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Pre-service teacher education students from two Australian universities were interviewed about their understandings of cultural diversity in music education. These initial findings revealed varied but generally consistent enthusiasm about including music from different cultures in teaching. However comments revealed an almost haphazard exposure to other musics. These were generally informal rather than learned in their formal education. Interviewees recognised the training that they had received in their tertiary studies in other cultures (both Western and non-Western) and expressed the intention to pursue professional development in their future careers. Engaging with the music of other cultures allows teachers and students to develop understanding and empathy with others. This is in line with current governmental initiatives on values that states that values education is intended to “inspire and educate the next generation to see their world through the eyes of others. We want children to become adults who are caring, tolerant, fair and compassionate” (Department of Education, Science and Training, n.d., p. 2). Comments from the interviewees illustrate just such attitudes and understandings. It behoves us as educators to prepare students for teaching in multicultural classrooms that reflect the wider Australian society.

Background

This research explores how music education students understand cultural diversity in a changing and often challenging world. In multicultural Australia, the development of positive intercultural attitudes is essential in the creation of an harmonious and integrated society. Music education is a powerful medium to address and rethink cultural diversity, where difference can be celebrated. Responding to issues raised by the 2005 National Review of School Music in Australia, higher education institutions are challenged to prepare programmes that explore issues in multiculturalism to engender tolerance, inclusiveness and diversity in education. Currently there is also an emphasis in Australian schools on the teaching of values that also stresses the notions of understanding and empathy. These are articulated by the Department of Education, Science and Training (2005) which identifies Nine Values for Australian schooling. These are: care and compassion, doing your best, ‘fair go’, freedom, honesty and trustworthiness, integrity, respect, responsibility, and understanding, tolerance and inclusion (DEST, 2005). Values education, like multicultural education, incorporates “any explicit and/or implicit school-based activity to promote student understanding and knowledge of values, and which develops the skills and dispositions of students so they can enact particular values as individuals and members of the wider community” (Curriculum Corporation, 2006, p. 8). Music is an effective art form that can transcend difference and build community.
Methodology

In 2006, final year teacher education students at two Victorian (Australia) universities undertaking music methodologies were invited to participate in an web-based, anonymous survey concerning past experience and their present understandings of cultural diversity in music education. The study investigated how students understand multiculturalism, culture and diversity in Australia. At the end of the survey, students were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews with questions developed from the survey responses. Such self-selection creates purposive sampling. In this process, researchers seek individuals with a particular interest that resonates with the focus of the enquiry. The research is phenomenological in the sense that there is a desire to understand the experience of cultural diversity from the point of view of the respondents (Merriam, 1998). This paper does not report on the results from the online survey rather it explores in-depth responses from several of the interviewees from both institutions.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as they allow for an individual in-depth exploration of the students’ experiences of cultural diversity. Interviews may elicit more detailed information and the richness of their responses can “add markedly to the researcher’s understanding of the social setting under investigation” (Kervin, Vialle, Herrington & Okely, 2006, p. 88). A good respondent can be termed an “informant” who understands the culture and is able to reflect on it and articulate these understandings (Merriam, 1998, p. 85). As is conventional, interview data were transcribed, analysed and emergent themes were identified (Kirchner, 2003). In this study, responses are included from the initial interviews undertaken in 2006 which involved five participants from each institution.

Students from both institutions varied considerably in age and life experience. These students had experienced life in other countries for extended periods (Russia, England, Sweden, Fiji, Cook Islands, Vanuatu and Samoa). All participants hold prior tertiary music qualifications and were, at the time of interview, completing teacher education for either primary or secondary music specialist teaching. Although the participants at the two institutions were undertaking teacher education degrees at either primary or secondary level, this was, for all students, their first formal introduction at tertiary to the teaching of multicultural music.

Student Understandings

For the purpose of this paper, two key issues were selected for discussion: students understanding of multiculturalism and how this relates to values education. Quotes from the interviews will be used to illustrate and illuminate thinking under headings that emerged as significant themes. The issues raised will be discussed as they resonate with research on multicultural music education.

Multiculturalism

Participants offered a range of understandings about multicultural music that initially focussed on difference. One respondent defined a multicultural society as one that, “involves more than one ethnicity”, another that “it’s when
different nations and different nationalities live in the same communities” and yet another response suggested a “culture that embraces many different cultures”. This suggests a model evocatively described by a participant as an “umbrella of culture” in which there were “all different cultures”. A society that was multicultural was considered to include “many people from many varied cultures living together in the same place and as a result their cultures merge and diversify and link together with other cultures”. The notion of a merging of cultures was qualified by one respondent who stated, “each culture is separate and has its great things. I’m not trying to meld us all into one banal boring culture”.

Hutchinson (2006) comments that, “making meaning of the world is a complicated process” (p. 304). This is particularly so when students’ experience varies markedly from how others in the classrooms perceive the cultural context. Logically, those with similar cultural backgrounds will have more congruity of understanding than those from different backgrounds. Teachers, particularly those at the beginning of their careers, need to recognise and acknowledge how cultural diversity may affect their selection of content and teaching style.

*West is not necessarily best*

Several participants identified the supremacy of western music, both popular and ‘classical’, as pervasive but not necessarily correct. One respondent stated quite strongly that, “I don’t think anybody should be led to believe that western music is everything”. Another described the situation in more detail, identifying the notion of familiarity in the choice of educational material, “from what I’ve seen the focus seems to be on western music and music that the kids are familiar with”. A participant who had joined a Gamelan ensemble during her tertiary music studies, used this as an example of a different music and how it might be included in broader understanding of music. She stated that,

I think we often get really stuck in this one western way and think that other ways aren’t beautiful and the concept of aesthetics and beauty in music, if I put a Gamelan piece on, I often wouldn’t immediately go ‘oh it’s beautiful’ because it’s so different from what I’ve experienced and from the sounds that my ear is used to hearing but once I understand something about how it’s put together and how it’s played and the actual look of the instruments and the feel of the instruments then I can much more appreciate the beauty in the sound because I’m more familiar with it.

This raises the concept of the aesthetic and its appreciation when engaging with music from other cultures. One respondent noted that other musics already exist in what might be part of the western music paradigm, that it was already “part of what we hear and what we’re familiar with and I believe it is an important part of western music”.

Intercultural music study and engagement by both teachers and students in a multicultural society such as Australia promotes understanding of difference and diversity. Music has both global and cross-cultural manifestations. Such knowledge can only be engendered by discarding a ‘west is best’ perspective (Campbell, 2004). A global approach to teaching music must infiltrate courses in tertiary education. By exposing students to other cultures and musics, we also explore cross-cultural possibilities more fully, richly and critically than previously (Oehrle, 1991). By incorporating music of another culture we may understand new elements and experiences in our own musical background and thus enrich our ability as teachers to present effective and inclusive music programs in schools (Nketia, 1988).
Participants identified the importance of the societal context of music. One stated that, “music reflects the society in which it is composed or from which it is composed” and another that, “music is an inherent part of the culture in which it is produced”. One respondent elucidated that, with a knowledge of cultural context, the unfamiliar becomes more comprehensible. She stated that, “often a very important part which can lead from hearing something and thinking that’s boring and it doesn’t do anything for me to once you understand the context that it came from and how it is used it suddenly takes on a new dimension and all of a sudden you find yourself enjoying a piece of music and becoming attached to it rather than just dismissing it because you’re unfamiliar with it or you didn’t like it for whatever reason”.

Another participant added an historical dimension to the idea of context, stating that, “the culture in which music is produced involves a whole social setting, the historical setting, the historical lead up to where the society is at the time, what’s happening in the society at the time that the music is produced and it is very important for people to expand their understanding of how things came about and why”.

One participant gave a longer description of how efforts to engage students in multicultural music might play out in the classroom. As can be seen, she is clearly trying to think her own way through the issues:

I think it’s dangerous to talk about this in too much of an idealistic way. I think often it would be hard to get them into it and hard to explain why and I’ve just talked myself a little bit I suppose into an argument of why I wouldn’t do it as a set block because then you’re like ‘ooh and then there’s this really interesting thing called multicultural music and it’s weird and we’re going to do a whole topic on it and it’s this really strange thing and so and so comes from India and can you tell us about why your music is so weird and different from ours’. That would be a real argument not to do that and to just integrate it more as we’re aiming to integrate different cultures into our society in Melbourne without a big hoo-hah and without a big fuss and picking up the really good elements of each culture including our own and blending them together a bit more.

This respondent continued to suggest how multicultural music might be included in the classroom, “So I think maybe kids would react to it a bit better if it was more integrated and if you came from the perspective of a teacher … just making it all more natural rather than a big deal”. In another response, a participant suggested involving parents of students from different cultures as a resource. She suggested that students could go and ask their “parents about this style of music and come back and give us a little”. This raises the idea, albeit in a very small way, of engaging the wider school community in the provision of multicultural music education. It also demonstrates an awareness of the cultural diversity available in the societal contexts that embed classrooms and schools. However, care needs to be taken about how teachers do engage parents and community members in their classrooms. Hutchinson (2006) points out that, “teachers of diverse student backgrounds therefore need to be sensitive to their students’ backgrounds and what they bring to the classroom to ‘fill-in-the blank’” (p.308). Encouragingly, the participant responses do demonstrate such sensitivity and awareness of the potential contribution of others to their teaching. Benham (2003) confirms that, “demographic trends show that the students these teachers will be teaching in the future will be more and more
culturally diverse. As a result, teachers will increasingly encounter situations in which they find themselves to be in the position of being an outsider” (p.23).

Multicultural music and values education

Several respondents identified a link between multicultural education and valuing other cultures, which resonates with current Australian initiatives in values education. The National Framework for Values Education (NFVE) recognises the shared values “such as respect and ‘fair go’ as part of Australia’s common democratic way of life which includes equality, freedom…they reflect a commitment to a multicultural and environmentally sustainable society” (Australian Government, Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005). One participant made this link clear when she stated that, “it just helps us to understand each other’s culture a bit better and to value it I think”. The role of the teacher in this was seen as pivotal. One participant stated that, “as long as when we’re teaching we put value on it then the kids will grow up implicitly understanding and feeling that value”. If this was successful and students embraced the experience there is, as one respondent stated, “the opportunity there for a deep understanding and knowledge … about the social and cultural context of where and how music is produced, encouraging them to think and understand in different ways”. There was, predictably as the interviewees were all pre-service teacher education students, some trepidation about how this might work and how effective it might be.

Another respondent student saw other benefits from the increased tolerance that could come from an effective multicultural music program. She said that, “I just believe that it might resolve some problems at schools at the moment... bullying mostly”. Another participant linked this to the notion of individual student confidence. She stated that multicultural music education “would give students more understanding of others, I would say it would give them more confidence maybe that the other cultures are not minorities and that would certainly build their confidence and self esteem”. In the current Victorian multicultural document, which is aligned with the NFVE, emphasises respect for all communities, opportunities to work together to reaffirm similarities, the elimination of racial and religious intolerance and the rejection of racial vilification, harassment and discrimination (Victorian Multicultural Commission, 2006). This supports the respondent’s suggestion concerning the positive role for multicultural music education in reducing intolerance and increasing empathy. As Hill (2007) confirms, it is the role of the teacher to “enhance the capacity to both think and feel regarding values”.

Conclusion

These interviews revealed that pre-service teacher education students from two Australian universities were generally enthusiastic about including music from different cultures in their classrooms. The responses also identified that their own experiences in cultural diversity were somewhat “haphazard” and there was some hesitancy about how this might play out. One participant commented that, “I guess you have to be pretty confident in your knowledge of teaching about things, I don’t really know, I can’t imagine walking into a classroom and trying to teach something that I know nothing about or very little about so perhaps that’s a factor”. Respondents admitted that their tertiary studies had helped them.
One stated that, before this engagement, she knew nothing and added, “probably the most multicultural music I knew of was Ladysmith Black Mambazo because of the Graceland album and that’s probably about it really”.

Benham (2003) suggests that, “teacher attitudes about diverse classroom settings are not based only on surface knowledge about another culture ... our personal histories ‘by necessity, contribute considerably to our belief systems’” (p. 24). In this study, in responding to questions, the participants acknowledged their own personal understandings and the importance of teaching multicultural music in schools. As Benham (2003) points out, “the challenge of teaching in a culturally diverse setting can be overwhelming, but the payoff is just as great” (p. 30). Benham (2003) continues to warn that, “failure to address cultural diversity within the classroom, or to adequately prepare teachers to teach in diverse settings, may have negative repercussions” (p. 28). Diverse settings exist within both teacher and student populations. Hutchison (2006) qualifies this even further, arguing that, “inter-national and intra-national diversity pose a challenge for cross-cultural teaching” (p.308).

Only two of the emergent themes from the interviews have been considered in this discussion – understandings of multiculturalism and how it relates to values education. Responses concerning multiculturalism could be grouped under three sub-headings: Multiculturalism, West is not necessarily best, and Societal Context. It was encouraging to find that the interviewees held the view that western music was not culturally superior and further that respondents noted that western music itself could be influenced by music from other cultures. The interviewees were all aware of the importance of acknowledging the societal context in which the music is created and the ways in which it is transmitted and sometimes modified. Concerning the relationship of multicultural music education and values education, students recognised the potential role of music in teaching to develop positive attitudes of tolerance, empathy, inclusion and respect which are central to the Nine Values for Australian Schooling (DEST, 2005). Teacher educators need to act on these understandings held by their students and ensure that programs are underpinned by these principles that reflect Australian societal values. Both teacher educators and their students need to make decisions about ‘what matters and why’ in the inclusion of music from diverse cultures in education. As Lo Bianco (2003) points out, culture is “not random, or idiosyncratic, or wholly personal but … is patterned, learned, and social, but also changing, and constructed” (p. 25). Rather than the somewhat haphazard experiences recounted by the interviewees at both universities, tertiary educators need to provide purposeful and structured multicultural music teaching.

References


