapeutic songwriting with dyslexic children in Hong Kong. The article is informed by the author's observations and experiences during the sessions and ongoing personal reflections. The first section will offer descriptive vignettes and the author's reflective analysis. Three themes will be emphasised: learning how to read Chinese words through therapeutic songwriting, drawing on the client's resources throughout the process, and increasing reading motivation through therapeutic songwriting. The second section will more broadly discuss the potential implications of this case story for the use of therapeutic songwriting in supporting dyslexic children in Hong Kong towards further practice and research.

Keywords: dyslexia; therapeutic songwriting; resource-oriented music therapy; school-aged children; Hong Kong education

Introduction

On a Saturday afternoon during the summer, I waited for my first child client to come to my new Studio in Hong Kong. I was surrounded by my precious "tools," a mixture of musical instruments, board games, toys, storybooks, and picture cards. I reflected on how my music, education and work journeys had brought me here. After becoming a speech therapist and later a music therapist, the distinction between the two roles started to blur. I couldn't separate my work into "speech therapy" and "music therapy." I began to bring music to my speech therapy sessions intuitively, and I often incorporated communication goals into my music therapy sessions. Sometimes, more choices meant more struggles.

While I was lost in my thoughts, the sound of the doorbell brought me back to reality. As I approached, I heard a little boy excitedly chattering behind the door about the rainy sky, the rushing cars, and the people he saw along the way to the building. I often felt a bit overwhelmed to meet new clients. On the one hand, I looked forward to connecting with the families and starting a therapeutic journey. On the other hand, I worried about my therapeutic and decision-making capacities during the first encounter. Despite being self-conscious, I opened the door. “Sunny Sir, good afternoon!” The little boy greeted me cheerfully in Cantonese with a big bright smile. Although he wore a face mask (due to COVID-19), I could still feel his vibrant energy.

The rain had stopped, and the sun’s rays streamed through the window. Chun Yip (pseudonym) hopped towards the window and stared at the blue sky and the green mountain. He vividly described everything in his sight. “The sky is not grey anymore! Can you see the clouds that are moving?” Chun Yip’s mum was surprised that he quickly adapted to the space. Common among Hong Kong parents, she wanted to make an excellent first impression, as I heard her telling Chun Yip to behave and listen to me. I picked up my guitar, stroking on my favourite I-bVII-IV-I chord progression and started improvising a “Hello Song” in Cantonese. “We say hello to the sun and the clouds! And we say hello to everyone!” I invited Chun Yip to fill in the blanks. “We say hello to the buses and taxis! We say hello to the trees on the mountain!” We finished the “Hello Song” on a prolonged C chord after we had greeted everything we could name.

Background

Overview of Dyslexia in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, dyslexia is defined as “a specific learning difficulty affecting individuals whose literacy achievement and cognitive-linguistic skills fell below that to be expected on the basis of individuals’ age and IQ” (Chung, 2017, p. 4). According to Chan et al. (2007), the prevalence of developmental dyslexia for children between the ages of 6 and 10 ½ in Hong Kong is 9.7%. The same research also discovered a two-fold prevalence of boys compared to girls. One common learning need of dyslexic children includes reading and writing support. In Hong Kong, dyslexia has been commonly conceptualised under the multiple cognitive-linguistic deficit model that highlights dyslexic children’s difficulties in rapid naming, as well as morphological, visual-orthographic, syntactic and discourse areas, when they engage with Chinese language learning (Chung, 2017). More broadly, reading motivation, academic self-concept, mental health, and educational and occupational prospects are reported to be impacted by dyslexia (Wilmot et al., 2023). In contrast to the prevailing research on deficits of dyslexic children in Hong Kong, Lam and Tong (2021) found that dyslexic children in grades two to four exhibit higher nonverbal creativity than their non-dyslexic peers, highlighting a potential strength among dyslexic individuals. Wong et al.’s (2023) qualitative study of 30 dyslexic children in Hong Kong showed that these children exhibit different learning styles and needs and may benefit from tailored assistance to their strengths and preferences.

Music Therapy and Dyslexia

Music therapy has been applied in mainstream school settings to address young people’s social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural needs around the globe (Carr & Wigram, 2009). Music therapy has also been used to support young people with disabilities and to promote inclusion in mainstream schools (Twyford, 2020). Regarding music therapy and dyslexia, the research literature on Western populations shows strong links between music and literacy skills (Cancer & Antonietti, 2022; Patel, 2010; Rolka & Silverman, 2015). In

neuroscience, researchers have discovered that music and language have numerous shared features regarding their developmental characteristics, perceptual processes, and common neural substrates (Patel, 2010). In a systematic review focusing on music and dyslexia, Rolka and Silverman (2015) discovered studies examining the challenges of dyslexic students in learning music and studies exploring the use of music to strengthen literacy skills and assist in identifying dyslexia.

Later, Cancer and Antonietti (2022) further systematically reviewed studies that examined the effectiveness of music interventions with dyslexic children, finding out that most interventional studies reported positive results regarding reading measures. The authors further suggested that music-based interventions with/without reading activities were the most effective approach (Cancer & Antonietti, 2022). Bishop and Snowling (2004) suggested that dyslexia can manifest differently in the Chinese language because of its linguistic differences from alphabetic languages. Since these reviewed music interventions are based on alphabetic languages, whether these results could apply in Hong Kong, a region that uses Chinese as the primary written language and Cantonese as the primary oral language, remains unclear.

Therapeutic Songwriting and Dyslexia

Therapeutic songwriting is a common music therapy method that utilises songwriting with clients to address therapeutic goals (Baker, 2015a). According to a two-part worldwide survey (Baker et al., 2008; Baker et al., 2009), despite therapeutic songwriting being frequently used by music therapists in the developmental disability sector, there is an underrepresentation of reports in this area in the literature. The survey predominantly covered countries in North and South America, Australasia, and Europe, where alphabetical languages are dominant. To date, Gfeller's (1987) study remains the only known publication that discussed the use of therapeutic songwriting to address literacy and linguistics goals with students experiencing reading and writing difficulties, including vocabulary, reading, and writing. She also provided examples of including social goals (e.g., building friendships) within the written song. With her work in the United States, the author also emphasized the benefits of integrating daily-life language experience and structural aspects into songwriting. As the literature focused on alphabetic languages, the application of therapeutic songwriting in non-alphabetical language regions, including Hong Kong, remains unexplored in literature.

Music therapy is a relatively new profession in Hong Kong, and only a few studies have investigated its uses (e.g., Tuet & Lam, 2006 on dementia; Yum et al., 2020 on autism). There are no research reports regarding music therapy or therapeutic songwriting for dyslexic people in Hong Kong. Therefore, using music or music interventions, including therapeutic songwriting, in working with dyslexic students in Hong Kong is an important area worth further research and exploration.

About This Article

I wrote this reflective article at the beginning of my doctorate study at the University of Melbourne as I reflected on my music therapy practice in Hong Kong. Chun Yip, a joyful, energetic dyslexic child, was one of my first clients in that space, and working with him ignited my passion for pursuing further studies to explore the role of songwriting with dyslexic young people in Hong Kong. This article reflects on my work with Chun Yip as an example of adopting therapeutic songwriting with dyslexic children in Hong Kong. The article is informed by my observations and experiences during the sessions, discussions with my doctorate supervisor, Dr. Lucy Bolger, and ongoing personal reflections.

This article is divided into two main sections. Section one (Verses) focuses on my

observations, experiences, and reflections while I worked with Chun Yip. To contextualise the scene, I will offer descriptive vignette examples before my reflective analysis. Three perspectives of reflections will be emphasised: learning how to read Chinese words through therapeutic songwriting; drawing on the client's resources throughout the process; and increasing reading motivation through therapeutic songwriting. The vignette and reflection will also explain and elaborate on various theories and approaches that informed the work with Chun Yip. Section two (Chorus) will discuss more broadly the implication of this case story for using therapeutic songwriting to support language and literacy goals in dyslexic children in Hong Kong and propose further recommendations for practice and research.

About Chun Yip

Chun Yip is an 8-year-old Cantonese-speaking boy. According to his parents, he is diagnosed with developmental dyslexia and mild language disorder. The family made a self-referral after they saw the studio's website. After initial assessment and discussions with Chun Yip's parents, three goal areas were established, including language (mainly on vocabulary and narrative expression), literacy goals (skills of reading common Chinese words) and social goals (interaction skills and pragmatics). The current article will focus on the language and literacy goals areas supported by the therapeutic songwriting experience.

Chun Yip's resources were also identified in the initial assessment. Chun Yip loved playing drums, singing and dancing. He attended a private drum lesson and participated in group dancing class every week. Alongside his musical interests, Chun Yip enjoyed drawing and writing. He often enthusiastically demonstrated writing various Chinese characters he knew and liked. On a relational level, Chun Yip's mother actively encouraged Chun Yip to try out different extracurricular activities like sports and arts to find out what he enjoyed. She was also attentive and responsive to Chun Yip's expressions and needs.

About Me

After graduating with a bachelor's degree in Speech Therapy at the University of Hong Kong, I worked as a speech therapist at schools in Hong Kong for a few years. As a music lover, I was intrigued by the power of music in healing and growing in personal and relational contexts. I then engaged myself in music therapy training in Hong Kong. Since graduating with a master's in music therapy from the University of Melbourne, I launched my therapy studio in a new town in Hong Kong as a dual therapist (music therapist and speech therapist).

My clinical work is guided by what I have learned from speech and music therapy education. On the one hand, I apply my understanding of language and literacy development and various language stimulation techniques. On the other hand, I started to explore music therapy approaches and frameworks that might help work with school-aged clients. As a result, I have adopted an eclectic approach in my practice, drawing on theoretical approaches flexibly according to the client's ongoing needs and interests in the session (McFerran, 2015). In my work with Chun Yip, the following approaches and frameworks are primarily drawn on.

Resource-oriented music therapy

Resource-oriented music therapy (ROMT) is a contemporary music therapy approach in which the music therapist supports and facilitates empowerment by emphasising strengths and capabilities rather than weaknesses (Rolvjord, 2010). ROMT, originating from the inpatient mental health setting, focuses on strengthening existing and cultivating new

resources. In my practice with school-aged children, I consciously recognise and use each child's inherent potential for resilience and self-expression instead of focusing on deficit and cure. Practically, this involves identifying the child's current interests and abilities and starting the therapeutic process from there.

Developmental speech and language training through music (DSLTM)

Developmental Speech and Language Training through Music (DSLTM; LaGasse, 2014) is an approach that utilises music to enhance functional communication skills, targeting speech production, language development, and social interaction in children and adolescents. Under neurologic music therapy (NMT; Thaut & Hoemberg, 2014), DSLTM draws on the neuroscience behind music to enhance speech and language capacities. Neurologic music therapists use rhythms, melody, and structure within a song and a balance between creativity and repetition to promote engagement in addressing the identified goals (LaGasse, 2014). I incorporate this approach into my practice to flexibly alter the musical elements to integrate target words/phrases for the child to engage in natural and meaningful practice.

About Our Work Together

Chun Yip has received weekly private combined speech therapy/music therapy sessions in the therapy studio since August 2021 until present. This article reflects on the first 10 sessions with Chun Yip. These sessions took place across a three-month period in August through October 2021 and focused on therapeutic songwriting to meet language and literacy goals. A 1-hour session typically began with a greeting song and closed with a goodbye song as a means to provide structure. For each session, I prepared several interactive experiences to address identified goal areas. One of Chun Yip's family members, usually his mother, was present in sessions as an observer, and I debriefed the parent at the end of each session (see Table 1). Informed by humanistic and resource-oriented perspectives (Abrams, 2018; Rolvsjord, 2010), the planning was not prescriptive but a resource for Chun Yip and me to draw on as the therapeutic process evolved.

Table 1. Session Overview.

Section	Description
Opening	Greeting song and verbal check-in
Interactive experiences	Interactive games, book or story sharing, picture descriptions, drumming, song singing, music improvisations and/or therapeutic songwriting
Closing	Verbal/Musical closure and goodbye song
Debrief	Providing a summary of the session and take-home strategies to the parent

About the Language Used in This Reflection

Chun Yip is a pseudonym, and I employed this approach to protect the client's privacy. While I am writing about Chun Yip and his family, I am aware that as a music therapist and a writer, I can choose how to represent their experience in music therapy (Fairchild & Bibb, 2016). Thus, I am responsible for writing the story respectfully by intentionally and reflexively selecting the language to communicate my practice (Thompson, 2022). While I recognise the complexities of language choice and their potential effect on Chun Yip's experience descriptions, it is noted that I, a non-dyslexic clinician/researcher, cannot fully understand the most appropriate choice of terminology without asking Chun Yip.

While I could not consult with the Cantonese-speaking family about the full content of the article due to the language barrier, I obtained consent from the parents to include Chun Yip's stories in the article and provided the translated abstract for their review.

There is a phraseology debate over using *identity-first* and *person-first* language in communicating dyslexia within and beyond the dyslexia community. Using *identity-first* language, such as "a dyslexic person," implies that dyslexia is part of the self while using *person-first* language, such as "a person with dyslexia," means that dyslexia is a removable extension of self. In Cantonese's conventional conceptualisation of dyslexia, we seldom differentiate between "a person with dyslexia" and a "dyslexic person." I opted to use *identity-first* language here to describe Chun Yip's experience in music therapy, which was informed by the neurodiversity movement that recognises dyslexia as an intrinsic part of self that contains unique strengths, characteristics, and traits. It is not something to be separated from the person (Dunn & Andrews, 2015).

The Verses – Case Vignettes and Reflections

Verse 1 – Introducing Therapeutic Songwriting Experiences

Vignette: Writing our first song together

In summer in Hong Kong, we could experience sudden rains and sudden sunshine on a single day. The fluctuating weather fueled the therapeutic process as I observed Chun Yip was very interested in it, and I supported him in exploring more deeply into his observation and expression. In every weekly session, Chun Yip and I sat beside the window to explore what was outside. Chun Yip started incorporating more elaborate descriptions of the scenery, using more extended and complex syntactic structures and fruitful vocabularies. I supported his learning by providing verbal and visual prompts. At one time, we recalled the improvised "Hello Song" and further developed the song into an original narrative that talks about the clear sky after the rain. Accompanied by my guitar, I recast Chun Yip's verbal production musically to sing the sentences with a melody that suits the Cantonese tone. I asked for Chun Yip's approval before writing the lyrics on a whiteboard. After several amendments and rehearsals within the session, our first composed song, "What Happens When the Sun Comes Out?", was video-recorded while I sang on the guitar. Chun Yip sang while beating his favourite bongos with his hands.

Chun Yip loved writing. Writing seemed an enjoyable activity to him, unlike other dyslexic young children in Hong Kong who might have negative attitudes towards writing Chinese characters (Wong et al., 2023). Chun Yip's mother said Chun Yip had difficulty navigating school activities, such as filling in the handbook, doing homework and completing tests, due to his reading difficulties. However, despite his reading capacities, Chun Yip was always keen on being a "teacher" in my session, teaching me all the Chinese characters he knew by writing on the whiteboard, such as "I," "have," and "sun."

Reflections: My speech therapy and music therapy training

Coming from a speech therapy background, I am passionate about learning approaches to the Chinese/Cantonese language. In particular, I am interested in the huge difference between English, an alphabetic language, and Chinese, a non-alphabetic language. In Hong Kong, Hongkongers speak Cantonese and use traditional Chinese characters for daily communication. Unlike alphabetic languages, the primary visual unit of Chinese is a character representing both a lexical morpheme and a single-sound syllable (Chung, 2017). Eighty percent of these characters are ideophonic compounds formed by a semantic

radical (that cues the character’s meaning) and a phonetic radical (that cues the character’s pronunciation). However, Chinese characters have a variety of semantic and phonological consistency and regularity (Ho et al., 2001). For example, readers can only directly decode forty percent of the characters from their phonetic radicals. Children need to deduce the pronunciation of an unfamiliar character by its phonetic radical or by analogy to another character containing the same phonetic radical (Ho et al., 1999). The Chinese language also has many homophones (Chung, 2017). That is, many words have the same pronunciation but different meanings. Therefore, knowledge of homophones is important for reading Chinese (Chung, 2017).

Music therapy training provided me with another perspective on viewing language learning. Research in NMT (Thaut & Hoemberg, 2014) describes the technique of Developmental Speech and Language Training through Music (DSLTM; LaGasse, 2014). DSLTM is a technique that employs musical experiences that are developmentally appropriate, such as singing, instrumental playing, and combining speech and movement with music to enhance language and speech development (LaGasse, 2014). I am also intrigued by the correlations between musical and language skills when reading Patel’s (2010) research. In particular, his research has indicated that music and language share common cognitive mechanisms, and music training can potentially improve phonological and syntactic skills. Therapeutic songwriting is a further music therapy method that integrates music with language. Songwriting has become one of my preferred methods for working with young people based on its potential to support language and literacy goals (Baker, 2015a). From my clinical experience, as illustrated in Chun Yip’s story as one example, therapeutic songwriting seems to have the potential to help students learn Chinese/Cantonese.

Vignette: Planning for a more strategic songwriting session

For the therapeutic activities that address both Chun Yip’s need (to read Chinese characters) and his resources (lived experience and love of music), I decided to incorporate therapeutic songwriting to cultivate his awareness of reading Chinese characters and his motivation to read more. Drawing on my speech and music therapy clinical experience, I suspected that putting the family of common Chinese characters of the same phonetic radicals in a song might help Chun Yip remember how to read the words. Also, the lyrics in the song might give context for Chun Yip to infer the meaning of the word.

The first characters that came to my mind were 晴, an adjective depicting clear and sunny weather, and 青, an adjective meaning green. Both characters have the same phonetic radical, 青 which sounds /ts^hing1/ in Cantonese. 晴 /ts^hing4/ has the same sound except for a different tone. The semantic radical 日 (a noun that means the sun) within 晴 implies that 晴 is semantically related to the sun. Six common words containing the phonetic radical 青 were chosen for songwriting. Table 2 illustrates the sounds and the meanings of each character.

Table 2. Sounds and Meanings of the Targeted Chinese Characters.

Character	青	晴	情	請	蜻	清
Sound	/ts ^h ing1/	/ts ^h ing4/	/ts ^h ing4/	/ts ^h ing2/	/ts ^h ing1/	/ts ^h ing1/
Meaning of Character	Green	Sunny	Love/ Feelings	Please	Dragonfly	Clean/ Clear
Semantic Radical and Meaning	/	日 (Sun)	忄 =心 (Heart)	言 (Saying/ Speaking)	虫 (Insects)	氵 =水 (Water)

Verse 2 – Drawing on Chun Yip’s Resources Throughout the Process

Vignette: What happens when the sun comes out?

In the next session, after singing our Hello Song, I asked if Chun Yip would like to play with some words and write a song together. I presented the six Chinese character cards and asked him to identify and circle the similar component 青 within each character. Chun Yip looked slightly amazed as he confidently told me, “Haha! It is so easy! I can do it all! I know all these words!” Chun Yip’s mum and I burst into laughter.

Then, I explained the meaning and the sound of these characters, with reference to their semantic radical. I gave some examples to put those characters in words, such as 晴天 (sunny day), 青草 (green grass), 心情 (feeling). Chun Yip drew a sun, some grass and a heart on the whiteboard and stuck the character card next to its respective symbols.

It was time for some songwriting! I invited Chun Yip to imagine he was in a park and that he would like to describe everything in the park using the characters on the board. Initially, he did not know what to do but continued drawing on the whiteboard. More clouds, more grass, more happy faces. I started strumming on the guitar and started with the character 晴, singing “在晴天，太陽……” (On a sunny day, the sun....), intentionally leaving a space for him to fill in the rest of the sentence. Possibly recalled from the famous Cantonese children’s song “The Uncle Sun,” Chun Yip immediately responded “出來了” (comes out). I replied by singing the whole sentence.

We sang the melody together a few times before he pointed at the dragonfly he just drew, asking animatedly, “咁呢隻呢?” (How about this one?). I recognised the completion of the first sentence and encouraged him to try using each character. I sang “蜻蜓在……” (The dragonfly is...) and pointed at the grass. Chun Yip responded, “青草” (green grass). The songwriting process seemed unnatural initially, since we paused a lot and spent time formulating the sentences. We stumbled, but we proceeded. At the end of the session, we co-wrote a 4-line song.

“On a sunny day, the sun comes out.
The dragonfly is flying above the green grass.
Please help to keep the park clean,
So everyone is feeling good coming here!”

「在晴天，太陽出來了，
蜻蜓在青草上飛。
請你幫忙清潔公園，
大家來這裡都心情好。」

I loved that we had many opportunities to play with the Chinese characters in this experience. We read aloud, drew its meaning, cooperated in writing the whole sentences, rehearsed through singing and musicking, and eventually happily performed our product in front of the video camera.

Reflections: Resource-oriented therapeutic songwriting

The process reminded me of my theoretical orientation of resource-oriented music therapy (Rolvjord, 2010). As I reflected on the way Chun Yip and I co-wrote the songs, it reminded me of the concept of collaboration and empowerment, which are vital elements in a resource-oriented songwriting process (Baker, 2015a). Baker posited that the music therapist and the client work together musically to create lyrics and music to form a product embedded with meanings. The client also experiences empowerment and ownership in deciding on the lyrics, style, instrumentation, and songwriting products

(Baker, 2015b). I decided to record the song with the intention of capturing the creative and collaborative process, with the consent of Chun Yip. It also drew on his interest in musical performance. By recording the product, I also aimed to provide a resource for Chun Yip and his family that could be revisited and shared outside of the therapeutic space (Baker, 2013).

After the session with Chun Yip, I felt energised by the process. Although I often adopt songwriting in my music therapy practice, it is usually employed for participants' self-expression and emotional expression. It was the first time I strategically incorporated reading goals into the process. Drawing on Chun Yip's resources (his love and capacity to play music, draw, and write), he enjoyed deciding on the order of the written lyrics lines to form a complete story, choosing which instruments to play and how to video-record the composed song. To me, there is a balance between Chun Yip's and my contribution. Although I prepared several Chinese characters as targets before the session, most of the ideas for writing up the songs came from Chun Yip based on his interpretation of the characters' meanings.

Verse 3 – Increasing Reading Motivation through Writing Songs

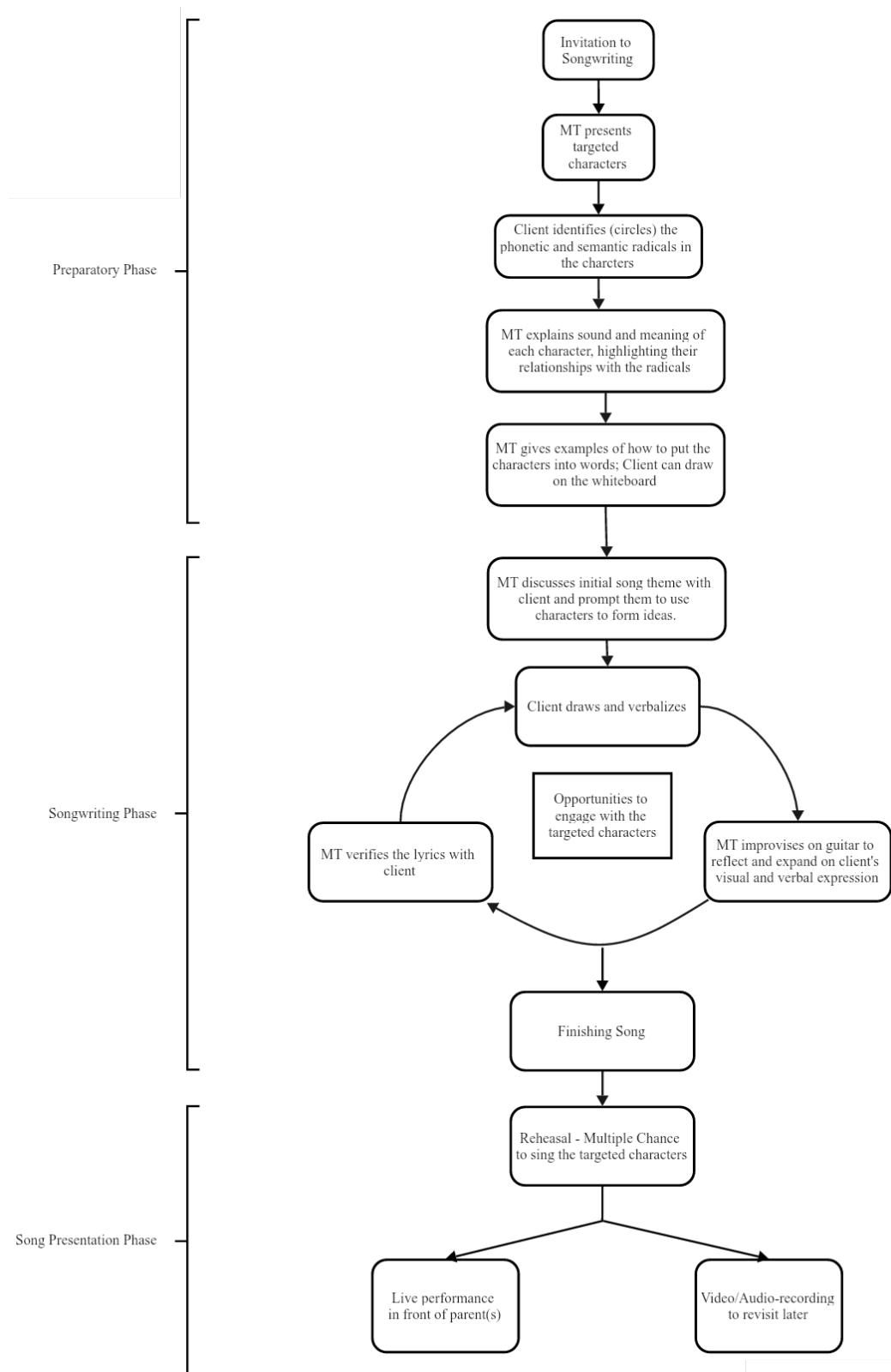
Vignette: Let's read and write more!

In the subsequent sessions, Chun Yip and I wrote more songs using different Chinese characters from other phonetic radical families. A songwriting process evolved during these sessions (See Figure 1). Firstly, I introduced him to the new sets of characters and explained their meanings. Chun Yip became comfortable with this routine, put these characters onto the whiteboard, and made new sentences himself. I supported the songwriting process by verbal recast and guitar accompaniment. Sometimes he needed support to stay in the activity, yet most of the time, he requested more cards from me to expand the song. We had written songs about "Taking Tram to Eat Dumplings" and "Mama Don't Blame Me" based on different sets of Chinese characters. I felt inspired by how creatively Chun Yip could draw on his lived experience to link with the presented characters.

I incorporated interactive games like Word Puzzle, Jenga, and Pirate Bowl to see if Chun Yip could read the characters after writing songs. Sometimes, he could read the characters by himself, and sometimes he could not. In those trials, semantic cues were effective as I sang him part of the lyric lines as a prompt. Furthermore, he could read more characters and try to guess the pronunciation of the novel characters in book reading activities. His eyes sparkled with joy and a sense of accomplishment when he could successfully read the characters on his own.

Chun Yip's mum was supportive, as always. After a few songwriting sessions, she told me that Chun Yip always sang the songs we wrote at home, and he proudly shared the song with other family members. She seemingly enjoyed listening to our songs a lot. I could see her smile when she was describing the experience at home. She explained that she never thought Chun Yip could read those characters and had such good memories. I asked how the songwriting process impacted his reading and writing in general. Chun Yip's mum shared that Chun Yip spent a lot of time completing text-based homework. The family struggled with completing all the homework while allowing Chun Yip time to rest for the following day's schooling. This often led to frustration for Chun Yip, and disagreements and disputes within the family. However, like what I observed in the session, Chun Yip's mum expressed that Chun Yip had become more motivated to complete Chinese reading and writing homework and more engaged in reading books outside the curriculum in his leisure time. His favourite books were Spider-Man and Zombie comics.

Figure 1. Songwriting Process.



Reflections: Turning Reading into a Fun Activity

Talking with Chun Yip’s mother reminded me of the encounters with other dyslexic young children and their families. Chan and Mo (2023) posited that Hong Kong’s elite and achievement-focused educational climate has overwhelmed parents of dyslexic children. From my observations, it was not uncommon for these families to experience frustration

and tension concerning completing reading and writing-based homework. While some parents understand more about dyslexia and its implications, others believe their children could improve if they worked harder. According to some parents that I encountered in my clinical practice, doing homework and revising was like a “painful muddy fight,” ending with more struggles and exhaustion. Extensive effort and time were spent daily, yet the resulting performance was unsatisfactory to parents and teachers. For example, most of my dyslexic students got very low marks on every dictation task, which required them to recall and dictate Chinese characters. A vicious cycle would be created: the more the child experienced difficulties and failures academically, the more they were reluctant to read and study, which resulted in more difficulties and failures.

While working with Chun Yip, I witnessed his motivation to read extend from the songwriting process towards other text-based activities within the therapeutic process and further towards academic and non-academic reading experiences at home. For him and his family, reading had become less of a struggle and more of a fun and rewarding thing to do. Chun Yip and his mother seemingly enjoyed discussing what he learned from school and book-reading in the sessions. I often heard Chun Yip’s mother share how she and Chun Yip incorporated the strategies in the session into daily activities and encouraged Chun Yip to join drum lessons. She also shared with me what she learned about dyslexia from other workshops. An increased understanding of Chun Yip’s dyslexic condition and his musical and creative strengths seemed to support Chun Yip’s parents in facing dyslexia-related barriers with Chun Yip. This has the potential to help break the vicious cycle of reluctance to read and underachievement in reading tasks.

Chorus – Discussion

While Chun Yip’s transformation within these few months was thrilling to his family and me as a therapist, I could not help but wonder why and how this songwriting process contributed to such positive changes for him. I started to look at different elements within the songwriting process that might help cultivate a successful experience of reading and writing in a Hong Kong context. Is it the therapeutic relationship? Is it the utilisation of Chun Yip’s resources? Is it the multisensory input? Or is it the musical components?

Trusting Therapeutic Relationship

The definition of therapeutic songwriting is “the process of creating, notating and/or recording lyrics and music by the client or clients and therapist within a therapeutic relationship to address psychosocial, emotional, cognitive and communication needs of the client” (Baker & Wigram, 2005, p. 16). This definition highlighted that therapeutic songwriting must take place within the songwriter-music therapist’s therapeutic relationship throughout the process (Baker, 2015a). Music therapy research also highlights the importance of therapeutic relationships as a predictor of change within the therapy process (Mössler et al., 2019). Therefore, building a trusting therapeutic relationship holds great importance.

In the case vignette illustrated above, I strived to create an accepting and supportive therapeutic relationship in my interactions with Chun Yip. In our first encounter, Chun Yip’s interest in the scenery outside the therapy room was met by my verbal and musical responses instead of behavioural management instructions, such as asking him to sit properly and pay attention. In the songwriting sessions, Chun Yip’s ideas were not judged upon their correctness but empathically listened to, validated, and expanded to formulate lyrics. The experience of unconditional positive regard, as informed by a humanistic ideology (Abrams, 2018), might be new for Chun Yip. It is not uncommon for a dyslexic child to feel judged and rejected within the Hong Kong educational system due to the high

demand for academic performance (Chu et al., 2011; Wong et al., 2023). The songwriting experience might have afforded a safe space that encouraged Chun Yip to express himself and demonstrate his creativity.

Therapeutic songwriting adopts a collaborative approach to music and lyric co-creation (Baker, 2015a). Instead of pre-composing a song containing all the target words for Chun Yip to learn, I intended to collaborate with Chun Yip at different stages of songwriting. I offered various options for musical instruments, melodies, and accompaniment styles for Chun Yip to consider. As Baker (2015a) suggested, the language and music used in the written song are with accordance to the songwriter's musical identity and language style. Chun Yip often picked up his favourite musical instruments and decided upon my suggestions quickly. This experience has prompted me to consider whether the trusting therapeutic relationship built across the sessions empowered Chun Yip's sense of control and autonomy over his work, whether it also led Chun Yip to believe in his abilities, and whether this might extend beyond the songwriting sessions.

Drawing on Chun Yip's Resources

With a resource-oriented lens, therapeutic songwriting can act as a journey for the songwriter to make sense of, and make meaning with their internal resources (Viega, 2013). These resources include personal experience and pre-existing musical resources. From Chun Yip's description of the surroundings to his experience of going to the park, each song written in the sessions captured an aspect of Chun Yip's life. Although some Chinese characters were chosen as songwriting starters, most of the lyrics were co-created based on Chun Yip's told stories. This appeared to empower Chun Yip to take ownership of the created songs and become motivated to write personal narratives creatively. Research has shown that engagement in reading activities is influenced by children's reading interests (Lohvansuu et al., 2021), therefore matching Chun Yip's interest and personal stories as songwriting themes may have helped make the reading and writing experience more successful and meaningful for Chun Yip.

Songwriters engaging in therapeutic songwriting often bring along with their pre-existing musical resources, including their musical identity, capacities playing an instrument and singing, and experience in songwriting (Baker, 2015a). Along with the principles of resource-oriented music therapy (Rolvsjord, 2010), Chun Yip's personal and musical resources were identified and explored at the early stage of the therapeutic process. Fairchild and McFerran (2019) suggested that a resource-oriented approach in therapeutic songwriting with children may aid to develop the therapeutic focus. For instance, Chun Yip's interest in drum playing was greatly acknowledged and developed during therapy sessions. As such, I synchronised Chun Yip's drumming rhythm with my guitar accompaniment. Video recording of the written songs allowed Chun Yip to demonstrate his musical strengths and his ability to sing the newly learned Chinese words to others. Music creation and recording have the potential to increase Chun Yip's self-esteem (Baker, 2013). From my observation, Chun Yip became more comfortable developing ideas for music and lyrics as he gained more experience with writing songs with me, showing a gain in confidence.

Apart from internal resources, relational resources such as family support were integral in the songwriting process. Baker (2013) suggested that sharing created songs with others creates opportunities for relationship building, especially for close family and friends. In our case, Chun Yip's mother was always the audience of our co-created songs, whether the songs were shared live or through video recording. As his mother shared, she understood more about Chun Yip's inner world. She acknowledged Chun Yip's capacities when these might not be evident in other activities associated with reading and writing. While his mother was surprised by Chun Yip's achievement in songwriting, her positive feedback

and supportive attitude might have contributed to Chun Yip's self-esteem and confidence. It has been suggested that parents' positive attitudes contribute to building a more caring environment that cultivates dyslexic children's learning (Brown, 2006). Recent qualitative research in Hong Kong also discovered that family support is crucial in enhancing Hong Kong's dyslexic young children's self-esteem and positive feelings towards learning (Wong et al., 2023).

Multisensory Input of Stimuli

In Hong Kong, students learning Cantonese/Chinese do not have phonological support, such as English's grapheme-phoneme correspondence rules and Mandarin's phonetic annotations. Traditionally, teachers usually utilised a "look-and-say" methodology to teach reading. That is, they do not explicitly teach the students how to identify and make use of phonemic structures within Chinese characters to read. Across grades, Hong Kong students acquire the pronunciation of Chinese characters through rote learning, drilling, and rehearsing (Holm & Dodd, 1996). This traditional teaching mode may disadvantage dyslexic children with difficulties in visual and phonological domains (Ho et al., 2001).

Ho et al. (2001) proposed using multisensory training to improve the reading and writing capacities of Hong Kong dyslexic children. Visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic-tactile representations of the words were presented to the participants simultaneously, with the support of real objects, pictures, cassette tapes, or activities (Ho et al., 2001). Dyslexic children's word recognition, textual comprehension, and writing improved following five weekly sessions. The authors suggested that multisensory stimulation integrated orthographic, phonological, and semantic information, which could address the multiple needs of Hong Kong dyslexic children. Furthermore, they posited that meaning-making aspects of the multisensory approach might have made the intervention effective, in contrast to the traditional "reading aloud" approach that emphasises passive learning (Ho et al., 2001).

The songwriting process described in this article contained features similar to Ho's multisensory intervention (Ho et al., 2001). Multiple representations of Chinese characters were presented. Chun Yip sang aloud while seeing the targeted characters, which might help strengthen his memory of the characters. Circling the phonetic and semantic radicals using different colour pens enhanced the discrimination of similar characters. Chun Yip also drew pictures and actively composed sentences to illustrate the meaning of words, potentially improving his reading comprehension. Explicit instructions on the sound and meaning of Chinese characters while writing lyrics might also help to enhance his memories. Hence, Chun Yip might become more familiar with reading target characters and new characters upon multiple input modalities. Thus, the multisensory inputs from the songwriting experience might offer him novel ways of learning by accommodating his unique learning styles (Jalil et al., 2018).

Musical Components

Various musical elements in the written song might contribute to the effectiveness of the songwriting intervention. According to the DSLM mechanism (LaGasse, 2014), the structure of a song could be helpful, especially when the child needs more verbal and musical support initially. While repetitions of the target words are required to enhance memorisation, the musical elements for each presentation of the song could be altered to maintain novelty yet provide multiple chances for reading (singing) the target words. In the songwriting process described in this article, Chun Yip and I practised singing the target Chinese characters numerous times through the brainstorming, rehearsing, and performing stages. While a song is naturally repetitive, and these sessions involved singing

the songs repeatedly, Chun Yip never complained of boredom. Conversely, his mother reported that Chun Yip found his reading homework boring. It seemed to me that Chun Yip's enjoyment of experimenting with different rhythmic and melodic patterns while singing the song might contribute to the contrast perception.

Lyrical creation was integral, as depicted in the songwriting vignettes. To date, only one historical text (Gfeller, 1987) described songwriting as a tool to remediate reading and language difficulties. Gfeller (1987) integrated a language experience approach within her songwriting work with English-speaking children with learning difficulties in the United States. Lyrics were created based on individuals' lived experiences—semantic and syntactic complexity in the creation resembles the student's oral language capacities. Similarly, Ho et al.'s (2001) multisensory intervention described that actively drawing pictures or composing sentences helped Hong Kong dyslexic students activate prior knowledge and enhance their comprehension. In songwriting, Chun Yip's various experiences, such as going to a park and eating dumplings, became his own learning materials. Through active participation in creating lyrics, Chun Yip composed songs that were meaningful for him and his learning.

Cantonese is a tonal language in which the lexical tones of each word impact its meaning. Previous research discovered a correlation between lexical tone perception and early learning of Chinese characters (Shu et al., 2008). Tsang (2013) further suggested that musical training might effectively enhance the lexical tone identification of dyslexic children in Hong Kong, supporting their reading and writing abilities. While Cancer and Antonietti (2022) identified that music training and musical/auditory interventions incorporated with reading activities were beneficial for children with reading difficulties, their reviewed studies were situated in alphabetic language contexts. It is interesting to consider whether Chun Yip's successful experience in recalling Chinese words could be attributed to the combination of musical and textual exposures in a songwriting experience.

Final Reflections

The reflections and discussions based on Chun Yip's therapeutic songwriting process have sparked my curiosity to ask the following three questions regarding music therapy with dyslexic children in Hong Kong:

1. Can a therapeutic songwriting experience impact dyslexic children's belief in their capacities to become successful readers and writers?
2. Can a therapeutic songwriting experience increase their motivation to read and write?
3. Can a therapeutic songwriting experience impact their word reading?

Positioning myself as a music therapist and speech therapist based in a non-Western setting, I noticed that most music and dyslexia studies addressed alphabetical language speakers. Given the vast difference between the Chinese and Western languages, manifestations of dyslexia and educational cultures, more studies should be conducted to address such differences. Further, most music therapy studies on the dyslexic population focus on deficits. Research adopting therapeutic songwriting with dyslexic individuals as a resource-oriented and strength-based approach is not evident in my literature searches. As Rolka and Silverman (2015) advocated after conducting a systematic review concerning music and dyslexia, more interventions should focus on utilising dyslexic children's strengths and capacities to promote growth in academic self-confidence, resilience, and creativity.

The stories of Chun Yip may or may not reflect the experience of other Hong Kong dyslexic children. The learnings from the stories were based on my interpretation of what

I observed in the sessions. Thus, this paper does not aim to generalise the learnings to represent the whole population. Rather, the aim of this article is to raise some important questions about the use of therapeutic songwriting with dyslexic children, both broadly and in contexts with non-alphabetic written language systems. With this case story, I hope to challenge the current Western-centric dominant narrative of therapeutic songwriting (Baker et al., 2008) by raising new considerations for therapeutic songwriting in non-Western contexts and proposing pathways for further exploration in practice and research.

Coda

At the beginning of each session, Chun Yip would eagerly share his favourite books with me. Spider-Man comics were more than just reading materials to him; they were sources of enjoyment and inspiration. His enthusiasm for the narratives inspired us to write songs together, to express his desire to gain superpower and to protect his loved ones.

“Spider-Man wears a red suit,
Spider-Man has black armour,
Spider-Man shoots out spider webs to protect us.
Spider-Man battles Venom,
Spider-Man battles Dr. Octopus,
Spider-Man shoots out spider webs to protect us.”

「蜘蛛俠著紅色戰衣，
蜘蛛俠有黑色盔甲，
蜘蛛俠發出蜘蛛絲，保護我們。
蜘蛛俠對戰毒魔，
蜘蛛俠對戰八爪魚，
蜘蛛俠發出蜘蛛絲，保護我們。」

At the end of the session, Chun Yip exclaimed, “Let’s write more songs next time!”

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Author Note

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