



Peer-reviewed Paper

Continuity in music education: A study of two approaches to music in the first year of school

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*For some, the transition from early childhood to primary contexts is a major change and a disturbing time for children and their families. This article discusses issues relating to transition and the child's voice, with a focus on the role that music plays in enculturating children into the new learning environment. The article is contextualised within the narrative of an imagined boy, Joseph, who is about to start school. Two classroom settings are described and critiqued, and contrasts between the two are discussed. Relevant literature, including *Te Whāriki* and the New Zealand Curriculum, supports the discussion, with a focus on the socio-cultural paradigm and its contribution to music and learning.*

Introduction

Joseph is a bright, friendly Māori boy who has just turned five and is ready to start school. He is passionate about Michael Jackson and sings and dances to Jackson's music in his own special way, often delighting others. Music and dance are clearly a major focus in Joseph's life. For the previous two years, Joseph attended an early childhood centre where the teachers responded to his particular interests. He was invited to make choices, in a caring and nurturing environment. Sometimes he would choose to sing and dance alone, sometimes with or for others, sometimes inside, sometimes outside. Sometimes, he would choose not to sing or dance at all.

Joseph established his musical identity and went about the serious business of building his musical intelligence through spontaneous and self-directed song and dance – a “socially mediated process that is supported by adults and more expert others” (Rogoff, cited in Barrett, 2003, p. 67). It is adult affirmation of Joseph's behaviour that has helped him to build a feeling of self-worth and accomplishment, and now that he is five, it is deemed that he is ready for school, but is school ready for him?

Here he comes, ready or not!

Clearly there is a need to establish criteria for school entry, but *ready* or *unready* labels are, according to Dockett & Perry (2002), more of a hindrance than a help. Readiness is dependent on aspects of a child's life that may impact on his or her ability to learn, rather than just a question of maturation or a specified set of behaviours. Each child arrives at school with his or her own distinctive characteristics and life experiences.

Recognition of variability of child and situation, viewed through an ecological lens, underpins much of the thinking in the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). In this document, Bronfenbrenner's levels of learning are illustrated as a set of nested Russian dolls, with the “learner engaged with learning environment” at the core (p. 19). It is the relationships between children and their immediate learning environments that give rise to the different voices that are crucial to



transition and the expectations that the various parties may have (Hamilton, 2006).

So, what is it that Joseph and his family expect as he begins school? The classroom climate that he will enter may or may not suit his particular individual's needs. The following narrative describes two contrasting learning environments that Joseph may encounter in his first year of school.

Classroom A

The teacher in this classroom is an experienced, well-respected member of the school community. She believes that children need to acclimatise to school as quickly as possible and she takes pride in her firmly established classroom routines. *Learning the basics* is the main focus of the classroom programme, and learning experiences that are not directly related to numeracy and literacy are kept to a minimum, as they are deemed to be frivolous and disruptive. Consistency is paramount and all children are treated the same.

Teacher A has been in contact with the early childhood centre that Joseph has attended. She is aware of his interests in music and dance and has interpreted this as a need to ensure that Joseph must learn to sit still, to get on with *real* learning and to stop showing off.

Classroom B

Teacher B believes that a musically enriched classroom creates a positive, welcoming learning environment and consequently, music is integrated into the school day. Music is played before school and after each break. The school day begins and ends with a class song, the roll is sung, spontaneous musical conversations are integrated throughout the day; alphabet and counting are chanted to a rhythmic beat, music is played as a cue to tidy up and sit on the mat. Shared stories are accompanied with sound effects and rhythms, the words of songs are readily available in the reading corner and recorded music is used as a stimulus for writing and speaking. There is a sounds table set up and children are encouraged to engage in musical play. Teacher B believes in co-constructivism, inviting children to be involved in their own learning and decision-making, based on individual interests, enabling each child to find the right *fit*.

Teacher B has been in contact with the early childhood centre that Joseph has attended. She is aware of his interests in music and dance and has interpreted this as a need for her to ensure that Joseph has opportunities to pursue his interests in music and dance at school. She is excited about the arrival of this new boy, who will fit in well to the musical environment in her classroom. She intends to invite him to be a *performer of the week* when he feels confident enough, so that he can share his interests with the other children.

Analysis of the learning environments

Teacher A has adopted what McLeod (2006) refers to as “the traditional role of the teacher as the *conduit of knowledge*” (p. 57) and is the type of teacher that parents may expect their children to encounter in their first year of school. Bishop (2003) argues that this approach is no longer appropriate in light of societal and curricular changes.



Quantifiable assessment data provides evidence that children are progressing in certain aspects of their learning, and while it may be argued that Teacher A is practising what is *tried and true*, there are issues of power relationships in what Donnelly (2006) describes as an attempt to “fashion students emotionally, socially, culturally and intellectually” (p. 9). The teacher’s voice dominates this learning environment and there is a danger that children’s voices may not be heard, resulting in the lack of acknowledgement of an individual’s personal interests and preferred modes of communication.

In Teacher B’s classroom, it is the child’s voice that is central, a factor that enables this teacher to develop a learning community (Ministry of Education, 1996), contributing to a more evenly dispersed power relationship. Forman & Fife (1998) describe this arrangement as being: “child originated and teacher framed” (p. 240). The child’s voice is used to determine both what children are learning and also how they are feeling. Teacher B develops an insight into each child’s particular background and interests and incorporates this knowledge into the learning environment, often through songs, musical play and spontaneous musical conversations.

A significant variable between the two learning environments is each teacher’s perception of the division between work and play. As Goodkin (2002) says: “Schools have a long history of separating work and play by diving in too soon to mechanics and structure without sufficient attention paid to play and exploration (p. 3).” For Joseph, learning through music tends to be inseparable from learning in other areas, and it is through play that he develops his own musical vocabulary, initially acting from instinct, but progressively refining his actions in response to interaction with adults. It is these interactions between Joseph and his teacher, and other adults, that will enable him to develop a “reciprocal and responsive relationship” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9) that enable him to feel connected with his immediate learning environment, a crucial factor in successful transition.

Teacher B’s musically enriched learning environment is based on her belief that music can help to create a pleasant and positive learning environment and a feeling of well-being, supported by Wylie & Foster-Cohen’s (2007) suggestion that “handled well, music can be one of the most important tools for encouraging well-being that any educator can use” (p. 14). In classroom B, the musical environment will enable Joseph to feel connected with things he knows and loves. His musical interests are celebrated and fostered in new and different ways.

Teacher A fails to acknowledge the valuable contribution that music makes to the classroom environment, perceiving music to be entertainment, rather than a valuable tool for learning. In this setting, Joseph’s interests in music and dance have little significance in terms of dialogue between child and teacher. The contrast between this setting and the early childhood environment that he has just left makes it difficult for Joseph to feel an immediate sense of connection, requiring considerable compromise on his part in order to fit into the existing teacher-dominated classroom culture.

Teaching through music

Joseph, like other children, has a musical story to tell based on his experiences, preferences and relationships (Campbell, 1998) and it is these musical stories that can contribute to cultural awareness as children learn about others through culturally diverse music (Paquette & Rieg, 2008).



Teacher B ensures that she incorporates an eclectic range of songs and instrumental music in her school day, making sure that some of the music is representative of the ethnicity of the children in her class. For example, the *waiata* that she incorporates into her singing repertoire enable children to develop an understanding of aspects of *te reo* and *tikanga Māori*.

In addition to these cultural and social factors, music also supports learning on multiple levels, including the development of important skills and understandings in literacy and numeracy. Teacher B builds on musical interests while enhancing language development, developing children's listening and speaking skills, attention, memory and abstract thinking skills. She believes that the children in her class love to sing, and as well as using familiar songs, she maximises opportunities to initiate spontaneous singing conversations with individuals and groups. The children, in turn, use their own expressive voices to respond, saying what needs to be said without hesitation, using repeating words and phrases and developing a sense of syntax. Teacher B perceives this to be an important approach to language acquisition, which is particularly useful for children in her class whose first language is not English. Her belief in the use of music to stimulate cognitive function through musical conversations is supported by research (see for instance Humpal & Wolf, 2003).

Does Joseph have a natural aptitude for singing and dancing, or has this been learned? Probably both I believe, but music for learning in the socio-cultural paradigm is not about talent, which tends to disregard potential musical growth (Campbell, 1998). Joseph may well have a good degree of pre-determined musical intelligence (Gardner, 1983, cited in Anderson, 2003) and his musicality is clearly visible, but it is the environment that will enable him to grow that potential. The labelling of children as *haves or have-nots* in terms of musicality is, I believe, a false dichotomy. All children have musical potential (Campbell, 1998; Humpal & Wolf, 2003) and it is up to educators at all levels, to provide opportunity and stimulation, allowing children themselves to become the music-makers.

Teacher B does not consider herself to be a *musician*, although she feels reasonably confident with her singing, and is able to play a few chords on her guitar to accompany children's songs. Like many of her colleagues, she feels that she does not have enough basic knowledge of the fundamentals of music to run an in-depth programme that teaches children *about* music, and prefers to leave that to the specialist. Teacher B views music education from a socio-cultural paradigm, with an emphasis on teaching *through* music, for a range of different purposes. She is resourceful and committed, providing a range of interesting materials for children to explore through musical play. She believes that the essence of music in a child's early years should be joyful, non-judgemental, non-competitive and predictable (Humpal & Wolf, 2003).

The New Zealand Curriculum

If, as the New Zealand Curriculum (MoE, 2007) suggests, we are to ensure that transition is a positive experience, with "a clear sense of continuity and direction" (p. 40), junior school teachers need to find ways to interpret the primary curriculum in relation to *Te Whāriki*, to ensure that there is an acknowledgement of where the child has come from. It is evident from earlier discussion that positive transition is dependent on more than words on paper, and while there may be common structures and assumptions



about what to teach, individual teachers may implement the curriculum in quite different ways.

It is interesting to consider that the two teachers described in this narrative could well be in the same school, possibly even in classrooms next door to each other. This is indicative of the power of the individual teacher to put his or her philosophy into practice in their own classroom environment, while still meeting curricular and institutional requirements. Each teacher constructs his or her own classroom culture with their own distinct rituals and routines, incorporating elements that are considered to be of value. The current New Zealand primary curriculum is deemed to be less prescriptive than the previous one, according to Begg (2006), who believes that there is opportunity, in the current curriculum, for the development of alternative classroom experiences that are suitable for particular students in their local environments. This freedom may, however, be “curtailed by the assessment industry that seems to operate in a paradigm of easily measurable objectives” (p. 1).

This is a timely statement in light of the recently released National Standards (MoE, 2009), the implementation of which may present classroom teachers with an even greater challenge to develop “lifelong learners who are confident and creative, connected, and actively involved” (MoE, 2007, p. 4). It is crucial for teachers to deliver a balanced and innovative curriculum so that children like Joseph will have opportunities to learn in contexts that are meaningful and appealing. Carr (2006) emphasises this need by acknowledging dispositions for learning within the strands of *Te Whāriki* and the key competencies of the New Zealand curriculum.

It is the connection of the learning areas in the New Zealand curriculum with the key competencies that can be puzzling for teachers, particularly in areas that tend to be marginalised, such as music. A musical environment gives children opportunities to develop capability in all of the areas of key competencies identified in the New Zealand curriculum (MoE, 2007). For example, music encourages creative thinking through interpretation, composition and exploration of sounds. By using language, symbols and texts, music offers opportunities to explore symbol systems, rhythm patterns of words and sounds to accompany stories. When using sound sources in the classroom, children need to manage self in order to be considerate of others. Class singing involves relating to others, participating and contributing.

Conclusion

A colleague once said to me that the absence of music in her classroom “didn’t do the children any harm.” How sad to think that education should focus on what might do the least harm! We need to draw on our own cultural resources and be strong in our personal beliefs in order to deliver what the institution expects of us while staying true to our learners (Ladson-Billings, 2005).

With increasing pressure on teachers to produce quantifiable assessment data, we need to think creatively and reflexively about how we will keep alive the creative spark in children like Joseph, working towards a combination of imagination and logic (Ministry of Education, 1996). We need to consider fresh perspectives and new ways of thinking as Teacher B has done in her musically enriched learning environment, to avoid merely doing more of the same.



The socio-cultural paradigm of music education allows for meaningful integration, fostering learning in a range of settings, and contributes to a welcoming, child-centered learning environment. Musical experiences can be shaped to suit the needs and interests of the children, and to celebrate diversity in the generalist classroom.

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