

A music collaboration with early childhood teachers

Lucy Bainger

Monash University

Abstract

It has long been known that generalist primary and early childhood teachers struggle with teaching music, due to a lack confidence and skills. This paper discusses some early findings of a phenomenological study which follows a twelve-month collaboration between a music specialist (the researcher) and a small group of early childhood educators in different pre-school settings. The multiple case study looks at this particular model of professional development through the eyes of the participant teachers, analysing their perceptions to identify how their general lack of music skills and confidence can be most effectively addressed. Through the data collected from the participants it can be shown that the general lack of confidence needs to be understood as a group of specific issues, referred to by the researcher as the 'group of confidence'. The different issues that make up this group of confidences can be successfully addressed through a mentoring collaboration that offers long-term and consistent practical and moral support. In addition, the implications of the collaboration on both the participants and the researcher have become an important aspect of the study.

Key words: early childhood education, music, teachers, confidence, collaboration.

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Introduction

This paper discusses some early findings of a research project involving a collaboration with a small group of early childhood teachers in a rural area of New South Wales (NSW). The participants had identified themselves as lacking confidence and skills in music and wanting to improve their ability to provide meaningful music experiences for the children in their care.

A large body of research consistently shows that music activities and free music play have significant benefits for the young child, and should be part of their general education (Forrai, 1990; Feierabend, 1990; Jeanneret, 1997; Temmerman, 1997; Burton et al., 1999; Suthers, 2004; Persellin, 2007; Temmerman, 2006; de Vries, 2006). This research reflects the views of

the community. The latest National Review of School Music Education (NRSME) done in 2004/5 received the highest number of submissions ever (over 6,000) indicating that 90% of Australian parents regard music as an important part of every child's education (Callaghan, 2007).

The NRSME also found that music in our primary schools is poor – both in quantity and quality, with the abilities of existing generalist teachers to meet the music needs of young children being patchy at best (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005). These findings apply equally to music provision in the early childhood sector, where there are still no national or state guidelines for music education (Southcott & de Vries, 2006). Generalist teachers in both the pre-school and primary areas of

education report that they can feel intimidated by having to offer music activities, often to such a degree that they avoid it all together (Mills, 1989; Harris, 1996; Bodkin, 1999;; Anderson, 2002; Russell-Bowie, 2002; Suthers, 2004; Temmerman, 2006; Nardo et al., 2006).

While none of the research literature disagrees with the claims made for music's value, and teachers attest to the importance of music as an essential part of early childhood education, the provision of music in many preschools and day-care centres still consists merely putting on a CD for the children to dance to, and singing a few traditional nursery rhymes. Teachers attribute their lack of competence in music primarily to the lack of focus on music in their training, with just six to twelve hours of contact time given to music in undergraduate teacher training courses (Temmerman, 2006).

The most critical factor in the quality of a child's education is an effective, skilled and confident teacher (Gharavi, 1993; Chen & Chang, 2006; Temmerman, 2006). A quality music experience for the young child can be summarized briefly as opportunities for free play and structured musical play in group times, involving the child in activities that facilitate a playful discovery of all the fundamentals of music. Chen and Chang's work suggests this can only be achieved with a teacher who has skills and feels confident in her own musical understanding and skills (2006).

As a participant in this study put it:

I guess it's just a different area from anything else you do, like mathematical concepts or literacy – music is very different. You have to have a lot of knowledge and when you don't have that knowledge it's difficult ... we're trained in literacy and numeracy as teachers, but not necessarily music. That's where we are struggling and trying to work out what to do. (Interview, Feb 09)

The director of one of the participating pre-schools echoed this particular aspect of music experience, saying that while everyone goes through a training in literacy and numeracy automatically by attending any school, a much

smaller proportion of the population, and therefore early childhood teachers, have had any long-term experiences of music making on which to draw upon in their own teaching (in conversation with director, 09). Today's teachers are a product of their own arts-poor education system. Having not been the recipients of good music experiences in their own education, teachers do not have background skills or understandings of their own about music to draw upon, as they do in other learning areas. This also reinforces their low levels of confidence.

The participants

Of the small group of teachers who responded to the researcher's invitation to take part in the study, three participants were chosen on three criteria; that they were within a thirty minute drive from the researcher's home, that they were able to commit to the time and access requirements of the study for a twelve-month period, and that the pre-schools they worked in represented the varied socio-economic demographic of the area.

Two of the participants work in community based pre-schools; one in a large town and the other in a small village, while the third worked in a private pre-school attached to a private school. The teachers are referred to by a letter pseudonym to protect their privacy. All three participants are experienced and qualified teachers; one with a university degree, another with a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Advanced Diploma while the third participant was trained as an infant and primary teacher, but three years ago took over the directorship of a pre-school.

The participants do not know each other, but had previously attended a workshop presented by the researcher in the local area that took place a year before the research began. Two of the participants had also taken part in an informal, fortnightly teachers singing circle organised over a three-month period by the researcher

for any interested local pre-school teachers. The researcher had a passing acquaintance with the other participant as she had worked at the same school for a period, over five years previously.

Methodology

This is a qualitative, phenomenological, multiple-case study which aims to gain an understanding of the inner experience of three teacher participants from three different pre-schools in a rural area of NSW throughout a twelve-month collaboration with a music consultant (the researcher). Phenomenology aims to understand the lived experience of participants and to “capture, as closely as possible, the way in which the phenomena is experienced within the context in which the experience takes place” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008, p. 28). The emphasis is always on the meaning of the participant’s lived experience (White, 2003).

Throughout the collaboration, a variety of data gathering tools are being used; including semi-structured, periodic interviews, reflective journals, and weekly or fortnightly observations of music sessions, which are always followed by a private discussion between participant and researcher. All participants are referred to with a single letter pseudonym to protect their identity. At the time of writing the field work was about to be completed with another round of interviews, and a final interview scheduled in six months time to gather data on longer term impacts of the collaboration.

As the focus is on the perceptions of the participants, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is used to analyse the data. IPA makes a detailed exploration of the participant’s accounts of how they experience and self-reflect on the process they are going through (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

IPA is a suitable approach when one is trying to find out how individuals are perceiving the particular situations they are facing, how they are making sense of their personal and social world. (Smith, J. A. & Osborn, M., 2008, p. 55)

IPA explores how the participant makes sense of their own experiences through their own act of self-reflection; perceptions, views and understandings (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). IPA recognises that research is a dynamic process, and acknowledges that the personal world of both the participant and the researcher influence the collection and analysis of data. It is also recognises that the quality of the data is reliant on the participant’s ability to describe and communicate their thoughts, feelings and experiences clearly to the researcher, and the researcher’s ability initially to facilitate these communications, and to then reflect and analyse the resulting data (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

Four research strategies put forward by Bresler and Stake (1992) to undertake qualitative research were used to formulate a phenomenological framework for this study. The first strategy: non-interventionist observation in a natural setting, was achieved by weekly or fortnightly observations of the participants, as they led group music times with the children as part of their regular working day. Non-intervention has been defined by Wiersma and Jurs (2009) as being without any manipulation or external imposition. In the study, the researcher took the ‘fly on the wall’ approach by sitting out of the sight line of the teacher, and out of the way of the children’s play area.

The second, an emphasis on interpretation of issues concerning both the participants (emic) and the researcher (etic), is a hallmark of the phenomenological study. Giving equal status to both the etic and emic perspectives emphasises the subjective nature of the behaviour being studied (Yardley, 2008). The researcher attempts to understand what the observed behaviour means to the participant, rather than presuming to know what things mean to the participants being observed (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). The presence of both the participant’s inner perspective and the researcher’s own perspective based on the collected data creates a double

hermeneutic as the study progresses. Shared communications through the discussions that followed the weekly/fortnightly observations continually informed both perspectives and, as a result, the process of the collaboration.

The third strategy recommended by Bresler and Stake is a highly contextual description of people and events. This is understood to be essential background to understanding the sub-text of the participant's communication. Therefore, before observations began, the participants took part in a one-to-one semi-structured interview which focused on the past and current music experiences in all areas of the participant's life. This served to provide a personal and historical context to the participant's perspective, in her own words, as referred to in studies by Crawford (2008) and Brocki and Wearden (2006). Periodic interviews and regular private discussions provided an inner and on-going context to the way the teacher was working, from week to week, while regular observations provided the researcher with a detailed context of each participant's work place.

The fourth and last strategy is the use of triangulation to validate information. Rather than trying to reduce data to a single, consistent account, triangulation seeks to enrich understanding of a phenomenon by valuing different perspectives equally (Yardley, 2008). The researcher's observations of the participants' teaching practice were triangulated with the data collected from the participants, where they shared their own perspectives on their work and what they were thinking and feeling at the time. The multiple case study provided a triple layer of triangulation: 1) a variety of data collection tools, 2) the equal status given to emic and etic perspectives, and 3) the comparison of data from three different case studies.

The collaboration methodology used in this study was based on Chen and Chang's (2006) 'whole teacher' approach where the supporting 'expert' must gain an understanding of the

context, the attitudes and beliefs, the existing skill level, and the specific needs of each teacher, before the researcher offered support, feedback and guidance in a tailor made fashion after each observation. Analysis of the data as it was collected, created a triangulation loop; where the participants own experience and perspective, combined with the researcher's observations of their practice continually gave rise to insights that influenced the collaboration as it progressed. There was also the lateral influence that resulted from the study being a multiple case one; where one participant brought the researcher's attention to a particular aspect of the collaboration, or raised a previously unacknowledged but relevant matter, this would then influence the collaboration with the other participants. In this way, each participant influenced the collaboration, with the researcher acting as the conduit.

Discussion of data

The first step of the research was an interview that focused on establishing context by asking the participants to talk about past music experiences in all areas of life, and current beliefs around the value of music to children, the participant's own musicality, and how they felt about doing music with children. Some of these issues were also raised in journal entries. Negative past experiences figured prominently for two of the participants. Each participant voiced strong beliefs about the value of music for young children, and all identified a lack of skills and confidence in general. Specific difficulties were also identified, such as not knowing how to make effective use of existing resources. It was not until the collaboration had been underway for about six months that more specific issues came to be identified by the participants, in the second interview.

At the same time, through the data gained from observations and the following discussions,

the researcher had identified the commonality of these specific issues. It was interesting to note that more than one participant would identify a particular issue at some stage – either by directly identifying it, or asking for specific help that pointed to that issue. As a clear pattern of shared issues emerged through the analysis of the different participant's data, the researcher created the term 'group of confidences' to collectively refer to these issues. Quotations from the participants are included to illustrate these issues in this discussion. To illustrate the process the participants went through as the collaboration progressed, three of these issues are discussed here – musicality, control and flexibility.

Musicality

The first interview indicated that the participants equated musicality with demonstrable music performance skills. Because none of the participants were fluent, active instrumental players or singers, this assumption resulted in the belief that they were not musical. This core belief undermined their individual musical confidence. Even past instrumental study did not change this belief in one case. D plays the piano to an intermediate level but has not yet had the confidence to play the piano at the pre-school for the children, or include it in their group music sessions. In answer to the question; "How would you describe your own musicality?" she responded,

I can't sing I'm not musical. (Interview 1)

Another participant responded,

I'm not a musical person myself ... I struggled with music at school. (Interview 1)

Negative music experiences at different levels of education had had a real impact on these inner beliefs. Two of the participants described being negatively assessed on performance of musical skills, remembered with much detail and strong feeling. Here the participants describe experiences of music at primary school:

As a child I suffered a bit with "Oh you can't sing" and that sort of thing. (Interview 1)

We had to sing to this teacher – we were all lined up and there were two boys in front of me and my girlfriend, and we were all being marked out of 10 and the teacher marked these boys with a 'T/D' – turns out that meant tone deaf – it was horrific. That was it – I never made a sound after that. (Interview 1)

For this participant, music experiences in her teacher training did not improve,

It was awful ... a Kodaly teacher ... got us doing all these hand things and I had no idea what was going on, and then she made each person sing. I must have had this look on my face because she never asked me to do it – I would have just died... I'm a terrible singer. (Interview 1)

The third participant did not report negative experiences, but throughout the year of observations she repeatedly mentioned how nervous she felt at being 'watched by an expert', and how difficult she found music.

This personal sense of lack of musicality was at odds with each participant's understanding of the children's natural musicality,

They just love music and gain so much from musical experiences. (Interview 1)
They really enjoy it...they just love the instruments...they quite naturally have an ear for music. (Interview 1)

As the collaboration progressed, the tension between two conflicting beliefs – the natural musicality the participants could all see in their children, and the self-perceived lack of musicality they felt in themselves, seemed to ease when the participants became more comfortable singing with the children. Reassuring the participants that they could sing, and that it was of great benefit to the children when they did sing, especially free of a CD, was particularly important in bringing about a positive change in the participant's self-beliefs around singing. One participant, who had had problems with ear infections as a child, and today has great trouble holding a tune, took up the offer of specific support through one-to-one

singing sessions, after school hours, as part of the collaboration.

As the collaboration progressed, the participants' self-perceptions of their own musicality began to change. All the participants were singing a lot more in their music sessions, as well as singing directions and instructions to the children throughout the day. Six-months into the collaboration, in the second round of interviews, a noticeable change in self beliefs around their own musicality was reflected in the participants comments.

I'm much more interested in music, learning songs and really hearing what's in music ...I've started to realise that I can sing, that I don't have to feel I'm not good at music ... that's been incredibly wonderful to me. (Interview 2)
I'm suddenly singing – and that surprises me! I feel supported. (Interview 2)
I definitely feel different! ... improvement in singing is the big thing...it's helping me to develop their skills and mine I was talking earlier about the children recognising that they are a musical person – the musical person isn't just on the CD – well I think I needed to change my perception of that too. (Interview 2)

The collaboration also caused re-appraisals in the one participant. Initially describing herself as musical, this participant had said in the first interview that she believed she was providing plenty of music in her work. This was not evident to the researcher in the observations. Six months into the collaboration, the participants had become more reflective, reaching a more accurate awareness of her practice in hindsight.

I guess I was more dependent on music from the CD's, but now I'm having to think a lot more about music now ... I realise my own lack of musicality. (Interview 2)

At the same time she was personally engaging with music differently:

I've got more of an appreciation now of listening to music at home, enjoying music on a personal level. (Interview 2)

The participants have been encouraged to use regular repetitions of musical games with

extensions each time; to strengthen their repertoire, and develop both their own and the children's musical confidence.

When the participants were asked to reflect on this aspect of the collaborations – the affect of their changing practice on the children's music learning – it was interesting to notice how the participants learning is mirrored in the children's learning. The participants were inadvertently describing their own process in the collaboration:

The kids love to feel familiar with things ... then you can add new things and they still feel safe. I thought they might get a bit bored (with repeating things) ... but they are actually getting more engaged ...this seems to be cementing things for them. (Interview 2)
I'm feeling more confident with my presentation, so the children are getting more from it. (Interview 2)

The link between confidence and control

Another issue that came up in early interviews and discussions was the realistic fear of losing control of the children while doing active and noisy music activities, especially when instruments or chasing games were involved.

We played with drums and tapping sticks... slow, then fast – you could see the kids' delight; "Let's do it fast!" That was enough – I packed it up. (Interview 1)

Playing instruments is the trickiest ... I'm afraid I'll maybe lose control of the group. (Interview 1)
I'll know to keep it very calm because ... it will be very exciting and they'll get so het up. ...(I want).... to keep them settled. (Interview 1)

The assumption that a quiet atmosphere is the hallmark of a 'good' teacher is at odds with the realities of best practice in music play. A good music session ideally involves an element of noisy fun, and free play needs to accommodate the child's un-structured exploration of sound (Wright, 2003). This can take some getting used to for the teacher who is used to exercising a lot of control to maintain a quiet and restrained atmosphere. Through observations it was clear that while the participants found unexpected

enjoyment in the children's excitement and noisy participation in some of the games, they were uneasy about being able to bring the children back to a manageable level. To encourage the participants to facilitate more active games and allow the children more freedom and movement, the participants were given simple strategies that help to manage the children's excitement and control the noise levels. In addition, it was recommended that breaking the large group of twenty or more children into a smaller group of around ten children was more conducive to group music play, and where possible, this suggestion was taken up, with excellent results. Mastering and using these strategies has resulted in a marked increase in the use of instruments and more active musical games.

When asked to put five known benefits for doing music into an order of importance, the participants nominated social development as either top or second. Social development can be supported in music through engaging children in games that highlight the benefits of co-operation; sharing and taking turns. The participants were encouraged to facilitate music games that focussed specifically on developing the children's listening skills. The participants recognised the link between these types of games and an increase in the children's overall ability to comprehend and co-operate, making general management easier.

Music helps with routine and discipline in a fun way. (Interview 1)

If you start off developing their listening skills then ... they can see that they can have fun and the limits are actually a good thing- if you wait your turn great benefit will come, much more than if you're just running around the room and screaming. (Interview 1)

As the collaboration comes to a close, the participants have become noticeably more comfortable with the playful, and occasionally rowdy aspect of musical games. They did not refer directly to this change in their own attitudes around this issue – it was more in the researcher's observations of their practice that the changes have been most evident.

Play and the need for flexibility

When lacking confidence, a teacher tends to rely more on an instructive approach (Kagan, 1992), and this is often seen in the way music is approached by early childhood teachers (Wright, 2003). As has already been referred to, taking an instructive approach puts the burden on the teacher of being an expert. In music this is particularly problematic, for both the teacher who lacks confidence, and the child who wants to learn through play. An instructive teaching style can sabotage the success of a playful activity and inadvertently inhibit a child's genuine exploration of music (Berger & Cooper, 2003). In contrast, the teacher is ideally taking the role of co-player in music games, acting as a leader who involves all the children in a playful, flexible teaching approach which greatly increases the children's engagement and enjoyment in musical games (Wright, 2003).

It is a natural consequence of musical play that children improvise on songs and games that they are familiar with (Marsh, 1979; Wright, 2003; Lum & Campbell, 2007). In the early months of the field work observations, the researcher observed that impromptu suggestions from the children were often passed over by the participants for various reasons; they interrupted the plan, the teacher thought the suggestion would not have worked, or simply that the children's in-put was not seen as important.

The participants were encouraged to connect with the children through musical play, as opposed to putting themselves into the role of being a music teacher. In feed-back discussions, the participants were urged to see in-put from the children as a very positive outcome, and in the spirit of play. They were encouraged to act upon suggestions from the children whenever possible. It was suggested that the aim of many music activities was ultimately the evolution of the game into a child-directed activity, constantly extended by the children's own suggestions and explorations. In this instance, the teacher acts

as a facilitator on the children's behalf. This was effectively presenting a shift away from teacher-centred leadership to child-centred leadership. Not surprisingly, the more instructive the natural teaching style was, the more challenging this shift was for the participant. It did, however, have the benefit of relieving the participants of the burden of being expert in a field where they lacked confidence.

Each participant was given directions in setting up and facilitating musical play that involved exploring sound and developing music skills through games and play activities. While they were still the leader, they were now able to explore and develop their skills alongside and with the children. The participants were also strongly, and repeatedly encouraged to value and utilise the children's ideas and suggestions as a real resource. By including this input from the children, they could now act as the conduit for extending the music play and learning for all the children. These ideas were noted down to add to the extensions of familiar materials, for continued and future use.

Using the voice more actively in speech also acted as a scaffold to slowly gain confidence to sing out strongly for and with the children. A step-by-step approach encouraged the participants to practice modulating and animating their voice while speaking in chants, then introducing games that allowed both the participant and the children to play freely with vocalizing and extending vocal range, sometimes through mimicking animal voices, or using the voice to make siren sounds. The participants were encouraged to actively take part in these games with the children, as a way of developing their own singing voices. In this way, the children's learning was mirrored in the teachers learning, and confidence for both parties increased correspondingly.

It has been noted earlier in this paper that gaining some confidence in singing made a significant difference in deepening the

participant's personal involvement in music play. Where the participants have become more confident, they have become more inclusive and playful, moving away a little from a more instructive style of teaching, towards a more child-centred and playful style. This was not an issue that the participants identified themselves. It was an issue identified by the researcher during observing the participants practice. It was not until the issue had been addressed that the participant's started to comment on it:

I'm learning to take some ideas from the children more, go with their ideas more instead of having what I think we're going to do.

(Interview 2)

I have made a conscious decision to let the children 'go' and play more.

(Discussion, Apr '09)

A wonderful feed-back loop has developed – the participant responds positively to the children's input, the children react more and more enthusiastically to music activities, which serves to increase the participant's confidence, and the children's input becomes richer and more imaginative. As one participant reflected:

I was really pleased today with the children's responses and felt confident to 'go' with their ideas rather than stick with the lesson plan ... very pleased with the listening skills and most of all by the sense of FUN! (Journal Entry, Feb '09)

A word on collaboration

An essential aspect of the collaboration was the building of trust between each participant and the researcher, based on the understanding that the researcher was there to support the teacher, rather than to assess their work. There was a clear need for the researcher to continually reassure the participants of this. The supportive and practical feedback helped to overcome this to a large degree.

I'm OK with that (being observed) now because I know there's the feedback about what I could do better ... it's actually a very nice thing to have you in the room (Interview 2)

As this relationship grew, other issues slowly emerged. Some months into the collaboration, the participants had a wider understanding of what was possible when doing music with children, which provided opportunities to extend existing skills while at the same time raised new challenges.

Each participant's lack of confidence in music was often marked by an emotional quality that demanded on-going sensitivity and tact from the researcher. While not spoken of directly, there was sometimes a palpable sense of grief when participants talked of negative early experiences and their perceived lack of musicality. It was evident that the researcher needed to be continually empathetic in understanding how, for each participant, it is an act of professional bravery to volunteer to put oneself in the vulnerable position of being observed while at work, especially teaching work in an area where you feel wanting. Teaching is a special art, made up of many distinctly personal aspects that demand respect;

The life stories of teachers explain that the practice of classroom teaching remains – forever rooted in personality and experience and that earning to teach requires a journey into the deepest recesses of one's self awareness, where failures, fears, and hopes are hidden. Classroom teaching seems to be a peculiar form of self-expression in which the artist, subject and the medium are one. (Kagan, 1992, pp. 163-164)

For the collaboration to be successful, it has been essential for the researcher to establish a supportive and accepting relationship with each participant, that respects vulnerable feelings of inadequacy and, perhaps most importantly, accepting and affirming the participants' current music practice, whatever it might be, as a valid starting point. In this, the researcher has faced two distinct challenges: firstly, taking into account the participants inevitable unease in being observed by someone they perceive as an 'expert' while working; and secondly, translating a private critique of the participants' practice into

helpful, supportive, and confidence-building feedback. Understanding the different issues that constitute the lack of confidence felt by teachers is essential when acting as a mentor in this collaboration.

Summation

An early finding of this study is that the general lack of confidence felt by teachers needs to be understood as a generality. This general lack of confidence is experienced by the participant teachers as a group of specific issues, each of which need to be individually addressed before the teachers can develop their skills and confidence to the extent that they become effective and active music makers with their children. Some of these issues were identified by the participants themselves, while other issues were identified by the researcher through observation, and later verified by the participant's response or change in practice. Only three of these issues have been discussed here, although more issues have been identified.

The findings of this study suggest that these issues need to be addressed, and that this can be done effectively using a long-term collaboration model of professional development, which involves the establishment of a supportive relationship between 'expert' and teacher, where the expert works as a mentor with each teacher in their own practice and work place.

Coming and seeing where I'm at and assisting me in the environment that I'm working in is extremely helpful – it assists me with my skills where I'm at at any particular time which I think is the best thing about it. (Interview 2)

(NB Underlining reflects vocal emphasis)

All that one-to-one is really beneficial ... it's all about me! (Interview 2)

Consistent and open dialogue based on mutual respect, and practical follow-up is an essential part of this type of professional development, resulting in a positive change in the teacher's practice and their perceptions of their own

music skills and confidence. With further data analysis, the group of confidences identified so far may well prove to be incomplete. What is clear is that this collaborative style of professional development is leading to positive changes in both the participants' perceptions of their own music skills and confidence, and therefore in their willingness to be active musically with their children, and a marked increase in the quantity and quality of the musical experiences and learning of the children in their care.

On a practical level, this research posits the value of funding the long-term development of teachers in a collaborative, mentoring relationship directed, in part, by the teachers themselves. While this would inevitably require an increase in funding, the question has to be asked; do we continue with a status quo which we know to be ineffective, where neither children nor teachers grow musically, or do we invest in an increase in teachers' professional skills, to create a new generation of children who take their musicality into the future? This may be a way of ensuring that the negative generational cycle is broken; children currently in our pre-schools could at last have valuable musical experiences to draw upon when they become teachers and parents.

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Lucy Bainger is a music educator living and working in the Southern Highlands of NSW. Having studied in South Australia and Hungary, she is currently doing a Masters in Research in music education through Monash University. Lucy has been a primary and early childhood music educator and trainer for more that two decades and regularly presents music in-services. In 2007, her book 'Music Magic', a music resource for early childhood teachers was published. Her current research is motivated by a desire to take part in improving the standard of music in early childhood, by finding the most effective way to support early childhood educators in gaining musical confidence and skills.