Music for life; a self-reflective study on childhood experiences formulating music education perspectives and philosophies.

John Heyworth
Music for life: a self-reflective study on childhood experiences formulating music education perspectives and philosophies

John Heyworth, Edith Cowan University

Abstract
Lifetime experiences in music, whether good or bad, can still have a positive influence in developing inclusive approaches to music teaching. This study is a self-reflective look at how such childhood to adulthood experiences helped shape an approach to music teaching that enabled successful music making in the general classroom. An approach towards developing positive, inclusive and enjoyable music experiences for primary school students.

Key words: music education, primary, practice, self-reflection, self-determination

Introduction
I commenced music teaching with an attitude I had developed during my lifetime (Hennessy, 2000; Russell-Bowie, 2002; Sinclair, Jeanneret, & O'Toole, 2012). As I developed as an educator I continued to reflect upon understandings of music content, music pedagogy and the learning and social needs of the student (Schön, 1986; Wiggins, 2007). Over time I became especially aware of the social needs of students and how this impacted on their attitude to participation in music (Mindess, Chen, & Brenner, 2008). The recorder was a serendipitous discovery. It became a medium for me to help build self-esteem and a sense of belonging in students. This was achieved because their musical experiences were positive and enjoyable (Hallam, 2010). How this came about was as a result of my childhood experiences along with a variety of teaching experiences all helping to formulate an inclusive approach to music teaching. This study is a self reflection in an attempt to give the reader an understanding of how plausible or valid reflections on present and past experiences can be in shaping approaches and lead to success in music education (Polkinghorne, 2007; Hemphill, 2009).

It is a self-reflective study in which I position myself as a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1986). Meanings I have discovered or learnt from past experiences (realities) have been important in shaping my approach to teaching (Crotty, 1998). These experiences have helped me discover and describe new understandings in music education (Boyd, 1983; Jasper, 2005). In the words of Walkerden (2009, p. 252): “practitioners reflect on where they are coming from now, and how that carries forward where they were coming from”. The study consists of vignettes designed to be engaging, informative, and accessible for the general educator (Goodson, 1992; Punch, 2005; Sword, 2009). It is partly a study of self-determination within various lifetime experiences and environments (Bandura, 1989, 1997; Boeree, 2009; Evans, 2015; Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Childhood experiences
Brisbane 1963: Within one year of my family arriving in Australia my parents embraced this land of opportunity by sending my sisters and me along to ballet, tap dancing, elocution, drama, music and swimming lessons. There was one particular lesson in particular that caused me distress.

Every week a feeling of dread would descend upon me - piano lessons! I portrayed a forlorn figure trudging along to the local convent after school. Eerie streets were often dotted with dead rabbits; eyes dangling from their sockets and blood oozing from their mouths, a result of myxomatosis (Wilkinson, 2001). The slower I moved towards my destination the more my
mood and the skies seemed to darken. I was steeling myself for my impending fate and I was often late! The punishment for arriving late at the lesson was to be sent to the veranda to copy out music theory for the entire lesson! To my mind this was far better than being hit on the back of the hand with a ruler for every wrong note played (and I could play many of these). Due to my tardiness the poor girl I shared the lesson with would have the whole lesson to herself. It wasn’t too long before this situation resulted in it becoming a race between us to be last!

Through my reluctance to practise and the avoidance of piano lessons I began to develop a love of theory. Even when forced to practise at home I would rather make up my own songs rather than practise set pieces. I can remember my first piece called Hungry. It only had one lyric, hungry, repeated many, many times and with increasing intensity. It was, to my way of thinking, extremely effective. This evolving love of theory and resulting exploration into composition were to become valuable assets for me in later years (Randles, 2013).

Another event was also about to change my attitude to piano lessons. In the following year a new nun came to the convent. What a difference she made! She was warm, generous and encouraging. She never used a ruler and she never threatened or punished us. Before long I started to run to my lessons to get there first! What a difference a teacher’s attitude can make (Wadlington, 2011).

**Early Primary School experiences**

I attended a local primary state school, often bare-footed and always dressed in khaki shorts and shirts. Morning classes commenced with the Lord’s Prayer. Once a week we would be marched into the assembly quadrangle often to the distorted tune of Colonel Bogey’s March booming from metallic cone speakers. After assembly we would march off again, this time to vaguely familiar and often indistinguishable tunes played by the school’s fife and drum band. The band had a special place at the back of the assembly and they didn’t ever have to march across that hot asphalt. How I wanted to be in that band!

One day my opportunity arrived. In grade five we were informed that auditions for the fife band would take place in a fortnight’s time. We were told that there were no lessons or instructions available and we needed our own fife. After much persuasive behaviour on my part my parents finally succumbed to buying me one. I was so excited and determined to join the band that I practised every day for a whole week! But no matter how hard I tried to blow, and I blew and I blew, I just could not make a single sound. Ever hopeful I went to the auditions to try and play a note or two. I just needed one note to play. I blew as hard as I could. No sound. That was it. I was out of the band. That sinking feeling of failure I had is something I have never forgotten.

The fife and drum band was my first experience of being excluded from a group. However another event was to occur that would again foster my love of music. The school introduced massed singing on Wednesday afternoons. I loved it almost as much as kicking a footy. And no one was ever stopped from singing! We all sang our hearts out (hopefully reasonably tunefully). This singing class became a positive and inclusive experience for us all (Mills, 1998). It was not until I moved to another school that I experienced the ‘tap on the head’ - an indication to sit down and be quiet.

It is likely that my early experiences in music shaped my approach to teaching in schools (Walkerden, 2009). My desire that all children be encouraged to participate in meaningful
music making was likely a result of these experiences. Over time I also came to realise that while there was need for special groups to help develop gifted students there was also a need for all children to experience the joy of music making. I had both those opportunities at the Brisbane school, and even though I was not good enough to join the band, I could still enjoy group music making every Wednesday afternoon at mass school singing. “Music is for all” (Mills, 1998, p.112).

Early teaching experiences
Perth 1980: As a young teacher I was faced with the rather daunting prospect of surviving a year which included teaching music to a fairly unruly year seven class. I had little sense of direction and few ideas on how to engage the class. By nothing more than a happy chance, I found a mixture of types of recorders hidden away in the back cupboard. I wondered if the recorder could possibly serve as an engaging instrument for a senior class. At least it was easier to blow than a fife!

Is the recorder an instrument of beauty or of torture (Lander, 1980)? From my early experiences of teaching descants to 30 enthusiastic nine and ten year olds, not only did my ears suffer, but also my relationship with the teacher next door. What I did find, however, is that young children are enthusiastic learners of the recorder, at first anyway! Children like to impress. To impress they need to be seen and heard. And therefore the best way to be heard (and then seen) is to play as loudly as humanly possible and be noticed. The resulting sound can be quite challenging to the ear!

The fault is not with the recorder and the fault is not with the child. It would take immense skill and experience to make 30 descant recorders sound pleasant to the ear (Kersten, 2000). The problem for me was to reflect upon and try and make sense of how to better create a harmonic and enjoyable experience for my classes (Walkerden, 2009). Schön discusses his experiences in solving problems and discusses an intuitive, interpretative approach, even by someone who was not necessarily a skilled practitioner (1986, p. 27). In a similar fashion I wanted to try and make this work for my students. I considered whether a mixture of recorders would be motivating to play and sound reasonably pleasant. Perhaps a variety of recorders might have more prestige and motivation for the older students and reduce the occurrence of the occasional reluctant student. I had learnt to play recorder in my early college days and so I developed some ideas on how I might be able to make this work. Having recalled that recorders were not fifes, this time I was going to make sure every child was supported in playing the notes!

The next problem to solve was to find some music that my students could play. The music had to be easy to play for absolute beginners yet motivating at the same time. I thought I perhaps could write or arrange something, especially after having experienced writing *Hungry* when I was young. Some immediate advantages of this came to mind. I could add an appealing title to the music in an attempt captivate my students’ interests. Therefore I could write for the recorders I had at my disposal and meet my students’ musical abilities and needs at the same time. Success was likely to come if they were able to master simple passages reasonable quickly and easily (Hallam, 2010). Despite having no bass recorders an idea was also emerging for composing four part SSAT pieces. The four parts opened up the opportunity to have four ability groupings. Without labelling my students I was able to include gifted students in more demanding parts and engage other students with more easily achievable parts. For some of my more reluctant boys I could also allocate recorders that had
some prestige. The tenors were perfect for this. In this way all parts were distributed throughout the whole class.

This strategy worked well for me at the time, but later on I was to discover that a fairer model was to have mixed ability levels. The use of group leaders and mentoring became more inclusive and engaging for my students (Tolmie, 2010). Peer teaching had “benefits beyond the transmission of knowledge and skills (not least the peer teacher)” (Sinclair, Jeanneret & O'Toole, 2012, p. 214).

Towards a teaching philosophy
Over the years I have come across some people who have developed an aversion to music perhaps due to childhood experiences. A story frequently heard was one of rejection from a school choir (Mills, 1998, p. 5). Perhaps this was the result of pressure in creating excellent performances or showcasing the school. This need to excel may overpower the need to encompass a love of music through more recreational activities (Hemphill, 2009). I remember many situations where the school, my students and I have been on show. Keeping a balance between producing performances and at the same time facilitating enjoyable music making for all was quite challenging to achieve.

Along the way there have been many people who have had an impact on my approach to education. One example was of a School of Instrumental Music [SIM] teacher who came to our school (Department of Education, 2015). Up to five students per group were chosen for this program. Their selection was largely based on their performance in a standardized aural test alongside the recommendations of their teachers based on good work habits and academic performance. I remember a student from difficult circumstances having very little success at school and yet had a love for music. Because her work habits were poor and she had a considerable lack of social skills I hesitantly discussed this situation with the SIM flute teacher. I wanted to include this student but was afraid her school habits would count against her. Not only did this kind teacher want to include this student, she insisted on it! The student responded to the challenge in a remarkable way; improvements in her learning habits and social skills were dramatic and she excelled at the flute. Today she participates in many community music groups and has developed into a happy, well-adjusted adult in society.

This illustrated how much music can affect our students’ lives. It can be quite a daunting prospect for educators to contemplate, especially as actions and words can have positive or negative consequences. A pre-service teacher informed me of a school report card that had read: “tries hard, but does not have a musical ear”. The pre-service teacher stated that this had devastated her and it had taken her nearly ten years to play any sort of music again (University student’s private correspondence, March, 2015). Presently I am working with a boy who is on his last chance at school. Learning to play the drums is starting to turn his life around. He has found happiness in music. Happy children are likely to become satisfied adults (Jewell & Kambhampati, 2015).

Music has the power to be a social and interactive subject (Heyworth, 2013). It includes communal singing and various levels of group music making. School choirs, instrumental ensembles, and musical theatre are all examples of musical activities that draw groups and communities together. In the words of Pound and Harrison (2003), “music has traditionally played a strong role in supporting group cohesion.” My experiences in childhood and adulthood have given me valuable lessons for the importance of including all students in collective music making. My recorder classes were for my general classes and not selected
groups. They evolved into mixed ensembles where I could incorporate all the different experiences and skills children could bring into the classroom.

Conclusion
Reflecting on past experiences helped me develop meaningful music experiences to meet my students’ needs. It was perhaps only by chance that I used the recorder as a voice for fostering a love of music participation with all my students. It could have been another voice. These days we have drum circles, ukulele groups, community singing, dancing and many other activities that encourage the active participation of everyday people. At the same time we also have high quality concerts where talented people can perform and entertain us. From my life experiences I have learnt the importance of maintaining the balance between the two. It is from my self-reflections, influenced by past experiences, people and environments, that I have developed an inclusive approach to music education.

References


