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Creating a Community of Learning
School-based Partnerships and Onsite Professional Development in Tertiary Courses

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Creating a Community of Learning: School-based Partnerships and Onsite Professional Development in Tertiary Courses

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Abstract: Field based teaching for tertiary institutions are not a new phenomenon. This paper reports on school-based partnerships and onsite professional development as a way to enhance pre-service students understanding of music teaching and learning. The paper situates itself across two continents forming part of my wider ongoing study into the attitudes and perceptions of arts education students, while preparing culturally responsive teachers across two continents (Australia and South Africa). The onsite visits to schools provides a rich opportunity for tertiary educator and student to reflect in-and-on the teaching and learning experience. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis to analyse and codify the interview data of music lecturers and students, I offer a platform for a discussion of the benefits and limitations encountered. By providing students with school-based partnerships as a form of onsite professional development within teacher education courses, we enable them to expand their ways of engaging in music and in pedagogy as they develop an initial repertoire of teaching competencies. Through such opportunities they continue to gain comprehension of the various dimensions of music experience and to understand student learning. The onsite teaching and learning in this study was a demonstration of a worthwhile experience that could be beneficial across other learning areas in teacher education.

Keywords: Teacher education, Music education, Professional development, African music

Introduction

Teaching is a multifaceted and skilled profession that requires a wide range of skill, strategies, knowledge and understandings. Music tertiary educators are exhorted to provide students with a wide range of experiences and competencies to develop their professional knowledge in order to enter the profession as early career music teachers. Globally, music tertiary educators are faced with the issue of ‘so much to do in so little time’. Hence, universities are encouraged to forge links with schools where pre-service music teachers, tertiary educators and teachers engage in professional learning. One of the challenges tertiary educators face when preparing their students “is to provide opportunities for students to engage with and acquire this professional knowledge” (Sutherland 2005, 3). Acquiring professional knowledge is situated neither at the university or the school. Rather, it requires “the collaborative work of the two” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993, 284). It is widely perceived that tertiary courses deliver theoretical underpinnings to students’ knowledge base while schools are places where the actual practice takes place (Henry 2001). In order to bridge the gap that may exist between theory and practice, universities have embraced educational partnerships with schools as an important and integral part for music teacher education programs. Sutherland (2005, 3) points out it is important for tertiary educators “to provide opportunities for students to engage with and acquire this professional knowledge”. The collaboration between music teacher, music lecturer and pre-service teacher forms a dynamic partnership where meaningful teaching and learning takes place onsite. Soto, Lum and Campbell (2009) point out that the bridge building in these exchanges allows schools and universities to have deep and meaningful conversations of music practice and the expectations of teacher preparedness.

School-university partnerships are not new phenomena; they “have become widely accepted as a primary means to strengthen teacher education in all subject areas” (Brophy 2011, 149). It may be argued that by “placing pre-service music teachers in educational partnerships early and frequently in education provides the context for developing the necessary competencies to
become successful music teachers” (Burton and Greher 2011, 105). This paper situates itself within my wider ongoing study that started in 2010 Attitudes and perceptions of Arts Education Students: preparing culturally responsive teachers across two continents (Australia and South Africa). Formerly I lived and taught in schools in South Africa, now I am a music educator at tertiary level in Melbourne where I live. As part of my research into how best we can prepare students for the twenty-first century I often visit educational sites in South Africa to engage with music educators to have conversations about how best we can prepare high quality music teachers for the classroom. Researchers recognise that there is much to be gained when we have discussions with international academics about the ways in which we prepare our students from a global perspective (Burton 2011). In 2010 and 2012 I revisited two South African universities and spent a week at each on both occasions at North West University [NWU] and the University of Pretoria [UP]. In this article, through interview data, I provide a snapshot of field-based experiences within tertiary education courses across the two South African universities and the university where I work in Australia. Burton and Greher (2007) identify that field-based experiences or school-university partnerships can take many forms. For the purpose of my article, the pre-service experiences relate to School-Based Partnerships (SBP) as well as learning onsite in the field with local communities. It may be argued that SBP is one way for students to gain onsite Professional Development (PD). This article contends SBP and onsite PD is an effective way to enhance pre-service students understanding of music teaching and learning. The purpose of providing such opportunities within university courses is for undergraduate students to explore and experience teaching settings that are often far removed from their own (Soto et al 2009). When planned well these partnerships serve as a beneficial pathway “for developing successful music teachers” (Burton and Greher 2011, 107).

Theoretical Underpinnings

SBP and onsite teaching and learning form an important part of the music-teaching units offered at the three universities in this study. The practice is separate from school placements also known as practicum or school experience. The SBP can be seen as a form of PD as its serves as a useful vehicle to encourage teacher learning. The time spent at the schools or in the field offers the students, music teacher and music lecturer the opportunity to reflect on their teaching practice. It is not my intention to discuss the wide array of PD models, as they range from ‘one-off’ events, through short-term programs conducted over several weeks to ongoing more extended programs. Rather, the school based visits in my study can be seen as a form of PD where students and lecturer gained understandings of pupils’ learning in order to bring about “change in the classroom practice of teachers” (Guskey 2002, 382). The visits provide opportunities for students to discuss and learn new skills and to experience instructional practice onsite with the music teacher and music lecturer. The opportunity to be part of such an exchange give students “a clearer image of the kind of teacher they want to be” (Conkling 2007, 44) and serves as professional learning and growth where onsite PD aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice. According to Campbell and Brummet, SBP offer students ‘hands on’ opportunities to “develop an initial repertoire of teaching competencies, [students] comprehend the various dimensions of music experience and understand student learning” (2007, 52). It also is a rich collaboration between schools, teachers, academics and students where the engagement is “simultaneous renewal” (Lefeve-Davis and Heller 2003, 566). According to Sutherland SBP is “an alternative method of assisting students to develop professional knowledge” (Sutherland 2005, 3) and provides a place where students can enhance their theoretical knowledge and at the same time improve their classroom practice (De Corte 2000). Through onsite visits, students have an opportunity to be involved with the day-to-day activities of the practice as “learning is viewed as a social situated activity” (Sutherland 2005, 3).
SBP gives both the music teacher and tertiary music educator the opportunity and the space to reflect and share their practice. In my own situation, I am the only music staff member on my campus, hence the partnerships offer me the chance to dialogue with teachers, relieving feelings of isolation and also keeping abreast with classroom practice (Hunter 2011, Bresler 2002). In reviewing examples of school-university partnerships, Harris and van Tassell (2005) confirm they serve to supervise and mentor teacher interns as well as provide practical experience of teaching early and throughout the teaching course (Darling-Hammond 2012; Summers and Weir 2012). By including onsite practical experiences in the music teacher courses, students are better informed of how to teach, which may transform “attitudes and beliefs of pre-service music teachers” (Emmanuel 2005, 39) and help future music teachers to stay in the profession. I agree with Robbins and Stein who argue that creating strong partnerships with schools or in the community are fundamental to sustaining lifelong commitment to music teaching as they can only enhance music teacher education courses in the future (Robbins and Stein 2005).

Methodology

This article forms part of my wider research project Attitudes and perceptions of Arts Education Students: Preparing culturally responsive teachers across two continents (Australia and South Africa). I gained ethics clearance in 2010 for this project to undertake research at North West University (NWU), University of Pretoria (UP) and Deakin University (DU). I visited South Africa in October 2010 and October 2012 to obtain interview data from three music tertiary educators and some students who volunteered to be interviewed. I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a qualitative approach to undertake the interviews for my study. Semi-structured interviews are considered an effective data collection strategy when using IPA as the interviews allowed me to ask exploratory questions. The use of IPA focuses on how people make sense of their life experiences and their lived world (Roberts 2013, Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009, Brocki and Wearden 2006; Shaw 2001). I undertook all the interviews in a conversational manner (Smith 2004; Eatough and Smith 2006). As part of the wider study, the interviews were taped and the data analysed and coded in relation to music teacher education, issues of culture, and diversity, multiculturalism and community pathways and school based partnerships as a form of onsite teaching and learning. IPA uses direct quotations from the transcripts (Larkin et al 2006) to make sense of the lived world of the participants (Pringle, Hendry and McLafferty 2011). This paper only focuses on the music tertiary educators and student voices across the three universities (including my own voice as the DU music educator) regarding the benefits and limitations encountered in relation to school-based partnerships as an effective way to foster onsite professional development.

Background: SBP at the Three Universities

Globally, music tertiary educators are often faced with limited time due to staffing, resources and timetabling issues within tertiary courses (Russell-Bowie 2003; Ballantyne 2007). Jeanneret and Forrest argue that universities continue to be influenced by both internal and external factors to support lobbying for more music teaching time within the units (Jeanneret and Forrest 2009). Given the reduced time and resources available at tertiary level, music educators create a community of learning through SBP as a form of onsite PD within tertiary courses. The experience for all students across the three universities entailed a range of teaching and learning experiences, opportunities for performance, conversations about pedagogy, classroom management and cultural exchange. Across all three universities in this study, students experience different forms of onsite teaching and learning in their music units. The SBP at the two universities in my study in South Africa largely focus on the teaching and learning of South
African music whereas the SBP at my university in Melbourne focus on the teaching and learning of Orff, Kodály and Dalanco approaches to music education with specialist teachers.

UP is approximately 1.5 hours from Johannesburg. As part of their Bachelor of Education (Primary) course, tertiary students have the opportunity to teach onsite in local schools approximately 20km from the university with the music teacher and primary students. Here students have the opportunity to experience, explore and engage in teaching African, Afrikaans and English songs across 10 weeks of the semester. In their 4th and final year, they prepare a music production as part of their assessment for music education. The time spent at the schools allows the music lecturer, pre-service teacher and schoolteacher, if there is no music specialist at the school, to reflect on content and pedagogical knowledge. The immersion with local schools over an entire semester gives these students the chance to rethink their role and identity from ‘university student’ to music teacher. Throughout the semester they weekly gain confidence to teach and take charge of the music lesson as they prepare for the music production. At the end of the semester a music production forms part of the unit assessment as they work closely with the teacher, school and music lecturer onsite.

The experience at NWU is similar to that of UP, this university is approximately 2.5 hours from Johannesburg where students go out to schools with the music lecturer and work in local township schools within 20-30km from the university. The students undertake onsite teaching as well as learn from the local teachers and students about indigenous African songs and dances. They work closely with the lecture to collect and archive indigenous music from the local community. In addition to SBP within the Bachelor or Music (Education) and Diploma in Music, students can also undertake a field trip to Venda in South Africa. Venda is a very long distance from the university - an overnight drive. At this university much research and many community pathways have been developed over the years with culture bearers and local schools in Venda. The immersion into the life and culture of the indigenous Venda people is a valuable and challenging experience for all concerned as both students and lecturer develop new skills, knowledge and understandings of Venda music and culture which forms a rich part of South Africa’s music.

As part of my own unit offering at DU within the Bachelor of Primary and Secondary course, students work onsite with schools to have hands on experiences in local classrooms with the music specialist and myself. DU is situated is approximately 30min from the city of Melbourne. Schools chosen are generally 20km from the university and I have formed a relationship with the music teacher and school over the years. The SBP have been excellent teaching and learning encounters for both students and myself. It provides a space and place to think about new and different ways to teach, assess and relate to curriculum reform. Similar to the universities in South Africa, which I had visited, the assessment tasks are also linked with the onsite school visits where the music teacher and I design the tasks to correlate with the teaching that is taking place at the primary school. The students normally go onsite with me for five weeks out of their twelve-week semester.

Findings and Discussion

In this section of the paper I discuss the benefits and limitations in relation to why the tertiary music educators in this study provides school based opportunities for their students and what this experience mean for the students. During my interview as part of the wider study, I asked all three music educators in South Africa why we need to prepare students to be culturally responsive? All three strongly felt that South Africa has a rich variety of music, people and culture and it was necessary to include African music as students both black and white needed to know more about the music and culture of the local people as there are eleven official languages in South Africa which are predominately African. One of the interviewee’s comments, “although we are far into our democracy, there is still the lack of African music at tertiary education and
schools”. African music since democracy in 1994 forms a rich part of the Arts and Culture teaching area in education in South Africa. I also include African music in my own teaching within my teaching units, as it aligns with the new Australian Curriculum to teach about diverse music and cultures. Miya rightly points out that the African continent is vast and diverse so we as tertiary educators cannot know everything about African music or its culture (Miya 2003). Hence learning from the local people, artist and community is a form of professional development for students and lecturer.

**Music Educator Voices: Benefits**

At NWU I asked the music educator about the benefits of taking students to local schools. She commented “although we give them a broad background of the music at the university, we take them out into the wider community as there is enough knowledge, skills and teaching material untapped at these places”. The music educator firmly believes that, “the old way of doing fieldwork, of observing from a distance is totally out of date”, she strongly advises “not to go that route” rather she believes that “by taking university students into the field they learn far more”. The music educator mentioned that there are many local schools close to the university that welcome SBP as they see it as an opportunity for university musicians to work with classroom pupils. The schools are receptive to regular performances for the children as this interaction enriched the lives of the children and as well as the life of the school (Soto et al 2009). The music educator reiterates, “you are in a rural region with approximately 48 primary schools to choose from, so there is no problem to go out to these schools with the students”. In the interviewee’s opinion, “the material is there” hence taking the students out to local schools provides them with the rich opportunity to learn of local indigenous African music. The hands-on practical experience gives both black and white students the opportunity to learn of a different music and culture. The pre-service students also teach the school children songs, however, the SBP serves as a rich resource for local African people to teach the university students and lecturer local music and culture, be it Afrikaans, Portuguese or Twana.

At this university, students also have the opportunity to visit Venda, which is situated close to the border of Zimbabwe, approximately 22 hours by car from the university. According to this music lecturer he found “though I get them [the students] to read articles about what African music really is and I also expose them to music examples on campus, it is different to going onsite and learning with an authentic artist”. In his experience “working alongside a culture bearer of Venda music” opens up a whole new experience. He explained, “we [students and lecturer] live at the Amokia village in Venda where we undertake fieldwork experience”. This he found was challenging for the university students as it took them out of their comfort zone. According Kea et al “many pre-service teachers’ first impressions of unfamiliar places are informed or challenged by their own personal experiences in new environments” (Kea et al 2006, 10). Once students adjust to village life, the music educator finds they begin to appreciate and value what they have in their own homes and at the schools they attended. The fieldwork experience is concentrated and hands-on, working with the culture bearer, school children, learning new songs and dances and taking notes of how to teach. The onsite teaching and learning experience for two weeks serves as an ‘intensive’ giving students the time and space away from the university to learn how culture, melody and rhythm work together as the lecturer comments “so its not just about drumming, the students learn musical games and learn to move and play on the instruments”. The music lecturer also noted that the “white students are challenged by the practical component” going onsite and learning within the community with the culture bearer as a form of onsite professional development “challenges me as I have to teach them in a different way”.

At UP, the music educator strongly feels the need to link theory to practice by taking her students to work with local township schools who do not necessarily have specialist music
teachers. She finds there are numerous benefits for her students and herself. The music educator has built a good relationship with the schools and principals over the years and has negotiated the timing of these visits as well as the stage production that students prepare as part of their assessment task. She comments “we do try to give enough ideas and materials for our students as part of the course” and confirms that by taking the students to local schools helps them put theory into practice. The music educator strongly feels that though her “students themselves are such rich resources of African music” working with them at the schools is good practice for them to learn how to mange pupil behaviour, organise the stage program, and also teach the songs and movement. This I personally witnessed on my visits to this university when I accompanied the students and lecturer to the schools. She says, “it is challenging and rewarding when everything comes together and the joy is unspeakable that they do it so well”. The onsite teaching with the music educator is an exchange of cultures, song and languages at the school, which can only enhance the students’ knowledge and skills. The SBP served as an exchange of ideas where students “appreciated each other’s culture and were receptive to sharing about each other’s cultures and music”. At this university there is mixture of white and black students, which is similar to NWU. She was proud of the fact that her tertiary students were able to share their skills and take on the identity of teacher as “they sang, did the movement and modelled the pedagogy of how it is to be taught”. The teaching and learning onsite is a form of professional development for all concerned as they increased their professional learning and growth in relation to active participation and problem solving.

At DU as part of my music education units I found taking my pre-service students onsite to local schools a valuable experience for both students and I as we not only had fun working with children, we also learnt about new resources and had the chance to team teach with each other and the music specialist. Reading about the European approaches and seeing them in action in class links the theory to the practice. Over a period of five weeks visiting a school and preparing classes, we discuss what works and what does not work, and the students gain PD onsite from the music teacher who regularly undertakes PD overseas and also provides PD through the Victorian Orff Schulwerk Association. My students valued their time working alongside a music teacher, seeing themselves as professional music teachers and encountering real children in authentic music teaching and learning situations (Conkling and Henry 2002). They tried out lessons, kept a journal of their visits and had an assessment task related to the teaching onsite. Having conversations with the music teacher and myself gave the pre-service teachers the confidence to exchange ideas curriculum, assessment and reporting in relation to the Victorian curriculum. I, like university music educators in America, found that I benefited from visiting classrooms “as a way of remaining current with new curricula and pedagogical techniques, and public school teachers reported that they benefited from the new ideas and enthusiasm that university students bring to their classroom” (Brophy 2011, 152).

Student Voices: Benefits

Across all three universities when asked what did you learn from the SBP and what were the benefits, students reported, “it was fun”, “it was interesting to work onsite with real children and with your lecturer there”. They also commented that they had learnt about planning and preparing for the lesson and pacing lessons. “Though I was scared at first I watched the lecturer and music teacher and gained confidence to trial it with the children at the school”. Some students said “I felt like a real teacher”, “the children actually learnt from me”, “I was able to control their behaviour working in small groups” and “I had to give it my best as they looked forward to us coming to the school”. It was evident that the SBP offered students the chance to observe and reflect in and on the teaching and learning. In the case of UP, they had to prepare and choreograph a stage performance which made them work even harder. “We learnt from the children songs and we also taught them some songs which made it fun and interesting”. At
NWU, they said working with culture bearers “is the best way to learn about African music than reading it from a book” “being onsite is challenging, you have to just do it”, “the more you do it you gain confidence and you enjoy it”. For my DU students “self and peer assessing was an important aspect of our SBP”, “the practical hands-on approach is best done in schools with real kids”, “we learnt so much more trialing it and doing micro lessons at the school”. Across all three universities students felt the SBP “exciting” and “challenging” “it makes us think of the profession in a serious way and how we should be teaching one day”. Conkling rightfully suggests SBP “allows pre-service teachers to learn from each other and it offers an environment where changes in belief about music teaching might occur” (Conkling 2007, 48).

\*Limitations\*

The experience across the continents proved a worthy experience, the three tertiary educators in this study and I recognise the importance and impact that field-based teaching and learning has for our students. Setting up the school visits or field visits can be time consuming, Burton and Greher (2007, 20) point out once you set up “regular meetings to keep the lines of communication open” you can easily negotiate the times, dates and length of visit. This sometimes does not always go to plan and as it requires continued commitment by school and university (Soto et al 2009). The lecturers have to also follow what the school may be teaching at the time, which does not always correspond to what is being taught in the music unit at the time. There may be times when your planned visits are shortened or changed due to changes in the school timetabling which limits what you planned or what the students planned to do at the school. Making logistical arrangements such as travel for the students can be a constraint. It can be rather daunting taking instruments along to the schools and bringing them back weekly to the university if there is a limited supply of equipment at the schools. It may be considered a limitation of experience and exposure if students tend to work at the same school for the semester.

\*Concluding Remarks\*

As there is much to do in so little time, the benefits from the partnerships took the form of professional development for all concerned. Students gained professional development onsite making links to what Henry refers to as “linking theory to practice” (Henry 2001, 24) and becoming part of a community of practice as “school(s) are learning communities” (Clarke and Hollingsworth 2002, 949) that can offer students meaningful professional development. Across both continents, the students gained a greater understanding of how pupils learn; it gave them the opportunity to observe learning in a social context. They learnt from one another and from the teacher as part of social learning with the emphasis on observation, modelling and imitation (Bandura 1977). In particular it allowed the students to experience, engage and explore music teaching and learning in a ‘real space’ as many do not have the necessary knowledge, skills, dispositions, and experiences to teach in culturally responsive ways (Kea et al 2006; Burton 2011). By going onsite into local schools in South Africa in particular, students acquire cultural competencies to meet the changing classrooms demographics they will encounter (Emmanuel 2005). Similarly this rings true for the Australian students as Melbourne is considered the most multicultural city in Australia.

Whilst much has been written about the benefits of SBP, some students may feel that they do not want to pursue a teaching career; this was not the case with the interviewees I spoke to in 2010 and 2012 across the three universities. Generally students wanted to spend more time at the schools or in the field, “the experience obtained in a partnership provides a sense of career affirmation” (Hunter et al 2009). By providing students with school-based partnerships as a form
of onsite professional development within teacher education courses, we enable them to expand their ways of engaging in music and in pedagogy as they develop an initial repertoire of teaching competencies. Through such opportunities they comprehend the various dimensions of music experience and understand student learning. "Research demonstrates that as partnerships constituents works together for the good of each member, its broader whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts" (Burton 2011, 122). The onsite teaching and learning in this study demonstrated a worthwhile experience that could be beneficial across other learning areas in teacher education. I concur with Soto et al, that more research into school-based partnerships in music education could benefit our students if they work for longer periods in schools and in more than just one school which optimises their teaching and learning experience as they become part of the community of music practice (Soto et al 2009).
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