Now That the Dust Has Settled – What is Happening?

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For the last four years, music teachers in Queensland have been dealing with the phasing in of a new Arts Syllabus for Years 1-10. 2006 marks the official date for the full implementation and reporting of this document. Changes in curriculum documents can bring difficult times for music teachers. Will I have to change? Is the core content different? What methodology will I use? How will I assess? How will I report all this? Making decisions on what and how to implement the new document, needing extra time to write programs coupled with the extra curricula demands that accompany the duties of a music teacher, can add stress and tensions.

A research project was commenced to investigate the impact of this curriculum change. Firstly the issues that confront music teachers in this situation were raised and discussed. Interviews were then conducted with secondary music teachers in both state (where the implementation is mandatory) and private (implementation is optional) schools gathering data on their view of the changes.

This paper details the commencement of the ethnographic phase of the research. The researcher has been immersed in the natural setting of the year 8 music classroom. The experiences from participating in these classrooms in three high schools are detailed in this paper.

Introduction

The consultations, meetings, drafts, inservice sessions and trials are now complete and the new Arts Syllabus - Years 1 to 10 is a reality. 2006 is the year given to all Queensland state primary and high schools to have fully implemented the document and, by the end of the year; report on the outcomes to the Director General of Education. A research project was commenced to investigate the impact this curriculum change was having on music education in classrooms. Firstly, the issues that confront music teachers in this situation were raised and discussed (Hartwig, 2003). Interviews were then conducted with secondary music teachers in both state and private schools gathering data on the teachers’ views of the changes (Hartwig & Barton, 2003, 2004). In state schools the implementation is mandatory whereas for private schools the implementation is optional.

The next phase of the research has been the commencement of the ethnographic projects. The researcher has been immersed in the natural setting of the year 8 music classroom. The year 8 music classroom has been chosen, as I believe that this level is the most important level for music in the high school. In Queensland year 8 is the first year of high school, and a time when students need to choose whether they will continue the study of music in future years. If we are passionate about our subject, we need to continue to have students electing to study music at senior levels. The experiences from participating in these classrooms in three metropolitan high schools are detailed in this paper. State high schools have been chosen for this project, as the implementation is mandatory for the music teachers in these schools.

Methodology

Ethnographic research combines participant observation and many of the characteristics of nonparticipant observation studies in an attempt to obtain as holistic a picture as possible of a particular society, group, institution, setting, or situation (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993). The emphasis in ethnographic research is on documenting or portraying the everyday experiences of individuals by observing and interacting with them. As I wanted to obtain an in-depth look at how music was being taught in the year 8 classroom, ethnographic methodology was used in this project. Using this methodology enabled me to ask: *How are things being done now in the year 8 music classroom?* I did not have a precise hypothesis that was formulated ahead of time, as I wanted to attempt to understand the situations in the classrooms that cannot be predicted in advance. Through the use of ethnographic methodology my goal was to document the ongoing weekly experiences of the music teachers and the year 8 students in their school setting. Ethnography is a ‘practical’ personalised exercise for the researcher (Smith, 1999) whereby the researcher becomes a full participant in the field, and having another music teacher in the classroom can be helpful rather than a hindrance.

Classrooms would be observed on a regular weekly basis, in an attempt to describe, as fully and as richly as possible, what exists and what happens in those classrooms. Each teacher would be interviewed twice, at the beginning and the end of the project, and some students would be interviewed as small focus groups without their teacher being present. All interviews were transcribed. The process endeavoured to ‘paint a portrait’ of each classroom in an accurate manner enabling all to see each classroom, its participants and what was occurring in that room. Fraenkel &
Wallen (1993) believe that the ethnographic approach to research affords a richness of description that has great potential fruitfulness for understanding education.

For this project, the three music teachers were happy for me to come to one of their year 8 music classes for their weekly lessons for a period of six weeks. The schools detailed in this paper were the first three schools to volunteer for the project. I had discussed with each teacher my role during the lessons and they were all keen to have another music teacher in the room for this period, especially when I was excited to be actively involved in the lessons. Although the music teachers would have preferred to ‘nominate’ one of their year 8 classes, the ‘selected’ class was chosen on the basis of which one would be available for my timetable.

**The Arts Syllabus – Years 1 to 10**

This syllabus has five strands – dance, drama, media, music and visual arts. The philosophy underpinning the document is an outcomes based approach. This approach is learner-centred and focuses on providing opportunities for students to develop and demonstrate learning outcomes (The Arts: Initial Inservice Materials, 2002, p. 14). The emphasis is that students demonstrate the outcomes when they are ready and results are not compared with other students thus recognising the different ways, rates and settings in which learning takes place for individual students. The syllabus emphasises that students’ backgrounds, interests, prior understandings and experiences need to be valued and included as a basis for constructing new learnings within an outcomes framework (Initial inservice materials, 2002, p. 14). A particular methodology for the delivery of the core content has not been stated in the syllabus. In each of the 6 levels there is three core outcomes, which are: aurally and visually responding to music; singing and playing music; and reading and writing music. The teacher in addition to the core outcomes may write discretionary outcomes. Core content for each level is very prescriptive and presented in order of increasing complexity, for example, in Level 1 melodic elements are la, so, mi; and rhythmic elements are ta, titi and sa; in Level 4 melodic elements are extended do pentatonic (from Level 3), and including la pentatonic; and rhythmic elements include syncopa, timka, ti tum, and tum ti. These elements reflect the Kodaly methodology, even though the syllabus does not mandate a music methodology to implement. This was a strong criticism aimed at the syllabus document especially by high school teachers interviewed (Hartwig & Barton, 2004).

It is anticipated in the syllabus that students in primary schools – years 1 to 7 – will have achieved level 4 outcomes. For high school students – years 8 to 10 – levels 5 and 6 will be achieved. For primary students, the study of the five strands of the syllabus is mandatory whereas for secondary students the study of one strand is required.

**The Ethnographic Project**

**School A**

This school is in a metropolitan low-socio economic area, with 800 students. The board music subject is not offered and the music room is housed in a general teaching block. There is one visiting instrumental teacher with 10 students in the instrumental program, however no school band or choir exist. The classroom music teacher [John] is a 25-year-old male who has completed a Bachelor of Music and a Bachelor of Education.

John has only been teaching for two years. Although he trained as a secondary music teacher, his first appointment was as a music teacher in a primary school. He is eager to make an impression in this first appointment in a high school. John had organised a meeting with the primary music teachers in the area to discuss what was happening in music across the local area and to discuss the new syllabus and how it was being implemented in these local primary schools. He revealed that the primary music teachers were all working with the new syllabus and teaching using a vocal based program. Most were using the terminology of solfa and time names, but he was disappointed that the teachers were predominantly only working at level 1 and 2 of the syllabus.

The year 8 classes at this school receive music lessons for a term (ten weeks). They receive one music lesson per week of 50 minutes duration. The music room is one room at the end of a general teaching block and contains a keyboard and a few percussion instruments, chairs but no desks. John’s lessons are well prepared and he follows a written lesson plan. Each lesson commenced with some singing with John playing the guitar. The repertoire presented was mostly contemporary pieces that the students knew and sang very well. The school has a large Samoan population and John indicated that these students need no encouragement to sing and many play the guitar very well. The next session of John’s lessons worked on both rhythmic and melodic elements in much simpler repertoire. These elements were approximately in level 3 of the core content of the syllabus. The lessons always concluded with either a listening exercise or more contemporary singing for the students. I felt very comfortable in this classroom, as through a church choir I knew many of the Samoan students. John, on the other hand was a little uneasy the first week as he had been my student at the University, however, this was overcome after the initial lesson.
K: The student’s singing is very keen and they enjoy this component of your lessons. I was impressed with the energy in the singing from the boys in the class.

J: With the population here singing is easy to do … they do it without encouragement. Bit different to writing. Many can hardly write and reading levels are low. I have not even gone there yet. There is no [music] equipment here … I had so much more last year at the primary school. There is no money to buy anything. There is so much to do here and there is lots of talent but it will take a long time. The level is very low here…in everything not just music. I am only working at level 1 and 2. The 7s from last year were doing syncopa. It’s the same for the instrumental program … only has a few students because all they want to play is guitars. That’s what the parents encourage also. They don’t want to play orchestral instruments. At home the Samoan kids sing and play guitar.

Some comments from students included:

Mr N. is great. We sing lots.
Music is cool. We sometimes come in at lunchtime and sing.
I bring my guitar to lessons.
I like the singing best.

John is a young teacher, recently graduated from university and very keen to be following the syllabus document.

School B

This school of 650 students is situated in a metropolitan low-middle class area. There are composite music classes for both years 9 and 10, and 11 and 12 for a school based music course. There are 38 students in the instrumental program with two visiting instrumental teachers. The school has a dedicated music block and features a concert band and a school choir. The music teacher [Mary] is 50 years old and her qualifications include a Bachelor of Music and a Diploma of Teaching. Mary could not understand why I wanted to come into her year 8 class and her comments included:

Come into a grade 8 lesson! Whatever for? Grade 8 music is the worse class to teach in the school. I don’t really like it. Why do we have to do it?

The year 8 students at this school have music lessons for the whole semester (20 weeks). They receive a 50-minute lesson each week. Mary has taught in metropolitan schools for her entire career. She has taught in six different schools and had a break for five years for family responsibilities. Mary felt it was not important to ‘worry’ about the syllabus in year 8 as the “kids have all done primary music and they are sick of the solfa stuff and tas and ti tis … all I can do is give them what they want … then do real stuff in elective classes” [year 9 and 10].

The music room at this school is extremely well resourced with keyboards, computers, TV and video suite, synthesiser, two pianos, guitars, amplifiers and microphones, drum kit and various other pieces of percussion equipment as well as a state-of-the-art sound system. This was a very high-tech music studio. The 25 keyboards were set up in one end of the room in groups of six, whilst the other equipment was at the other end of the room. Mary’s lessons involved the students copying a melody from the board into their music books. These melodies varied in length, but were the main melodies from current pop tunes. Once copied, Mary would sometimes play a CD of the original recording artist, or encourage the students to sing the song. The students were then encouraged to practise the melody on the keyboard for the remainder of the lesson while Mary moved around the class and assisted students as needed. To finish each lesson, the students were shown various current music video clips. The students are involved in the music and are keen to sing along, play the keyboards or maybe I should say attempt to play the keyboards. They are having a good time and responded positively and I was able to move around the class working with individual students.

K: Do you only use pop tunes in your year 8 classes?
M: Yes that’s what they want … they behave … well most of the time. The elective classes are different … you know … they want to be there. None of the kids here go onto board music so we do a school based subject … lots of contemporary music … we have a good time.
K: Your music room is well equipped with the latest technology.
M: Yes the school realises we need the equipment to be up to date and the kids all love being able to record what we do … that is the 11s and 12s. I am working with the TAFE College and the kids will get credit for what we are doing here. Our kids will not go to the Con but they can achieve well in the contemporary areas.
K: What part does the syllabus play in your planning?
M: I’ve seen syllabus documents come and go. I’ve been around for a few years. The bottom line is doing what works. We don’t have board music, so it’s not important here. The kids get into the music they like.
Some students’ comments included:

We do lots of songs.
Mick and I just play with the keyboards.
We can bring in our CDs.
I have recorded lots of songs in music class.
We watch lots of clips.

Mary is an experienced music teacher and has been at this school for six years. She was convinced that syllabus documents come and go, and that the important issue was ‘keeping the students happy’.

School C

This school is in a metropolitan middle class area with 1100 students. There is a large music block with two classroom teaching areas, staff office space, storerooms, and three instrumental teaching rooms. The music program offers board music classes for year 9 and year 10, and a composite class for years 11 and 12 students with extension music also being available for interested students. Some 220 students are involved in the instrumental program with four instructors visiting the school each week for instruction. Extra-curricular music groups include two concert bands, a string orchestra and two school choirs. There are two music teachers – one male who is 30 years old and has a Bachelor of Education (Secondary) and Emma who is 40 years old, with a Bachelor of Music and a Graduate Diploma of Teaching.

The year 8 music class involved in the research receive two 35-minute periods of music each week for one term (ten weeks) and are taught by Emma who has taught in five previous schools covering city and country state high schools. She is a very cheery person, very enthusiastic and positive, and appeared to be quite excited about being involved in the project and having me in her classroom for six weeks. During an interview Emma revealed that she had looked at the syllabus and thought the core content was reasonable and she was following the sequence for her year 8 classes. The unit of work that was being presented was a composition unit and students would be writing their own composition for the final assessment task.

The students for this class were always seated in very neat rows of desks all facing the blackboard. Emma directed the lesson from the blackboard. For the six weeks I attended the lessons at this school the students remained seated in their desks for the full time of the music lesson. There was no singing, no instrument playing, no recorded or live music played and no making music throughout the lesson. The students sat quietly all through the lessons. The lessons were all theory based with the students writing notes, scales, time signatures, keys, chords and intervals from the board and completing music theory worksheets. The lessons were all the same for the first three weeks. In week 4 Emma started talking about composing and the ‘rules’ one must follow when writing a piece of music. These rules included having a good shape for the melody, having a climax note, start and end on the tonic, using a chord structure of I, IV, V, I for the 4 bars. In weeks 5 and 6 students were given the assessment task, which was to be completed during class time for these last two weeks. And so the students quietly sat at their desks and wrote their compositions on pieces of five lined staff notation and did not make a sound. Emma collected the compositions at the end of week 6 for marking. It was difficult to get involved in this class. For the first four weeks I felt the only position I could take was in a chair at the back of the room as the instruction was very directed from the board at the front of the class with very little interaction with the students. For weeks 5 and 6 I was able to move around the class freely and assist the students with their compositions as they worked individually.

Some of Emma’s interview remarks included:

K: The students are so well behaved during your lesson.
E: Yes, this is the best school I have ever been in. I don’t ever want to leave here. We reach a very high standard. I want to stay here for a long time.
K: How much practical music making, listening, playing do you do?
E: I leave that for years 9 and 10. In grade 8 I have to get them all up to speed so they can cope with what we need to do in year 9. They all come from different primary schools so I have to go back to the beginning and do the theory.
K: What part does the new syllabus play in your planning?
E: I follow it. All the sequence… I do all the elements. They [the year 8 music class] can do all the things listed for level 4, and then we do level 5 and 6 in [years] 9 and 10.

Students’ comments included:
I do piano so the theory is good.
I just copy from my friend.
I play in the band so I won’t do music [classroom] next year.
This is a veggie class for me. (Translation: this is an easy class. The student had successfully completed Grade 5 AMEB Theory.)

Emma has been teaching at this school for five years, and believes in a strong theoretical foundation for year 8 classes. She is working towards covering elements as per the syllabus.

Conclusion

I have presented the stories of three schools, their music teachers, one of their grade 8 music classes, and the content of these classes. The three music teachers are all passionate about the teaching of music and believe they are providing the best possible music program given the setting in which they are teaching, the resources available and the students involved.

Each story is unique in its context, its population and the interpretation of the syllabus and the delivery of the content. Although each story is very different, each is successful in its own way. Despite a lack of resources, John has his class engaging with music especially through singing – drawing on the strengths and interests of the students. He is working on developing the student’s knowledge and understanding of musical elements and is endeavouring to develop a program that attempts to deliver the syllabus content. Mary’s students enjoy coming to music lessons and are very happy to be interacting with and listening to music they know well. However, the question here is whether ‘writing off’ year 8 music is the best possible program to offer? Emma is building a strong theoretical foundation and understanding of the concepts. This is obviously working as there are strong classroom, choral and instrumental programs at the school. The students are able to meet the writing components of the syllabus content. It is easy to be critical of what is happening in these three classrooms but it is important to look at the positives from each of these contexts. There are positives in each setting on which to focus, and this is pleasing as some of my previous research in the year 8 classroom has not always been as positive (Hartwig, 2003).

It is intended to expand this research to other schools especially including the rural area. It is hoped that the future will also include connections and collaborations with the Queensland Studies Authority.

However, it raises many questions for curriculum designers both now and in the future. These include: How specific and prescriptive should a syllabus document be written, especially in terms of methodology and content? How much creativity should be allowed for the planning and delivery of the content by the teacher? How does a syllabus document provide for different contexts?

But most importantly – Does one size fit all?

About the Author

Dr Kay Hartwig has taught music from preschool to tertiary level. She now lectures in the Education faculty at the Mt Gravatt Campus of Griffith University to primary and secondary music specialists, as well as primary preservice generalist teachers. She is also co-convenor of the Master of Teaching program for International Students at Griffith. She is the current secretary of AARME.

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