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Cultural Understanding: Rethinking Music Teacher Education in a Multicultural Australia

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Abstract

This paper provides a multicultural perspective to music education in Australia and makes recommendations for the creation of more suitable intercultural training programs in Australian universities. It explores issues of multiculturalism in higher education institutions and argues that music education is a useful platform to address and rethink cultural diversity, where difference can be celebrated. Within Australian multicultural society, the rights and traditions of all people are recognized, respected and included. In this process, higher education institutions are challenged to prepare student teachers to meet the needs of society. This involves cultural understanding and the creation of multicultural curricula. From reflecting on current music education programs offered at Deakin University, Melbourne, it is argued that there is need to rethink current approaches to music education pedagogy. Although there are attempts to have an all-inclusive approach in teacher training, the music curriculum is still trapped in the *potpourri* effect of trying to create culturally responsive teachers for every permutation of the multicultural classroom. When Australian society, ideally approaches true styles of multicultural music, teachers and students will celebrate the rich diversity of this nation.

Key Words

Multiculturalism, Australian teacher education, culture, tertiary education, intercultural understanding
Contextual information

In 19th century, Australia perceived itself as an outpost of the British empire, songs taught and sung were similar to those of the 'mother country'. In the late 20th century, due to an increase of migrants, music of the 'other' was becoming more apparent firstly through assimilation and integration owing to musical experiences presented to children (see Southcott & Joseph, 2005b). Writing in the 21st century, Southcott and Joseph, (2005a) assert as Australians, "we have reached a time when the principle underlying the inclusion of the 'other' is a multicultural one, although our practices do not always demonstrate a real awareness of what this might be" (p.245). This concept of 'multiculturalism' emerged as a reaction to the ideology of assimilation in the mid 1950's and must be understood in terms of culture even though multiculturalism now includes musics from many places in the world. Within this changing context, universities, especially teacher education courses have responded slowly to the changes in demographics thus a need to reassess their policy and practices.

Forty years later, a survey conducted by the Australian Education International (2001), showed that at the university level there were over 1000 diverse proposals for coursework change with a greater emphasis on 'curriculum development initiatives towards internationalisation' (p.23). As part of reform efforts to internationalise the curriculum at universities, the author is of the opinion that teaching programs should also focus on courses that promote mutual understanding through exchanges (international and intellectual) of both student and staff. Such exchanges of curricula in Australian universities are currently carried out through "additional international content to courses,
...cross-cultural approaches, interdisciplinary programs (see Australian Education International for longer list 2001, p.23). As many students either enter the university as school leavers or at a later age and stage in their career paths, a new and different form of ‘tertiary culture’ has to be communicated to them through enculturation. Such a ‘cross-cultural experience’ according to Kirkpatrick and Mulligan (2002) applies to all students whether local or international. It is interesting to note that Borland and Pearce (2002) found that students do not acquire such enculturation naturally—it needs to be explained and developed through conscious strategies.

**Australian Milieu**

Within the Australian context, students, as in many other parts of the world, are challenged to develop intercultural knowledge and tertiary institutions are consequently forced to prepare teacher education students to be culturally responsive. Within educational settings teachers are presented with the task of teaching and managing pupils of diverse cultures, languages and backgrounds. It is imperative to address, as well as rethink, cultural diversity where difference can be celebrated through cultural understandings. The inclusion of multicultural curriculum for music can be an effective platform to prepare culturally responsive teachers. Southcott and Joseph (2005a) argue because music in schools has changed as populations have become increasingly heterogenous, we need to rethink teacher education programs.

Universities in Australia are faced with rethinking educational policies and course structures to be more inclusive of cultural diversity and associated knowledge systems in their curricula. According to Sadiki (2002), Australian education providers are well
placed to be leaders in internationalised education that equals the academic standards of peer institutions in other countries. As part of its ‘quality learning’ initiatives, Deakin University in Melbourne recognises and supports the needs, goals and teaching strategies required to achieve cultural diversity. The quality learning initiatives and strategic plans of the University, recognises and supports internationalising the curriculum to ensure that all teaching programs provide learning experiences that encompass international and intercultural perspectives (Deakin University, 2003).

In relation to the university’s strategic plan, in 2001, the author established a pathway to change the music curriculum for both pre-service and post-graduate students. In 2002, a ‘new’, ‘different’ and ‘interesting’ genre (African) was introduced as an example of multicultural practice. The author initiated the teaching of South African music and culture as an inroad to recognising cultural and musical diversity (see Joseph, 2003a, 2003b, 2004a). Banks (1991) rightly points out “it is neither possible nor necessary for the curriculum...to include content about every ethnic group” (p.4). The author positions her teaching approach to multicultural music education as teaching within diverse cultures like that of the African rather than teaching about them. Currently, through teaching students African music, she prepares course materials in order for students to be flexible in their understanding of ‘other’ music and their culture by developing teaching strategies and methods through which they can be culturally responsive to change.

Notions of Culture and ‘Other’

Firstly, the concept of culture can be understood at both a macro and micro level. Mushi (2004) argues that “every individual lives within certain cultural norms and is expected to
show certain behaviours and skills at the micro and macro level” (p.183). The term culture is often used loosely with a mixture of connotations. Kessing (1974) integrates the idea of culture as system (Geertz, 1973) and as communication (Hall, 1959). Kessing (1974) contends “culture, as a system of competence shared in its broad design and deeper principles, and varying between individuals in its specificities... it is the unfamiliar or the ambiguous, in interacting with strangers and in other settings peripheral to the familiarity of mundane everyday life and space” (p.89). From this viewpoint it can be argued as Volk (2004) points out “the greater the knowledge one has about the culture, and the expectations or rules of its music, the greater the understanding, or perception of meaning, of that music will be” (p.6).

Secondly, aligned to the understanding of culture is the notion of ‘other’. According to Thompson (2002) the ‘other’ is often constructed as a homogenised category, “static to geographical spaces” (p.16). However, within music teaching and learning this ‘other’, is to be understood as an aspect of the culture which it is part. For this reason, “understanding music in turn can help us to understand the world’s cultures and their diversity” (Nettl, 1992, p.4). It is only when we move out of our own framework and into the ‘other’ that we begin to make the intercultural connections that are absent in the music of our own culture. When you “find yourself in someone else’s music” (Massingham, 1998), you engage in cross-cultural dialogue not only about musical discourse but also about the canopy that embraces groups of people. By experiencing a broader spectrum of different music and culture, students have a deeper appreciation and understanding of multiculturalism.
Multicultural Education

Multicultural education and the concept of multiculturalism are multifaceted phenomena. "The term multicultural can be and is applied to both curriculum and instructional goals" (Milligan, 2001, p.33) and is often aligned to the notion of diversity and world cultures. Given that these concepts can mean different things to different people, it also presents the possibilities of many approaches to teaching 'multiculturalism' and making curricula inclusive. For this reason, educational sites, such as universities and schools, are fertile grounds to provide opportunities for raising the cultural awareness and understanding of diverse cultural groups. According to Nieto (1992) "multicultural education is by definition expansive because it is about all people...for all people" (p.313). However not all people feel they have a 'culture' so "anything else for them is ethnic or exotic" (Nieto, 1992, p.313).

Such notions of multiculturalism can be considered as a process. Writing in an educational context, Mushi (2004) points out that the focus should be on learners' classroom experiences and not merely be perceived as a 'culturally correct' term to be use in education policy. She suggests that well planned multicultural activities in the classroom lead to intercultural competencies necessary for effective functioning in a multicultural society. These intercultural competencies she suggest include knowledge, skills and dispositions (Mushi, 2004). Through an intercultural approach, students are more aware of their own culture this establishes positive attitudes of 'cultural relativism'. As Australian society continues to become even more multicultural, teaching practices continue to develop, taking on board 'generational changes'. If such cultural changes have not advanced over time, they will perish.
Culturally Responsive Teaching

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected and global, the notion of a holistic education that preserves one's cultural identity and heritage seems a tall order for classroom practice and teacher education programs. Yet "music educators of the twenty-first century have the opportunity to be better prepared than previous generations to teach diverse populations utilising diverse musics" (Erwin, Edwards, Kerchner, & Knight, 2003, p.137). It is argued "culturally responsive teaching enables students to be better human beings and more successful learners" (Culturally Responsive Teaching, 2005, p.2). Gay (2000) suggests including cultural knowledge of students and their experience makes learning more appropriate for effective learning. Such inclusion of students as part of a wider community of learners promotes cultural responsiveness in a multidimensional way thus it not only empowers and transforms both content and context but can be emancipatory as well. According to a number of researchers cultural teaching is liberating (Asante, 1991/1992; Au, 1993; Erickson, 1987; Gordon, 1993; Lipman, 1995; Pewewardy, 1994; Phillips, 1983). The incorporation of materials and experiences from both teacher and students can be part of this liberation process. Such a process in Hookey's opinion (1994) can help construct the potential of having multicultural or world education. In the main, this 'ideal' calls for pathways for change in educational reform.

Pathways for change

Joseph and Keast (2005) propose "change be viewed as an evolutionary rather than revolutionary process" (P.134), as education becomes part of what is commonly referred
to as a “tradable activity” rather than a stimulus to curriculum and student aspirations (Elliot, 2000, p.33), Australian universities have set up a number of pathways for such change which can be aligned to Booth’s (2000) notion of “the ability to trade educational goods and services successfully in the global market-place” (p.42).

As part of rethinking its programs at Deakin University, pathways have been set up through the Faculty of Educations ‘global experience teaching practicum program’ to experience multicultural education. Such programs are offered in the Australian Northern Territory, Canada, Ghana, India, Vanuatu and Switzerland. According to Global Experience (2005), the ‘global teaching program’ challenges you to think about, deal with and appreciate cultural and educational knowledge and/or practices and perspectives different to your own. In relation to expanding and exploring cultural understandings of music at this university, the Ghana experience offers a fifteen-day program set up for students (studying both primary and secondary courses), where students learn about traditional drumming, dance, song and social studies in Ghanaian culture. Such a visit becomes an even more authentic encounter for students to experience music, dance and culture in Africa. What the author imparts through an elective course is bringing Africa to her students thereby ‘localising the content and context for her Australian Anglo-Celtic students (see Joseph, 2003, 2004, 2005).

Currently, another successful pathway is having an artist in residence teach African music and dance to schools, in Melbourne, where many Deakin students are currently attached. This experience extends relationships with schools, the local community and is an initiative that experiments with teaching methods, curriculum construction and new ways of presenting African music to students in schools and the university.
Apart from the author’s own teaching of djembe drumming through courses within the music education program for both undergraduate and postgraduate courses, Deakin University Student Association, currently employs an artist in residence or guest artist to further enhance students’ skills in African drumming through weekly workshops. As each musical culture has its own traditions and practices, different methods of teaching African music and drumming are taught by the artist all depending on their country of origin. This provides “insider’s view of a culture...[and] can help dispel stereotypes and provides correct information quickly” (Erwin et al., 2003, p.135). Thus the tertiary education institutions are replicating school practice therefore increasing authenticity.

The above pathways are evidence of change. It is anticipated that such encounters allow students to become flexible, develop strategies and methods through which they can grow to become culturally responsive teachers. Although it may be argued that cultures differs, “it is a myth to think that music is closely bound to a particular culture that no one outside can penetrate it” (Reimer, 1994, p.237). Accordingly, Reimer further argues, “music is universally shareable and can be shared by all humans beyond particular cultural manifestations” (1994, p.237). Hence the author argues that music education and programs currently offered at Deakin University is an effective and useful dais to address and rethink cultural diversity where difference is celebrated.

Conclusion and Implications

Although there is a need to rethink and address cultural diversity within teacher education programs, the author recognises that it is not possible to provide in-depth experiences for all students whose cultural backgrounds are different. However, by designing research
and assessment practices that require students to make cross-cultural contact through activities that range from simple in-depth interviews and cultural exchanges, it is possible to prepare students to become 'culturally responsive'. Also by involving international students to model different cultural practices and be recognised as participants in the program, it is also possible to foster cultural understandings (Eisenklas & Trevaskes, 2003, p.400).

According to the general recommendations made in another culturally complex society, for Alaskan schools, "we teach the way we are taught, university faculty and others associated with the preparation of teachers should participate in cultural immersion experiences themselves to develop the insights and sensitivities they intend to impart to their teacher candidates" (Guidelines..., 1999, p.7). Living for more than three decades in apartheid South Africa, now working in Australia with predominantly Anglo-Celtic students and staff, the author fully supports the Alaskan guidelines. She further contends that such an engagement can only build a positive teaching environment for both student and teacher. Thus strengthening cultural responsiveness to the changing and multicultural Australia where we find ourselves.

Higher education institutions are challenged to manage diversity and address the needs of ethnic diversities in preparing teacher students to be culturally responsive. It would seem apparent that the ethos of institutions would have to change, if effective promotion of understanding, acceptance and difference are to be commemorated. It must be noted that this cannot be solely achieved through individual coursework of study (for example music education). This point is fully support by Vavrus (2002) "an introductory experience through one multicultural education course in the teacher preparation
curriculum is inadequate” (p.20). Johnson (1995) suggested such initiatives should be integrative (infused through all elements of the educational enterprise), egalitarian (assuring equitable status for all parties), substantive (ongoing, significant and purposeful), inclusive (involving all stakeholders) and culturally responsive (sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of all member groups) in their orientation.

Teacher education programs must take into account the diverse Australian society and prepare future teachers to be responsive, tolerant, sensitive and culturally literate. Nieto rightfully argues “we do our students a disservice when we prepare them to live in a society that no longer exists” (1992, p.281). As part of a global society providing a wider range of music, the potpourri effect should reflect more “real world music and provide important connections for all our students” (Erwin et al., 2003, p.137). Music education continues to be a successful way to explore intercultural understandings, acknowledging and affirming diversity within and beyond Australia. Such a “process of education goes beyond the demographics in a particular country” (Nieto, 1992, p.281) and is to the benefit of all students and teachers. In higher education, we face the challenge to provide educational leadership and professional development for music education that can continue once graduates leave as they begin their professional life, continuing to promote cultural understanding in a multicultural and changing Australia.

References


