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## **Sharing and Speaking about African Music: Professional development with Swaziland Primary School Teachers**

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The teaching and learning of Indigenous African music is characterized as a holistic integrated experience where music, dance and theatre are inseparable, seen as an integral part of culture. The transmission of this experience is absorbed through participation in cultural activities from childhood in the community. In African societies, both traditional and contemporary, musical arts education and the understanding of culture are fundamental to life, community and society. It is through musical arts, that Africans embrace spiritual, emotional, material and intellectual aspects and knowledge of both the individual and the community. This paper reports on an in-service program (August 2006) offered at the Centre for Indigenous African Instrumental Music and Dance Practices (CIIMDA), Pretoria, South Africa. For the purpose of this paper, the one week professional development course undertaken by generalist primary school teachers from Swaziland is highlighted and proves worthy for these teachers to implement what they learnt in the classroom. As a position paper, I contend that the understanding and participation in indigenous cultural musical arts practices, enlightens learners about their cultural heritage and further enriches their understanding of African music and dance that can be adopted, adapted and applied to primary schools in Swaziland. This paper summarizes some key findings of interview data from ten participants in relation to the intensive program. By offering such in-service professional development programs, teachers are able to reach their wider communities where they will continue to share and speak about African music, dance and culture.

### **Introduction**

In most traditional African societies, music is not written down, but rather passed down through oral tradition hence “informed and accurate listening is as important and as much a measure of musical ability as is performance, because it is the only means of ensuring continuity of the musical tradition” (Blacking, 1976, 10). As a position paper, I contend that professional development (PD) is one medium of ensuring that African creative musical arts and culture are effectively passed down, shared and communicated. This paper reports on a PD course undertaken at the Centre for Indigenous African Instrumental Music and Dance Practices (CIIMDA), Pretoria, South Africa, it outlines some notions of African music, Musical Arts and PD and reports on a few salient points raised by participants in relation to what their expectations were for the week and what they learnt in that week. The paper also suggest that there is a need for ongoing PD in African music and Musical Arts as many teachers would not have had training in their teacher education courses. However, the paper does suggest that short term PD in music is a worth pathway for generalist primary teachers attend, where they gain skills and knowledge that are feel confident and comfortable to apply in their classrooms It would seem necessary for primary teachers to provide a holistic education to students that would incorporate African music and culture in their classrooms.

During an intense week of sharing and speaking about African musical arts, participants engaged and made connections with one another. This setting “begin(s) the process of constructing a world of community” where collegiality and

professional communication is explored among teachers (Elbaz-Luwisch & Kalekin-Fishman, 2004, p.255). I only observed one day at the end of the week where I interviewed all participants. In this paper, I argue that PD is a way forward where generalist primary schools teachers can share, show and speak about the philosophy, social constructs and music of the African people and include more of it into their daily generalist teaching.

### **Context: CIIMDA**

CIIMDA is based in Pretoria (South Africa), it offers a variety of PD in the playing of a number of African instruments (classical drum, bow, mbira, xylophones to name a few) dance, philosophy and culture. At CIIMDA you learn about indigenous knowledge, family history, rites and even complex constitutional matters of modern day politics. Within the context of learning, careful discussion between participants, master musician/s or visiting artist/s in residence is facilitated and explored about dance, song, culture, rites, ancestral connection, totems, myths and taboos. It must be noted that CIIMDA also sends out practicing musicians, culture bearers and academics on African music to undertake PD programs with teachers in South African Developing Countries.

### *Participants*

Ten teachers from Swaziland were selected by the Ministry of Education to attend a one-week in-service program in Pretoria, South Africa (August 2006). Swaziland, a relatively small country is geographically sandwiched between South Africa and Mozambique where the main languages spoken are English and Swazi. English was the medium of instruction for these teachers at CIIMDA. The participants were all generalist primary school teachers from various primary schools. Their ages ranged from early 20's to 50's (four female and six male). Music in Swaziland is offered weekly for 30 minutes as part of class music at the primary school level. Workshops ran from 8:30am to 6pm daily.

### *Methodology*

At the end of the week all ten participants volunteered to be interviewed as a focus group, the data gathered informed the findings and discussion for this paper. The group interview took place in an informal fashion for approximately one hour and was taped with the permission of the participants at the end of the week. I did not attend the entire week I only spent one-day observing and at the end of the day I interviewed the group collectively. By creating a comfortable environment in the focus group, interviewees were encouraged to share their perceptions, points of view, experiences, wishes and concerns (Krueger & Casey, 2000 and Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999), in the form of a discussion amongst participants and myself. The interview can be aligned to an ethnographic interview where “a particular kind of speech event” is used to gather cultural data (Greef, 2002, p.303). According to Greef (2002), the value of ethnographic interviews lies in its focus on culture through the participant's perspective and through first hand encounters.

## **African Music**

It is an arduous task to outline African music, life and culture as the continent is so vast (fifty-three countries with over 700 million people and 700 distinct languages), I offer only a few general remarks in brief. Music in African societies is not different to other societies. It has an aesthetic significance with long traditions and values that are associated with the people and represents part of their identity. A large part of that identity is the concept of music making, making meaning and sharing which Nketia (1966) aptly describes as part of the traditional way of life, and not as embellishments of it.

Music making is, therefore an index of a living community and a measure of the degree of social cohesion among its respective units. African music can be conceptualized in terms of musical and extra-musical purposes forming a significant socializing aspect to the music. This view is supported by Nzewi's (2003) notion that African music is "formulated to perform differentiated tasks in the social, religious, political, economic and health systems (p.15).

The basis of music education for the African is an oral and aural tradition, here music can be used as an education tool to learn about and or get to know other musics serving as an engaging hands-on activity and/or experience, as well as a form of knowledge system. Such a knowledge system Nzewi (2003) points out can be reduced or transformed by educators for formal education through which the musical arts of Africa can be promoted.

## **Musical Arts in Africa**

The arts in Africa Nketia (1995, p.1), "classifies into traditional (cultivated in context in which behavior is guided by ethnicity, kinship and a common indigenous language, religion and culture) and contemporary arts (cultivated in context in which linkages beyond those of ethnicity from the basis of social life)". In keeping with Nketia, Akrofi (2004) comments that traditional arts were the only category existing before the advent of colonization and colonialism that later gave birth to contemporary arts. He further identifies traditional arts as community orientated, performed together with dance, play, oral literature, story telling and other arts (Akrofi, 2004, p.2). This view is supported by Mans (1998, p.374) who affirms, "musical arts education in Africa should be based on *ngoma*, which summarizes the holistic connections between music, dance, other arts, society and life force". One effective way of promoting, preserving and protecting indigenous knowledge in education is offering professional development at various educational sites and at all levels. CIIMDA is one such place in South Africa that provides PD for many Southern Developing countries.

## **Professional Development**

According to Loucks-Horsley (1998) professional development (PD) and the notion of change are interrelated. PD can encompass a variety of programs (short and long-term, school based and off-site, teacher led and directed and expert led, and voluntary and mandatory programs), thereby altering the professional practices, beliefs, and teachers' understanding of student learning (Griffin, 1983, Guskey 2003).

Although the PD program discussed in this paper took place over short term (one week), off-site and expert led, it can be closely aligned to the notion of ‘traditional PD’ that normally takes place as a ‘one-off workshop’ or training session. According to Stuckey (1999), teachers have not always benefited from one-hit professional development programs in order to produce real changes in teachers pedagogical practices. I support this notion of PD and agree with Stuckey (1999) that PD needs to be long term and ongoing.

It is common practice when doing PD that culture bearers and or experts in a particular field conduct the workshops whereby the participants are active learners, having the exposure and expertise to share with colleagues taking control of their own professional development (Stuckey, 1999). This was very much evident in the lively discussions and debates when learning the djembe and mbira as well as when speaking about African philosophy and spirituality. While PD should be based on the ideas and knowledge from outsiders to assist teachers (Gordon, Gerber & Price, 2002), Lieberman (1995) asserts it should be situated at schools that are site-based. In this instance, workshops were based at CIIMDA.

During PD workshops it was hoped that participants would share their new experience and develop a sense of teamwork and camaraderie that will build their collective and individual confidence to try new procedures or practices when returning to their classrooms. By giving teachers the opportunity to control their learning and content, their motivation and commitment increases, their self- efficacy is enhanced and teachers are empowered to take risks, assume new roles, in the hope to make the school culture more collaborative (Gordon et al., 2002, Hodges, 1996 and Pink & Hyde, 1992). This process in the wider school community allows and enables teachers to either start or continue their sharing, showing and speaking about African music and how it may be used in primary schools amongst generalist teachers.

### **Sharing and Speaking: Findings and discussion**

This section of the paper, I deliberately called sharing and speaking about African music, dance and culture, as this is exactly what took place between participants and culture bearer/artist in residence. Music making in Africa is playing with someone and not just for someone. Hence a sense of communal music making and sharing as pointed out by Nketia (1966) and Nzewi (2003) two prolific writers on African music. Here I only offer a few salient comments from the interview data and my observation of the participants regarding what their expectations were of the week and what were some of the things they had learnt that they could take back to their community settings in Swaziland regarding the notion of music making and sharing. By attending PD at CIIMDA, the generalist teacher is now able to incorporate and promote African musical arts into their classes where they had not been previously trained.

All participants stated that they had good tonic-sol-fa skills (singing, reading and writing), as they were all involved in choral music as conductors out of their school settings. However, they did expect to learn more about staff notation, African dance, composition, writing of songs and how to play ‘other’ indigenous instruments. The participants did agree that such expectations were met, however, one major set back for them was time. The course was “full on” and “highly organized” agreed all interviewees. One person commented, “time was a shortcoming...a course for two weeks was condensed into one week ...we did very well with all the practical things but not with maybe staff notation”.

Although all participants were African, they had daily discussions about the philosophy, and spirituality of African music and its connections to life and culture. “This was sometimes new...what we learnt and heard... this sharing helps us promote indigenous knowledge and helps us preserve it”. The artists-in-residence, culture bearers or workshop leaders came from Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Although the presenters were not from Swaziland, the participants culture is part of the wider African culture in terms of the many indigenous traditions, rituals and rites and was also presented during the week and shared through song and dance from the Swazi peoples. Although there are differences in language across the continent there are many commonalities in relation to music and culture which I do not explore in this paper.

It was interesting to learn that none of the participants had ever learnt the Mbira (African Indigenous instrument from Zimbabwe, known as a finger/thumb piano). They described this experience as “wonderful”, “it relates to the Western music use of the keys”, “we used both thumbs to play and became competent”. This aspect was something they did wish to take back and teach in Swaziland as well as drumming. Even though drums were not new to the participants, the djembe drum and the sonority of it was different. “I have done drums before but this is different, the tone it gives out is richer” said one interviewee. Learning the djembe drum which is West African was seen by teachers as a new aspect to teaching music and culture from another part of Africa as the continent is so vast. Teaching the djembe at schools will help promote the music and life of people in West Africa thus making students aware of the relevancy of music and the use of the so called ‘talking drum’ which is still used in many remote villages in Africa. More importantly what all participants commented on was the spiritual aspect of drumming and connecting with one another in the group. None of the participants knew each other beforehand, during their week of PD they ‘spoke’, ‘shared’ and ‘showed’ and built friendships. “I now have many friends with whom I will be able to share resources and my teaching experience” such sentiments were felt by most in the group.

In the main participants said they would all use drumming in their classroom, “it releases tension and I will use it as a teaching strategy”. Another said “I will use it to communicate”, African drums sends a specific message and is good to improve listening skills in the class”. “What I have learnt from this week is an earth spiritual experience which I would like to take back to my class”, commented another.

In sum, participants learnt about developing the child in a holistic way through musical arts. They wanted to make their students more aware of the relationship between nature, spirituality and African music. One participant said, “coming for this week made me realize who I am...I am an African and I will share that so before we sing we should realize who we are”.

### **Conclusion**

The one-week PD on African music proved to be a worthy experience for the ten-generalist teachers. Not only did they learnt more about African music and culture and its link to spirituality, they also learnt western notation, new songs, new ways of playing the drum as well as basic skills to play the mbira. Such knowledge gained during that week teachers said “will be used in their classrooms” and as they “gained more confidence they will incorporate more it into their classroom”. Boyle, Lamprianou, & Boyle, (2003), claims that traditional approaches to PD such as short term

workshops (like the one experienced at CIIMDA), one-off sessions and enrichment courses do foster teachers' interest and deepen their understanding of content knowledge and pedagogical skills. One interviewee commented "we all will come back for more PD like this...it would help if we have a bigger venue so more people can attend from other countries so we can see their perspective and learn share and speak with them". It must be noted that such PD sessions appear insufficient to foster the necessary teacher learning which can significantly alter what teachers teach or how they teach (Shield, Marsh, & Adelman, N, 1998; Weiss, Montgomery, Ridgeway, & Bond, 1998) even though the participants said they will try out various things learnt in the week in their educational settings. I concur with Garet, Porter, Desimore, Birman, & Suk Yoon, (2001); Shield et al., (1998) & Weiss et al., (1998) that depth of teacher change in terms of generalist teachers wanting to include African musical arts in their teaching is dependent on long term professional development. Nonetheless the short term PD offered at CIIMDA according to the interviewees had increased teachers confidence and competence, they gained new knowledge, skills and understandings as generalist teachers and would use it to promote African musical arts in their classrooms.

#### **About the author**

Dawn Joseph is a lecturer in music and education studies at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. Her current research focuses on the teaching and learning of African music and teacher change in Australian education settings. She is the Co-coordinator of the Australian "Musical Arts Education Action Team" cell for the Pan African Society for Musical Arts Education (PASMAE) and is deputy chair of the Australian Society for Music Education (ASME) Victoria.

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