

How do newly-arrived and refugee children perceive music-learning?
A summary of three children's descriptions.

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summary of three children's descriptions.**

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Abstract

Music is often described as a universal language, and indeed, for young immigrants and refugees of primary school age arriving in Australia from around the world, music can be one of their first experiences of success and familiarity in school. There is a growing body of research that demonstrates the potential of music to support development in literacy and other areas of learning; however, students have their own experience of the way music impacts upon them. This paper discusses findings from a 2008 research project in a Melbourne English Language School for new arrivals, in which three students describe their perceptions of a composition-focused music program, and the meanings they ascribe to the activities.

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Background

In 2007, 5549 newly arrived students from backgrounds other than English enrolled in Victorian schools, with more than a third of this group arriving as refugee and humanitarian entrants (DEECD, 2007). Schooling experiences vary widely among newly-arrived students, as do their prior experiences of music learning and music making. There are many pathways towards developing musical understanding, but do different cultural experiences make these less navigable, or does the universal language of music create pathways for all? When considering musical understanding in diverse populations, the students themselves have much to share with us.

There is a growing awareness both in educational and therapeutic circles that music learning and participation in music-making can have a powerful, positive impact on the lives, well-being and educational outcomes of young people (Bryce, Mendelovits, Beavis, & Adams, 2004; Deasy, 2002; Fiske, 1999). Recent research demonstrates links between music learning, educational success and cognitive development, and offers opportunities for success and engagement in school to those students who struggle in more purely 'academic' environments (Bryce et al., 2004). Literature also supports connections between music, literacy and bilingualism, and suggests that music activities can be designed to support student development in oral language and listening skills (Spina, 2006). When considering music learning in the context of newly-arrived and refugee students, with the multiple challenges these students face in their schooling, these potential outcomes take on an even greater significance (Baker & Jones, 2005; Rousseau, Drapeau, Lacroix, Bagilishya, & Heusch, 2005).

Within Victoria, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) strives to meet the educational needs of newly-arrived students of diverse language backgrounds in a number of ways, including the provision of nine English Language Schools and Centres, where students can develop English language skills in the context of the key learning areas in an intensive, fulltime environment. Students typically attend these schools for between two and four school terms before transitioning to mainstream schools (DEECD, 2007).

Newly-arrived students contend with culture shock on numerous levels. For students attending an English Language School, they must learn a new language with its associated sociolinguistic behaviours of etiquette, customs and implicit usage (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001) as well as the 'hidden curriculum' of classroom

culture (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004, p. 489). Outside of school, they may be grappling with multiple stresses caused by settlement and transition, as well as, particularly in the case of refugees, the continuing impact of pre-migration experiences – often very traumatic or distressing events that they have personally experienced, that they have witnessed, or heard about. A significant number of refugees from war-torn countries have grown up in refugee camps and have had little or no formal education prior to arriving in Australia (Birman, 2005; Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006; Candappa, 2000; Cassity & Gow, 2005; Muir, 2004).

Research site and context

This paper reports on findings from a research project that took place at a Melbourne English Language School (MELS) [pseudonym] in 2008. I am both the researcher and the resident music workshop artist in the school. As workshop artist, I am contracted by an outside arts organisation to provide music workshops in the school on a weekly basis, with a focus on group-devised music and composition.

The research project was developed in response to my desire to better understand the impact that the music activities have on the students, and the ways in which music composition might be supporting the students in their efforts to learn English and build confidence in themselves at this crucial transitional time. However, before I could build an understanding of the impact the music activities might be having on the students, I wanted to know their perceptions of the work. How might their different cultural and schooling backgrounds influence their perceptions of learning music in school in Australia, and how would they describe their experiences thus far?

My workshop program takes place with the three primary classes, divided into Lower, Middle and Upper Primary. This research project focused on the Upper Primary class. Three students were invited to take part in the project, selected for their capacity to respond to the interview setting and articulate their thoughts (with the assistance of interpreters), and the different cultural and schooling backgrounds they represented.

Methodology

This is a qualitative case study inquiry, designed to capture the music program in a particular time and place, as it is experienced and perceived by the students (Yin, 2003). Embedded within the case study structure is a phenomenological approach to the inquiry, in that no presuppositions are being made about the subject of the inquiry, and in considering the participants' responses as rich text, with multiple and layered meanings and intentions (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Rogers, 2005). Grounded theory served as a procedural model in drawing conclusions from the resulting data, following an emergent, inductive approach.

Interviews with the three child informants have been the primary data source, with further methods such as participant observation, documents, literature and interviews with secondary informants serving in the interests of triangulation. Interpreters assisted the students in interviews that took place in Term 3, 2008, when each of the participants was in their last five weeks at MELS, preparing to make the transition to mainstream school.

Research Question and theoretical foundations

The overarching research question guiding this study asks how the students at MELS perceive music learning. Students build musical understanding through their perceptions; in asking how the students *perceive* the music activities, I am defining perception as being the cognitive interpretation of the “raw input”, or stimuli, sensed by the body and translated into meaningful information (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004). Perception refers to the ways in which we draw in and make sense of the world, and the way we perceive things depends on our prior experiences. It is not fixed or constant (Aque, 2007), but rather is constantly constructed and modified. Perception will be influenced by what takes place in the music classes, and the point that students are at in their lives and within the school. Asked the same questions at a later time, the three students' responses might be quite different.

In child development research, children of this age (10-14 years) are considered to have emerging metacognitive awareness and the ability to reason about abstract ideas (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004). This expectation supports my own observations of the students' responses in class; accordingly, I unpacked my research question further to progress from concrete referents to more abstract, causal questions (Saywitz, 1990, cited in Zwiers & Morrisette, 1999):

- *concrete* perceptions (*WHAT*: the things we do in class, what keeps us busy, the structures of the lessons);
- *metacognitive* perceptions (*HOW*: the way we learn things, the overarching concepts that are learned);
- *abstract* perceptions (*WHY*: why we are learning these things, the meaning and purpose of the activities and curriculum); and
- *emotional* perceptions (feelings, preferences, sense of self and sense of others).

The three student participants – three case studies

Three students from the Upper Primary class at MELS, from three contrasting cultural and linguistic backgrounds, took part in the interviews. Pseudonyms are used, chosen by the students. A snapshot of the three is given in Table 1, using information offered by students and their class teacher in the interviews. The categories reflect the conceptual framework that underpins the research design, which proposes that students' cultural backgrounds, prior educational experiences, prior musical experiences, and unique circumstances of migration and settlement, could all influence their perceptions of music learning at MELS. The table below offers the reader a context within which to consider the students' interview responses.

Table 1 – Cultural snapshot of the three student participants

	Kevin	Leki	Susan
Cultural background	China	Thailand	Sudan
Age	10; nearly 11	12; nearly 13	14 (though her 'official' passport/birth certificate age is 11).
Time at MELS	3 terms	3 terms	6 terms

Prior schooling	Age-consistent with Australia. Teacher-directed, 'transmission' style of teaching; 40-50 students in class.	Age-consistent with Australia, from the age of 8; large classes, transmission-style of teaching. Leki describes it as a severe and stern experience.	Extremely disrupted prior schooling, refugee camps only. No literacy in her native tongue.
Prior music experiences	Singing songs from a big book, teacher on the stage playing piano.	Traditional Thai dancing; singing; beginning to read Western notation; experiments on piano at home.	Creative and cultural music, singing and dancing in a community context (refugee camp and church)
Participation style in school	Keen, focused, and hard-working. Motivated to achieve and master new skills. Happy to be challenged. However, his first two terms at school were marked by great distress, frustration and culture shock.	Engaged but low-key participant. Happiest out of the spotlight. Extremely quiet, shy, although not with peers.	Enthusiastic, engaged; natural leader among peers and in music class.
Family circumstances and home life	Traumatic arrival in Australia, as he was separated from his original primary caregivers, and travelled to Australia alone to live with unfamiliar relatives.	Living in Australia with Thai mother and new Australian dad. Home life very quiet and lonely, she reports.	Living with natural parents, but large number of step-siblings still in Sudan. Susan is 'the chosen one' of her family to come to Australia, and is thus under considerable pressure.

Students' perceptions

This section draws together comments from the three research participants (Kevin, Leki, and Susan) on the themes that have emerged after cross-case analysis of their individual interviews. Further responses are included from their class teacher (Alice).

(i) Lesson content – instruments, composing and inventing

The students were asked to identify the different kinds of things they do in music, and the different things they learn. They each described the usual lesson structure as starting with 'games', a 'warm-up', or 'warm-up games', which then led to the main body of the lesson, generally focused on instrumental music-making and singing.

For the three students, the constant use of instruments and the group-composing focus are the cornerstones of the music lesson content. Their first response to this question was to list instruments, drawing pictures of the ones they couldn't name. They each declared "the instruments" to be their favourite parts of the music lessons.

The music we play comes from our heads, not from a book...
Sometimes people are all doing different things. Like when there is
two parts to a song, and the students are playing different kinds of
instruments.
(Leki)

We do it together... you bring your idea. There's a lot of things being
played, a lot of other instruments... everyone is playing different
things.
(Susan)

(ii) Process and strategies

In discussing the different ways they learn and invent music in the music classes the children considered the kinds of strategies the teacher uses, the kinds of thinking processes they have developed for themselves, and other ways of figuring out what to do when you have very little English to help you understand.

They offered descriptions of the process of putting a group-composed piece of music, or a song, together.

We tell the teacher our thoughts, the teacher writes on the board, and
then we put it in order. For example, this semester the topic is about
friends. Everyone in the class thinks about friends. Then the teacher
will gather information from every student. Then the students help
each other to organise the body of the songs and put in order.
(Leki)

Kevin described the playing techniques he has learned, and recalls the detail of how to sit, hold sticks, and remember rhythms. Furthermore, Kevin developed many of his own strategies for perfecting his parts, which can be observed in the music lesson video footage. We can see him turning his xylophone mallets the wrong way round, so that he can tap out his part silently, practising while the teacher's attention is elsewhere. He also takes pains to clarify information, asking questions in order to understand, in halting but determined English.

Susan spoke in detail about her own creative decision-making processes. She describes her thought processes when she is "doing music in her head":

We use the alphabet to make words to make music, and we use
numbers. To play xylophone you use the first letter and then the
second, and you don't do just one letter a lot of times. And you just

think, what can I do, how can this get better... and what do you think you can do. And you make it up, and starting to do it by yourself, then if you think that is good, then you gotta do it with people. Then we try to break it down, a little bit, to learn the other side [other parts]. And just practise... you learn something quickly if you do it many times.
(Susan)

I asked their class teacher Alice how the students know that they are taking part in a composing process in music. Given the way new students rely on copying what they see other students doing in order to participate in lessons, what kinds of signals are being given in the composing process that might make this clear?

Maybe they don't [realise it] at the beginning but I think it clicks later that it's not someone else's, that it is their music... I think they must know that we're actually composing this, because it is actually changing all the time until we get to the [musical idea] that suits us.
(Alice)

(iii) Perceived challenges

Each of the three students felt that music could be quite a challenging subject, but that its level of difficulty varied for each student. Unsurprisingly, they all highlighted the difficulty that newer students have, "because they don't know English" and the unfamiliar nature of the lesson content and teaching style.

For Susan and Kevin, however, music was far less threatening than other classes during those early days in the school, because there were elements that were already familiar to them.

[At school in the first days] I didn't understand anything. I just feel, like, helpless! But music's not like this. In music you have to create some music, some rhythms... In music, you know a little bit, you feel alright.
(Kevin)

For Leki, that didn't really help.

In the beginning, with no English, there's not much else that can help you in music. I felt afraid, in the beginning. But I stopped feeling afraid when I knew more English.
(Leki)

Leki and Susan identified a particular aspect of music performance that they find difficult.

Singing while playing instruments is difficult. For some, remembering the notes to play on the instrument is difficult. But it is easy for some people. For me it's just medium.
(Leki)

Yeah, it's a bit hard to do singing and drumming at the same time, for the first day it's hard. If you have some time, if you keep doing that, everything gets better.
(Susan)

It is perhaps not surprising that the challenges for the students are largely to do with their newness at the school, and unfamiliarity with the language. All three students, who were in the last weeks at Language School at the time of the interviews, had been through the experience of slowly acquiring enough language for things to start making sense. Everything gets easier for newly-arrived students with the acquisition of language, and familiarity with the routines and requirements of the environment. Even music-specific skills, while challenging to learn, can be learned and perfected.

(iv) Why study music?

In each interview, when students described particular music activities, they were asked why they thought this activity was being taught. Leki believed that the warm-up games at the start of the lesson “help [students] relax”.

Susan saw the warm-up game as a way for the students to get into the right mindset for music – to cast aside distractions and prepare for the work. Kevin picked upon this theme of feeling good in the music lesson, but also recognised other benefits.

We play games at the start. But these are to warm up our bodies, so that we feel good when we go to your lesson. Or to warm up the voice so that we can sing good... Yes, I think this kind of thing is necessary.
(Kevin)

In answer to the question “Why do you think we do music in this school?” Kevin took the point of view that for children coming from all over the world to attend school in Australia, it was important for them to have a base level of knowledge about music in general (as part of a thorough education), as well as some understanding of the music of this country.

It's also important to learn music knowledge. I also think people [from other countries] want to learn the music from here, from Australia.
(Kevin)

Susan concurred with Kevin, saying that the many different nationalities in the school meant many different music experiences, so a new approach that they could all do together was important. Susan also recognised the value of people from different countries being able to exchange the ‘music and dancing of their language’.

Like in Kakuma [refugee camp in Kenya] some people just dancing in their language, and they show people how you dance in their language, and you try to show people what you are doing before, and how, in your country. Because a lot of people, they don't know about your country and you show them what you used to do... and... it's good.
(Susan)

For Leki, whose connection to school is very driven by her peer friendships, the answer was much more straight-forward.

We have music at this school to have fun.
(Leki)

Conclusion

This study has proved to be rich in the insights it offers on a number of areas, including the depth of understanding newly-arrived students can have of their music experiences in Australia, despite the way these may contrast with their prior schooling experiences, and what we as teachers understand of the way children's cultural backgrounds may impose upon their adaptation to school in Australia. It has also highlighted some of the methodological issues that can arise when researching a newly-arrived, non-English-speaking cohort of this age-group.

Certainly in the case of these three informants, it would appear that the conceptual framework that guided the research design had presumed a wider cultural gap than perhaps exists in a music context. For these students, it seems that rather than their different cultural backgrounds being a predictor of their perceptions of music learning, their personalities and approaches to learning in general seem the stronger determinant.

Kevin's comments reflect his motivation towards discipline-based learning and the mastery of skills. However, it is also an enjoyable subject for him, in which he 'feels very good'. Susan's experiences of music in her community and in a multi-ethnic refugee camp have shown her the way that music can bring people of different cultures together. It is also enjoyable and makes people feel good, and it has its own unique challenges that can be worked at and achieved. For Leki, the lonely child at home, anything that creates opportunities for young people to work together in a fun and engaging way is important to have in school. This is her criteria for *anything* at school, according to her teacher, and it is perhaps a relief to be in a place that nurtures and draws forth her playful, social side.

What is most significant is that, despite the potential language barriers, we learn that each student is not only fully aware of the lesson content but is cognisant of the learning strategies offered by the teacher, as well as those they have developed themselves. The universal language of music draws them in, and becomes a conduit for musical understanding and skills, as well as for powerful connections with others and joyful experiences of school, at an important and vulnerable time in their lives.

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