From Little Things Big Things Grow: creating lifelong responsive musical experiences

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ABSTRACT The Australian story of the Gurindji strike pertains to a seven-year protest by the Gurindji people, led by elder Vincent Lingaiari, demanding a return of Indigenous land that had been placed under the control of pastoralists from the late 1800s. The story of their struggle was captured by the composers Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly in 1993 in a song titled From Little Things Big Things Grow – which relates the story in terms of Australian popular ideals of mateship, courage, the battler, a fair go, the underdog getting one over on the powerful and a happy ending where the hero wins. This article uses the song by Carmody and Kelly as a metaphor for considering recent international research in musical education, music teaching and learning processes. Specifically, the author is interested in how current research captures the musical experiences of children, teachers and parents in a multiplicity of educational settings to create lifelong responsive musical experiences. Drawing on themes from the Carmody and Kelly song, in dialogue with recent international research in the field of music education, he illuminates how the master-apprenticeship relationship of interdependence, courage, commitment and access offers the potential for a happy ending where music education is the hero.

Introduction
The place of music education in the mandated school curriculum seems to be constantly under consideration in much of the western world. Since arriving in Australia in 2006, I have found many of the concepts, elements, dimensions and meta-dimensions to resemble those I had experienced in South Africa, and the deliberations surrounding arts and music education curriculum inquiry to contain similar agenda and debate. Often the debate centres around questions such as: ‘Is arts education taught for appreciation alone or should it be seen as a means to enhance learning in other subjects?’ ‘Should art be taught as a discipline for its own sake or for the body of knowledge, skills and values to be derived from it (or both)?’ ‘Is arts education for a gifted few in selected disciplines or is arts education for all?’ (UNESCO, 2006, p. 3). These questions remain central in shaping the approach not only of future teachers, but of arts practitioners, students and policy makers.

The current emphasis within the learning area of arts education is on the connectedness and inter-relation of and between the arts. The nature and practice of integrated arts is not a twenty-first-century notion. Many labels have been attributed to the concept of integration throughout history, including: interdisciplinary instruction; unit teaching; the project approach; inquiry method; and whole language (Cornett, 2007, p. 8). In western writings, references to integration and the arts can be traced back as far as Plato, and later to Rousseau and Dewey. More recently, the concept has appeared in constructivist approaches to teaching and learning (Chrysostomou, 2004). Sinclair et al (2008) state that the practice of integrating the arts raises many questions. Surprisingly, the least debatable may concern the rumination over definition or terminology in relation to music education.
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Gather round people let me tell you’al a story
An eight year long story of power and pride
British Lord Vestey and Vincent Lingiarri
Were opposite men on opposite sides

As I read Musical Experiences in Our Lives: things we learn and meanings we make (Kerchner & Abril, 2010), Living in Worlds of Music: a view of education and values (Mans, 2009) and Musical Creativity: insights from music education research (Odena, 2012), I found myself humming the refrain melody line From Little Things Big Things Grow (Carmody & Paul, 1993).[1] I was intrigued how three distinct texts concerning music education originating from three unconnected geographic locations could bring about the same melodic response to me while reading. My experience of the piece of music to date had been limited to media advertisement and manipulation.

Vestey was fat with money and muscle
Beef was his business, broad was his door
Vincent was lean and spoke very little
He had no bank balance, hard dirt was his floor

I began my own search for the origins of this musical work that earwormed [2] its way into my head to become my preoccupation and discovered that it tells a story that is everything applauded in Australia: mateship, courage, the battler, a fair go, the underdog getting one over on the powerful and a happy ending where the hero wins. The three texts that inform this article capture the musical experiences of young children, teachers and parents in a multiplicity of educational settings which parallel that which is applauded in Australia by celebrating all that is ‘musically educative’ (Kerchner & Abril, 2010, p. 1) in that they involve music teaching and learning processes: the master-apprenticeship relationship of co-musical inter-dependency, courage, commitment, access and a happy ending where music education is the hero.

Musical Experiences: from childhood and beyond

Musical experiences are widely held to contribute significantly to children’s learning and development. In recent times, music educators have looked into how musical experiences can be made more relevant and accessible to people throughout their lifespan (Myers, 2006). Myers’ assertion that the ‘lifespan perspective enlarges and extends the vision of a musically aware society to provide a context for high-quality learning and teaching from nursery school through eldercare’ (2006, p. 16) is captured in all three texts and encourages reflexivity and discussion in the field of music education regarding the ways responsive lifelong musical experiences are created. It is from such ‘little things’ that ‘big things’ grow.

An education rich in musical experiences provides students of all ages with valuable opportunities to experience and build knowledge and skills in self-expression, imagination, creative and collaborative problem solving, communication, creation of shared meanings, and respect for self and others (Klopper & Power, 2010).

Throughout our lives, we exercise and develop our innate musicality through singing, playing instruments, moving, composing and listening. Alone and with others, we engage in musical experiences to challenge us, comfort us and bind us to others. These experiences help us construct meaning and understanding of music, and help us come to understand ourselves, our cultures and our world (Kerchner & Abril, 2010, p.1).

Engagement in quality musical experiences has also been said to positively affect overall academic achievement, engagement in learning and development of empathy towards others (Fiske, 1999; Deasy, 2002; Russell-Bowie, 2006; Cornett, 2007; Sinclair et al, 2008; Ewing, 2010; President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, 2011). Valuing learning in a diversity of ways, as defined by Gardner’s multiple intelligences theory (1983), affords the potential for diverse learning to occur through arts-based learning engagement (Ewing, 2010). Dinham (2011) suggests ‘providing opportunities for children to work in a variety of media – and to work with different
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combinations of media – gives children more tools and opportunities to think and act creatively’ (p. 113).

An education rich in the Arts ... is vital to students’ success as individuals and as members of society, emphasising not only creativity and imagination, but also the values of cultural understanding and social harmony that the Arts can engender. (ACARA, 2011, p. 3)

Kerchner & Abril (2010) in Musical Experiences in our Lives: things we learn and meanings we make offer a wide-angled view of the multifaceted dimensions of musical experience, meaning and learning throughout the lifespan. The contributors to this compendium of qualitative research studies are experienced university music teacher educators and music therapists, and the book’s content is relevant to infancy through to older adulthood, with case studies presented from a diverse range of settings. The authors view music learning during musical experiences as part of enculturation, its processes and products solidifying without having identifiable beginning and ending points. Musical experiences that result in the construction of meaning and learning are the prompts that have the potential to stimulate deeper understanding of one’s self, others and culture. These prompts can inspire subsequent musical engagement and learning experiences throughout the lifespan or can assist in the reshaping of a musical culture. The contributors to this text explore shifts in thinking, acting and feeling related to people’s experiences with music sounds or musical groups in a multiplicity of settings. The chapters prompt reflexivity of one’s own practices and experiences as a way to consider innovative pedagogical possibilities for lifelong musical experiences. This intentional reflexivity is akin to the manner in which Bresler (1995) explains how action researchers study – with the aim of improving – their understandings of their own educational practices and the institutions in which they operate.

Musical Experience: meaning-making, culture and community

Humpal (2010) shares the unique power musical experience has to affect people. ‘It calms as well as energizes. It serves to bring groups of people and individuals together while still allowing them to reach deeply within themselves’ (p. 73). Musical experiences are said to add order to our lives while allowing the creative and divergent sides of our selves to develop. Over the span of a lifetime we experience a diverse number of musical styles, generated from our associations with gender, age, social class, ethnicity, geographical region, religion or musical subculture (Custodero, 2010). Musical culture is a dynamic phenomenon, defined by multiple, evolving influences that connect experiences between disparate spaces and places across time, and among groups of people.

Gurindji were working for nothing but rations
Where once they had gathered the wealth of the land
Daily the pressure got tighter and tighter
Gurundji decided they must make a stand

A common language, a common culture, common experience, common ideas and common needs linked the Gurindji people. The musical experience affiliations constitute ‘sound groups’ – a term that Blacking (1995) used for persons linked by ‘a common musical language, together with common ideas about music and its use’ (p. 232). Musical culture is the confluence of cumulative experiences and present circumstance at a particular point along a lifelong trajectory. Custodero (2010) presents a collection of portraits that underscore how intersections of musical cultures create contexts for children’s development. In the same way that the Gurindji people decided to draw on accumulated experience to respond communally, the portraits offer lessons in possibility – music teaching and learning are foundations of continued development advanced by necessary adaptations to settings, practices and characteristics transformed by communal contributions. In Living in Worlds of Music, Mans (2009) explores the manner in which each sound group (cultural soundscape) is a symbolic expression of a society’s collective cognition, arranging behaviour and sounds into collections and configurations that fulfil each society’s requirements.

They picked up their swags and started off walking
At Wattie Creek they sat themselves down
Now it don’t sound like much but it sure got tongues talking
Back at the homestead and then in the town
'The importance of cumulative experience to human beings is as natural and necessary as breathing is to life' (Moore, 2010, p. 277). Without living through experiences (as the Gurindji people did), we cannot fully know, comprehend or understand. It is difficult to contribute to the transfer of culture to others if we have not encountered, manipulated or resolved through experience. Dewey (1938) contended that in order for an individual and a society to learn, actual life experience is required, because ‘experience arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative and sets up desires and purposes’ (p. 31).

Dewey understood that in order for an individual or a society to grow, develop, communicate and make significant contributions to culture, community, nation and the world, personal and communal experiences are imperative. In the case of musical experience, the significance and benefits to teaching and learning music are obvious due to the character of the medium; however, the experience in music varies in form depending on the social, cultural and environmental factors in the lives of the individual, culture or community. Such was the case for Vincent Lingiarri.

In *Living in Worlds of Music*, Mans (2009) draws on her amassed career-long ethno-musical knowledge gained from comprehensive fieldwork to explore musical worlds and how we as people inhabit them. Mans draws on a wide range of social science perspectives, including research in anthropology, cognitive studies, music psychology, ethnomusicology and music education. The text stresses an understanding of musical worlds to be a valuable transformative educational tool that supports a multicultural-rich music and arts education. Mans (2009) explores the way in which musical expression displays much about identity and cultural norms, and by interspersing contributing commentators and three musicians' personal musical journeys, she illustrates how particular musical sounds are aesthetically related to these norms and evokes critical dialogue with voices from different parts of the globe. The manner in which this is achieved brings theory into different living perspectives. Ruud (2009) contributes to Mans' (2009) view:

A musical identity is established throughout our musical socialization through repeated encounters with musical pieces within our cultural surroundings. Musical experiences give rise to musical memories linking autobiography and emotion to time and place. When identifying with a music [sic], that is, taking a subject position within the flux of musical discourses surrounding us, we are at the same time positioning ourselves within a matrix of cultural positions, ethical and political values. (p. 105)

Vincent likewise positioned himself within a matrix of cultural positions and ethical and political values when he met with the ‘big politicians’ as a representative of his people, staying true to his cultural identity.

‘The most common process of getting to know music is by means of enculturation – a process of lifelong learning’ (Mans, 2009, p. 33). This lifelong response to musical experience is offered through the perception, experience, understanding, absorption, acceptance, practice and valuing of cultural practices.
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From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow

Cultural immersion is largely founded on observing and modelling the behaviours, attitudes and emotional reactions of others in situated experiences. Mans (2009) builds the rationale for cultural immersion as ‘part of the broad music education of any individual’. On the topic of cultural immersion, Bandura (1977) prompts:

Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviours are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action. (p. 22)

Then Vincent Lingiari returned in an aeroplane
Back to his country once more to sit down
And he told his people let the stars keep on turning
We have friends in the south, in the cities and towns

Although specific cultural and contextual frameworks can be said to contribute significantly to explaining our communal ways of living and being, it must be asserted that we are individual human beings with individual propensities to generate, change and initiate. Such propensity is demonstrated in the tale of Vincent Lingiari, as above. Odena (2012) celebrates the rich diversity of ways in which learners generate, change, initiate, develop and use musical creativity in Musical Creativity: insights from music education research by examining how musical creativity can be fostered in formal school settings, as well as studio, conservatorium and university settings. With contributions from a number of key researchers in this field, the text draws upon rich frameworks related to creativity, applying them directly to music education. ‘A common saying has it that creativity awaits the prepared mind. For music educators and music education researchers, the question “how is the mind prepared for creativity?” is one of our central concerns’ (Barrett, 2012, p. 51).

Conclusions: childhood and the foundations of lifelong musical responses

In the contemporaneous writings creativity and innovation are promoted as culturally valued enterprises that provide potentially wide-ranging cultural, social and economic benefits (Barrett, 2012). As humans we naturally learn through our interactions with people, culture and the physical worlds in which we live, from the earliest moments of our lives (Barrett, 2012). As such, our interactions with others and materials can be regarded as improvisatory, made-in-the-moment and frequently responsive to stimulus, thus marking the early beginnings of lifelong creativity. It appears that the desire to make music is present from early childhood (Veloso & Carvalho, 2012). Undertaking the pursuit of music assists children to structure, give meaning to and understand their daily experiences. Music is used to express the relationships that they are beginning to establish with the world in which they live. Veloso and Carvalho (2012) propose that music becomes a different pathway to life understanding, life-enhancement and life-wisdom. This lifelong response to musical experience exemplifies how from little things big things grow.

Eight years went by, eight long years of waiting
Till one day a tall stranger appeared in the land
And he came with lawyers and he came with great ceremony
And through Vincent’s fingers poured a handful of sand

Creating lifelong responsive musical experiences is founded on a ‘generative social practice and the lived-world’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 35). The implication of a generative learning is that it is considered an act of creation and co-creation; as a portion of learning time occurs in partnership with others, it is regarded as social, and the lived-in world signifies real-world practices and settings that provide relevance, usefulness and transferability to and for learning (Burnard, 2012). Maxine Greene (1995, p. 23) explains that ‘the classroom situation most provocative of thoughtfulness and critical conscious is the one in which teacher and learners find themselves conducting a kind of
collaborative search, each from her or his lived experience.’ While Greene’s particular research was specific to music composition as a way of learning in a school classroom setting, the tenet of her argument can be extended to include non-school environments as sites where musical experiences of communal endeavour provide opportunity for the master-apprenticeship relationship of co-musical inter-dependency to mature over time. Where from little things big things can grow.

That was the story of Vincent Lingiari
But this is the story of something much more
How power and privilege cannot move a people
Who know where they stand and stand in the law

The music education texts around which this article is primarily focused present stories beyond advocacy, developmental or procedural approaches, or responses to music education. They provide valuable sources and resources, which dialogue the creation of lifelong responsive musical experiences. Each author shares persuasively the essence of these lifelong responsive musical experiences drawn from a team of international experts from the fields of music education, music psychology and music therapy. Like the composers Carmody and Kelly (1993) who co-wrote From Little Things Big Things Grow, which captured the story of the Gurindji strike and Vincent Lingiari demonstrating mateship, courage, the battler, a fair go, the underdog getting one over on the powerful and a happy ending where the hero wins, the three texts reviewed in this article capture the musical experiences of children, teachers and parents in a multiplicity of educational settings that reveal the true essence of lifelong responsive musical experiences. The texts succinctly describe music teaching and learning processes, illuminating the master-apprenticeship relationship of interdependence, courage, commitment and access, and providing a happy ending where music education is the hero!

From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow

Notes

[2] An earworm is a piece of music that sticks in one’s mind so that one seems to hear it even when it is not being played. Other phrases used to describe this include musical imagery repetition and involuntary musical imagery.

References
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