

Connecting Children with the Land Through Song

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SPEAKERS

Cherlene, Tiiu

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- T** Tiiu 00:02
This was like silos coming down and then merging and going: Wow, song! Song is here and it's supporting our learning in the land and we're all so excited. And it's a way to bring it together to bring our voices together to bring that joy and it comes through us. And I think that that was the start of exploring song as a part of learning in the land, about the land, with the land.
- C** Cherlene 00:41
Hi everyone, you're listening to the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada podcast. I'm one of your hosts, Cherlene Eloria, and I'm the communications coordinator for CNAC, which is headquartered on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe. If you'd like to learn more about what we do, please check out our website at childnature.ca.
- C** Cherlene 01:02
I'm joined today by Tiiu Strutt. Tiiu is first generation Canadian, of British and Estonian descent. She is a mother and lives with her family in Southern Ontario, in the land of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee and Huron-Wendat, in the land of the First Peoples of the Williams Treaty. Tiiu is an educator and an artist. She currently works in the elementary

public school system, and is committed to engaging students with the natural world on a daily basis. She also has over two decades experience writing and performing songs. She continues to create and share songs that support children and communities with connecting to the land. Tiiu is committed to developing knowledge and understanding of the culture and history of the Indigenous Peoples of this land, and of marginalized peoples she shares this land with. She believes all humans should have access and opportunity to develop a meaningful relationship with the land, and is committed to learning and advocating to make that change happen in her community and work.

C Cherlene 02:07

In this episode, we will hear from Tiiu about why she considers song to be the most valuable tool in her toolbox as an educator. We'll also learn about how we can use songs to connect students and children with the land.

C Cherlene 02:22

So, Tiiu as a public school teacher, you engage students with the natural world on a daily basis and I know that this is really, really important to you. So why was it important for you to make this a key part of your work as an educator, making nature and outdoor learning central to your work as a teacher?

T Tiiu 02:41

I think the importance of working in the land on a regular basis with children, and why I do that has really evolved over time. I'm very grateful that I have the opportunity to work with children in the land where I live, which is the land of the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee and the Huron-Wendat, in the land of the First Peoples of the Williams Treaty. And in spending time in the land here, as somebody whose family comes from another part of the world. My dad's side of the family came here when my dad was just a young child, three years old. And my grandfather told me the story of how when they arrived finally after, you know, finding their way through the land, they arrived in Thunder Bay. And he told the story of seeing a man go out fishing, and how he reeled in these beautiful fish. And for him that moment of witnessing the beauty of the land that was here, he said for him he knew at that time that his family had found home. My mom's side, she came from Britain. So my dad's side of the family Estonian roots and heritage and my mom's side of the family from Britain, she came as a young adult for a new opportunity and to explore a new place.

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Tiiu 04:19

And so I come to this land with that background, and I work here in this land. And it has been a learning journey and what's propelled me outside in the beginning, it came from curiosity, I think. I remember my first teaching position. I was a prep coverage teacher. They gave me 100 minutes once a week to teach Grade One science and I just couldn't understand how to use that time and I thought well, we will go outside because that's what we're doing in Grade One. We're actually exploring and examining what's happening, what's changing outside. And so that was the very beginning.

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Tiiu 05:08

But then as my journey continued, and then I had kids of my own, I now have a seven and nine year old. But when I was on my second mat leave with my daughter and my son, I really struggled. I had a very hard time with my postpartum. I had terrible anxiety and my mental health became kind of a critical issue. And where I found my peace, where I found my well-being was being outside in the land. And so when I returned to school, it became kind of vital that if I was going to return to the school system, while also figuring out how to, you know, manage things at home, and also putting my mental health top of mind, we had to go outside, I had to go inside. And so that propelled us outside. So then it became a part of mental health. And thinking that this is how I'm going to support myself and then considering, well, if this is supporting me, then hopefully it's supporting the students that I work with.

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Tiiu 06:17

And I did find that. I did find that students who were very quiet in the class would suddenly come alive outside. We'd walk to the local creek and this one girl who barely spoke in class would be at the top of the tree, and I found out that one of her greatest joys was tree climbing. So there, the journey unfolded to like a new level where it's like, okay, mental health. And then I was very fortunate to have an administrator who invited me to be a part of the new FDK program and said, "Would you take kids outside?" And so that then became a new opportunity and a new level to explore. And there, I started to see student engagement. I started to understand inquiry in a different way. And then I started doing learning about the land that we live in, the history of the land, the history of the First Peoples of this land. And I started considering how this new knowledge and understanding I was gaining was going to shift me as an educator.

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Tiiu 07:35

And that then began the journey of understanding a lot more about Indigenous education, about Indigenous ways of knowing. And how when I'm outside, there's opportunity for me to embed what I have been learning and to share that with children and to lift different knowledge systems. And I'm still on that journey, you know, I've started working with CNAC as a shadow facilitator, and there's a whole new level of learning. Exploring ethical spaces, and what does ethical spaces mean and exploring decolonization in a different way. And I've really got to give gratitude to Kay Rasmussen, who's my mentor, for supporting that and supporting all of us in that journey. And so it keeps shifting and it keeps evolving, but what I will say is that every turning point, every step that I take towards this work is always pointing towards the benefits of engaging and learning in the land. And all of the different ways that it can benefit me, can benefit the children I work with, can benefit the land, can develop relationships. And it supports a really engaging learning process in the land. And so I think it's a learning journey that I'm on and I think I will just continue to uncover it as time goes on.

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Cherlene 09:34

Yeah, thank you so much Tiiu for sharing that and kind of really articulating well your journey to getting to this part. And yeah, I just wanted to echo like when I was younger, being outside always was where I felt happiest. And unfortunately, in my elementary school days, that only happened in the periods of recess. And so, you know, if I could go back, I would have loved to be in a forest school setting or had some time to learn and like really go through the curriculum, but just outside. And so I'm really interested to hear what you do in your classroom, sorry, out of your classroom to connect children with nature. And I'm hoping we could talk about that next. So Tiiu, what grades do you teach?

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Tiiu 10:28

Yeah, so because of my skill set, I can teach in French, I have a music background. I've always fallen into the role of what we call prep coverage for the most part in my teaching career, which means that I go into classrooms when the homeroom teacher gets prep time. And so I've done very much a full range. I've done music from kindergarten to Grade Six, I've taught science at various levels, I've taught the FDK program, as you know, as their sole prep coverage teacher for a number of years. So I've really kind of run the gamut from K to 6, a little bit of homeroom experience, but by far and away, a prep coverage teacher.

C

Cherlene 11:12

So Tiiu, I'm curious, what are some things you do with your students to connect with

nature every day?

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Tiiu 11:21

Probably the biggest things that we do is we have some routines. So I'm committed to taking children outside consistently. So one of the things that happens is students see that I'm coming as their teacher, and their prep cover teacher, and they know that we're going to go outside. So the first part of our routine is getting ready to go outside. And then the second part of our routine - in the French classes, I call it our "marche de merveille," our wonder walk. And what that is, we go outside, and it's simply giving children time to explore. So they choose if they want to explore on their own, with a partner, in a small group, and what kind of exploration they do. But it's just giving them time and space in the land. And I might offer a provocation, "When you go outside today, notice what maybe looks different from the last time that we were outside. What sounds different? Are there any different smells? What do you notice?" So that's a really big part of our routine.

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Tiiu 12:28

And then what we do is we gather and circle together. And the last two school years, when we gather in circle together, what our next routine that we do is greeting and thanking the day. And that routine comes from a teaching that was shared with me from Hopi Lovell Martin, who is Lenni Lenape, Britain and European descent. And he was a part of my forest and nature school training that I did with CNAC in 2019. And he shared with us his tradition of when we gather, we greet and we thank the land that we're in together. His work, you can find at edgeofthebush.ca. And he's also written a blog post with the York Region Nature Collaborative, and it's called "Acknowledging Land." And in his work, and in the teaching that he shared, is he encourages that to acknowledge land with children, one of the ways to do this is to greet the land and to say "hello" and to say "thank you." So that's one of the routines that we go outside and we do that in call and response together. So that's kind of the beginning of our time together in the land. So there's the commitment to that time outside, going out regularly, taking the time to notice and then taking the time to share what we're noticing, and starting with gratitude.

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Tiiu 14:08

From there, what we do, it really kind of depends on the subject that we're covering, and what curriculum we're looking at at that time, and how might we use the land to help us with that learning. So that's looked like a whole variety of different things. And then it's also, in being in the land, it's being prepared for things to take a turn. There's one day we went outside, there was the time to explore and in one of the spaces that we learn in,

there's five mature trees and four of them are these beautiful mature maples, and we were getting soaking wet. We were standing underneath these trees, but it was a beautifully sunny day in March and it was kind of this mystery as like, well, why are we getting so wet? There's no clouds in the sky. And so on that day, things took a big turn just because of what was happening. And that actually launched into an inquiry around starting to learn about maple sap and maple syrup. And that was not something that I had actually foreseen happening that day or really at all. It was kind of a new opportunity that arose simply because earlier in the year, some arborists had come in and taken off a number of branches on the trees. And so all the sap was pouring out because of the fresh cuts in the wood. And so that was kind of a new experience on that day. So being prepared for things to go in a different direction, depending on what we're observing and what we're noticing. But by far and away, the most important thing I find that I'm doing to connect children to nature is a commitment to go outside and a commitment to our routines.

C

Cherlene 16:02

That sounds awesome. You had mentioned earlier that when your students know they have you for a period they know they're going outside, and I'm wondering, how has that been like during COVID-19? You probably had a portion of online schooling, were you able to still connect kids with nature virtually? And how did that look like?

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Tiiu 16:27

There's definitely been a shift. When we were first face to face, there were a lot of parameters around how we were going to keep everybody in the building safe while we were learning. So I was thinking about how to adapt to those things outside. So I have a gathering snake, it's a long rope. And I use like a monkey, I think they call it a monkey fist knot at the end, and I got my felt, and I've turned it into a snake's face. And that's our little snake and she gathers us and this year, she had stripes on her. And the kids knew that they needed to stay by the stripes, and that just for me insured distancing when we were outside in the space. So thinking through strategies about how we might keep ourselves safe while we were in the school.

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Tiiu 17:19

There was also I mean, where I teach, there was the parameter that we weren't allowed to sing. So that actually made teaching music a little bit - it forced creativity. And actually it forced us to have some different learning experiences that we wouldn't have had. So I feel like creativity abounded, and we were able to work with it. Now we are online. And do you know one of the funnest things that we've been doing? And this is my approach and I

would love to hear other people's approach because there's no doubt it's a challenge. But what I'm working on supporting children in is I'm working on supporting them in exploring their voice. How high can their voice go? How low? How fast? How slow? How loud? How soft? How silly? Those are the basic questions that I ask myself when we're going to do something is: How might we explore our voice? So what I've been doing in the online space is I've been thinking about what animals share the space with us. And then I've been looking on YouTube for videos of these animals making sounds. So I found this amazing video that somebody had taken of this pack of coyotes in Yellowstone, like yipping away. And so the first thing I do is I say to the students: "I've got a new video for you, there's an animal." And I'll describe the animal and it's so engaging because I'm like, "Okay, this animal doesn't have wings, is covered in fur, walks on four paws and I hear this animal at night. If I go outside of my house, I'll hear this animal calling at night." And honestly the engagement! Like I can see kids, they want to figure out what's the animal. So now we're really thinking, and then once they figure it out, I'm like, "Yeah, okay, we got it. It's a coyote!" And then I'll play the video and I just love watching their faces as they hear the sound that the animals make. And then their task is: Can you find a way to make that sound in your home? Can you find something that you would be allowed to play with? Or can you use your voice to recreate that sound at home? And then we'll play the video again, and they'll try to make the sound to see if they can sound like that animal. And I'm trying to put together one voice exploration with developing our environmental literacy of who are we sharing the land with. So we've done coyotes, and owls, and foxes. And today what did we do? We've done bullfrogs, and a baby fawn. So that's how we're kind of doing it. It's a challenging set of circumstances that we're in right now. That's how I've been able to spark our interest and connect us with the land and with each other, and with our voices through this time we're going through.

C

Cherlene 20:28

It is a very difficult time. And I can imagine as a kid, how fun it would be to just unleash a wolf howl, when you've been stuck at home for a whole year.

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Tiiu 20:43

It's tricky. I'm trying to figure out how to get them off the screen. And I'm also trying to negotiate having two young children in the primary years at home, too. So it's a big juggle, but I feel like that has been a lot of light and a lot of joy. And I've really enjoyed seeing how engaged they are in trying to figure out what animal it might be. As a French immersion teacher, it's also helping us really build our vocabulary. And yeah, the opportunity to explore our voice and the whole range of it and to be able to connect with the natural world. I think I've landed on something that I hope is supporting them in a

good way at home.

C Cherlene 21:30

In a recent blog post you wrote for CNAC, you wrote: To support children in developing their relationship with the land, I consider song to be the most valuable tool in my toolbox. Please tell us about this. How do you use song in your teaching?

T Tiiu 22:01

Yeah, for sure. Honestly, one of the hard things about this year has been not being able to use song exactly, like not singing. So we've done a lot of using our voice in ways that aren't singing. I've always noticed, when I sing with kids, there's a tension, there's something about it. To sing out loud, I think, you're being a little bit vulnerable, you know. I'm coming from a different place, and it captures attention, and I think it captures excitement. And so in that way, if you can capture interest, and you can capture excitement, we're trying to make that connection. A lot of being an educator is building a relationship, right? So if I'm going to share from that part of me, and I invite you to share it from that part of you, well, then we're connecting on this different level, right? And I'm just naturally somebody who enjoys using my voice, and I enjoy being a little bit silly with it. Yeah, for me, it's joyful, and it's from the heart, and it's filled with love. So it's just a natural thing to want to do more of, right? And it's a natural thing for people to want to be a part of.

T Tiiu 23:39

So for activities: I mentioned earlier, how one of our routines is acknowledging land, and greeting and thanking the day. We do that with call and response. And from there, what we also do is we also greet each other. If we're all standing in circle, we're in the French Immersion program, I would call "Bonjour, Cherlene." And then you could call back "Bonjour, classe!" And that's us just starting to warm up our voices. It's giving everybody the chance to have their voice heard individually, if they want to. We also have the right to pass if you don't want to. And when we start doing the saying hello to each other. We start exploring our voices in different ways. So we might do that with a louder voice, a softer voice, a higher voice, a lower voice, a louder voice, a softer voice, and sometimes a sillier voice. And so we're starting to just warm up our voices.

T Tiiu 24:54

Another activity that I've done with younger students, with the FDK students, is stretching our bodies and stretching our voices. We'll sing the song "Head and Shoulders, Knees and

Toes", and we'll explore slower and faster. And what we'll do is we'll reach down in the space and we'll touch the earth, and feel the earth, and feel that nice stretch off the back of our legs and stand up. And we'll sing "Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes." And then, "I wonder if we could stretch out our sides and our arms?" And we've got Snowy, the birch tree over here, and Sappy, the maple tree over here. "What if we all stretched our arms out? Is it possible that we could touch Sappy and we could touch Snowy at the same time and maybe tickle the sides of those trees?" And "Wow, now we stretched our bodies a little bit more, I wonder if we could sing that song faster together. And then maybe we'll reach up and tickle the branches above our heads or reach past the branches and try to catch a cloud. And maybe even reach through the clouds! If there's lots of clouds, can we put them out of the way? And can we reach up? And could we feel the sun on the other side of those clouds? Could we warm our hands? And wow, our bodies are really warmed up. I wonder if we could sing that song even faster together." And so again, it's just warming up our voices, warming up our bodies, noticing the land that we're in.

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Tiiu 26:35

Another little way just to like warm up our voices. There's a song that I learned from Stacy James who's a music educator here in Ontario, and it's a camp song and a lot of people probably know it and it's all about a banana. And I love this song because you can use it in English, you can use it in French, you could use it really I would imagine in any language because it's very simple. You have a banana. You peel the banana. You chop the banana. You smash the banana. You eat the banana. You go bananas. Do you know this song?

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Cherlene 27:07

Yeah! When you said it's about a banana, I had a vision of me at camp.

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Tiiu 27:14

Right! So this is a song that makes you smile because it's fun. So for those of you who don't know it, the song goes: "Peel banana, peel peel banana, peel banana, peel peel banana. Chop banana, chop chop banana, chop banana, chop chop banana. Smush banana, smush smush banana, smush banana, smush smush banana. Eat banana, eat eat banana, eat banana, eat eat banana. Go bananas, go go bananas, go bananas, go go bananas!" So this song felt super safe to use this year because I didn't really feel like we were singing. It feels like we are choral speaking together with a beat. And so what if we had a banana? And we sang that - or said that - as human beings? But now we've got a banana in our belly? And what if we go for a walk? What if we imagine that we go for a walk? Let's go to the creek that's just behind the school. And oh, did you see that? Did you

see that little animal that just went running across us. That small animal covered in fur with a bushy, bushy tail. And its fur is black. Right? So this is again, getting kids to think about what we might find. Oh my gosh, it was a squirrel and guess what it had in its hands: a banana. And so, now we're having fun. But we're also going to explore what it might sound like if you were just a little squirrel and you were eating. So we might start to explore a quieter voice, a higher voice. And then you know, oh wow, we do the whole thing again. And then you know, wow, we just saw a squirrel eating a banana. Kind of cool. Let's imagine we're gonna continue walking. And you know, I could ask the kids, what kind of animal is that over there? And it's a great way to check in with the students and figure out what do they know about who are we sharing the land with right? Then, we could try to sing the song like raccoons. We've done it like crayfish. We've done it like flamingos. And one of the things that I do is like whatever they suggest goes. Because it's all about exploring our voice and I think that, by them sharing with me "Flamingo", rather than being like, really are we going to see a flamingo if we walk down the street? It's like, sure! Because we're going to explore our voice and you know what we're on a learning journey together, and that's where you're at, and as an educator that gives me information.

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Tiiu 29:58

And then as they start to bring forward as we continue learning together, and this is where it can now start to include inquiry, right? Because it's like if we're also learning in science about the needs and characteristics of living things. And then, as they start to suggest animals it lets me know which animals they're connecting with. And then, we're talking about how this is my greatest tool as an educator? Well, now kids are thinking about who's sharing the land with us. And inevitably, the next time I see them, or within the next few times that I see them as their teacher, they'll come over and they'll say, "Guess what I saw this weekend? I was out with my family, and you wouldn't believe what walked across the road. It was a raccoon!" And so they're starting to look more closely at the land, and they're really excited about it, and they're sharing it with me. And you know, oh right, "What did it look like?" And there depending on what your lens is as an educator, you could go in a lot of different directions. "Oh, wow. What animal was that? What did it look like? Let's see what we can find out about that animal. What does that animal's voice sound like? How might we sing that song like that animal? I wonder what that animal needs? And why it might have been crossing the road? What questions do you have?" And you could start a whole learning journey about a raccoon, because they've come with that to you, and they're totally engaged in it. So for me, song is like a launching point. It's constantly a provocation because it's constantly inviting them. If I'm singing about the land, in the land, I'm constantly inviting them to make observations and share those observations. And from there, all the questions we can ask, all the exploring we can do, all the learning that we can do that we can connect to all the other curriculum. And it started

by pretending that we're a squirrel eating a banana, right? So it all kind of works out.

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Tiiu 32:04

So I'll use song in that way, but I also am really interested in singing songs that are specifically about inviting kids to look closely at the land. And I try to write songs that will include students' input, and that's the Tree Song Cycle that I have written, and I've been sharing. They're seasonal songs where you can sing with children, and then you can invite them to add in what they're noticing while they're in the land. And again, by just inviting them to notice things, they start to think about noticing things. And so they start to notice things. And then from there, you've got a launching pad for inquiry, and you've got something that's going to support your inquiry because you can keep on going back to the songs and hear what they're offering as you go through your learning journey. Right? What are they now thinking about when they think about animals in the land? What are they now thinking about when they're thinking about what the trees look like, at different times of year?

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Cherlene 32:48

Thank you so much for sharing, I was smiling the entire time. I know people can't see me smiling. But I'm just imagining kids in a yard just singing, and like chugging along and singing about a banana and animals and it's making me smile. And it's making me happy. So I can see how as a kid that would really open you up to be in a good mindset to learn and to observe and to really connect with the land and develop a relationship with the land. You mentioned a little bit that you write your own songs, you mentioned the Tree Song Cycle. I want to ask, how did you get into songwriting? And you did some performing as well, right?

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Tiiu 34:06

My parents have always said that I have always been singing from when I was a young age and then when I was a teenager, I did start writing songs. And I just kind of followed that. I found song and songwriting was a way for me to kind of explore all the things I was feeling in my heart. And it felt like a way for me to do that. It just kind of was there as something for me to explore. So that's where it really started when I was a teenager, and then through my 20s I just kind of kept having this interest in exploring it and so I did. Yeah, I was like a performing singer-songwriter, really focused on writing songs and sharing them. And then the journey kind of changed, I guess, in that I liked that work, but I always felt pretty ungrounded in it. And as I was nearing the end of my 20s, I really felt a longing to have a place to call home. And so I just started trying to find ways to work

more closely from home. I started working with kids and teaching them music privately. My partner, became fiance, is a teacher in the schooling system. And I was like, well, you know, I'm spending time with kids, when they're not in school, you're spending time with kids when they are in school. So I decided to go back to school to be able to work in schools so that, you know, if we're going to make home and be together, then if we could work at the same time, that would be helpful. So that's what kind of landed me in the school system.

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Cherlene 36:05

Did it feel natural to kind of include song in your teaching? Did it feel kind of scary at first? Or was it just something you always knew you were going to do when you became a teacher?

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Tiiu 36:16

That's a good question. I mean, not in the way I'm doing it now. I definitely wasn't like, "Oh, I'm a singer, songwriter, I want to work in schools. And this is what it would look like." It's kind of like how I was talking about how I started with, you know, with taking students outside. It started in one way, and then the journey really evolved for me to kind of go, oh, but when I take kids outside, look at this aspect of it, look at how I can engage in the land in this way. Look at all this learning that I'm doing about the history of the land, look at what I'm learning about the history of education in this land and recognizing I'm a key player at this time in that. And that's been a journey that I will always be continuing on. I think likewise with song. I think for me, it started when I was a teenager. There was a lot of loss that was going on, and there was a lot of grief, and I needed a place to put it. And so that's where songwriting started. And I think in my 20s, I was very, quite honestly quite lost. And it just seemed to be the one thing that made sense was that I knew how to use song or I felt comfortable exploring song to find a place.

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Tiiu 37:37

And then when I started teaching, it launched me into a different world. And I definitely didn't start with writing songs to support inquiry. I definitely didn't start with bringing students outside and exploring song in that way. I think the beginning years when you're an educator is trying to figure out what's expected of you, and make sure you're covering all of that. And then, figuring out how to apply yourself in that. Because of my background, I definitely was given music classes to teach. But the opportunity, I think really came when I came back from my second mat leave. And I was given a homeroom at that time, and the administrator I had at that time said, you know, we're putting in a

new FDK program, I noticed you like to take kids outside, do you want to try the FDK program? And it was about being outside. And I said, yeah, sure, let's try that. Without really having a clue what that was gonna look like. And so that started to piece things together.

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Tiiu 38:50

There was actually a really neat moment. So with the FDK program, it was siloed for me in my head. I was teaching music at these times, and we were going outside to learn at these times. It was very kind of separate in the beginning. And then in the spring of that year, a robin family came and built a nest in the space where the children were outside during recess. And it became like this huge inquiry into like, whoa, there's a nest there! Who lives there?

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Tiiu 39:47

We were able to document. You know, we'd go out with a selfie stick, and we'd look up in the nest and see what was in the nest. And oh my gosh, there's an egg! Oh my gosh, there's two eggs. Oh my gosh, there's four eggs. A week later, oh my gosh, there's three eggs. What happened? And the mom and dad robin were amazing that they would let us come and take these pictures and we watch their babies grow. And then I will always remember the moment when we were outside. And we saw that the baby birds were -

T

Tiiu 40:05

Actually let me backtrack, this is a good story. I hope I'm not talking too much, but this is really good. So we're watching like bird family, robin family. They're leading us through this journey and I'm super stoked about this, and I'm taking pictures and I'm putting them up on the wall inside the school so that the whole school can follow along. And we're watching these birds go through their journey, and then it's recess time. And I get you know, over the PA: "Madame Strutt, can you please report to the office, Madame struck, please report to the office." Which you know, everybody, I think at all times is always like, oh, gosh, what have I done. And so I go running down to the office. And my principal was like, one of the birds is out of the nest, and it was an emergency. And everybody was like really worried, the bird was out of the nest. How do we support this robin? She fell out of the nest, how do we get her back in the nest? One of the babies. So I go running out where everybody's trying to figure out, like everybody's involved in this. And it's like, well, let's think about what we've been learning. I think maybe she's ready to fly. And so we just decided to leave her be. And sure enough, we watched the bird. The bells ring so all the kids have got to go back inside. So I kind of stand there and I watch for a while. And sure

enough, the bird goes off, but I'm the only one who's gotten to see it. So we go outside in the afternoon and I've got the whole class with me, and we're looking and I tell them about what happened in the morning. And then this little robin hops up on the side of the nest and like puffs up her feathers. And she flies! She takes her first flight right in front of all of these children, and it was magic! Like you couldn't have ever asked for a better moment as an educator. The kids were so happy for this bird. They were so happy for this bird. It was such a magical moment. And for me this was like me embracing like, wow, this is the power of learning in the land. This is the power of land is first teacher.

T

Tiiu 42:15

And I remember driving home and there was a song. The song just came. And so I shared the song with the kids. And it was all about the journey that we've been on. It goes: "Cheerup, cheerup, cheerily! Cheerup, cheerup, cheerily! A momma bird sang to me. Cheerup, cheerup, cheerily! Cheerup, cheerup, cheerily! A robin red breast, led me to her nest, Now what do you think I did see?" And the first verse is all about how at first we found a nest. And then the second verse is how we found these eggs and they were blue. And then we went back and we found these baby chicks that were pink. And then we saw them grow and be ready to take their first flight. I can send you a link to the song. For me, this was like silos coming down and then merging and going "Wow, song! Song is here and it's supporting our learning in the land. And we're all so excited and it's a way to bring it together, to bring our voices together, to bring that joy, and it comes through us. And I think that that was the start of exploring song as a part of learning in the land, about the land, with the land.

C

Cherlene 44:06

Wow, when I asked that question I did not expect such a story. I mean, that robin could have been a paid actor I don't know. Are the kids like: How did you do that? How did you get it to fly in front of us?

T

Tiiu 44:24

It was sheer sheer magic. It was such a gift. Robins I find are such a gift. I feel like they've been a real gift in my journey and that was a magic moment.

C

Cherlene 44:38

Is this song about the Robin on your blog?

T

Tiiu 44:42

No, I haven't shared that one out. The blog started because I wrote this song just before that when I was on my mat leave. I wrote a song called Green Leaf and it came from being outside with my children, my son, two, my daughter, newborn. And my son was kicking the leaves and I was just able to write a song from like his - what I think might be his lens. And I think from sharing the Robin song, I was like, Oh, they might like the Green Leaf song, so I shared the Green Leaf song. And then, as we were spending more time in the land, in the fall, I remember there were these huge pile of leaves in the trees that we were able to see because all the other leaves have fallen to the ground and wondering, you know, what might we find in trees, like once the leaves are gone? You know, what's that sneaky tree been hiding from us all this time. And so I started writing more songs about trees. And then, I started to realize that if I kept writing songs about trees throughout the year, well it was turning into a bit of a song cycle.

T

Tiiu 46:01

It was around the same time I was doing my training, my forest and nature school training, and the group I was working with - amazing group of people - Tanya and Pam were leading us, Hopi was brought in as well as Heather Charles was brought in. She's from the Chippewas of Georgina Island to support our work and our learning. And I remember having a conversation specifically with Hopi, and in the conversation, just really kind of gave me a bit of courage to start to share my voice. And so I started with sharing Green Leaf, so that was only this past fall.

T

Tiiu 46:45

So on my blog, what I've been doing is I've been sharing my Tree Song Cycle. So as we go through the year, different songs that I use to spark, to provide provocations, to allow children to share their observations for us to celebrate our learning together. And what I've been doing is I've been focusing just on sharing the Tree Song Cycle at this point. Because one of the ways I've been supporting myself through Covid is, I've been trying every moon cycle to share a song, and to write a new song to share out next year, because it's giving me something to look forward to because Covid has been so challenging. And it's constantly pulling the rug out from underneath us, and I've just said, this is something that I can do for myself that gives me a sense of, "yep, I know that that's gonna happen next year." So my plan was to share the Robin song next year.

T

Tiiu 48:01

I'm happy to actually I've been looking on social media, so many people are connecting with robins. I mean, if people are interested in it, it's a song - I'll share it again next year through my blog, but you can sing it as its entirety. But as you go through a journey with kids, you could just sing one verse at a time: we found one brown nest and robin says to me - what does she say - "There was one nest, delicate and brown. In a cozy little place, with nobody else around. Momma said to me, Come back in one week, I promise there will be more to see." So it can support your inquiry. So yeah, I'll happily share that out. And next year, I won't do a blog post about it, but I can put it on my YouTube profile. And then people can find a way that it might work for them. But I am going to look forward to knowing that next year, I will share out a post that would say how I might use it if in an inquiry process with children.

C

Cherlene 49:09

Are your students ever involved in the songwriting?

T

Tiiu 49:12

Yeah, for sure. That's been something also that, you know, I think Covid has really supported me starting to explore that. In past years I've gotten comfortable with - I share the songs and here we go. And we co-create. I've got some songs where we ask for different animal sounds, and we co-create in the moment. But this past year with Covid, there was another magic moment that I'll share with you and I've got to go back to start with our routine. We go outside, we explore the land, we gather in circle, we greet the day, we thank the day. And so when we we're nearing the time of the winter break, and I was thinking about how it's a time of year when often we celebrate with each other, maybe we give gratitude to each other. And I thought what might that look like this year? In a set a circumstances where we're not going to be singing, where we're not going to be gathering, what might that look like?

T

Tiiu 50:22

And so we started using our understanding of language vocabulary in the land, and started connecting it to rhythm. So if we do "Arbre", like tree. That's got two sounds to it. If you say, "verre de terre", which is an earthworm, it's got three sounds to it. Verre de terre. So we started playing around with rhythm and how we might play that in different ways in the land. And then students started exploring body, because they needed to move. Kids were like sitting at their desks for a lot of the day, and so they needed to move. When I was bringing them out into the land, they needed to play with stuff, like the space that I bring them out to is covered in woodchips, they like needed to play with woodchips. So I

was trying to find where is the intersection between this need of theirs, and then my need to cover curriculum - or uncover curriculum as one of my mentors Tanya Murray would say.

T

Tiiu 51:32

There were many moments, you know, and it was hard. There were hard moments where I thought, oh my gosh, I don't know what to do. They're so into the woodchips. Maybe we need to go inside. Maybe we can't focus because of the woodchips and I would go, no relationship with land. That's the overarching note: Relationship with land. So we stayed outside. And we started using these things to explore sound, to explore rhythms. And then to further the idea of gratitude. And so I said what if we wrote like a gratitude song for the land in which we live.

T

Tiiu 52:14

And so I had children, you know, just on this day, what might be one thing that you're just feeling a lot of gratitude for in your heart? And we started to build a song where students were naming the land and what they felt really grateful for. And then we pieced it together to make that into a song. And then we added body percussion with it. And so, that was a really special kind of experience that we did in December that was songwriting. And it was very much like, I lead it. I walked us through what this would look like. And then fast forward a few months, and it was March and the sap started running on the maples. And so we started exploring that and started exploring, where does this knowledge come from?

T

Tiiu 53:07

And acknowledging the Indigenous knowledge that's been shared with us and that we're going to - let's learn about this a little bit. And so we tapped the trees for some maple sap, I brought it home, boiled it down to maple syrup, brought it back and the kids on their faces were like, woah! That connection of: that's maple syrup and that came from this beautiful tree. And I just asked, "How might we say thank you to the tree?" and I really thought it was gonna be like, "Oh, yeah, let's write a card" or "Let's hug her". And the first thing a student said is "Let's write her a song. Let's make her a song." And my heart, like as an educator, I was like, "Wow, what a great idea!" Honestly, I don't even think that it occurred to me. I was just like, what do you guys think? And, um, gosh, that was like, one of the best days ever! That was right up there with the robin day. And so we were able to co-create together - what do we want to say thank you for? And so, it's this beautiful song, and there was body percussion to go with it. And my favorite line from the song is: "You

are my friend."

T

Tiiu 54:32

The song goes: "Miigwetch, Sugar. Miigwetch, Sugar. Miigwetch pour la sève. La sève fait le sirop. Yummy, yummy, yum. Merci, Sugar. Merci, Sugar. Merci pour la sève. Tu es mon ami. Yay, sugar!"

T

Tiiu 54:53

So translation: "Miigwetch" is something that we learned about back in the fall. About how that is, in the land that we live, which is the land of the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee and the Huron-Wendat. The land of the First Peoples of the Williams Treaty. The word for thank you is "Miigwetch". And so back in the fall - I'll share with them that, we're learning outside of the school, but the school hasn't always been here. And in the school, we learn English and French because people came from other parts of the world and established schools in English and French. My family has come from another part of the world, and that's part of my history, and I'll share that with the kids. And then I'll say, and there's people who've been living in this land since time immemorial, no matter how far you go back, their family, this is always the land that they have called home. And in their language, they say, thank you, miigwetch. This is what feels right for me is that I think that that is the language that the land understands best. And so when we're saying thank you, let's say miigwetch. So that's why miigwetch.

T

Tiiu 56:21

So miigwetch Sugar - and Sugar is the name of the tree. They've decided to name the tree Sugar. "Miigwetch, Sugar. Miigwetch, Sugar. Miigwetch pour la sève." So, thank you for the sap. The sap makes syrup. Yummy, yummy. Yum. Thank you, sugar. Thank you, sugar. Thank you. Thank you for the sap. You are my friend. Yay, sugar. And that day, when they brought all those words forth, and that idea, that was one of my favorite shared songwriting experiences ever.

C

Cherlene 57:00

For any teachers who might be listening, any educators who don't have any songwriting experience, what would you suggest they do? If they do want to try a little bit of incorporating song into their teaching, into their day?

T

Tiiu 57:13

I say go for it! I think that if you've got any part of you, that's like, "Hmm, interesting idea." Go for it. I think that one of the things that I am thinking a lot about is, thinking a lot about how in our society where we are right now, there's an idea that there are singers, and then there are not singers. The amount of times that I hear like, "Oh, I can't sing and won't sing in front of other people." And I think to myself that when we do that, we're narrowing the scope of whose voices get heard. If I, as an educator, make that decision or have that and don't share my voice, and don't show that all voices can be heard, all voices can be explored? Well, then students and children don't understand my voice just as it is, can be explored. I can explore how high can my voice go? How low, how fast? How slow? How loud? How soft? How silly can my voice be? If you're thinking that you want to start to explore this, then give yourself permission to explore it. Give yourself permission to share your voice exactly as your voice is, because your voice has a place, your voice belongs, and your voice needs to be heard.

T

Tiiu 58:07

And in doing that, you're showing all the children that you work with that their voice matters, and their voice belongs, and their voice deserves to be heard. And for me, I think about how that's not just supporting musicality, that's supporting children in understanding, and feeling that sense of belonging, feeling that sense of confidence in their voice. And an understanding of how to use their voice, because there's times in your voice no matter what, where you're going to need to use a loud voice. There's times for a soft voice. So getting comfortable with your full range of voice, so that as you go forward in your life, you can apply that. It's not about being a singer. It's not about carrying a tune or being on pitch. It's about exploring. So if you're feeling like oh, I want to try this - just do it! And start you know - much like how I shared that, I haven't gotten to this point, like I magically showed up here where I've been like sitting on this since I was 15 and first put a guitar in my hands. It's been a total journey for me.

T

Tiiu 1:00:07

I also think about how you got to start in a way that feels good to you. And I think about childhood songs. I offered the Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes. That's a song I've been singing since I was a little kid. The Banana Song, I remember learning when I was in my 30s. But I probably sung it, you know, at camp. Just how you were like, "Oh yeah, camp song." And that doesn't mean that that's in everybody's repertoire at all. For some people that will have been their first time hearing that. So think about your childhood songs, like think about the songs that your family sung to you, when you were a little kid. Think about the songs that you might have learned. I do think it's important to be mindful about how

times have changed and that you're sharing songs that are appropriate within the current time, right? And then, start with the songs that that you learned when you were a kid. And keep in the back of your mind that this isn't about me needing to sound a certain way. If you're working with children in the land, likely the expectation that people who are employing you is that your job is working in the land with children. It is not being able to stand up in front of everybody and sound like, pick your favorite music singer here. It's not about being able to sound like them. That's not what anybody's expectation is on you. Their expectation is for you to support children in their learning journey. So allow yourself to explore the highs, the lows, the fast, the slows, the louds, the softs and the sillies and try something and see where it takes you.



Cherlene 1:02:10

And that's a wrap on this episode, friends. I hope you found this conversation helpful. To learn more about Tiiu weaves song into her teaching, check out her blog post "Singing is Exploring" on the CNAC website and follow her work at landheartsonline.wordpress.com. Thank you so much, Tiiu for joining us and for you listeners tuning in at home. If you like what you heard, be sure to subscribe because we've got more great guests coming your way. If you have any topics you would like us to cover, feel free to reach out to us on social media. This is Cherlene Eloria for the Child and Nature Alliance podcast, signing off.