

Melinda: De facto primary school music teacher

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Abstract

A series of reviews dating back to the 1960s and a body of research literature points to the inadequate delivery of music education by generalist primary school teachers in Australian schools. Despite recommendations for specialist music teachers to teach music in all Australian primary schools to counter this ongoing trend such an approach has not been endorsed by the Australian government. In addition, there simply are not enough music specialists to fill such positions. This article focuses on an alternative way that music education can be delivered in Australian primary schools, namely through music being taught to all classes in a school by a generalist primary school teacher with a passion for music education. Told from such a teacher's perspective, this article employs a narrative methodology to outline how this might successfully occur.

Key words: primary school music; narrative inquiry; generalist music teaching

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Introduction

Melinda is in her third year as a primary school teacher. She admits to loving the job, particularly that she is now the “de facto” (her word) school classroom music teacher. This article, a case study of Melinda’s work as a generalist teacher teaching music is presented as a story. As Cleaver (2012) states, “while narrative meanings within a story may stand alone, when a story is presented as formal research it may be better served with some explanation, given that the best interests of scholarship may be at stake” (p. 37). With this in mind I will present a rationale for presenting Melinda’s story and briefly discuss the methodology employed in constructing Melinda’s story prior to the telling of her story.

Teaching music in the primary school

Music is identified as a discipline within the arts that is to be taught in Australian primary schools.

This is articulated in both state based curriculum and the new Australian curriculum. However, the *who* should be teaching music in the primary school is not clear. In the draft *Australian Curriculum: The Arts Foundation to Year 10* (2012) there is no direction in terms of who is best placed to teach music in the primary school, despite the fact that reviews into music education from the 1960s (i.e., Bartle, 1968) up until more recent times (i.e., DEST, 2005) have indicated that specialist music teachers should be teaching music in primary schools, rather than generalist primary school classroom teachers. Research points to the substandard way that generalists teach music (Bresler, 1995; Giles & Frego, 2004; Saunders & Baker, 1991; Stake, Bresler & Mabry, 1991; Wiggins & Wiggin, 2008), hence the argument for music specialists who are not likely to suffer from inadequate time devoted to music and music education like preservice generalist primary teachers (de Vries, 2011; Hocking, 2009; Stevens-Ballenger, Jeanneret & Forrest, 2010) or the lack of confidence to teach music that many generalist

primary school preservice and in-service teachers suffer from (de Vries, 2011; Hallam et al., 2009; Hash, 2009; Hennessy, 2000; Holden & Button, 2006; Jeanneret, 1997; Mills, 1989; Russell-Bowie, 2009).

Specialist teachers in the arts are rare in most Australian public schools (Russell-Bowie, 2010), with the exception of Queensland, with “over 87% of Queensland state primary schools” having a music specialist (DETA, 2009-2012). In response to the *National Review of School Music Education*, DEST, 2005) recommending that all primary schools should have a specialist music teacher, Jeanneret (2006) indicated that this is unlikely to happen due to the difficulty the Australian federal government would have in convincing all state and territory governments to fund such a program, and the dearth of primary school music specialists if such an approach was to be taken. Russell-Bowie (2009) states that the “funding for music and other arts programmes, specialist music/visual arts/drama/dance teachers, instruments, resources and teacher training has decreased significantly” in Australia due to economic rationalism (p. 24). As a result primary school teachers are faced with having to teach an increasing range of subject/discipline areas, including the arts. However, school principals have identified the need for subject specialist teachers such as music specialists in the primary school (Abril & Gault, 2006; Ardzejewska et al., 2010). Fortunately Australian principals have the flexibility “to advertise for teachers with specialist skills in particular subject areas” (Russell-Bowie, 2011, p. 169), so they can appoint music specialists to teach music if they wish to do so. But what happens if they cannot find a qualified primary school music specialist? This was the problem faced by the principal at the school where Melinda works.

Methodology

Narrative methodology was employed in this case study. Working from the premise that we live storied lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006), narrative methodology emphasises that people

impose story structures on their lived experiences (Sinclair Bell, 2002). The narrative researcher listens to and responds to what is told to them by the research participant – in this case Melinda (a pseudonym) – and re-stories this interview data into a coherent story (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). This means that as researcher I have analysed the interview data obtained from an initial thirty minute telephone interview and a subsequent face-to-face hour long interview with Melinda, and structured this into a narrative. The narrative includes substantial direct quotes from Melinda. Drawing on the work of Ollerenshaw & Creswell (2002) I identified the five elements of plot structure – character, setting, a problem (or problems) faced, actions taken to address the problem/s, and resolution – and used these to organise the analysed data into a narrative.

Narrative inquiry focuses on the complexities in personal stories (Barone, 2009), allowing the researcher “to present experience holistically in all its complexity and richness” (Sinclair Bell, 2002, p. 209). Personal stories like the one offered by Melinda can offer “alternative, often resistant or counter-hegemonic versions of things like truth and reality” (Bowman, 2006, p. 9). The focus is not so much on what happened, but rather why a person believes something happened, thus capturing “the way in which people view, understand, and make sense of their experiences” (Abril, 2007, p. 23).

With a focus on “relational research” (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009, p. 599) my primary concern was ensuring that Melinda was able to respond to and shape the emerging narrative that was drawn from our two interviews. As a result we met for a third time where she read and responded to the narrative. I am not (and cannot be) the “silent” researcher in this narrative relationship. Rather, I have used the strategy of employing my researcher’s “interactive voice” (Chase, 2005, p. 666) in the narrative where I foreground my own opinions and responses to Melinda’s story.

Melinda's story

Melinda teaches grade 4 in a public school in metropolitan Melbourne (Australia). She is in her third year of teaching and has taught at this school since graduating from university with a Bachelor of Education degree. She taught grade 3 for her first two years. It was during her second year teaching that one of the girls in her class asked her why the school did not have a choir: "She asked this because we'd just finished our weekly music session - that class just *loved* to sing. I didn't have an answer for her so I thought about it and went and spoke to Don [the school principal] about maybe starting a choir." Melinda had no experience conducting a school choir, "but I was in a choir and I play the piano, so thought I could have a go at it." Don supported the idea and within a month she found "more than fifty children" attending the weekly choir rehearsal. Following some school performances and a performance at the local shopping centre Melinda felt exhilarated about her choir: "I can say that I love teaching and I had a great class last year, but I think I looked forward to choir more than anything else."

Don commented on a number of occasions that she was doing a good job with the choir. "I remember he told me that he loved having music going on at lunchtime when they rehearsed. He'd drop in every now and then."

In December of that year (Melinda's second year teaching) he called her into his office. "He told me he wanted a music teacher for our school and asked if I knew anybody that might be interested and qualified to do the job. I remember thinking really hard if I knew someone ... but I didn't." As Melinda told me this I noticed her smiling. "And then he said, 'What about you?'"

"And you jumped at the opportunity, right?" I said.

"I was flattered. But no, I didn't ... I love music, I have always taught music to my class, but the idea of being the school music teacher, it was a lot to take in. It was scary."

"Why?"

"I don't have the training. Not to teach music."

Melinda revealed that Don had in fact been looking for a music teacher with music teaching qualifications. "But he said he couldn't find anybody ... And he knew me and knew I fitted into the school and took the choir, so he thought I could do it."

"Did you think you could?"

"Not then. I told him I'd need to do some courses. Some PD [professional development]."

"How did he respond to that?" I was quite cynical about this, knowing that relevant professional development in music is not a priority for schools (de Vries, 2011; Garvis & Pendergast, 2011), even though teachers who identify as teachers of music either do engage in professional development in the field or desire to (Bush, 2007; Conway, 2008; Tarnowski & Murphy, 2003).

"He was really good about it, said I should map out what I needed, when I would do it, and the cost."

"The school paid for it?"

"The lot." The professional development that Melinda undertook included a three day workshop in the school holidays, two days in term 1 the following year, and a weekend in term 1. "I didn't mind doing this in my own time because the school was paying, and I knew I would also get some time off class to attend [a PD] too."

When asked what she gained from the professional development she undertook she listed skills in conducting choirs, "using Orff" in her classroom music lessons and "how to make the most of technology and music. It was all useful, and I used what I had learnt pretty much straight away." I asked if she intended to undertake more PD in the immediate future. "Well I've blown my PD budget for this year, so probably not ... unless there's something really good and I'll pay for it myself. But I've been networking with some other teachers, other music teachers. We're on Facebook and talk a lot, share resources, ideas. That's really useful for me." Upon further probing Melinda revealed just how much she got out of this informal network of music educators. It was only after we

had talked more about this that she commented, "I knew I learnt a lot from them, but now that we've talked [about it] it's probably a lot more than I realised." The value that Melinda places on informal networking with other music educators is in itself a form of ongoing professional development, as identified by a range of authors who also reveal that music educators place significant value on opportunities for such networking (Bush, 2007; Conway, 2008; Krueger, 2000; Rouston et al., 2005).

Melinda was not the only subject specialist in her primary school. Although Don wanted Melinda to be the school music teacher he explained that this was part of a bigger vision he had for the school. "He was looking at using some staff like me as subject specialist teachers. Not full time, but part time. So I ended up teaching music, but only in the afternoons after lunch. The rest of the time I'd have my own class and teach them. But the other specialists taught my class when I was teaching music."

"What specialist areas?"

"Music, art, PE [physical education], science, Chinese."

"Why those areas?" I asked.

"There was staff with skills [in those areas]. And Don said in a staff meeting that these subjects weren't being taught throughout the school and thought they should be."

Melinda had some reservations about taking on the music specialist role at first. "I told Don that I thought it might be too much to take on. I didn't want to let down my [day to day] class." Don allayed Melinda's fears by telling her that the children in her grade 4 class would be especially selected so that she would not have any children with "severe learning needs or behaviour problems." I asked Melinda how she felt about that. "Relieved, but a bit guilty. I knew there were a couple of really difficult children coming into grade 4 and Gina [the other grade 4 teacher] got them. But she doesn't take on a specialist teacher role like me so I guess that's fair."

"Did you have any other doubts about taking on the music teacher role?"

"Not really. Not after knowing I'd had some PD and knowing I'd have a great space to teach music in ... that set things up beautifully." Melinda is referring to the "multipurpose room" we are sitting in. It is an open, inviting space with an upright piano, interactive whiteboard, and chairs stacked in the corner of the room. There are also cupboards which contain musical instruments, songbooks and CDs. "This is where I take music lessons and my two choirs," she says, smiling. "It's a good space, nice and light and airy, with plenty of room."

Melinda now has two choirs, "because of the demand ... I had to form two." Both choirs commence rehearsal once a week half an hour before the school lunch break. Children remain in rehearsal for a further twenty minutes during the lunch break. "It works well. The kids like getting some time out of class, but they know they have to commit to staying on for some of their lunch [break]."

"Did you decide on this?"

"I got the idea from one of the other teachers I met doing PD. I ran the idea past Don and he agreed to it. It took a while getting kids to remember to come, but now it's all good, they remember."

"You have a very supportive principal." While school principals may value music as part of the curriculum, constraints such as finance and timetabling can provide significant challenges to providing the support required for a school music program (Abril & Gault, 2006).

"Tell me about it ... I couldn't have done all of this without him. He's been great. He even comes along to the choir performances, you know out of school."

"Why is that?"

"He's just really supportive of music. He told me that he thinks music can really make a school ..."

(It is at this point that I wish I had ethics approval to interview Don, to understand why he values music in school. But I don't.)

"... and I think it does. You have no idea how many parents have come up to me and said how

they love having the choirs in the school and how the children like coming to music. I am so glad I've got this opportunity."

"And your [grade 4] class is okay?"

"Just the little things that every teacher deals with; the reporting, the paperwork, some minor behaviour things with a couple of the children. But that's teaching."

"So there's no problem balancing your class and doing the music teaching?"

"No, not really. But that's because of where I am now. I was ready for this. But there is no way I could have done this earlier on, like in my first year out [of university]. I've had the chance to get things right in my teaching in the first two years. I had a great mentor who helped me with my planning and some parts of my teaching. That really helped. I sometimes feel now like I'm juggling two jobs. It's okay, I can do it, but definitely not two years ago, or even one year ago."

I can't help thinking back nearly a decade when I began as a teacher educator. I had an outstanding student, Trudy, in my music education class with an extensive music background, including four years teaching piano and voice to children. I encouraged her to apply for a job as a specialist music teacher, even though she was completing a general primary education teaching degree. She applied and got the job teaching music, but she also had her own class, just like Melinda. We kept in contact once she started teaching. In second term of her first year teaching she took indefinite leave from teaching. I remember her telling me it was simply too much trying to juggle the music teaching role and having her own class. Unlike Melinda's situation, Trudy did not feel she had the support of the school principal.

The school Trudy had been teaching in was also much larger than Melinda's school. Melinda is able to teach music to the entire school in the hour after lunch, five days a week. Trudy was teaching music for a little over half of her teaching week. I mention this to Melinda. "I wouldn't do that," she said. "I wouldn't feel as if my class was mine. I do now, not only because of the time I still spend teaching my

kids but it's also part of the school culture with all the other specialists having their own class too so the children know this and they get this and it all just works. It's part of this school, it's what we do."

It's what we do.

I love the fact that Melinda clearly feels an integral part of the school and not the "lone music teacher", something I recall suffering from early in my career as a primary school music teacher. She clearly feels valued in her school and identifies as being part of the wider school community: "I do all the staff PD that the other staff do, I plan with the other staff, I do the social stuff with the staff ... I'm one of them and it's great."

I have spent a considerable amount of time over the last three years interviewing teachers about the work they do, particularly in reference to music education. Melissa comes across as one of the happiest, most fulfilled teachers I have interviewed. I tell her this. She beams. "Thank you. I really appreciate that. And I am happy, I do feel fulfilled. I love this job. I loved teaching from my very first prac[ticum experience] at uni[versity]. And I just feel so blessed that I'm teaching here, in this school, teaching music which I have such a passion and love for."

Postscript

I felt the need to write Melinda's story because of the current (actually ongoing) state of crisis that is the teaching of music in Australian primary schools, whereby generalist primary school teachers are being left to teach music or in some cases a qualified music specialist is employed to teach music. Melinda is not the latter. Rather, coming from a generalist teacher background she has taken on the additional role of music teacher. My time spent in Victorian primary schools as a university lecturer supervising students on practicum suggests there are many generalist teachers in schools employed as music specialists. Melinda's story provides a possible way forward for school principals wanting a specialist music teacher who cannot, for whatever reasons (i.e., funding, access) employ a "music

teaching only” teacher. It should be stressed that this is just one story, so generalisations cannot be drawn from Melinda’s experience. Now, as Cleaver (2012, p. 39) writes, “the reader is invited to explore interpretive possibilities and develop criticisms and critical insights” about Melinda’s story and her role as “de facto” music teacher. Needless to say this story is drawn from Melinda’s words and my re-storying of these words; her music teaching has not been addressed.

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