

# The Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

Final Reports - 2019

## Works-in-progress

# Tweens and self-making through music making

Kathe Gray

### What is this research about?

This ethnographic research project was conducted with tweens enrolled in summer music camps offered by Toronto's Regent Park School of Music in the Jane and Finch neighbourhood. Its findings will help refine my approach to a broader project that aims to document the skills and knowledges tweens develop through music education and performance as well as the ways they find they use of such knowledge elsewhere in their lives. How do their music-making experiences at camp inform the ways in which they "perform" themselves at the camp, at home, and in their communities at large? How do their experiences shape the ways in which they imagine themselves and their places in world? Crucial to both projects is capturing youth perspectives through their own words and actions.

### What you need to know

Relatively few anthropological projects have prioritized the voices and actions of children and youth. Consequently, the perspectives of children and youth are absent from much ethnographic literature. Exceptions that inform this project include Brown 2011, Chin 2001, Cox 2015, and LaBennett 2011. Using the summer music camps offered by Toronto's Regent Park School of Music (RPSM) as a fieldwork site, this study provides insights on how to approach the design of a proposed youth-centred ethnographic project.

### What did the researcher do?

The proposed pilot study initially consisted of two phases: first, participant-observation with all enrolled campers during summer music camps; second, three sets of arts-based group workshops and interviews with no more than six campers between August and December 2019. However, only the participant-observation phase was completed. This participant-observation took place over two one-week camps, the first a glee camp focused on singing and dancing, the second a "build a band" camp. I observed the activities of and interactions between music camp participants aged 9 to 13 while participating alongside them.

### What did the researcher find?

Using ethnographic details from the study, the information below notes the four main discoveries regarding the design of this pilot study and outlines how these findings might inform future youth-centred ethnographic research at RPSM summer camps.

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**TWEEN AGENCY** Studying youth empowerment can open a researcher to having that empowerment turned against her research plans. For me, it was crucial to recognize and honour that agency, especially given that this project prioritizes the voices of youth. Consequently, a willingness and ability to improvise with both research design and overall objectives was integral to this study. To illustrate: while parents and guardians are accustomed to signing waivers and consent forms as a rote part of enrolling their children in extra-curricular activities, children and youth are rarely asked for their signed assent. Tweens at both weeks of camp were provided with an assent form to complete. During the first camp, I explained my project to tween campers as a snack break started. Given an opportunity to decline participation in a research project, some tweens openly and audibly exercised their right to say no; others declined in order to return to a snack break as quickly as possible. Consequently, only three campers agreed to participate in my project at this camp. At the second camp, with the cooperation of the instructors, I introduced my project immediately after our first lunch break, also shortening and simplifying my explanation of the project. All but three campers agreed to participate in the participant-observation phase. However, they declined committing to the post-camp arts-making sessions I had proposed for the fall, explaining that they needed to protect their free time.

My takeaway: My explanation of my project must be brief and straightforward. The assent form also needs to be streamlined — ideally, one page instead of four. This necessitates a project that focuses on participant-observation at the camp itself, rather than incorporating follow-up workshops that campers are ambivalent about committing to. An alternative would be introducing a consent form specific to each phase of the project, rather than covering all phases in a single form.

**RAPPORT** An ethnographer must think carefully about how the kind and quality of data she collects is influenced by her self-presentation and her approach to engaging with youth participants, particularly when the fieldwork period is brief but intense. During this pilot project, I found I needed to overcome my own perceived authority as an adult and a researcher by participating wholeheartedly alongside the campers in all activities and noticeably seeking out and crediting their knowledge. That is, my actions demonstrated my intentions to youth more clearly than my words.

For example, I initially participated in all instructor- and counsellor-led activities but only observed free play and food breaks from a distance. While my hands-on participation gave me insight into the skills and knowledges that the organized activities were intended to cultivate, I was otherwise removed from the social life of the campers, from hearing the details of the campers everyday lives at home, at camp, and at school, and from fostering an equitable connection between them and me. That changed when I began, for example, comparing lunches with the other campers, playing ultimate frisbee with them, asking them to explain new lingo or teach me new card games, and performing on stage as one of them. Being unafraid of looking “silly” — or at least getting accustomed to it — was especially important when it came to instructional activities that were unfamiliar to me — like hip hop dancing.

My takeaway: Given how short the participant-observation period is for each camp, I need to immediately begin participating alongside the campers, fitting in more like a peer/colleague than as a researcher, counsellor, or parent figure. I should also consider being a presence during school-year programming so that I become a known entity to some of the campers in advance of the next camp.

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**AGE** My broader research project need not be limited to tweens and teens; younger ages are also engaged in making knowledge on a daily basis. Initially, I selected to work with tweens, in part, because I thought they would have the relative maturity to interpret their experiences and to articulate their insights. However, I discovered that kids of all ages theorize the world in which they live — that is, they try to make sense of it, to draw connections between their past experiences and new ones — and capably share this through word and action.

Consider: Participants at the first camp I attended ranged in age from 6 to 13. When I spoke about my research and introduced the assent forms to the 9- to 13-year-olds, the younger campers began a snack and free play break, though we all remained in the same room. Once I'd collected the completed assent

forms, I invited anyone with questions to join me during the break. While none of the tweens approached me, I spent the break entertaining a raft of questions from four younger campers: "What sorts of things will you observe?" "What kind of questions will you ask?" "Are kids fun to observe?" "Why am I too young for your research?" "Can we hang out with you even if we can't be part of your project?" One 8-year-old even checked in with me about the success of my research on the last day of camp.

My takeaway: I can extend the age range of the campers for my next stint of participant-observation; indeed, comparisons between the two age groups could reveal insights that working with tweens only might not. I am also thinking through how to cultivate curiosity about my research among tweens as the younger campers had.

**TRANSLATION** Just because adults were once children and youth does not mean that we can assume we will be able to accurately interpret their actions. Sometimes, consulting with an older youth can provide important insights. My then fourteen-year-old daughter functioned in just such a way for me.

For example, I spoke with her after my first day at camp, describing how the younger campers, who were not covered under the ethics approval for my project, had been much more interested in spending time with me, while the tweens I'd come to observe were much more distant with me. "That makes complete sense," she said, and went on to explain that for the younger campers, I was a kind of mother figure, someone who could provide comfort and assistance and who would help to facilitate connections between campers who were too shy to do so themselves. She added I was likely also a parental figure to the tween campers, too, but that tweens go to summer camp, in part, to escape their parents. Not only did my daughter's observations help make sense of a situation that puzzled me, she also underlined how important it was that I relate to the campers as a camper myself rather than as a parent, teacher, or researcher.

My takeaway: Integrating a teen advisor into my broader project might lend more nuance to my interpretations. I am now considering the ways in which a near-peer (to the campers) might become a formal part of the research team, perhaps an older RPSM student, one for whom the position might be the means of securing a high-school credit or a paid summer job.

How can you use this research?

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### How can you use this research?

This research has been indispensable in helping me reconfigure my approach to continued ethnographic research at RPSM summer music camps, and I hope to put my findings into action at the next summer camps. However, it may also be useful to researchers considering ethnographic projects that prioritize the voices of youth, particularly with regard to securing assent and establishing rapport with youth participants. It may also be of use to ethnographers pursuing participant-observation over short but intense intervals of time.

### About the researcher

Kathe Gray is a doctoral student in theatre and performance studies at York University. She holds an MA in social anthropology from the same institution.

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### Keywords

Community Engaged Research, Music Education, Youth, Ethnography

### About the Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

The Helen Carswell Chair represents a partnership between York University and Regent Park School of Music (RPSM). All faculty and graduate students of the university are encouraged to collaborate with RPSM on special projects that are aimed at improving community music programming and curriculum for children in the Jane and Finch neighborhood and beyond.