Engaging the Year Eight Student in Music Making

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“Music sucks!” These words are often spoken by year eight students when referring to their classroom music lessons. This perception of music changes dramatically when they leave the school grounds and ‘plug in’ their walkmans. How do we engage these young adolescents in the music making process? This paper details the results of a ten week action research project that was conducted in collaboration with another music teacher in a year eight classroom for my doctoral thesis. Also included in the paper is a small case study of one of the students – Steve. It details his progress over the ten week period. The project explored issues that confront year eights generally, in the contemporary music teaching and learning context. It contributes to the body of knowledge that provides ideas for music teachers in planning experiences for their students.

Introduction


It has always worried me that music which, outside school, almost continuously goes in and out of young people’s heads – which stirs their feelings and activates their bodies, becomes when presented – or as presented – inside schools, a ‘dead bore’.

Why is this so? Why are students not engaged in music when it is presented inside the classroom and yet music plays an important role in the lives of young teenagers? In collaboration with another music teacher a ten-week action research project was conducted in a year eight music classroom. The primary research question for the project was: How can music experiences be presented at year 8 that will: stimulate students’ interest; improve their knowledge; develop students’ aesthetic sensitivity to the art of music and produce students with positive attitudes towards school music classes? The short-term aim was to document positive experiences and encourage other music teachers to utilise them in their music classrooms. The long-term aim was to stimulate new interest in the studying of music so that elective music student numbers would increase.

Music has a unique nature – a special function to strengthen, to extend, to illuminate, to transform and ultimately to make life worthwhile (Swanwick, 1981, p. 50) and can thus provide many benefits for the child. The Gulbenkian Report (1982) argues that not to involve children in the arts is to fail to educate them as fully developed and feeling human beings. Music educators are failing if we do not find better ways of engaging our students in music and the arts. Fiske (2000, p. XII) suggests:

With the 21st century upon us, we, too, must be champions of change; we must meet and exceed the challenge of giving our young people the best possible preparation we can offer them. To do so, we must make involvement with the arts a basic part of their learning experiences. In doing so, we will become champions of change for our children and their children.

Little research in music education has been specifically targeted at this year 8 level. Whilst very small percentages of students will use their music skills professionally, worthwhile music experiences can be a stepping-stone to producing students equipped with music-for-life skills. These students will become the music makers of the future as parents and in the community musical life. They will also become consumers of music and the future concert audiences. Beck has written that:

All school subjects, experiences, aims and attainments ought to be conceived in terms of their relationships to life goals. Schooling should enable learners to achieve life goals in school and beyond school – in working life, family life and social life (cited in Elliott, 1995, p. 308).

The Project

The project was conducted over a 10 weeks period being one term of the school year. The action research model adopted was devised by Zuber-Skerritt (1995, p. 13). She describes action research as “collaborative, critical and self-critical enquiry by reflective practitioners who are accountable and make the results of their enquiry public”. Her model of upward spirals indicates continuous improvement of practice and extension of knowledge – personal knowledge and knowledge in the field. The four sections of an action research cycle – planning, acting, observing and reflecting are not static steps but as Zuber-Skerritt (1992, p. 112) describes, “dynamic moments in the action research spiral”.

Reimer’s (1989, p. 53) philosophy of music education is based around the idea that “music is a way to know the world – to create and share meaning in the world – and to function effectively in this mode of cognition, one’s musical intelligence, must be developed”. Reimer argues that music study should concentrate on those qualities of sounds that make them expressive. The music educator in this process needs to employ language and techniques that are true to the nature of music as an expressive form. Reimer argues that the expressive qualities should be the focus. On the other hand Elliott’s (1995) focus is upon the ‘praxial’ or the practice of music making. He proposes that the meaning of music is a way of engaging with self-knowledge and an intrinsically enjoyable activity. His theory places an emphasis upon practice. Reimer’s philosophy points out the special experience that underlies all music activity while Elliott offers a praxial dimension of that activity. A combination of the perspectives of Reimer’s aesthetic approach, his emphasis on listening, and his view of music as an autonomous object and Elliott’s attention to practice – the praxis of performance and reflection – was used to establish a firm basis on which to construct the approach to music education.

The program was presented in four cycles. The experiences presented for the students during these cycles included:

- **Cycle 1** – rhythms, raps, drumkit;
- **Cycle 2** – staff notation, keyboards, singing;
- **Cycle 3** – graphic scores, soundscapes, guitars;
- **Cycle 4** – major composition.

Data collection involved both the music teacher and myself keeping a journal throughout the project; video tapes and photographs of the students and their work as well as student questionnaires and interviews.

The school has a population of 600 students and is situated in a low socio-economic area in a Metropolitan area. There are five year 8 classes at the school. During the term, 8A has music for 1 hour per week; 8B has 1 hour per week; 8C 1 hour per week; 8D (the action research group) has 2 hours per week; and 8E has no access to music lessons. All year 8 students were given a maths test and reading age test at the beginning of the term. The maths test contained 40 marks. The mean for 8D was 21. The reading age test revealed that two students had a reading age of 15, one student 14, three students 12, five students 11 and the rest below this level. As the average age of the year 8 students is 13 years, most of the class fall well below this age in their reading ability. This information has a significant impact on the planning of the music program. It was decided to present the tasks in a variety of ways and to limit the setting of written tasks as some students may be unable to read the tasks set. Maths and music are two subjects requiring students to work with symbols and values. We were aware that the low maths scores could indicate that extra assistance may be required when expecting students to work with music symbols and requiring students to read and interpret music notation. Some students may also experience difficulties in understanding values of notes and their relationships within bars of music.

**Cycle 1**

The first cycle provided an opportunity for the music teacher and me to build on the students’ rhythmic skills from primary school. We then moved into putting these skills into practice on the drum kit – drawing on Elliott’s (1995) idea of practical experiences in the classroom and having the students play the instrument and not just look at a picture or video clip of a drumkit. The new concept explored was the stylistic features of rap and then the students were extended into composing their own rap compositions and performing them. We were pleased with the rhythmic skills of the class and decided that the students were ready to move into melodic and keyboard skills in cycle 2. We were excited that the students had all attempted their first composing and performing task and were confident that these beginning experiences had laid a foundation on which to build.

**Cycle 2**

Although the keyboard component was successful and engaged many students, the disappointing issue of this cycle was the struggle with singing. We had attempted to sing most of the keyboard songs as well as play them. This was not very successful. More and more I believe that we need to continue the primary school strategy of singing in every lesson and certainly at the first year 8 class. If singing is not included the students’ confidence seems to disappear. The students became very self-conscious when it came to opening their mouths to sing. Why is this so? Upon reflection I believe that we should have included singing from the first lesson. One student – Mark – commented to me:

Mark: “O Miss! You mean we have to sing!”
Me: “Why don’t you want to sing?”
Mark: “Cause I Can’t!”

This comment was of concern as this student has just spent seven years in a primary school music program that has, as its base, singing. Harrison (2002) found that the main reasons boys were reluctant to participate in singing and music was that they were being bullied or simply that, in their view, it wasn’t a cool thing to do. Harrison set about changing the perceptions of boys in music at his school. He is slowly seeing some results with several `popular’ boys now involved in musicals and dramatic production at the school. He believes that when the school honours all kinds of
endeavours then boys feel more encouraged to do things. He believes that if the school honours the footy team as well as the boys in the band, choir or musical, their individual worth in the community is raised.

The students’ skills in using the keyboard, and for many of them, reading traditional music notation, had developed during this cycle. The rhythm skills developed in cycle 1 had improved and been further developed.

**Cycle 3**

In this third cycle the students found it difficult to play and experiment with sound. The sounds they produced on the percussion instruments were very traditional and most performed their soundscapes with the feeling of a 4/4 beat. Pop music is predominantly in 4/4 time so I guess they naturally lean to that. The students needed encouragement and assistance to break free of traditional ways to play the instruments and traditional sounds. To achieve better results in creating what is really meant by a soundscape more work is needed with the students to allow them to truly explore sound, how to make it, and how to put it together in one composition. However, the end products were in some cases very creative. The students were engrossed in this task and had taken much more responsibility for their compositions and performances than in cycle 1. This was evident to both the music teacher and myself. In fact we both wrote a similar comment in our diaries.

**Music Teacher:**
The students remained on task better than they have before I believe. They practised with the instruments that they had chosen and I indicated that they could extend their pieces by adding more instruments or increasing the length of the piece. Most of them returned to their score and improved them which was a good thing. Although I gave them half an hour to rehearse some of them still wanted more time to get ‘it right’. Most of the performances were actually quite creative.

I wrote:
Lots of noise in the room – but lots of activity. The students are busily practising – ideas being exchanged – compositions being created – new ideas being tried out – a big buzz to be in this room full of excitement. Oh! If only all lessons could have this much intensity and interest.

The guitar playing was a skill that all students wanted to master and their participation and eagerness were evident. For the soundscapes the task became as challenging as each group wanted it to be. As the students self-selected their working groups they were comfortable with the people in their group and this allowed each group to work to the ability of the group, achieving the balance between anxiety and boredom (Csikszentmihalyi, 1994) which leads to enjoyment and achievement.

After the successes in cycle 3, we believed that the students were ready to proceed into cycle 4 where the task would involve drawing on all the skills and knowledge from the previous three cycles. This task would bring all the musical skills together – a culmination and a holistic approach for the final weeks.

**Cycle 4**

The time for this cycle was cut short by one week (2 lessons) as the school introduced a special timetable for year 8s to conclude the term. It was very disappointing to finish the term with a shortened timeframe. I felt disappointed for the students also as they showed that they knew that they could have performed at a much higher standard if we had been able to use the last week of the term. During the first cycle and their performances of the composed raps, I doubt if many (or any) of the students were concerned about the standard of their performance or its musical content. But now, ten weeks later, the students were upset at reduced practice time and thus substandard performances. I considered that a breakthrough. My journal noted:

If only we could continue music lessons with these students in the next term and build on the achievements that have resulted in the work this term!

It was also interesting to see that the singing in their composed melodies in this final task was a little better than in the class activities. I wondered if the students felt more comfortable singing when they had instrument in their hands – something to hide behind? Did this give them more confidence? Or is this the way they see the pop stars predominantly performing?
Case Study – Steve

Steve was not difficult to miss in the class. He was the one who was always interrupting when someone was talking. He was the one moving around the class and trying to annoy anyone he came beside. He was the one who did not want to do anything constructive. Drum sticks in his hands became lethal weapons and no one was safe beside or around him. The music teacher identified him in her journal:

We discussed that “boy with beans” – he was pretty bloody awful – have to think of some ways to include him in “on-task” activities with me as the “minder” – if you know what I mean. Boys are always the ones that have difficulty in behavioural area – I wonder why?? Are we addressing this fact in a positive and successful way?? – I don’t think so.

I decided to make Steve my personal challenge for the project. My main concern was that he would not be a disruption for the rest of the students for the following lessons but also I was keen to work on a one-to-one basis with him in an endeavour to help him. I sat with him for the whole next lesson and he worked very well and he was able to master the two modern tunes on the keyboard by the end of the session. He did not fully understand the rhythm and was not able to read all the notes without the assistance of some names being written on them but he had succeeded! He was very proud of himself. I was also thrilled with the results – but how often can a teacher sit with one child for one hour when there are 29 others in the room? The music teacher reported that Steve had started coming into the keyboard lab to practise at lunchtime. She wrote in her journal: “I think Steve felt good about actually being able to play the pieces – boost to self esteem”.

Steve’s attitude and industry took an immediate turn around. He showed some interest and initiative in future lessons. He had a guitar with a broken string. Instead of complaining or annoying someone beside him he promptly fixed the strong and got on with the practice. He had come a long way and in such a short time. Maybe he had had a flow experience (Csikszentmihalyti, 1994), or at least some individual transformation had occurred.

For the composing of the soundscape Steve joined a group with his friends Mick and George. My first thought was “that means trouble with those three together”. They were unable to get started and needed a lot of help with getting a basic structure. However, with assistance on mapping out a structure and brainstorming ideas, they were able to put together a good composition although it was very brief. But again with the ratio of one teacher to three students this group of boys was able to produce a composition and perform it for the class. This resource is not available in the regular classroom.

It was a most satisfying experience to be able to witness the transformation that had taken place with Steve.

Conclusion

There had been some high and low points throughout the term but there had been many very positive things happening with the students in the music classroom. It was exciting to be able to witness the musical, social and personal skill development of the students in the class and be a part of their engagement with music over the term. The practical experiences of playing instruments were very successful for all students, especially the guitar playing. The singing activities were the least successful and we need to give more thought to how in the future this needs to be developed.

The action research project showed that it is possible to design and implement musical experiences for year 8 students that can capture their interest and assist in developing positive attitudes towards music. During the last week of the term, I asked the students about the things they liked most about their term of music. Some of these comments received included:

I loved being a composer.
I pretty much enjoyed everything.
The songs we got to create and perform them was great.
I thought learning the instruments was the best.
Playing the guitars that was pretty good year and the keyboards were okay yeah.
I liked it because of the compositions we had throughout the term and the semester and I liked how we got to make our own songs and experience it by singing them and showing it to others.
I liked making our own song.

Only 2 students from the project year 8 class chose to continue with music study. Upon my first reflection this was a disappointing number. I decided to explore the reasons behind the students’ subject choices. Two important issues arose. Firstly, an investigation of the subject selection form revealed that the compulsory subjects are heavily
weighted for the maths, language, science and health and physical education areas. Secondly, students must take English and Maths in each semester and three compulsory subjects each of Science, SOSE (Studies of Society and Environment) and Computer Studies. Once these subjects are locked in there is little room for electives. This type of timetabling disadvantages music and in fact all the arts subjects. In semester two of year 8, only one elective is to be chosen – the other subjects are compulsory and locked in. As the year 8s at this school do not get to sample all subjects in first semester there is a strong desire to ‘try’ the other subjects. Students, on the questionnaires, identified reasons for not choosing music as:

- I didn’t have enough room to do music.
- I would like to explore other subjects.
- Because I couldn’t fit it in my schedule.
- My mum said not to do it.
- Because of my parents. They chose my subjects without me know what they were.
- It’s no good for your OP [overall position].
- My mum said there was no future in music.

The positive to come out of this was that none of the student responses had anything to do with not liking music or the fact that their year 8 experiences had not been positive.

We did make music (Elliott, 1995) in this classroom and without compromising the integrity of music (Reimer, 1989). The students were engaged and there was obvious development in their musical skills and also their understanding of musical elements. For some students this was the first time they had been exposed to music other than from their ‘pop culture’. As they were exposed to more and more listening examples, their tolerance and interest in listening to ‘different’ styles and genres of music developed positively. Of course the project did not provide all the answers but in fact raised many issues worthy of further research, such as the development of singing at this level and the engagement and teaching of boys especially in the music classroom.

As Melton (cited in Sink, 1996, p. 602) maintains, “junior high or middle school education is the most important level of education, to review, during which time lifelong values are formed”. This would appear to indicate that if we want to develop lifelong attitudes and skills in music, the year 8 level is the time to do so.

**References**


About the Author

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