

Lost and found: Music activities delivered by primary classroom generalists

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Abstract

Primary classroom teachers can play a vital role in the music education of primary school students, providing a basis for lifelong learning in music and the arts. Research shows that not all Victorian primary school students have equitable access to music education and that the role of the classroom teacher becomes valuable in supplying or augmenting music education. An instrumental case study was conducted on the music activities delivered by three purposefully selected participants located at Melbourne metropolitan schools. The resulting data, representing the teaching practice and perceptions of participants has been presented in two frameworks, with the aim of assisting classroom teachers to include music activities in their day to day teaching, and to deepen student learning in and through music.

Key words: music education, music activities, primary school music

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About the theme 'lost and found'

In a study about the music activities delivered by selected Victorian primary school classroom generalist teachers, the phrase 'lost and found' had several apt connotations. Firstly, music activities delivered by generalists were found to be 'lost' attributed to the minimal data kept at the government level about primary music education programs (Parliament of Victoria, 2013). A goal of the study was to document some of those seemingly missing music activities. Secondly, the generalists who delivered music activities in the course of day-to-day teaching, prospective participants in the study, were difficult to find. It appeared that generalists delivering music activities may indeed be 'lost' due to a lack of "skills and confidence" (Parliament of Victoria, 2013, p. 19) or submerged in the crowded curriculum (Parliament of Victoria, 2013). Through purposeful sampling,

three participants were 'found' who demonstrated commitment and enthusiasm for delivering music activities. Thirdly, the findings revealed that the music learning outcomes inherent in the music activities delivered by participants were often de-emphasised or 'lost' in the integrated activities favoured by participants. Overall however, the findings indicated a variety of music activities delivered by participants and upon close examination, aspects of best practice pedagogy were 'found'.

The study

Underpinning the study was the stance that classroom teachers can play a vital role in the delivery of music activities to provide or augment music education for primary school students. Key literature informing the study was the Final Report of the Parliamentary Inquiry (2013) which

found that “not all students have equitable access to music education in Victoria” (p. 17), echoing similar statements from the National Review of School Music Education final report *Augmenting the diminished* (DEST, 2005). Yet, classroom teachers can play a “fundamental role in ensuring that all students receive a quality school music education” (Parliament of Victoria, 2013, p. 19). Other key literature focused on music activity content (Russell-Bowie, 2012) and pedagogy, namely; authentic (Dinham, 2014; Herrington, 2014), arts integration (Dinham, 2014; Ewing, 2010; Russell-Bowie, 2012) and best practice pedagogy (Jeanneret & Stevens-Ballenger, 2013; Sinclair, Jeanneret & O’Toole, 2012; Russell-Bowie, 2012).

The aim of the study was to investigate the music activities delivered by selected classroom generalists. In effect, the music activities took centre stage. Through data collection numerous varied music activities were identified and analysed. Descriptive accounts were formulated of selected music activities. Other research outcomes included recommendations by participants about their delivery of music activities, participant perceptions of the planning, and the place of music activities and the presentation of two models culminating from the data, to inform the delivery of music activities by future generalists.

A qualitative research methodology (Crewell, 2005) was employed and the research design consisted of a collective instrumental case study (Stake, 1995). The three participants, representing information rich sources in the provision of music activities, were selected for the study through a survey and purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2005; Stake, 1995). Drawn from two state primary schools in the North-Western Metropolitan area, the participants taught in three different year levels; Foundation and Year 1 (from School 1) and Year 5 (from School 2). The participants had different backgrounds in music. Participant 1 played guitar and had singing lessons, Participant 2 had studied music theory extensively many years prior, and Participant 3 had no formal music training but

loved to listen to music. Semi-structured interviews and a detailed activity matrix instrument were the main data collection tools. Analysis through the use of manual coding (Stake, 1995) enabled themes to emerge for discussion.

Music activity findings

The first research objective required a presentation of descriptive accounts of the music activities delivered by the participants. The music activities were identified and subsequently analysed for content, pedagogical approach, proposed learning outcomes and resources. Represented in the findings was a range of music activities in which the main content themes were singing, listening and performing arts related. Generally the music activities were short in duration and delivered regularly by participants. The participants mainly favoured an integrated pedagogical approach (Dinham, 2014; Russell-Bowie, 2012), each to varying degrees. Integrated music activities were particularly evident in the data from Participant 1 who referred to music activities as a type of pedagogy for English, stating that “music is a powerful tool for learning” for generalist subject areas. Every morning he would sing with the students and play guitar to revise the days of the week, the months of the year and general alphabet songs. When asked about the learning outcomes in the music activities he delivered, Participant 1 did not refer to any music learning outcomes, rather the outcomes were focused around students building social skills, memorising information, developing English skills and “learning how to be a student”. Generally music fostered student engagement and interest, thus it was a “great way to start the day”. Participant 1 and his Foundation class wrote a song together and performed it at assembly.

Although Participant 2 delivered integrated music activities, mostly to support mathematics and term topic areas, she emphatically stated that in her perspective these activities could not be classified as ‘music activities’. In contrast to Participant 1, she defined a ‘music activity’ as

including “rhythm, pitch and using instruments” and as such, she did not believe she was not delivering any music activities at all! Participant 2 spoke in retrospect about how she would like to include more music (like in the “old days”) but due to current team planning constraints and an emphasis on literacy and numeracy, she felt that music activities in the generalist classroom, including hers, “did not come through”. She proposed that the learning outcomes in the music activities she delivered were to “teach kids singing and dancing” and that music activities could enable students to develop discipline and focus. Participant 2 loved to lead students in dancing activities and she enthusiastically encouraged students to present music performances.

The music activities delivered by Participant 3 seemed somewhat embedded in his teaching style and emerged in a largely spontaneous manner. Again, integrated music activities were a main feature, yet Participant 3 infused these activities with elements of constructivist (Jeanneret & Stevens-Ballenger, 2013) and authentic (Dinham, 2014) pedagogical approaches. Music activities covered singing, composing, improvisation and comparative listening. Learning outcomes emphasised music learning, “sing along in time, you know, with the tune” and student ability to “hear a song and remember it”. Additionally he acknowledged how music in the classroom connected students to world cultures, history and the themed topic, whilst at other times music could function to promote student relaxation, focus and creative writing. Students in the Year 5 class taught by Participant 3 wrote and performed songs about natural disasters.

Recommendations from participants

During the interview process, each participant reflectively shared strategies and insights about music activities based on their own experiences. Prompted by the researcher, the participants suggested recommendations specifically framed for generalists who may lack confidence or experience

in delivering music activities. The resulting recommendations included practical suggestions, such as from Participant 1 “use very, very basic lyrics and music”, Participant 2 “plan ahead, don’t make it up”, and from Participant 3 “go slowly when teaching new songs”. Other confidence related recommendations emerged containing much enthusiasm, such as this comment from Participant 3, “You just have to give it a go!” Participant 3 also recommended, “The kids will flow with your activity and will give you ideas about what else they’d like to do with it, they will come up with things.” The insights, strategies and recommendations reflected the individual personality and teaching style of each participant and overall conveyed their shared enthusiasm for music activity delivery.

Planning and place of music activities

To provide contextual data as a backdrop in which to view the music activities, the participants were questioned about the manner in which they planned for music activities. Three main themes regarding the planning of music activities emerged. The data indicated individual planning of music activities by participants. For example, Participant 1 learnt specific songs on the guitar in preparation for sing-a-long activities. Secondly, year level team planning of music activities was identified in the study. The planning by Participant 2 with respect to music activities never differed from that of her year level team colleagues. As a third theme, spontaneously delivered music activities also occurred. For Participant 3 this was the main manner in which music activities were included in his day-to-day teaching.

Music activity planning within year level team meetings was reported to be minimal. The planning of music activities that did occur within the year level team was, for Participant 2, heavily impacted by the low level of confidence and limited skill level of other team members. Participant 2 reported this scenario as a main constraint on the inclusion of music activities within her year level. Participant 1 reported that in year level team meetings music

activities may not always be considered because there are so many other aspects of the curriculum to plan. One of his recommendations for generalists about music activities was “to include them, don’t forget about them”. Participant 3 delivered mainly individually planned and spontaneously delivered music activities and referred to team planning very minimally in comparison with the other two participants.

The place of music in the general curriculum program was perceived by the participants as being synonymous to the purpose of delivering music activities. The question of the place of music in the generalist curriculum program became a question of why music activities were included. There was no set requirement placed on the participants to deliver music activities within the school environments in which they were employed. Each participant acknowledged benefits and positive aspects of engaging students in music activities. Participant perception of the place of music activities in the curriculum reflected their differing musical backgrounds and teaching experiences. For example, the placement of music activities in

day-to-day teaching by Participant 1 was more greatly emphasised when he commenced teaching Foundation students. However, in summary, the main place of music activities in the general curriculum, as perceived by the participants, was undoubtedly for student fun and engagement.

Frameworks

Two frameworks were developed from the study and presented as a research outcome. The first model, the summary framework (Figure 1.1), reflected a culmination of the emergent themes within each main area of the research. Depicted as a set of building blocks, the summary framework indicates the factors that seemingly enabled music activities to be delivered by the participants. The second framework, the music activity delivery framework (Figure 1.2) was more specific and provided a three step guide to deepening the musical learning outcomes within the integrated music activities delivered by generalists. The music activity delivery framework was inspired by the arts integration model titled ‘Syntegration’ presented by Russell-Bowie (2012).

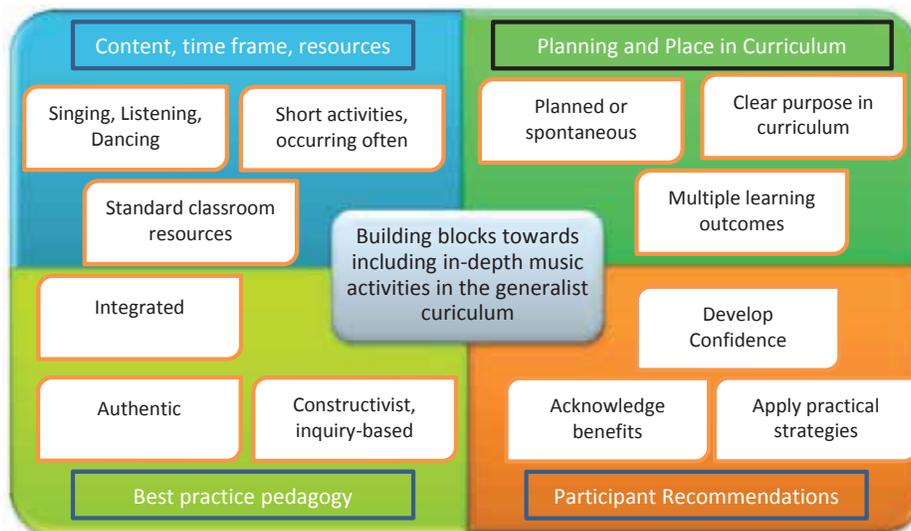


Figure 1.1: Summary framework.

Significance

The descriptive accounts of music activities delivered by classroom generalists were one outcome of the research. In a minimal way, the descriptive accounts address an aspect of the research problem regarding the ‘lost’ data about the music programs in Victorian primary schools (Parliament of Victoria, 2013) by providing an in-depth look at the music activities delivered by three classroom generalists. The two frameworks, reflecting a culmination of data from the study, have been developed with the aim to guide the future practice of generalists in the delivery of music activities and to encourage generalists to deepen the music learning outcomes within the activities. The music activity delivery framework in particular was based around the integrated pedagogical approach to reflect the preference amongst the participants for this approach and to acknowledge time constraint issues that participants reported regarding the crowded curriculum (Parliament of Victoria, 2013),

whilst encouraging an emphasis on musical understanding.

The goal of the research was to generate and present useful data about the music activities delivered by generalists. The data could enable and inspire other generalists to deliver music activities in their day-to-day teaching, especially in cases where these activities may currently be absent. The research outcomes contribute to existing research and resources which reflect the similar goal for music activities to be present, to be ‘found’, in the general education of Victorian primary school children.

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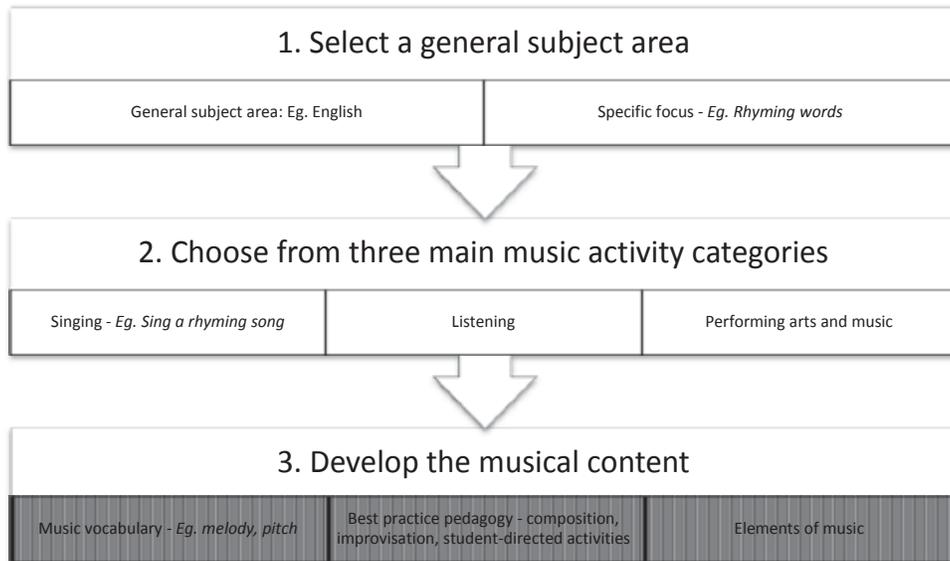


Figure 1.2: Music activity delivery framework.

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