

# Teachers make a difference to the study of Aboriginal music in NSW

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## Abstract

Australian Indigenous music and culture are in the foreground when Australia celebrates itself in international contexts but their inclusion in the school curriculum is sporadic. In NSW, high school music teachers are responsible for educating students about Aboriginal music(s) and culture(s) within a mandatory focus on Australian music. Two NSW high schools made changes to their music programs to enhance their teaching in this area and this article contrasts their stories with reported school music environments that demonstrate limited awareness and lack of confidence.

**Keywords:** Aboriginal music/s; community elders; regional support

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## Introduction

In New South Wales (NSW), high school music teachers are responsible for educating students about Aboriginal music(s) and culture(s) within a mandatory focus on Australian music. Two NSW secondary schools have made changes to their music programs to enhance their teaching in this area. In so doing, they were influenced by accessing relevant and engaging resources that affected their decision-making about the repertoire they program for their students. These changes made significant connections to the community and local Aboriginal Elders. The schools are Bankstown Girls' High School and Ashcroft High School. Both schools have highly diverse demographics, with a strong representation of Arabic cultures. We acknowledge the two music teachers, Marimar Salerno and Jasmin Jones, for their vision and ongoing commitment to implementing programs

that respect and value Indigenous Australian music. This article places their stories in the context of a history of research on Aboriginal music and its sporadic inclusion in school music programs.

## Toward the Australian Curriculum in context of earlier reviews

As Australia moves towards a national curriculum, the draft 'Shape of the Australian Curriculum: The Arts' highlights three cross-curriculum priorities. The first one focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in curriculum. Its objective is to provide opportunities to *embed traditional and contemporary Australian Indigenous arts understandings and practices with integrity and respect, stimulating contemporary artistic expression as living, evolving cultures* (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2010, p. 21). Given that not all states

and territories include specific direction towards Australian music (Forrest, 2008), let alone Australian Indigenous music, this is a valuable objective. Australian Indigenous music and culture are integral to the ways in which Australia celebrates itself in international contexts (such as the 2000 Olympics) but their positioning in the school curriculum is open to scrutiny. Indeed, Neuenfeldt (1998) described the insertion of Aboriginal cultural practices into formal curricula as 'sounding silences' in Australian education and maintained that Australia has a long history of "conscious exclusion of Indigenous presences, voices and themes" (pp. 202-203). By contrast, ACARA aims to encourage students to *explore and celebrate the interrelated and holistic nature of Country and Place, People, Identity and Culture, and understand and respect cultural protocols* (ACARA, 2010, p. 21). These worthy aims need to be seen in the light of current practice. Two Reviews make significant comments about the use of Indigenous music in education both for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

The first is the Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education called *Freeing the Spirit – Dreaming an Equal Future* (NSW AECG & NSW DET, 2004). This Report states:

*Recent research and literature (Bourke, Rigby & Burden, 2000; McRae, Ainsworth, Cumming, Hughes, Mackay, Price, Rowland, Warhurst, Woods & Zbar, 2000) highlight recognition of culture as being fundamental to achieving Aboriginal student engagement. Cultural recognition and understanding will be encouraged through the formation of partnerships and strong personal relationships between school educators and Aboriginal Elders, families and community members. (p. 89)*

Alarming, the Report also states:

*Teachers suggested that it is rare for Aboriginal perspectives to be included in programs in most secondary curriculum areas and that they have limited awareness of teaching resources to support the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives. (p. 113)*

The recommendations of the Report drew attention to one significant area, as part of the

quality teaching program for school teachers, that the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) should enhance the curriculum support to teachers by developing, in consultation with the Board of Studies, Aboriginal communities, Elders and the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultation Group (AECG), *regional support material that identifies Aboriginal cultural knowledge, skills and expertise that can be accessed by schools* (p. 192).

The second is the *National Review of School Music Education* (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005). In the opening pages, the Review states: "There are gaps in Australian music curriculum documents in some States and Territories...about Indigenous music" (p. ix). Dunbar-Hall and Beston (2003), cited in the Review, identified the relative lack of confidence of music teachers to approach the teaching of Indigenous music. The Review also drew on insights from contemporary ethnomusicology that music can only be understood within the context of culture (p. 27).

## Indigenous music in schools

NSW Aboriginal Education Policy (2008) declares commitment to increasing knowledge and understanding of the histories, cultures and experiences of the First Peoples of Australia. However, currently it is possible to teach in any state or territory in Australia without including Australian Indigenous music. It is not mandated. There is however, a broader mandate and that is engagement with the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy, with its commitment to education about Aboriginal Australia for all students. Teachers without experience of Indigenous music in their undergraduate degree or in their teaching methods, struggle to include Indigenous music in the curriculum. However, there are supportive Indigenous performers that might be accessed more frequently by schools. In order to initiate attitudinal change to unfamiliar cultural traditions (Marsh, 2000), teachers could facilitate contact between students and performers (who have become known as 'culture-bearers'). Actively

involving these people in the teaching of specific musics, teachers could provide strong links between the culture of the learner and the unfamiliar culture (Murphy-Haste, 2009). Indeed, an important approach to teaching Australian Aboriginal musics is by working with community members and musicians, as one of the '8 ways' framework (Yunkaporta, 2009) that represents Aboriginal ways of knowing.

Such a community approach nests within an understanding of the context from which music arises, essential in any music teaching and learning. For Aboriginal people, "music is a way of knowing country" (Dillon & Chapman, 2005). At the heart of Aboriginal culture is the attachment for and significance of place. "Singing about [the important sites for an individual] affirms their existence and the connections between them and their owners" (Dunbar-Hall & Gibson, 2004, p. 70). This is a quite different connection to the land than the one more commonly experienced by people in western society who might love the place they call home but it is not the inseparable part of their being. Research confirms this contextual understanding can provide an approach to teaching unfamiliar music (Dunbar-Hall, 2001). A related approach is the incorporation of Australian Indigenous popular music in school curricula. As Wemyss (1999) pointed out, this may serve "as a means to cultural tolerance, as a role model for Indigenous community members, as a source of musical knowledge, as a current social comment or as emblematic of cultural intricacies; or it may be viewed as a combination of all these things in a synthesis of function akin to the concept of musical fusion inherent in the genre itself" (p. 36).

## Method

At the end of 2007, a series of four workshops was held to present material for a new resource from the NSW DET, Creative Arts Unit of Curriculum Directorate. The workshops were held in Berowra, Port Macquarie, The Eora Centre and Blacktown

Arts Centre. Teachers from all regions attended - Sydney, Western Sydney, South Western Sydney, Northern Sydney, Hunter Central Coast, Western NSW, North Coast, Riverina, Illawarra South East and New England. The state-wide focus was taken to make the resource available for a wider audience including NSW DET teachers rather than only distance education students, its original target audience through the Centre for Learning Innovation. The resource was written by Margaret Bradley and had five units of work. The second of these units focused on Indigenous Australian music under the title 'Music of Our Place'.

The workshops were designed by Margaret Bradley and included the input of a culture bearer, Matthew Doyle, a Dharawal performer whose people come from greater South Western Sydney and who featured on the accompanying recordings. The material from the resource was based around one activity looking at Matthew Doyle's *Mouth Music* and his collaboration with Riley Lee called *Spirit Dance*. Along with Mathew Doyle and Margaret Bradley, Mari Rhydwen, Aboriginal Languages Consultant presented at one workshop, and Riley Lee joined two other workshops. Teachers (n=58) attending the workshop trialled the activities, learned the songs, engaged with circular breathing and tongue talking for didjeridu playing and were introduced to a range of websites. On the workshop days, the teachers were given the first two units of the five unit resource with accompanying CDs: 'Why Music' and 'Music of Our Place.'

After 18 months, two workshop participants, purposively selected, were interviewed about their use of the materials with high school classes, their modification or extension of activities, their successes with the resources and the evidence of those successes, and their intentions for further developments in their schools.

## Findings

There is a common thread between the two teachers interviewed in that they had been

programming Indigenous Australian music before the workshops occurred. These two teachers were looking for more substantial hands-on learning than they were previously offering with text-based experiences. Thereafter, their stories are presented for the unique context in which they have developed.

### **Teacher 1's beginning**

In 2004, the project that commenced at Teacher 1's school was a cross-KLA (key learning area) project with Year 9s, drawing on the students' elective choices. The staff, motivated by a HSIE teacher mentor, nominated Aboriginal culture as a theme that could run across all KLAs. Teacher 1 described the aim of this project as *increasing knowledge retention, providing stimulus and using different pedagogies*. The leadership of the teacher mentor evolved into a staff group with members from each of the KLAs *to bring on board their own material. The idea behind this project was to pinpoint one year group. We targeted Year 9 because they had selected their electives. For any teacher with a Year 9 class, the topic for Term 3 was focused on Indigenous culture.*

### **Teacher 2's beginning**

Teacher 2 already had a small Indigenous music program when she went to Margaret's workshop at the end of 2007. Basically it was text-book material. *I was a little bit too scared to move beyond that. I didn't think it had a lot of substance so going to this workshop was inspiring for me. I added things from the booklet. Additionally, I learned to work with the community. I got in contact with one of our local Elders. I'm very lucky because our school has established connections with our local Elders which they have been nurturing for many, many years. Auntie May is our local Elder and she's also a lifetime member of the AECG [Aboriginal Education Consultative Group]. She works very closely with the school and is always there at Reconciliation Ceremonies.*

### **Development of the project in School 1**

Since the cross KLA project in School 1 began, student presentations have taken many forms, from models and plays to interviews and game shows. More recently, the students keep an e-portfolio and post pictures and blogs on the school intranet. After the 2006 workshop, the 2007 project incorporated the 'Our Place' booklet as a stimulus for discussion of Indigenous culture. *That's when I got an insight into how to incorporate all the activities. While they are aimed at Stage 4 and upwards, they are entirely appropriate for students whose musical literacy has yet to strongly develop. The students engage in learning by rote as is culturally appropriate for this music.* At the end of seven weeks, they delivered a presentation of their project, based on the learnings in all their KLAs.

The school runs an Opening Ceremony for the Year 9 project in July. At the 2008 Opening Day, Mathew Doyle was a key figure, appropriately engaging school students in the South Western Sydney region, land of the Dharawal people, and demonstrating knowledge of country through music (Dillon & Chapman, 2005). He was joined by two other Aboriginal artists – a dancer who was traditional, and an instrumentalist who performed on violin. The Year 9 students needed to absorb the fact that Aboriginal culture has many facets and they enthusiastically responded. Later that day, sitting on the floor with the music class, Doyle explained different techniques of playing the didjeridu. In the weeks that followed, the students enjoyed making didjeridu-like shapes from PVC off-cut pipes, in the same way Doyle told them he had done for a performance with the Queensland Symphony. They used different lengths to get different pitches and decorated them with their own symbols. Having engaged with the music practically, the students were able to identify characteristics in music they heard. The music with which they engaged had grown out of the area in which they experienced it. Study of the music subsequently moved beyond the traditional context to contemporary

sound. This aligned with Wemyss' 1999 research. Through examples of popular Indigenous music, students explored rhythms and textures. Questions on the school intranet provided ways for the students to self-assess their musical understanding at their own pace.

In 2009, the cross-school project underwent another change to include a strong ICT focus. In music, the students extended an activity on *Cora* by Yothu Yindi. The students had identified the idea of the descending melodic line, constant rhythms and drone. They then imitated that, using body percussion and vocal sounds, using the ideas but recreating them in their own way. *On the day that they did it I was so taken that they did such a great job that I was absorbed in listening to them but a student teacher recorded them. Students that I didn't expect to get involved, did get right into it. It was fascinating and it was purely as an imitation based on the original activity. It extended it, getting faster at the end in a way typical of Arabic culture. So they brought their own ideas to it.*

As the project completed in 2009, students worked on their own musical compositions, with lyrics that reflected what they wanted to say. The project brought students to an appreciation of how people get inspiration for songs. Subsequently, the project with Year 9 students continued to evolve. The students were encouraged to draw on these experiences after the project completed. Throughout, the project highlighted the concept of transferring knowledge across from one learning situation to another. *They have learned that you have to learn the 'bits in between' that are the links, to use that information and transform it. That ensures it has been a very worthwhile experience.* Teacher 1 maintained that the first year the school ran the project, the teachers were learning as they went. Activities that worked were kept for future use and developed. Teachers reflected on why some activities did not work. Every group of students' reception of musical material has been different. In 2009 preparation for the project was

also different, taking place in cyberspace. The evidence of the success of the project was in the portfolios the students uploaded to the school site. There was a constant monitoring process and the students learned that their preparation needed to be long term, not last minute. Those portfolios showed the outcomes of research and creative work. The collaborative learning was also a bonding experience for the students.

In Teacher 1's view, the successes have been the students' increased awareness of the plight of Aboriginal people along with the richness of their culture. It was particularly significant that they had the opportunity to engage with an Indigenous musician from their own local area. In the community there is quite a rich Indigenous culture. Future directions include the continuing input of local Elders who *have been quite impressed with what the kids were presenting.* Teacher 1 reflected on the growth of her own knowledge of Indigenous culture since this project began: *I hadn't learned anything else than we learned in Year 3 [about the colonising of*

**Figure 1: Cultural fusion activity on *Cora* with the central figure imitating the didjeridu through beat boxing and the performance culminating in an accelerated tempo.**



Australia]. For the students, this school has been quite involved in Sorry Day and Harmony Day. This project provides an opening that there are other cultures out there. We are 97% NESB so what we are talking about is ANOTHER culture to add to our list of 20+ cultures that we have here. The main culture here is an Arabic background; and we have a large Vietnamese population, Pacific Islanders and a lot of refugees from Afghanistan, from Sierra Leone and Africans from a number of different places. Everyone has their own struggles, but this project lets students learn about the First Australians. The project demonstrates that cultural acceptance can be nurtured and engaged learning in music can occur.

### **Developments with Teacher 2**

The learning experiences for Teacher 2 took a slightly different direction. When she went to the Deputy in 2007 after the workshop, identifying a desire to work on an Indigenous unit for Year 7, she asked about contacting the local Elder. The Deputy provided Auntie May's phone number. Consequently, the teacher rang Auntie May, identifying herself and her school and explaining what she wanted to do in class; and Auntie May said: 'Yes, possum,' looked at her programs and advised on what worked and what did not. *I just didn't realise at the time that was not the norm – that you need to establish that connection. Because of what the school has done previously, I was able to have that connection.*

At the end of 2007 Teacher 2 went home from the workshop with a stack of resources and was inspired beyond belief. *We had a performance by Mathew Doyle and he was teaching us about the techniques of tongue talking and the breathing techniques for playing the didjeridu. He wanted to know if we had questions and my question was: 'I'm female – can I teach it?' It was his advice to consult the local Elder. Until we received advice, the students watched videos and did the circular breathing activities where they blew into a cup full of water using a straw – and the Year*

7 students loved that. Auntie May maintained because I was a teacher and NSW has more a maternal hierarchy in Aboriginal society that I could teach it. I didn't take that as permission to play it but to teach it. The school also invited a few parents who played to come into classes.

In 2008, there were other changes in the Year 7 music program. *After I got inspired, we used all the information on the didjeridu. Margaret also gave us some websites to have a look at. They had sound samples on them that were very helpful. I'd get the students to download the sound samples and identify what animal the sound samples represented. Now, with the laptops it's even better. We did a couple of composition activities where we used symbols. We looked at Dreaming stories, summarised them in sections. For each section the students had to design a symbol and represented that with sound. Then they painted them on a boomerang and they were displayed. That was an activity that Auntie May really liked.*

In 2009, Teacher 2 began to share her understandings from using the material in a different way. She started to wonder how many teachers were similarly unaware of the protocols of approaching the local Elder. She explained that she *didn't really get taught much at high school, didn't really get taught much at Uni. Didn't walk away from studying Indigenous music with any tangible resources.* Seeing a flier asking for presenters for Teacher Training Australia, she submitted an idea about making connections with local Elders and getting support for programs on Indigenous music. She worked with Auntie May, talking about the guidelines and the resources selected for her program. She located an Arts Council book on Procedures that had some information about linking with the community. *So my presentation was on linking with the local Elders, linking programs with the community; using Indigenous music in lessons. During that workshop we did a composition task – the year 7 boomerang task. We also did a Stage 5 task, an Indigenous rap. I went into that with some newspaper clippings and gave them out so the*

*teacher participants created verses based on a news story. The Stage 6 composition was creating an arrangement for an Aboriginal song, 'Inanay.'*

The teacher participants have set up a network from this workshop. Teacher 2 passed on recommendations from Auntie May about Koori Radio and website suggestions from the 'Our Place' booklet. The teachers were a cross section of experienced and beginner teachers. It was a validation of the assumption that *people do not know where to start looking. People don't know how to go about doing the right thing.* The workshop looked at the protocols and how you get in contact with your local Elder, to be invited to see them. It also linked teaching Indigenous music to the NSW Quality Teaching Framework.

Teacher 2 also talked about what schools can do to open the doors to the community, linking with the '8 ways' framework (2009). *Last year I taught my students the Welcome Song that Mathew Doyle taught us and which he gave us permission to teach. They're not a choir. They're my elective class. This year I taught them Inanay and another lullaby and the Elders that came were very moved and were singing with us. My Deputy Principal calls my Year 10 group the League of Nations. There was one Indigenous student singing on Reconciliation Day. The others were Pacific Islanders, Chinese and Australian, all performing. A student in Year 12 said: 'It's pointless if there's only one Indigenous student singing.' I said: 'No you've missed the point. Indigenous students don't need necessarily to be introduced to their own culture. But everybody needs to encounter the culture of other people. That is the point. All the students were singing these lullabies. They've made that connection. Their reaction is: 'Let's learn them. Let's try and see if we can sing in a different language.' And the boys would sing too. They liked it so much they were singing it down the hallway. Same with the Mathew Doyle song – they're singing it down the hallway. And the siblings of some of the students in that class were telling me how they were singing it all night. That's been the biggest joy for me: that students are taking this with open arms.*

Future directions for Teacher 2 included taking Indigenous music into Year 9 and 10. *My plan is to blend Indigenous music with Australian Art music. I'd definitely use the Rap piece. That is generally a style of music that the students like to listen to. This is when the 'Our Place' booklet will really start to happen. What I'll do is look at traditional music with Year 7 and build on that in later years. In Year 9 and 10 we can look at the music as it reflects the culture and some of the controversial issues. It's a good preparation for the selection of topics in Years 11 and 12.* This approach to teaching Aboriginal music confirms the use of popular music alongside traditional musics. Confidence to teach has been supported by contact with community members and Elders, encouraging the directions that have been taken by the teacher.

## Conclusion

Contrary to the situation recorded in the Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education (2004), these two schools have developed valuable Aboriginal perspectives in their programs, one school across the curriculum in Year 9. They have fulfilled the commitment expressed in the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy, making a global connection between and within a cultural frame. To a large extent, they have implemented their educational approaches because of the regional support materials developed in the Department of Education and Training, as recommended in the Report. The resources provided teachers with a way inside the music that allowed students to engage actively in learning.

Moreover, both schools have formed partnerships and strong personal relationships between teachers and Aboriginal Elders. They have learned the protocols of making contact and have been rewarded with the shared expertise of culture bearers. Their exploration of these relationships demonstrates the beginnings of significant moves towards confidence in the teaching of Indigenous Australian music.

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