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The Use of Music in Early Caregiver-Child Relationships in Bhutan:

A Changing Landscape

Anne Karine Råmunddal Kippenes [1*]

[1] Norwegian Academy of Music, Oslo, Norway
* anne.r.kippenes@nmh.no

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Abstract

This study addresses how the local practices, traditions, and perspectives surrounding the use of music in early caregiver–child relationships are articulated by local musicians, singers, and health workers in the context of Bhutan. This small Buddhist kingdom in the Himalayan region with historical, religious, and cultural ties to Tibet is undergoing rapid transformations influenced by globalization. A qualitative research design was employed to explore the topic, using individual semi-structured interviews. The study was conducted from the viewpoint of a Western-trained music therapist and also involved local collaborators. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The findings reveal existing customs and practices similar to those recognized in Western literature as musical interactions between caregivers and children, and they emphasize how music can create unique opportunities for children's social participation in various contexts. The results highlight the effects of globalization on the role of music, showing that factors such as technology, migration, and the influx of new ideas are influencing children's access to music, the ways in which music is practiced by children and caregivers, and traditional events. The discussion is framed around music as an inborn capacity, aligning with the concept of communicative musicality, and is viewed through an ecological perspective of music in addition to the concept of "scapes" to comprehend the evolving musical landscape in Bhutan.

Keywords: music in early childhood; caregiver–child relationships; Bhutan; cultural globalization; technology

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Introduction

There is a growing interest in the role of music in early childhood across various research fields and practices. Recent studies have increasingly focused on children's music within family and home environments (Young & Ilari, 2019). The present article explores the musical landscape of young children in Bhutan. Research from the field of education has focused on how children learn, including how they develop musical skills and an appreciation of music, mainly within educational settings. This research also considers non-musical goals, such as improving academic performance, enhancing social skills, and supporting overall development (Burton & Taggart, 2011; Young, 2016). Research in early childhood music therapy emphasizes the ways in which music can help children achieve health-related goals, support children with disabilities, and enhance the bonds between caregivers and children (Houde & Narendran, 2018; Kern, 2020; Tuomi et al., 2017). Campbell and Wiggins (2014) provided perspectives from ethnomusicology on children's engagement with music across different cultures and traditions around the world. Children's music occurs in various settings, not just in schools or clinics. Recent research has emphasized the diverse factors that influence children's musical engagement, ranging from family to social contexts. This research has included more interdisciplinary and culturally sensitive perspectives on children's musical engagement. Children's agency is increasingly recognized, with musical transmissions seen as complex, multidirectional, and interwoven between children and adults (Campbell & Wiggins, 2014; Welch & Barrett, 2023; Young & Ilari, 2019).

This growing research interest reflects increased attention on early childhood care and development on national and global scales (Black et al., 2017), as demonstrated by the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to provide all children with the opportunity to grow and develop to their full potential (UNICEF, 2023). This is further supported by guidelines issued by the World Health Organization to strengthen policies and programs aimed at effectively addressing early child development (World Health Organization, 2023). Although Bhutan has recently directed more political focus toward this issue (UNICEF, 2022; University of Hong Kong, 2020), the exploration of music in early childhood remains largely unexplored.

The research presented in this article stems from the relationships built by Norwegian professionals working in Bhutan from the 1970s to the 1990s. Since meeting my husband in the late 1990s, I have become familiar with Bhutan, where he grew up and where my in-laws maintain connections. In 2018 and 2019, I was part of a group of Norwegian professionals attending conferences and collaborative meetings in Bhutan. In 2018, I presented a conference paper that featured a video of a music therapy session with a young child with cerebral palsy. This sparked interest in music therapy among local leaders and health professionals and led to discussions about local lullabies and children's songs. Several of the Bhutanese health professionals noted that there is no tradition of singing with infants in Bhutan, which likely reflects assumptions about Western notions of children's music (Campbell & Wiggins, 2014). However, "children's music" is a broad term that includes music for, with, or by children (Vestad, 2017); the understanding of what the term implies is also not universal but highly culturally and socially situated. Reflecting on the conversations recounted above made me reconsider my assumptions about music and culture in Bhutan. I believe all cultures possess forms of musical expressions and interactions evident in caregiver–child relationships. Therefore, this study assumes that musicality is an inborn capacity, aligning with the concept of communicative musicality, which describes the nature and musical qualities of early mother–child communication and interplay, viewing both as active participants in a musical dialogue. The theory posits that music constitutes a fundamental aspect of human interaction (Malloch, 1999; Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009). Additionally, the idea of musical affordance (DeNora, 2000), and

ecological perspectives emphasizing the contextual, active, and interactive nature of musicking (Ansdell & Pavlicevic, 2009; Stige et al., 2017; Stige & Aarø, 2012), provide relevant theoretical lenses to this article.

Cultural responsiveness involves sensitivity to cultural differences, a willingness to learn, and awareness of personal biases when engaging with others (Bolton, 2020). Conducted by a music therapist trained in Norway with experience in early intervention, the research presented here is influenced by ideas and values from a Western context. While I have longstanding ties to Bhutan, I recognize that my outsider status limits my understanding of the local culture. However, this perspective may help me notice aspects that insiders overlook.

This article aims to improve our understanding of the *musical landscape* of young children; that is, how music is used in caregiver–child relationships and in the environment in which children grow and develop in contemporary Bhutan. It also explores how globalization affects individuals and communities, particularly regarding access to, use of, and participation in music. In this study, "caregivers" include not only parents but also a range of individuals such as grandparents, siblings, or other babysitters. The study's results are developed on the basis of qualitative interviews with 12 local musicians, singers, and health workers from Bhutan. These participants' dual roles as professionals and caregivers enabled them to provide in-depth information. The conversations were guided by the following research question: How are the local practices, traditions, and perspectives surrounding the use of music in early caregiver-child relationships in Bhutan articulated by local musicians, singers, and health workers?

Bhutan

The kingdom of Bhutan, also known as the Land of the Thunder Dragon (*Druk-yul*), is situated in the Himalayas between China and India. Although the country is small, with land area approximately the size of Switzerland and a population of about 780,000 (United Nations Statistics Division, 2023), cultural diversity is considered an integral part of Bhutan's national identity (Tshering et al., 2009). Historically, Bhutan has been relatively free of external influence and developed a unique tradition and culture that still exists today (T. Dorji & Melgaard, 2018). While Bhutan has strong cultural and religious ties to Tibet, its steep hills, narrow valleys, and rugged terrain have fostered the growth of various unique cultures, languages, and ways of life in isolation. As a result, a diverse range of cultures and traditions thrive throughout Bhutan (Phuntsho, 2018). Buddhist ideas and practices have greatly influenced Bhutan's politics and culture. Today, Bhutan is the only sovereign nation with a dual Buddhist-temporal administration. Bhutanese life-cycle rites begin before a child is born, and at the end of life, cremation is considered a type of fire offering (Rigyal & Prude, 2016). In Bhutan, it is common for people to seek protection from their local deity, and some deities are believed to possess more power than others (Tashi, 2009). When visiting Bhutan, the religion is visible in the landscape, which is marked by temples, *stupas*[1], and *prayer flags*[2]. Spirituality is woven into the daily lives of

[1] *Stupas* or chortens are sacred places of worship and a means of offering. In Bhutan, chortens contain religious relics. To ward off evil, chortens are often situated in locations considered inauspicious such as river junctions, crossroads, mountain passes, and bridges.

[2] *Prayer flags* feature mantras or prayers in Tibetan script and are often found strung along trails and peaks high in the Himalayas. The flags are hung in high places, and the wind carries the blessings depicted on the flags to all beings.

people. Visitors may notice elderly people turning *prayer wheels*[3], monks dressed in red robes in the streets, the smell of incense in the town's shops or burning butter lamps in altar rooms inside a Bhutanese home.

Change has come extremely quickly to Bhutan: the country has changed more in the last 50 years than it did in the previous 500 years (Phuntsho, 2018). From 1960, planned economic development changed the country from one of the least-developed countries in the world in 1971 to a middle-income country today (United Nations, 2024). Change and modernization of the country are having an irreversible impact on the culture and lives of the people (Drukpa, 2009). Even the most remote villages and households are being connected to roads, electricity, and the internet (Dorji & Wild, 2013). In 1999, Bhutan became the last country in the world to introduce television and internet. These changes have transformed people's use of time, habits, and social life. New urban settlements, the shift from extended families to nuclear families, and large numbers of emigrants to Western countries are other factors that shape modern Bhutan (Phuntsho, 2018). The linguistic landscape of Bhutan is changing rapidly. Phuntsho (2018, p. 61) suggested that many dialects and minor languages may become extinct in a few decades due to Western influence and globalization. Currently, English is the most widely spoken language; it is taught in schools, used for official correspondence, and is more prevalent than the national language, Dzongkha. In the past two decades, the government of Bhutan has prioritized enhancing the quality of care provided to children by giving services to support child development, including health, an initiative in line with global priorities and recommendations (UNICEF, 2022). These examples highlight the significant changes that are currently transforming Bhutan's society.

The Music of Bhutan

Bhutan has rich oral and musical traditions dating back hundreds of years. Folk songs include songs of prayer, songs of happiness, songs of praise for the country or the king, songs of sorrow, and songs of good wishes. Originally, songs and music not only served the purpose of entertainment but were also highly refined works of art that reflected the values and standards of society. The songs can broadly be categorized as traditional songs and *rigsar* (popular songs), *zhungdra* and *boedra* (traditional songs or folk songs), and religious and ordinary songs. *Zhungdra* spread from the *dzongs,* the centers of civil administration and religious activities, to villages. *Boedra* is said to have been spread through medieval court servants called *boed garps*, who traveled through villages on official assignments, or via pilgrims and traders who traveled to Tibet. *Rigsar* is described as popular songs and music originating mostly from the urban centers from the late 1960s with similarities and associations with English pop songs and songs from Hindi films (Drukpa, 2009; Kinga, 2001).

Folk songs are sung and danced during specific local festivals. Singers line up in a single row to sing and dance *zhungdra*, while a circle is the most popular formation for dancing *boedra.* A village singer called *Sipiem* would lead the songs and dances during special occasions, and most Bhutanese are familiar with the choreography and easily connect with the rhythm of the movements in dances that are performed during informal social gatherings and celebrations (Kinga, 2001). Masked dances are performed across Bhutan during religious festivals. During these performances, dancers with wooden masks move

[3] *Prayer wheels* are inscribed with the mantra "Om Mani Padme Hum" on the outside, while the interior contains copies of sacred texts. Spinning the wheel is equivalent to reciting the mantras. There are various types of prayer wheels: portable or handheld, water wheels, fixed wheels in monasteries, and wind wheels.

in choreographed steps, accompanied by the chanting of monks and *lamas*[4], the crashing of cymbals, and the sound of drums (Phuntsho, 2018). Religion and music are intricately connected. One of the most dominant religious themes in folk songs is the value of human life, the central teachings about impermanence, and the need to live it meaningfully. The same songs have been sung through generations educating ordinary people on social, religious, and environmental values (Drukpa, 2009; Kinga, 2001).

From around the 1990s, film production and the growth of private music studios greatly influenced accessibility and listening habits, and the market became flooded with *rigsar* music albums (Kinga, 2001). A popular new type of music is B-Pop or Bhutanese popular music, where songs are sung in Western style, sometimes either featuring rap or being full rap songs (Dorji, 2021). Digital media and platforms like YouTube and TikTok have transformed access to music, influencing younger generations' musical expressions.

Culture, Children, and Music: Theoretical Perspectives

Culture-centred thinking supports a focus on individuals and groups in context and on music as a situated activity (Stige, 2002, 2015). As human beings, we are constantly engaged with the world around us, participating in an ongoing exchange with our physical, social, cultural, and political surroundings. Children are born into a particular time and place; they are embedded within a family, a community, and a larger socio-cultural environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2001), developing and learning in interaction with more experienced others, such as their parents, other adults, or older siblings (Vygotsky, 1980). Musical experiences and interactions occur within evolving historical and cultural contexts, which shape and are shaped by the individuals involved (Campbell, 2010; Campbell & Wiggins, 2014). Rather than a fixed entity, culture can be viewed more as a flexible and dynamic concept, representing continuously developing ways of life and practices of meaning-making (Stige, 2002, 2015). Instead of being viewed as something "static," musical traditions can be understood as things that are created and constantly refreshed. The continuity of these traditions is complex and new approaches to understanding and studying children's musical cultures have emerged in recent years. Children are now recognized not only as recipients of culture created and transmitted by adults, but also as active and competent cultural users and creators (Campbell & Wiggins, 2014). The theory about communicative musicality posits that musicality is an inborn capacity for relating to other people that serves as a resource for cultural learning (Malloch, 1999; Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009). Pavlicevic and Ansdell (2009) built on this theory and suggested a more social dimension visualized by a model with a three-stage progression. The progression starts from *musicality* (as a psycho-biological capacity), which prepares the ground for cultural learning as the cultivated facility of *musicianship* (the expression of musicality in and as culture), which includes learning and working with a range of musical affordances or musical "aspects" (instruments, texts, traditions, etc.), which in turn supports the social activity of *musicking* with and for others (Ansdell, 2014, p. 202). This is an interesting model for investigating the cultivating processes in dyadic forms of musical companionship in caregiver–child relationships (we) towards participation in a more collective musical and social community (us) for young children in their first developing years.

Music sociologist DeNora suggested an alternative way of thinking about music situations from a meso-perspective (DeNora, 2000), which follows and observes people and music within particular situations and their unique conditions, in the middle of the musical action. This involves posing questions about how people, music, and situations

[4] *Lama* is a Buddhist religious teacher or leader.

interact by asking: When? Where? Who? With what? And with whom? As Ansdell notes (2014, p. 27): "Music is always something between and amongst." DeNora (2000) adopted the concept of affordances from ecological psychology, providing an approach to articulate and contextualize what music uniquely offers and how this operates within situated action. Musical affordance is different from being a one-sided stimulus or effect; it depends on the when, the how, and the whom of the given context. An ecological view of music (Ansdell, 2014; Stige & Aarø, 2012) examines musical actions within the constantly evolving physical, social, and cultural contexts where they occur. An increasing number of research studies on early childhood music have adopted ecological perspectives, which further enrich our understanding of the role of music in diverse settings (Barrett & Welch, 2023; Campbell, 2010; Campbell & Wiggins, 2014; Young & Ilari, 2019).

The impact of technology and media on children's musical worlds is increasingly becoming a key area of research (Barrett & Welch, 2023; Young & Ilari, 2019). Given Bhutan's rapid transformations, shifts in the musical landscape are emerging, not only from the increased availability of technology but also from changes happening at various levels throughout society. The sociocultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's framework of five scapes helps us understand how cultures around the world influence one another and how culture is constantly reshaped and transformed by the movement of cultural elements across the globe. The five scapes of flows are (1996, p. 6–10): (1) *ethnoscapes*: flows of people as immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, students, tourists, etc.; (2) *technoscapes*: rapid movement of technology, both high and low, as well as informational and mechanical, across boundaries that were previously impenetrable; (3) *financescapes*: rapid movement of money across boundaries; (4) *mediascapes:* flow of information, images through both traditional and social media including newspaper, magazine, television, internet, and so on; and (5) *ideoscapes*: movement of ideas and ideologies. Critics have expressed concerns about how the agency of individuals can be identified within these flows (Rockefeller, 2011; Taylor, 2020). Later efforts have aimed to add complexity and nuance to this framework by exploring the dark sides of globalization (Appadurai et al., 2006), as well as pointing in direction of hope and the idea of globalization from "below" (Appadurai, 2000). Cultural flows are characterized by their shifting and unpredictable nature, and processes of power and dominance can manifest in cultural spheres in diverse ways across different locations. Each individual and community perceives and experiences these flows in distinct ways. Tsing's statement that noted "the local is (re)made all over the place, at all times" (Tsing, 2000, p. 338) highlights the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of local cultures. Rather than perceiving the world as a "global melting pot" (Evrard, 2017), globalization manifests uniquely within each local context. This perspective carries important implications for research, promoting an exploration of how individuals and communities in diverse settings uniquely influence and are influenced by global dynamics.

Method

Design and Participants

The present study is a qualitative one, as qualitative research methods are useful for studying social phenomena and how people experience and reflect on their situation, which aligns with the explorative nature of the research question (Wheeler, 2016). Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, conversations that are guided by certain topics while allowing for flexibility in the structure (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2021). This approach to interviewing facilitated a tailored dialogue, accommodating the interviewee's narratives and the incorporation of unanticipated themes.

Twelve interviewees were recruited, all Bhutanese living in Thimphu (the capital) or its

surrounding areas. In the context of examining a phenomenon in a foreign culture, it is crucial to be able to access the field of study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Since 2017, I have been in regular contact with a Bhutanese musician and a research leader from the University of Medical Sciences in Thimphu who have served as facilitators and cultural guides. Six of the interviewees, aged 23 to 86 (two men and four women), were local singers and musicians (hereafter referred to as Ms), carefully selected from the aforementioned musician's network. I first visited the National Referral Hospital in Thimphu in 2018, where my university contact introduced me to the head of the Community Health Department (CHD). The CHD head selected six nurses and health workers (hereafter referred to as HWs) to participate in this study; all had 10 to 20 years of experience working with children aged 0–5 and their families. The group included one man and five women aged 30 to 50. The participants were recruited from networks to which my collaborators had easy access. Given the relatively small sample size, the interviewees were selected by strategic sampling, which involved recruiting individuals with relevant qualifications (Thagaard, 2018). Quota sampling (Thagaard 2018, p. 55) ensured representation of various categories including musicians, health workers, and participants from different age groups and language backgrounds (Dzongkha, Sharchupkha, Lhotsamkha). Nine participants spoke English as a second language. The participants came originally from the western, eastern, or southern parts of Bhutan, with some moving for job opportunities or family reasons. Others had lived in Thimphu or the area around their entire lives. A few of the participants studied abroad and came back to Bhutan to start working. All participants (except the two youngest) had children, and three were grandparents.

The Interview Situation

The participants were interviewed for 25–60 minutes during May 2023. The first six interviews with the singers and musicians were conducted with the musician mentioned above as a mediator and interpreter: three in English, two in Dzongkha, and one in Sharchupkha. The influence of the interpreter is recognized, and the research process is considered subject to "triple subjectivity": the interaction between research participant, researcher, and interpreter (Temple & Edwards, 2002). Two interviewees hosted us at their homes, two at their offices, and two preferred a local hotel restaurant. The six interviews with nurses and health workers were conducted at their workplace, all in English. Both groups were asked about the main topic: traditions, practices, and perspectives on music. Moreover, the health workers were questioned about aspects related to childrearing to gain insights into childhood in Thimphu. Some participants spoke freely before questions were posed, even singing to provide examples. Conversations were occasionally redirected to the questions, and a summary was given at the end to allow for any additional comments. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, with local language interviews translated "on the spot" and later transcribed by the interpreter.

Ethics

The study follows the ethical standards set by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Sikt) and received approval from The Research Ethics Board of Health, Bhutan (REBH) as well as the study site. All participants were informed about the research aims and their rights in their respective languages (Liamputtong, 2010), and they provided informed consent by signing an individual consent form or by thumbprint.

Ethical considerations extend beyond formal procedures. As Trondalen stated, "Ethics is not a fixed entity; it is fresh produce" (2023, p. 9). Research projects require ongoing reflexivity concerning the decisions made at every stage (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2021; Stige

et al., 2009). In qualitative research, the researcher acts as the "instrument," which raises challenges concerning positionality, especially when the researcher enters a different cultural context as an "outsider" with academic and economic privilege. This complicates the dynamics between interviewer and interviewee, leading to potential ethical dilemmas involving power, knowledge, and language. Postcolonial theory critiques the continued dominance of Western power and ideology in knowledge production, which raises important ethical questions regarding the researcher's responsibilities (Gandhi, 2019; Go, 2016). Even though the research question arose from my interests as an external researcher, it was crucial to involve local collaborators in a mutual and respectful dialogue during the entire research process (Liamputtong, 2010). My collaborators helped select the study site, establish the recruitment criteria, and formulate the interview guide. They also assisted in evaluating the researcher's role during interviews, ensuring that cultural norms were respected. I conducted the analysis while inviting collaborators to provide feedback on the selected themes, ensuring an accurate understanding of the cultural context.

Analysis

The analysis follows the steps of thematic analysis described by Johannessen, Rafoss, and Rasmussen (2018), based on Braun and Clarke (2006). The steps are: (1) preparation, (2) coding, (3) categorizing, and (4) reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Step 1: The interview transcripts were read carefully so the researcher could be familiar with the data, asking, "What are they saying?" (Johannessen et al., 2018) and noting initial ideas.

Step 2: The first coding was *in vivo* (a Latin term for "in the living"), mainly based on the participants' own words (Thagaard, 2018). Patterned coding was then employed alongside analytic memos, comparing and contrasting codes to develop core categories using *in vivo* and descriptive codes. A computer software program was used to organize data and code text.

Step 3: Categories were grouped into themes, which are groupings of data with important common features that together constitute an answer to the research question (Johannessen et al., 2018).

Step 4: Two themes are closely aligned with the interview questions, while a third emerged from the data. The findings are structured around three themes: (1) music in caregiver–child relationships and at home; (2) music in the community; and (3) changes over time. All of the participants discussed the ways in which music was practiced and also the various aspects of family and community life, reflecting on the differences between "before" and "now." Each of these themes includes sub-themes that appear in the presentation of the results below.

Results

Music in Caregiver-child Relationships and at Home

This theme covers practices and experiences of music within caregiver–child relationships and children's home environment. When we began discussing music in early childhood, most participants struggled to recall any specific songs from their early childhood or songs typically used with children. As a Western researcher, I approached the topic from a context where children's music has been specifically developed and recognized. This appeared to be an unfamiliar concept to the participants. However, when probed more directly with questions like: "How do you put babies to sleep?" or "Do you know songs used with babies to play?" the participants began sharing local practices of singing or "humming" with infants, as well as discussing singing and musical practices within family

life. Three sub-themes are further presented: (1) lullabies and soothing melodies, (2) playful interactions, and (3) daily life experiences of music.

Lullabies and soothing melodies

Several participants from diverse regions and linguistic groups described a common practice of singing or humming infants to sleep. When asked if she had any memories of singing or knew any lullabies to soothe infants to sleep, one of the youngest participants (M6) responded: "It does not really happen in Bhutan because they do not sing, but hum." She began to softly hum a wordless tune to demonstrate: "Aw-Aw wow […] like that. When they hold the baby and make them sleep." A health worker (HW6) from Western Bhutan said she did not know any "bedtime songs," but according to her experience, caregivers would say in a singing tone, "Baby-baby, sleep-sleep." Another HW (HW2) from the East demonstrated a similar tone, but with additional lyrics:

> *Participant:* To calm a baby, we used to do it like this [demonstrates by moving her arms from side to side and sings in her own language]:
>
> Aw-aw-aw
> Your father is going to come with the water
> Mother is going to come with the food
> Just calm down
> Aw-aw-aw
>
> *Researcher:* Is that a tune?
>
> *Participant:* Yes.
>
> *Researcher:* Why would you use music with a baby?
>
> *Participant:* To calm them down when they are crying […] Babies are used to listening, and sometimes they used to stay quiet after listening to music.

A senior[5] participant (M4) recalled another practice from his childhood that is somewhat different, but related, involving the use of a homemade fabric swing. He detailed how a combination of folk songs (*Buedra*) and competition songs (*Tsangmo*) was used to soothe the baby. He noted that the choice of language varied among mothers and further explained:

> They used to hang ropes from the window towards the other end of the house, make swings, keep the child lying there, and they would sing folk songs and tsangmo. […] We used songs to put the baby to sleep, and when the child cried.

Several participants described how they would pat the baby's back rhythmically while singing or how the caregiver would cradle the baby in their lap or arms and sing. One senior participant (M2) described how they would calm a child and sing to "make him feel confident and feel [that] someone is near." Another senior participant from the southern region (M1) talked about his experience of singing when his children were sick:

> When we sing when they are suffering from fever, they are relaxed because of the tunes and all […] They are cool, you know, because of the melodies. They forget the pain. Instead of the pain and all they listen, that is helping, actually.

[5] Senior refers to participants aged 60 and older.

During an interview with one of the health workers (HW4), the topic of caregivers visiting the health unit for growth monitoring and immunization was broached. I asked whether he had observed the caregivers singing. He responded:

> Participant: Yes. With the shot [vaccine], the baby starts crying, and then the mother and father try to calm down, but either way [...] showing their phone and letting them listen or sing to them.
>
> Researcher: What kind of songs?
>
> Participant: Normally, it's just, you know, those English rhymes. Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star, Baa Baa Black Sheep, and all.

Playful interactions

Several participants described playful interactions to elicit laughter from the children. M2 shared that people use to tickle their baby and say "che-che-che" to make the baby giggle. Another common practice described involved caregivers carrying their baby in a shawl on their back and playing "Ko-ko." This game, similar to Peek-a-boo, involves the caregiver moving their head from side to side.

A few rhymes were presented, all in Sharchupkha, the language of Eastern Bhutan. HW5 illustrated a practice of tickling the baby while reciting a rhyme and provided a translation:

Ngab kai woonba uhna na Sa gai dani uhna na Mew-mew	From the sky the eagle is coming From the ground, the cat is coming Mew-mew

The same participant recited and demonstrated a rhyme with accompanying hand gestures, which was traditionally used during mealtime to encourage a baby to eat:

Chimmey tonkey tonkey Golo-golo-golo Paya-paya-paya Hum!	There is rice, and wheat ("this is grinding"). We are separating the rice and grain. It is cooking, and the baby will: "aaa" [she opens her mouth to demonstrate].

She said she learned from her mother and grandmother and shared another rhyme about the moon. She recounted how her son was very curious, often asking questions like, "What is that, Mammy?" during their evening walks, and she would sing:

Ani lani koko Naan hang zaan cha ya Jaang bara towo zaan cha Mom hang kamcha ya Gotham muni kamcha	The moon is like an egg ("We ask the moon") What are you eating? I am eating my red rice ("That is what we eat here") What is your curry? I am eating the fried egg

Daily life experiences of music

The interviewees highlighted the significance of folk songs. M1 noted, "Usually they (ordinary people) just sing," and then continued:

> Sometimes with kids, sometimes together they sing, sometimes on the way, in the fields, and sometimes at home also. It is just normal songs that are popular in that area, not especially for kids. It's just general songs. Sometimes they are about animals, about village life, and sometimes about life.

M6 remembered her mother singing old *boedra* and Sharchup songs while she was weaving at home. Several others talked about learning songs from their mother. HW1's mother used to be a song leader in the community:

> I learned some songs from my mother because my mother is a traditional singer in the village, we usually call it *sipiem.* She had 300 songs in her mind. *Sipiem* means one of the song leaders in the community, like one of the very attractive singers, so I usually learned from her. I used to sing in the community also.

Songs were passed on from parents to children and singing could be a way to participate and have a role in the community. Singing and instrumental music were described as essential components of religious activities, such as chanting prayers in the evening or during rituals. One of the oldest participants (M3), who spent her childhood in central Bhutan, shared memories from her grandparents' home, particularly recalling her grandmother's singing.

> Participant: Phagpa Chenrizig Jigten khorda cheybala gom songsoel (God of compassion I meditate on the impermanence of this world).
>
> Researcher: Is it like a prayer?
>
> Participant: It is a chant, yes. I would be awake and listen to her chants. It was very beautiful.

Several participants emphasized that when elders engaged in music, even infants would be involved. A couple of participants from the east spoke about their father or grandfather singing or playing instruments during rituals as part of their roles as monks or village priests (*gomchen*[6]). M6 shared her memories:

> During my childhood days, my grandfather used to do those rituals on this "tong-tong, ching-ching" and all: bells and religious drums. We had a big altar room in my grandparent's house because my grandfather used to be the head of the monks, this body in my village. A village priest. That was the first musical instrument I heard during my childhood. I used to go with him when he went for rituals. I used to follow him.

The participants identified various reasons why caregivers might not engage in singing with babies. They indicated that due to commitments such as fieldwork or office jobs, caregivers may not have the time for singing. Some admitted they previously had "no idea" about music or suggested that older caregivers might prefer activities like chanting and praying over play or perhaps feel lazy due to age.

Music in the Community

This theme explores the role of music in the family's social sphere and community, divided into two sub-themes: (1) music during celebrations, festivals, and rituals; and (2) institutionalizing playful parenting, which examines music's recent inclusion in a development program.

[6] *Gomchen* refers to the lay priests in Bhutan

Music during celebrations, festivals, and rituals

Bhutan is home to a rich array of ritual practices, celebrations, and festivals that are central to the community's social, religious, and cultural life (Phuntsho, 2018). Interviewees described events involving children's participation, emphasizing that each region has its own unique traditions. One participant (HW1) shared an example of babies taking part in singing and dancing during a New Year gathering known as *losar*:

> There we gather with large family, we put music on, and we have a campfire, so our babies participate there. We gather and eat the food and we keep the baby on the ground when we sit, and some carry the baby on the back. We sit and sing, we stay in the line and sing, or we will make a circle.

She added that babies are sometimes brought to archery competitions, which is the national sport of Bhutan. These are often large events with refreshments and performances. While men compete, women support the game by preparing feasts, cheering, supporting, and dancing for the audience (Choki & Wang, 2015). House consecration was another event described by several of the interviewees. This is a ceremony that involves a *lama* or a village priest performing rituals for the protection and blessing of a new home and the family. Singers and dancers will engage the guests in folk songs and ring dances after the ritual. Singing is considered to bring good luck to the home. M2 shared how children would enjoy and learn during such an occasion:

> They [the children] enjoy, and they like it. Especially when you start to sing, children start to enjoy. And also when they dance and they try to learn how to dance; the dance steps, the hand movements, the body movements and the steps. Children at the drinking milk stage (*mingbu*[7]) are not able to understand or follow the steps. But once they grow up, they start to react and learn.

Several participants described how babies are carried on the back in a *sari* (shawl) and participate in religious festivals, *pujas* or annual rituals together with their mother or the whole family. M1 said:

> Sometimes the young kids dance along with their parents. They celebrate by joining the whole family. They should be older than one year, able to stand on their own. When they are not able to stand, they are carried on the back while their older brothers and sisters are holding hands and joining the parents in the dance. Sometimes they can also sing, even the ones that are just over one year old can say some words of the song, a few words. If they like the melody, then they would sing. When we dance, they also dance.

The annual ritual *tshechu*, which means "the 10th day," is an age-old tradition that has been passed on for generations and is still carried out today. Mask dances (*gar cham*) are normally performed. *Gar* means the movement with some twisting of the body, while *cham* means movement of hands and legs, and the dance is a dramatization of the teachings of enlightened spiritual masters and usually happens in the *Dzong*[8] (Choki & Wang, 2015). Children are brought along and participate in their own way; HW4 described it as follows:

> They [the children] copy those mask dances. And they try to dance along with them [the dancers]. Seconds to a few minutes. And for those festivals where we go for our rituals, lots

[7] In the tsangla dialect of Eastern Bhutan, *mingbu* is a word to describe a breastfed child, meaning something soft and vulnerable. It is the same term that applies to the early stage of corn growth, when it is wrapped in a thick, protective husk (Carlough, 2003).

[8] A *Dzong* is a fortress that serves as a religious, administrative, and social centre in each district.

> of people gather there and sing. So [the children] join for some time. But of course, they do not know the whole thing, but they just—how to say it—include themselves. […] They just participate along with the adults. Get in their line and make some moves here and there.

Celebrations and festivals form an integral part of Bhutanese tradition and spiritual life, as well as serving as social gatherings, bringing communities together.

Institutionalizing playful parenting

A new approach to music practice within the community was introduced by health workers trained in the Care for Child Development Plus (C4CD Plus) program, which includes songs and dances. Since its launch in September 2019, this program, initiated by Save the Children and the Ministry of Health, has been implemented in rural Bhutan at Basic Health Units. Caregivers of children up to three years of age are invited to monthly group sessions during immunization visits, with a total of 12 sessions aimed at enhancing playful parenting skills over the year (University of Hong Kong, 2020). HW4 explained how the program has changed their practice:

> *Participant:* Before we used to go and weigh the baby, give the injection, give the anti-wormings, give the vitamins, and then wait for some minutes for those babies that are injected; then we would leave them. With the introduction of this C4CD Plus, now we go there and sit with the mothers with children from zero to three years and then we initially, we greet the child, we have a song, you know… [starts singing]
>
> *Kuzu Zangpo*[9] *Kuzu Zangpo Kuzuzangpo … Aum Kuenzang Kuzu Zangpo Kuzu Zangpo Kuzuzangpo … Aum Dechen*
>
> All children, mothers […] children are also involved. And then those who can walk can also go there, the toddlers are being held by their mum and then we sing together. And then when the session is completed, everything is done, then we also sing:
>
> *Jo gay jo gay charo tsu Lap thub di gi Dari na lu lhap mi tsu, lang len thab ba jo gay.*
>
> *Researcher:* What does that mean?
>
> *Participant:* Let us go, let us go, we are putting our hands together; whatever we have learned here today, we will implement in our home. This is the song.

HW1 learned that children can listen, observe, and understand and that singing can capture their attention and facilitate communication. Several HWs noted that singing together creates a friendly environment and that it "becomes easier to do things." HW6 said that many caregivers are illiterate and are not aware of the benefits of singing songs, reading books, and playing games.

Changes Over Time

In all the interviews, participants contrasted past practices with present ones. Even the youngest participant, a 23-year-old singer, noticed changes in musical practices from her childhood in a village without television to her current life in Thimphu. The interviewees highlighted the influence of foreign elements through schooling, development programs, TV, and the internet, particularly the exposure of children to Western languages, as well as fading traditions, relocation and family fragmentation due to increased urbanization and migration to places like Australia. As a researcher, I was surprised by the unanimous

[9] *Kuzu Zangpo la* is a phrase in the Bhutanese language that means "Hello/How are you."

expressions of concern among the participants regarding the use of mobile phones, the dominance of English, and children's lack of social engagement and knowledge about local traditions. The following subthemes are presented below: (1) foreign influence, new instruments, and new technology; (2) fading of traditional practices; and (3) gadget time and Westernization.

Foreign influence, new instruments, and new technology

The oldest participant (M4), now in his eighties, has experienced significant changes and wanted to share his life story because "it provides important context before we proceed with the prearranged interview questions." In his youth, there were no roads, and people traveled on foot. Mail was delivered on foot as well. Schools did not exist, so he learned to read and write under the guidance of a Tibetan *lama*. During that period, royal children were sent to India for their education, and if a family had five boys, three were obligated to serve the king. M4 lived in the village and cared for cows and sheep until he was eight. He recalled how he would listen to the seniors dancing and singing in the evening after work:

> It was music during harvest time, during worktime, and back at home in the evening. […] In my days, when I grew up, there were no terms like traditional music, folk music, traditional, or modern; it was all just songs. People just sang because they sang. The modern classifications and distinctions came with schooling. […]
>
> It was just a natural way of life. But now when people started to make terms, there is new music, guitar music, *dranyen*[10] music. Today people are trying to define, give names, that kind of form, this kind of form, modern classifications.

He expressed that he was unable to read and write at that time and learned the songs by memorizing them. Nowadays, he sees that children are using "all those things" (technical devices) and they are "picking up music on their own." With development programs and foreign influence new types of instruments have come, such as pianos, keyboards, guitars, and also the screen:

> They [the children] sing and dance to the music of the new instruments. With the changes in time, I see all these new instruments and also the screen. They do not pay interest in the folk music instruments. They do not know how to play the traditional instruments. And the children do not know how to play the dranyen. There is not much they need to do. It is all coming on the screen.

Another of the senior participants (M2) expressed concern about the changing ways in which children learn:

> Most of these pop songs have beats, catchy tunes, and easy rhythms; they [the children] catch up easily. They sing to it, they dance to it, and they learn to sing along. In old days we had to know the lyrics and learn the songs by ourselves, sing by yourself, but now they can sing along with the songs on the screen. You had to sing your own song, dance your own dance steps, move your own hand gestures, and also learn the lyrics on your own. But today somebody sings there; you just pretend to sing along or dance along, which is much easier and faster.

Recorded music means that it is no longer necessary to have musicians, M2 continued:

> Before it was all vocal songs, now there are new instruments, there was no recording and

[10] *Dranyen* is a traditional instrument of Bhutan.

> they had to go live. You do not need musicians like you did before. Today it is easier in some ways.

With phones, you don't even need teachers:

> Now, I think most of them are catching much faster because of all these phones and all. In the old days you had to go through a teacher to be able to learn one song. But today you don't need teachers, you can just place the phone […] the mobile is becoming a teacher. They do not have to learn by themselves, because they can re-listen again and again to the phone. In the olden days, we had to learn word by word, song by song by our memory.

He continued to talk about mothers' and children's use of phones:

> The mothers are listening from morning to evening to the phone today. So the child is already influenced as the mother is already listening or watching. Some songs are always there, some music is always there.
>
> I have a grandchild who is only one year old. He is already on the screen, with songs, movies, games, cartoons, Hindi programs, and some Bhutanese videos. Children pick up on their own, they choose their programs.

Some participants remembered playing music cassettes, watching TV, and singing Bhutanese songs with their children or engaging in Hindi dances. Things have changed in recent years, as caregivers now more frequently use their phones and play English nursery rhymes. With the advent of YouTube, some grandparents are becoming more familiar with singing English songs, as reported by HW6. Songs in Dzongkha, like *lap chu, lap chu* (wash your hands), have also started to emerge. HW6 further mentioned that "M Studio," based in Thimphu, has been creating songs in Dzongkha that are available on YouTube for download.

> Then they will sing along. Children and parents, then they will watch TV. They download it on the drive, so they will put it on the TV and then they sing. So many local language songs they have developed.

Fading of traditional practices

Several of the participants talked about fragmentation and division of family and community life. In a farming community, grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren lived together, but now, in the towns, there are more nuclear families. The melodies and songs are "products from the village" and people living in town would have "no idea" of how to perform them, so the traditions are "fading." HW6 said:

> But now, with […] people moving to the urban area, there are fewer people in the village. These things are fading. They do not invite people now during rituals. They just perform rituals, then some [people] will dance and sing, but even that some are not doing now.

Young children are often cared for by their grandparents, and technological devices have become common in households. HW4 said:

> I think mostly they [people moving out] bring their grandparents or their parents from the village and they let them take care of their children, but the grandma is the physical presence there. The children will be taken care of by the gadgets, you know, the iPads, the smartphones.

Gadget time and westernization

Several health workers expressed concern about young children spending time with

phones instead of interacting with their caregivers. HW6 commented:

> In Bhutan, we have so many cases with the introduction of the phones. They [mothers] just hand over the phone, and the mother will be busy with other work.

HW4 arranges classes for new mothers where they talk about the importance of early stimulation and being available for the baby. She shared her thoughts about caregiving in the "age of gadgets":

> Due to the gadgets these days, they forget, you know. Their focus is on the phone, and they just put their [...] and it is like auto-mode … [laughs]. Now, this generation […] most parents are young. They are brought up in this gadget time, you know, technology time.

These days, HW6 said, soothing songs are played on the mobile to put babies to sleep:

> These days most of the children will need music when we put them to sleep. But not by singing. Some will do the singing by themselves, but some will just play on their mobile. That soothing music they will play. It will help the child to calm down.

Most of the health workers were concerned about how exposure to Western culture through internet platforms seems to affect the language development of children, because mostly English songs are available. One of the health workers (4) shared her thoughts on this topic:

> I think nowadays, with this Westernization and exposure to Western culture, mostly they [caregivers] do not speak because children want to watch cartoons right from infancy. They are exposed to these English rhymes, not the Dzongkha versions. Twinkle, Twinkle, Baa Baa Black Sheep, Baby Shark – all those, you know. They are listening to that one and watching all these English cartoons, so, at the moment when the baby starts speaking, they speak in English.

Several participants mentioned a phenomenon known as "virtual autism."[11] Health workers reported an increase in caregivers expressing concern about their children's linguistic and social development. The health workers referenced an article published by the Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS) around the same time as the interviews (Dema, 2023). The article suggested that excessive screen time for young children may lead to autism-like symptoms, including difficulties with social communication and interaction.

Discussion

The findings reveal existing customs and practices similar to those recognized in Western literature as musical interactions between caregivers and children, they show how music can create unique opportunities for social participation and learning for children in various contexts. They also highlight the effects of globalization on Bhutan, illustrating that factors such as technology, the movement of people, and modern trends are influencing children's access to music, the way music is practiced among young ones and traditional events.

The following discussion is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on music in the context of early childhood studies, examining the *affordances* (DeNora, 2000) of music in relation to care and learning. The second part explores the impact of globalization on the *musical ecology* (Ansdell, 2014; Campbell & Wiggins, 2014; Stige, 2002, 2015) of

[11] The term "virtual autism," coined by the Romanian psychologist Zamfir (2018) refers to disorder of children's functionality and development caused by the excessive consumption of virtual environments (smartphones, tablets, TV, laptops, etc.) in the first years of life.

young children in Bhutan, specifically regarding their access to music and their growth towards musical community and belonging.

The Affordances of Music in Relation to Care and Learning

Most of the participants did not recall specific children's songs or lullabies. However, they did share memories of adults using singing or humming as a way to soothe children or help them sleep. Such vocal practices can afford regulatory and emotional support and foster secure relationships (Edwards, 2011). A wordless tune, a form of deep and slow humming, was described and demonstrated, often combined with rhythmic movement, rocking the child in one's arms, or patting the child's back while singing. Dissanayake (2009) posited that music as an art form may have developed from the musical interactions observed between mothers and their infants across diverse cultures. Singing is a primary tool for communication between a caregiver and child and is used by humans to bond with and soothe their babies (Papoušek, 1996). A supportive, secure, and intimate relationship with a primary caregiver is crucial for healthy development throughout life (Bowlby, 1982). Music therapy programs involving mothers and infants have demonstrated the benefits of encouraging parents to engage musically with their children (Abad & Williams, 2006; Gaden & Trondalen, 2018; Nicholson et al., 2008). One participant mentioned times when the caregiver's singing seemed to lessen the child's pain and promote relaxation when he or she was sick. Other participants shared observations of parents singing to their children during vaccination. Lullaby singing can effectively reduce infants' pain response and mothers' anxiety during vaccination (Bekar & Efe, 2022). In various clinical settings, music intervention has been applied for the treatment of pain and anxiety; Bar et al. (2023) provided a systematic review evaluating the impact of music therapy on pain and anxiety control in hospitalized children.

Even before they develop the ability to speak, infants actively engage in an interactive, non-verbal social dialogue (Malloch, 1999; Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009). The findings of the present study present examples of musical conversations in which infants and caregivers participate in dialogic vocalization incorporating musical elements. The songs, games, or rhymes were reportedly used to elicit laughter or smiles from the child or to encourage the child to eat. Games such as *che-che* or *ko-ko* align with the concept of communicative musicality (Malloch, 1999; Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009). Within the dyad, elements of musical culture are incorporated, nurturing the development of *musicianship*, the expression of musicality in and as culture (Ansdell, 2014; Pavlicevic & Ansdell, 2009). Through shared experiences in interactive games with caregivers, peers, siblings, and other individuals in their surroundings, young children learn about themselves, about others, and about forming and maintaining interactions. The results above illustrate that children are engaged in musical experiences and participate in their own way. They engage alongside their family, which is increasingly being recognized as being hugely influential on young children's learning and development. Involving parents and caregivers in early learning activities and creating an enriched environment for children to grow and thrive is essential for their development (Britto et al., 2017). One participant (HW1) reflected on her experiences from the playful parenting program, emphasizing that children can listen, observe, and understand, and that singing can capture their attention and facilitate communication. Research shows that family-focused music environment programs in the local community can enhance children's communication, social, and play skills, while also benefiting parents' mental health (Clift et al., 2017; Nicholson et al., 2008)

The participants expressed their concern about how the inclusion of mobile phones in caregiving has transformed traditional practices. Caregivers increasingly use music from technical devices to help children sleep, calm them when they cry, or keep them entertained while they are busy with other tasks. This change has led to activities where

the child has less interaction with the caregiver, and the local health workers raised concerns about its effects on the development of secure bonding and other developmental outcomes. As Henriksson-Macaulay and Welch (2015) pointed out, such self-directed music experiences do not provide the relationship-building opportunities that active music-making does. Several health workers noted the phenomenon of "virtual autism," raising questions about the effects of screen usage on children's social and linguistic development. The early use of screens has raised increasing concerns about children's development worldwide. A study from China addresses screen time and autistic-like behaviors among preschool children (Chen et al., 2021). Research from Denmark on this subject indicates a correlation between poorer language development and high mobile device screen time among toddlers (Rayce et al., 2024). A study from Japan (Takahashi et al., 2023) showed developmental delays in communication and problem solving associated with screen time exposure at one year of age. Sticca et al. (2025) provided a systematic scoping review and a developmental psychology perspective on the effects of screen time on early childhood development. The study showed that the effects of screen time on child development are highly complex and depend on factors—the child, the context, and what the child is watching—that the authors highlighted as essential for future research to investigate.

While children can learn from screen media, such learning tends to be less effective than learning from real-life experiences that include socially relevant signals, turn-taking, and joint engagement (Jing & Kirkorian, 2020; Sundqvist et al., 2021). Learning language and its communicative, symbolic, and social functions is crucial to early child development. Infants have been observed to be particularly attentive to the rhythmic patterns of nursery rhymes, a trait that helps prepare them to anticipate and eventually participate in verbal exchanges. The period of infancy and early childhood represents a critical window of opportunity for language learning, generally recognized as the period before a child reaches two years of age (Maguire-Fong & Peralta, 2019). Chen-Hafteck and Mang (2012) described music and language learning in early childhood in more detail.

One interviewed health worker mentioned that caregivers today primarily know English nursery rhymes, with another health worker adding, "The moment the baby starts speaking, they start speaking in English." (HW4) These observations highlight the prevalence of English songs for children in the music industry and on digital platforms such as YouTube. Bhutanese parents apparently prefer their children to learn English, perhaps due to prevailing trends that view speaking English in Bhutan as more "modern." There is no doubt that mastering English opens opportunities for higher education abroad, future job prospects, and probably increased family income. However, statements about young children ceasing to learn their local language call for consideration of the potential impact that English could have on intergenerational communication, access to cultural heritage, and the understanding of one's own cultural identity.

A child's development and learning occur within the context of relationships with others and are shaped by participation and experiences in a social and cultural environment (Maguire-Fong & Peralta, 2019; Rogoff, 2003). The present findings illustrate how children have been integrated into the adults' living and working spaces and how music is woven into their daily life experiences. Children can be seen participating in music while working, walking or during the performance of folk songs at home in the evening. They may be placed in a *sari* on the caregiver's back, situated on a lap, or at the side of events, but they remain present with their senses, observing, listening to the sounds of music, or feeling the rhythm and movements of the dance. By being included where life happens or brought to events, children are given opportunities to "include themselves" (HW4) in the music through physical engagement, as in the example above of how children are copying the mask-dancers. Children are listening in (Rogoff, 2003), and become familiar with the shared rituals, practices, and stories that define their community.

Musicianship (cultural learning) is cultivated by children's "musicality in action with the sociocultural world," which includes: "learning and working with a range of musical affordances (musical 'aspects,' instruments, texts, traditions, etc.)," through musicking, which is "the engaged, social activity of musicianship in action, which is grounded in specific musical occasions and performances" (Ansdell, 2014, p. 103). Participants described how children partake in the circle dance and learn "the dance steps, the hand movements, the body movements, and the steps" (M2). Children do not initially master these skills without support from more experienced individuals, but "once they grow up, they start to react and learn" (M2). Children's development has been described as a "cultural process" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 3) where children learn the ways of their culture by "pitching in" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 9). However, opportunities for such learning and participation need to be made available.

The Impact of Globalization on Children's Growth Toward Musical Community and Belonging

Participants describe a "fading" (HW6) of traditional cultural practices and a fragmentation of family structures and community life. Appadurai's concept of "scapes" can be used to understand these changes, viewing globalization as the interaction and disjuncture between the five scapes (Appadurai, 1996). Increased mobility (ethnoscape) results in fewer invitations to rituals and gatherings, causing people who live in towns to lose contact with culture bearers and opportunities to learn skills that connect them to their local cultural community. Instead of experiencing live music, children are now learning music from digital media; as one participant stated: "The mobile is becoming the teacher" (M2). As Bhutan transitions from a low- to middle-income country, there is an increased financial flow (financescape), and access to new resources (technoscape). Internet platforms like YouTube have introduced floods of new images (mediascape) and, thus, new songs, instruments, habits, and languages. Emerging trends (ideoscape) include new music practices such as sing-along sessions featuring songs streamed from YouTube. World Health Organization guidelines (ideoscape) have also influenced politics, such as the inclusion of music in a Playful Parenting program, which affects health workers' practices. This shift not only alters children's opportunities for cultural learning or social participation but also transforms caregivers' practices of music and children's exposure to music in their daily lives.

The various musical and cultural experiences individuals encounter and the musical resources available to them, serve as tools for cultural learning and identity development (Pavlicevic & Ansdell, 2009; Stige, 2002, 2015). Technology and media in Bhutan offer a wide range of musical resources that appear to be heavily influenced by Western culture. These changes open new possibilities, such as learning a new language and connecting to a global community, but also present challenges. Gratier and Apter-Danon (2009) proposed that "belonging" comes to life in musical communication in the first months of life, and possibly prenatally (p. 304), and that this is both culturally and musically derived. Their research on immigrant dyads shows cultural variation in the way mothers and infants organize their vocal exchanges and how these cultural styles seem to support communicative musicality. The vocal exchanges can be disrupted when the mother has a confused sense of belonging (Gratier & Apter-Danon, 2009). What happens when the caregivers have no idea about the cultural traditions of their community? As per the abovementioned research, caregivers' lack of cultural rooting could potentially lead to a diminished nurturing of a sense of belonging among their infants.

As a result of globalization, developing a cultural identity has become more complex, requiring the negotiation of multiple cultural influences (Arnett, 2002). The narratives rendered above demonstrate how closely music experiences are tied to place, time, and

other people. Research indicates that music can be intimately linked to the stories we tell about ourselves and acts as a significant marker for how we understand ourselves and our position in the social and cultural landscape (DeNora, 2000; Ruud, 2013). In changing times, music can provide a vital tool for finding anchors and a sense of belonging and can help negotiate and navigate identity and competence.

Conclusion

This article sought to improve our understanding of the musical landscape of young children in Bhutan. It has explored local practices, traditions, and perspectives surrounding the use of music in early caregiver–child relationships, as articulated by local musicians, singers, and health workers who serve dual roles as professionals and caregivers. The results show that music is deeply woven into the daily lives and relationships, as well as religious practices, and community events of people in Bhutan, illustrating how children are involved and engaged. They demonstrate how music can provide caregiving opportunities, learning experiences, and platforms for social and cultural participation for young children.

The impact of globalization is clear, as changes in values, social life, and family structures reshape how caregivers and children engage with music. While traditional musical heritage remains important, modern influences, especially through technology and media, are transforming the landscape of early music experiences and the ways music is transmitted. The findings illustrate technology's potential for caregiving and learning, while highlighting how English-dominated children's programs and nursery rhymes on digital media affect Bhutanese children's development and learning, and the possible negative consequences of technology on early relationships and child development. This study also demonstrates that the musical landscape of young children is shaped not only by historical cultural heritage and global cultural flows, but also actively molded by the individuals who inhabit it. The ongoing challenge is to find the balance between preserving the rich cultural heritage developed over centuries and embracing new opportunities provided by our increasingly interconnected world and technological advancements. Future research should continue to explore how music can serve as a resource for children, caregivers, families, and communities, ensuring it remains a vital component for building relationships, fostering cultural learning, nurturing identity, and promoting social and cultural belonging in the years to come.

This study was conducted from the perspective of a foreign music therapist, and I encourage local researchers to engage in early childhood music studies to enhance the diversity and depth of insight. This study included a limited number of participants, most of whom live in urban areas; future research should include a broader range of participants from various regions and language groups within Bhutan. Incorporating children's perspectives could also provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of music in caregiver–child relationships as well as in society.

The theme of cultural preservation deserves deeper exploration, particularly with regard to positioning children as active agents and carriers of their culture in the face of modernization and globalization. Areas to explore could include the implications of these shifts on the transmission of musical traditions, and also how music can facilitate language learning, foster intergenerational communication, provide access to cultural heritage, and enhance the understanding of one's own cultural identity. Such research could also provide valuable insights into multicultural perspectives. Given Bhutan's rich cultural diversity, exploring music as a pedagogical tool in early learning could provide valuable knowledge concerning enriched diversity in early education.

There is also a need to further investigate the impact of mobile phone and screen use on evolving values, perspectives, and practices related to musical engagement in Bhutan, as well as the role of the cultural context in shaping how technology is used.

This paper highlights the role of music in strengthening connections between caregivers and children and demonstrates how music can create a rich learning environment for communicative, social, and cultural development. Future research could explore how music can be effectively utilized in early intervention and healthcare settings to support health goals, enhance caregiver competence, and strengthen relationships between caregivers and children.

The perspective presented here reflects my viewpoint as an external academic and music therapist. I conclude this section by encouraging others, including cultural insiders, to pursue further research and share their perspectives on this topic.

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About the Author

Anne Karine Råmunddal Kippenes is an Early Education teacher and Music Therapist. She is currently a PhD candidate at the Norwegian Academy of Music, Music Education and Music Therapy Department.

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