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Promoting social inclusion in music education: International comparisons of key issues of teaching and learning as perceived by music teachers from four countries

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Introduction

One of the impacts of globalisation is that many countries are faced with similar societal changes, most of which manifest as challenges to the classroom in terms of pedagogy, values and teaching strategies. Issues of achievement, social equality, learner disaffection, teacher stance and teaching strategies now receive considerable public exposure and attention. In this paper, we prefigure just two elements, which provide the specific focus for informed international educational comparison, as the overarching pedagogical challenges of ‘engagement’ (i.e. learning disaffection) and ‘achievement’.

It is commonly agreed that music plays a crucial role in preventing social exclusion – since it has the capacity for functioning as aim and means when creating an effective learning environment for multicultural schools. Music teachers working with disaffected learners, in areas where there is risk of social exclusion, are confronted with difficulties: most of them have not been professionally trained for the present situation and lack materials, methods and support for reflection. But they are also confronted with possibilities: creative teachers, understanding the potential of music as a unifying force, can use their diverse context to develop teaching methods with relevance for all learning contexts.

This project – which arose from discussions at the ISME Conference in Tenerife and included Bo Wah Leung (Hong Kong, China) and Frits Evelein (The Netherlands) in a first stage – set out to identify and characterise the practices of teachers. In so doing the project focused on the following, which couple as the aims of this paper:

- to compare how ‘social inclusion’ in music education in different countries is identified and characterised;
- to compare specific themes concerned with what teachers say and do as they encounter same, similar and different ways of conceiving and coping with social inclusion in music education in different cultures.

Why comparative research? Several assumptions underpin this decision to conduct a comparative study. Firstly, we share the view that we can’t possibly understand our own classrooms until we’ve looked in others. Secondly, that comparative studies have

the potential to uncover the hidden assumptions that underpin what we do (and do well) in our classrooms. Thirdly, it offers alternatives to the ways in which we have always done things.

The local contexts: A glimpse of national, school and teacher issues from the four cases

Case studies were carried out, in each of the participant countries, in secondary schools placed in regional locations that presented social problems such as poor socio-economic background, social deprivation, or high numbers of students from ethnic minority groups. The English, Swedish, Spanish and Australian selected schools presented different characteristics:

- In **England**, 'social inclusion' has become well established as a terminology accompanying an array of strategies and initiatives designed to improve the life chances of disadvantaged groups, a characteristic of the selected comprehensive secondary school. The music teacher featured in this case had the most 'macho' of students, motivated differently in relation to music.
- In the current national governing document for school music in **Sweden**, the emphasis is on making music together as a basis for experience and learning, and music as a force for individual development. The Swedish music teacher featured in this study works at a school where 25 languages and 35 countries are represented. In his classroom the muslim girls play popular music in the bands, just as everyone else. Focus is on cooperation and collaborative teaching.
- Secondary music in **Spain** is a compulsory subject shaped by a concept based curriculum and a historical approach. In the studied school, a group of students that failed all other subjects was highly motivated by a different subject narrative, which consisted in the preparation of concerts where each class acted as an orchestra, in an approach that the teacher called 'music for all' and that fitted with the local wind band culture.
- In **Australia**, 'social inclusion' is not directly addressed in state and national policy documents but as a point of advocacy. Secondary music is based upon creating, making and presenting music in past and present contexts. The 2006 national review of music education notes 'a difficulty in identifying schools catering specifically for cultural diversity in their music programmes.' The case study school represents a context where the music teacher is engaging with cultural diversity through a creative contemporary music program that forges a relationship with the wider community and has a documented effect on social inclusion.

Common to each context were teachers having to cope with disenfranchised learners. In a Swedish context the question was raised, "How to handle a group of children with 25 different mother tongues?" and "How to move from majority culture to minority, from thinking 'us and them'?" In Australia the question was raised, "How to move between multi-culturalism and urban indigenous experiences and values in one lesson?"

Methodology and methods: Comparative case study

This was a small-scale study which involved *inter-perspectival collaboration* between four university based researchers. The methodology was qualitative and the design

principle was multiple-case study. Whilst case reporting recognises the complexity and embeddedness of social contexts, the kind of *generalisation* offered is from *case-bound features* of the instance to a multiplicity of classes (e.g. social inclusion by one teacher in one school may tell us about social inclusion by other teachers in other schools). Theoretically informed by an interpretivist research paradigm, this style of educational case study, acknowledges the culturally embedded nature of teaching and learning. Data collection involved classroom observation and indepth individual teacher and learner interviews (the latter participants' perspectives are not a focus of this paper).

Themes arising

The main themes reported in this presentation underlie similarities and differences concerning the kinds of pupil understanding and learning these teachers appear to promote or encourage and the challenges they have overcome and deal with daily in their classrooms. These include:

- pedagogies
- learning discourses; and
- classroom interactions.

Challenges faced by the teachers included:

- lack of economic resources
- gaps between the official documents and the reality in the classrooms
- low level of support from the school administration
- low status of the subject in the local community and among colleagues,
- a “low effort-immediate satisfaction” culture encouraged by the media, or learning disaffection.

We argue for the development of an emerging framework and vocabulary for studying social inclusion in music education in general and for documenting and explaining the particular differences which emerge in promoting social inclusion in music education.

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