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Masakhane: Drumming up an Effective Music Curriculum for Pre-Service Teacher Education

Abstract

The introduction of African indigenous music to a generalist primary teacher education course transcended both cultural differences and personal inadequacies of students. It provided a cohesive bond for promoting the learning of music that is aptly represented by the African concept of *masakhane* (building together). This research demonstrated the effectiveness of Africa music for promoting cross-cultural music education, thereby providing a worthy model for implementation in other teacher education programs. According to findings from a questionnaire survey and interviews, students reported they were able to more effectively engage with, know, create, perform, teach and experience music through African rather than just the Western music. This experience provided students with new musical knowledge, understandings and skills as well as giving them insights into another musical tradition and culture. Students also perceived Indigenous African music as a source of motivation, interest and enjoyment, thereby promoting their creativity and musical learning. As global citizens, we need to embrace diversity and change not only in our immediate teaching contexts but also in broader educational policy. This curriculum clearly enhanced the effectiveness of music within a teacher education course and by extension has the potential to contribute to a greater professional and public good in education.

Introduction

As Nketia (1988) points out, I—like many expatriate music educators—have selected indigenous music from my own country of origin (South Africa) as a starting point to develop curriculum materials for my teaching. Firstly, I place myself within the context outlined by Brophy (1986), who advocates that it is essential for educators to view themselves as active socializing agents capable of stimulating students' motivation to learn. Secondly, my decision to use African music was based on Carver and Tracey's (2001) notion of 'empowering students' to overcome the often commonly-held belief that 'they cannot achieve' which reduces their confidence and competence—for example, 'I cant' dance', or '...sing', or '...play', or 'I am not an Africa'. The incorporation of African indigenous music into an Australian context is not to be seen as mere tokenism where there is an attempt to simply redress the imbalance between Western and African music. Rather it suggests that when musical product is used to explore the context of African music, such contextualisation is intended to overcome the problems of tokenism. In reference to this, Goodall (1992) contends that, when meaning is absent, tokenism results. In her opinion it is only when we move beyond our own and into the others' frameworks that we can begin to contextualise others' thinking. It is within such a framework that I placed my teaching of African music.

Finally, my purpose in teaching African music as a cultural experience falls within a broader educational context that promotes the internationalisation of the curriculum (see Joseph 2004), thus positioning my research as 'doing the public good'. Part of the challenge of rethinking my teaching and curriculum structures was not only to prepare students for a specific and well-defined profession (primary teaching), but also to prepare them for active participation and adaptability in a world where change is inevitable and constant.

Project Background

The impetus for my research grew out of my own interest in African indigenous music and my decision to include it was based on my contention that engaging students with an unfamiliar genre may enhance their understanding of rhythm (beat, accent, metre and duration) and increase their competence and skills in drumming, moving and singing. The basis for this contention was that the use of a non-western musical genre would provide:

- 1) a 'level playing field' for all students, regardless of students' musical backgrounds;
- 2) an impetus for understanding of other cultures and their musics;

- 3) a model for teaching practical activities and cross-cultural understandings as part of the current educational policy to internationalise the curriculum; and
- 4) greater motivation for effective learning of a greater range of musics than just 'Western classical music' that in turn would increase students' self-esteem, competence and confidence as music educators.

The students participating in my research during 2002 and 2003 undertook *Primary Arts Education 2* for a semester. They were in their fourth year of study of the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree. All of the students were from Australia but came from a range of cultural backgrounds, and only two students in the 2002 and 2003 cohort had visited South Africa as tourists. It was hoped that the teaching of African indigenous music would not only introduce new musical content and pedagogies but also promote cross-cultural understandings. The unit focussed on the music pedagogies of Orff, Kodály and Dalcroze through the teaching of recorder and classroom instruments and for the first time African music was introduced, thereby engaging students with an unfamiliar music, language and culture. By exposing students to other cultures and specifically to their musics, students were able to explore cross-cultural understandings more fully, richly and critically than previously when focussing only on Western music. This point is well made by Oehrle (1991) who states that a growing awareness of other cultures is not only more possible but also necessary as we live in an increasingly multicultural and diverse society (p.26). My research confirmed that through a new cultural experience students felt much more confident and competent about the learning and teaching of rhythm, song and drumming.

Perspectives on African Music and Culture

African music and culture are inseparable—music is an integral part of life from birth to death. Floyd (1987) makes the point that, to the African, music is an integral part of daily existence at every stage of their lives and is an expression of that very existence. This contention is supported by Dargie (1996) who suggests that the African child in the womb feels the mother's movement and dancing which after birth is continued when carried on her back. He argues that children are thereby exposed to listening and musical participation from an early age.

My program aimed to familiarise students with the broader role of music in a culture other than Australia. According to Thorsén (2002, p.5), music education should not just be concerned with content and method; rather it should also develop attitudes and understandings about the role of music education in society. In African societies, music (song and dance) is the medium through which children and young people receive instruction about traditional customs and practices, obligations and responsibilities. They learn about members of their families, important people, places and events of their community, their tribe and their country (Warren, 1970, p.12). Thus music and dance are seen as important ingredients in the socialisation process for the African people (Blacking, 1983).

Unlike the Western system, the basis of music education in African indigenous communities is an oral tradition, which includes the performance of vocal and instrumental music interwoven with dance (Amoaku, 1982; Okafor, 1988, 1989 in Kemp & Lephed 1992). Oral tradition plays a significant role in African pedagogy (see Joseph 2004 for aspects of African indigenous music that relate to the transmission of learning). According to Amoaku (1982, p.116), the oral tradition is just as reliable as the written tradition and is "essentially derived from an inter-relationship with the universe, which a traditional society regards as factual and constant". An example of this oral traditional is the teaching of rhythm, exemplified by drumming, where there is no need for notation as the skills of drumming and the traditional drumming patterns are passed on from generation to generation (Vulliamy & Lee, 1982, p.171). Such a model based on the oral and aural transmission (as opposed to written Western based notation) of teaching and learning was successfully used in my program (see comments by students in findings and discussion).

Cross-Cultural Engagement

Through the teaching of African songs, students gained an understanding of the nature and role of music in both their own and in African societies (see comments by students in findings and discussion). The African songs utilised in my program included all of the possible applications of folk music such as lullabies, work songs, youth songs and, in the context of recent South African history, protest songs. In South Africa, the common languages and majority of indigenous people come from the Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho tribes. Songs

from these tribes were chosen to teach rhythmic skills and knowledge, and served to make cross-cultural connections to Western repertoire and pedagogies (see Joseph 2003).

By incorporating African music alongside the Western methodologies of Orff, Kodály and Dalcroze, students gained a richer understanding of musical content and of cross-cultural issues. I use the term “cross-cultural” in this context to represent the many dimensions of a cultural comparison. In this instance, “cross-cultural” encapsulates the fusion of music and dance/movement within the African music context and the Western pedagogies of Orff, Kodály and Dalcroze.

Amoaku (1982, p.118) asserts that, of all the contemporary trends in music education, Orff Schulwerk is perhaps the closest to traditional African music. He further states that essentials of Orff Schulwerk—which include speech, rhythm and movement—come rather close to the traditional African concept of music making. It is through a variety of Western and specifically South African repertoire that students gained an understanding of the richness, similarities and difference across music, culture and pedagogy. Through such an experience, students understood how differences were offset by similarities through cross-cultural engagement. It is my contention that learning through an unfamiliar genre like African music gives greater prominence to the concepts being taught and that learning is made more meaningful as the findings from this research reveal.

According to Nketia (1988, p. 98), what appears to be different cross-culturally may operate in similar contexts, hence the discovery of common principles, usages and behavioural patterns. He contends that it is not just the music we hear, but a knowledge and culture of music makers—their lives, what they do, and the occasions when they make music that puts us in a frame of mind to explore their music (p.101). This cultural experience through music is summed up by Du Preez (1997, p.4) who states “culture embodies the knowledge, values, norms, beliefs, language, perceptions and adaptations to the environment of a certain group of people”. Hence, incorporating music of another culture may assist students to assimilate new elements and experiences into their own background knowledge, thereby establishing new understandings of musical style and the broader culture (Nketia, 1988). Nketia found that “practical experiences of a simple aspect of the music process that we can manage, such as singing a simple song, clapping or stamping where this is part of the music or some simple movement, helps in our efforts to get to know and understand the music” (1988, p.103). This was fully experienced by my students through their study of and engagement with African indigenous music.

African Music in a Teacher Education Context

As mentioned earlier, I focussed specifically on the lives and culture of the Zulu, Sotho and Xhosa people in South Africa. One of the problems I faced with African indigenous music in this context with my students was the dilution of traditional African knowledge and practices through acculturation and diffusion. Given this context, I sought to introduce the music and culture mainly of the above-mentioned African people to my students. In 2002, thirty-one students undertook my music education subject for generalist primary teachers and thirty-five students undertook the subject in 2003. In both years, the music subject focussed on established Western pedagogies (Orff, Kodály and Dalcroze) as well as on African music. I used a variety of both Western and African songs as my primary teaching material (see Joseph 2002). These songs were initially studied as oral repertoire, and then the subject matter and context were discussed, allowing for comparisons, contrasts, variations, and similarities to be noted. The students were fascinated to compare and contrast the African understandings and learning styles with those of the Western tradition. As part of the subject, students engaged in singing, moving, playing instruments, dancing and dramatizing the content of the songs. This intercultural perspective provided a nexus between Western and African ways of knowing and was consolidated by the fusion of music, dance and movement. This multidisciplinary approach incorporated African indigenous music that encompassed local knowledge that was culture- and context- specific. Moreover the pedagogy that I employed focussed on non-formal knowledge that is orally transmitted which correlated to traditional African ways of transmitting knowledge. Thus oral transmission has been aptly described as dynamic, adaptive and holistic in nature (UNESCO and NUFFIC-CIRAN, 1999).

Research Procedure

In second semester 2002 and 2003, students enrolled for the music course were invited to participate in the research study. The subject ran for three hours per week (seven teaching weeks in 2002 and eight teaching weeks in 2003). For the purpose of my research, two types of data—an anonymous questionnaire and interviews with self-selecting members of the student cohort at the end of the 2002 and 2003 semesters— informed the results of the research. According to Van der Merwe (1996, p.283) “qualitative research methodology lends itself to the description of opinions and attitudes and gauging the effect of one event or variable or another”. The objectives of this research-based teaching program were intended to identify attitudinal changes, levels of motivation, confidence and competence in fourth year generalist teacher education students studying music through a knowledge of another culture and its music. Abeles, Hoffer and Klotman (1984, p.304) make the point that questionnaire and interview data attempt to describe phenomena and trend relationships as well as correlating, comparing and contrasting differences and similarities.

Although the questionnaire addressed a variety of issues, specific questions in the survey were designed to elicit open-ended responses that addressed aspects such as students’ level of knowledge, understanding, competence, and skills in relation to rhythm and its sub-elements (beat, accent, meter and duration). Specific questions were also asked regarding what aspects of African music motivated them to learn and whether their confidence and competence improved over the semester. The survey also included questions about differences and similarities regarding the Orff, Dalcroze, Kodály and African methodology. In addition, interviews with my students were informed by a semi-structured set of questions that were extensions of issues raised in the questionnaire. Several of the questions both planned for and spontaneous in the interviews provided rich data on insights students gained about African music, culture and society. The interviews allowed students to explain in more detail about their cross-cultural understanding of music concepts and culture. Individual interviews gave students the opportunity to reflect upon and discuss their levels of competency and confidence regarding their ability to play, move and sing, they also commented on their levels of motivation and attitudinal change regarding music skills and social understandings. All taped interviews were conducted by myself and were then transcribed enabling analysis of the data to be undertaken according to the four contentions cited earlier.

Due to the small sample of students responding to the questionnaire using Likert-scale (twenty-nine from thirty-one students in 2002 and twenty-eight from the thirty-five in 2003), only inferences rather than statistically-validated conclusions are drawn. The questionnaires that were used in 2002 and 2003 were intended as a ‘snapshot’ of the class regarding their experiences of the workshops. Only a small percentage (one third) of the class volunteered to be interviewed in both years.

Masakhane: Findings and Discussion

This section of the paper addresses the notion of what I refer to as *masakhane* (the ‘Nguni’ South African word which literally means ‘let us build together’). This emerged as one of the principle manifestations of African music in a non-African context. The incorporation of African indigenous music alongside Western music enhanced students’ understanding of rhythm. In the main most students stated that they learnt more about rhythm through African music in terms of beat, accent, meter and duration. This in turn increased students’ levels of competence and confidence in drumming, moving and singing, thus empowering them to create and experience new sounds and rhythms. By exploring African music ‘windows were opened’ for my students, encouraging dialogue about music, society and culture. Students came to realise the important role music plays in African life. Such understanding was clearly expressed by one student—“many values are expressed through music”: another added, “stories and history are told through music”. Almost without exception, students reported how other learning areas, particularly SOSE (Studies of Society and Environment), mathematics and literacy, could be integrated with teaching African music. A typical comment made by one interviewee was “part of SOSE is to explore [one’s] own and other cultures and therefore African music and culture can be integrated [into the lesson]”. Students became more sensitive to and infused with an intercultural perspective on music and the wider society. Through singing songs and understanding the meaning of songs, students reported that they had gained more insight about different types of songs (work songs, protest songs and celebration songs) and came to realise how song text was used to communicate about the lives and plight of South African black people. One respondent comments “I liked the way it was presented, we learnt the English meaning behind the songs and understood why they

would sing about such things... it was different sounds that they make so it is challenging". Miller (1989) affirms that understanding the differences between cultures not only opens the way to a deeper appreciation of the people who create and use that music, but it also brings perspective to the Western musical world. For the purpose of this paper, only some points concerning the use of African music raised in the questionnaire and interview will be discussed.

Starting with my cultural background as a South African now living in Australia and working with teacher education students of predominantly Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, it appeared that my 'local' knowledge and insights helped students to learn more about the music and culture of the African people. It was apparent from students' comments that my own African music background and culture had a more real effect on their learning and understanding. Two students remarked in interview sessions that:

Learning about the culture and that sort of [thing] helped connect the background with the music rather than just teach us music, you also brought your culture in which for me it is really interesting. I'd probably be really frustrated if I saw you up the front of the classroom with your accent and just telling me about [Western] music only which I already know about.

Exposing us to the [African] culture was interesting to listen to, because it is so different from ours. I guess they [African] are so involved in singing and movement about their whole life style, something we would never do anything like that.

Students reported that having learnt about Western and African music enabled them to establish greater musical and cultural connections that subsequently synthesized their learning, understanding and interest in African music as a cross-cultural engagement. One student commented:

we're also on a level playing field, 'cause all of us had different backgrounds in music but, when it came to something like African [music], very few of us—in fact none of us—have had the opportunity to actually play it and be a part of it and move to that type of music.

Another added:

You brought your personal knowledge and personal experience to it as well, it wasn't something that you just read about, that you weren't being related to us, it was something that you had experienced and been part of and could share with us and you obviously had a great passion for it.

Having included both Western and African music in the curriculum meant that students had the opportunity to work from the known of their own Euro-centric music to the unknown of African music. This reinforces one of the basic pedagogical principles that greater cross-cultural understandings emerges when both Western and African musical repertoire and pedagogies are used. As earlier stated, students began to perceive that both cultures employ songs and song texts to convey significant meanings. It is through such comparisons of repertoire that students gained a fuller understanding of the wider African culture. This was aptly summarised by one student who said:

When you saw that English translation [of the words of the song]...you could still see why they would have sung and it was good 'cause we don't really have these kinds of songs in English in Australia. You don't see the road worker starting to sing songs. It was good to get another culture, another feel for the culture.

Another student aptly encapsulated the experience of a new music and culture by stating:

The closest idea I had about African music I thought was they would sing for rain... I didn't have an idea they sung about other things. They sung when they work they'd sing about healing and things. I guess they [were] so involved in singing and movement about their whole life style—it's all included in that and we would never do anything like that. Its so different even the sounds.

Students also saw the strong relationship between music and movement, particularly through the African repertoire. "I have now learnt the connection between singing, dancing and movement is much more important than I thought" said one student. "Using movement to teach a [music] concept" as one student said, "was a new experience—it was not only fun but made it easier to understand". Students commented that, having experienced African song, dance and drumming, they realised how movement is inseparable

from the musical experience. By seeing each other move and play, the complexity of poly-rhythms became more visual and aurally meaningful for the students.

Such connections further synthesised students' understandings of the music in relation to South African culture. During the workshops, my own teaching of generic music concepts and African music provided students with a model of good pedagogical practice that was clearly demonstrated as being effective and meaningful. As some students commented, "I found it very beneficial when you showed us what to do cause then I could do it... you were modelling what I suppose to be doing. Because I did not have any musical background I found it difficult to keep up but seeing you do it and how you did it helped me". Another student points out that "the practical demonstration and examples given are the easiest way for me to learn".

Students felt enthusiastic and challenged in their experience of an unfamiliar musical genre. Common words used to describe respondents' experiences were 'new', 'different', 'challenging', 'fun', 'exciting', 'stimulating' and 'interesting'. Students commented:

Just a different rhythm and beat pattern... Just really nice to explore a different culture, something we never looked at before and something we don't hear on the radio especially... but having the opportunity to actually understand some of the places that it came from and some of the culture and the reasons why they do it was different, it was good, something special.

I liked the African music cause it was different. It was something new and a little bit different to doing the standard Western music which we did basically all through primary school, they very rarely incorporated music from another culture.

This new genre added to students' knowledge and gave them a broader perspective of knowledge, skills, competencies and camaraderie in terms of their music making and learning. This was experienced mainly through song, movement and drumming. I moved from simple to complex examples of rhythms, songs and movement that made it easy, enjoyable and fun for teaching and learning to take place. It was apparent that students learnt more when they were having fun through a 'hands-on' practical approach. A succinct comment by one student aptly describes the experience:

I really enjoyed the drums and beat and rhythms and things, so I really got into it. It was fun, fun to move to, fun to get up and dance. That's what teaching should be about [to]...—having fun—and learning comes from fun.

It became apparent during the workshops that students engaged more when they were having fun. They felt motivated and enjoyed what they were doing. One student in an interview remarked "you've got to make it fun for the kids otherwise they won't learn and the kids will just tune out and won't listen and you've got to be alive and active". The practical hands-on approach to teaching music concepts was an effective way for my non-music specialist to gain knowledge and skills. One student in an interviewee remarked "it's because there wasn't such a lot of just talk about the principles, though it was in the main theory-based, well minimal theory-based or application, all hands-on, all doing, all learning through doing". Students unanimously reported that the drumming was the best aspect of the hands-on experience and found it most rewarding when learning. Comments such as "the drumming was really good and helped me think of the rhythm and poly-rhythm was good... it helped you pick up different sorts of things and accents and off beats...helped to create the poly-rhythm sound".

Students remarked that the use of African music introduced them to different sounds with interesting beat and rhythmic patterns. Students were highly motivated and challenged as they engaged in activities to learn about rhythm. They reported that their competence increased during the semester as they moved from mono-rhythms to poly-rhythms. It was rewarding to see how their confidence and self-esteem increased when they played *with* each other rather than just *for* each other, Miller (1989) observes that this is integral of African music making. Making music together played an important part in the workshops as one student claims, "I really enjoyed it, it gave me more confidence even though I was terrible at it, it did not matter so much when you are working in a group and working together". The notion of working together was new and also challenging when playing together. Students commented:

It was hard to concentrate on my part. I felt nervous but as we learnt more and did it together. I was able to concentrate and play with others. I felt that I could do it and I was motivated to want to learn more about it.

Just the beat, the beat was kind of off-beat rather than a regular beat, and the movement was another part I liked because in every session we were up and dancing and putting actions to our songs even if we could not sing the song at first, it was still fun and challenging. Yeah I really enjoyed it.

I liked the drumming and the instruments because they were different. I learnt more about the elements and learnt more of rhythm and beat and accent with the drumming where, as using the recorder I felt I sort of learnt the musical notes and not really about accent and that sort of thing.

Whether just putting on a compact disc of Africa music or using the drums, or movement, or introducing Kodály time names (taa or ti-ti) [Western note names], the African music provides an alternative to what we see as traditional music education in schools.

Conclusion

Findings from this research revealed that students' skills, competence, confidence and self-esteem improved as they reaped the benefits of a cross-cultural experience and engaged in 'hands-on' learning. The use of African music empowered my students to exercise their creativity and, by extension, this enhanced their learning, understanding and skills through a discovery of African indigenous music. According to the research findings from questionnaires and interviews, the inclusion of African music was a source of both motivation and enjoyment in their learning of rhythm, songs and drumming. As suggested by Thorsén (2002), such an experience develops attitudes and understandings of the wider role of music education in society as well as a greater understanding of the African culture. My students certainly came to an appreciation of what Nketia (1988) identifies as the discovery of common principles, usages and behavioural patterns that enabled a synthesis of their intercultural understandings. Such a transfer of knowledge, skills and repertoire from traditional environments to contemporary settings maintains and strengthens what Nketia (n.d.) refers to as the "Africa artistic experience".

My project introduced students to another knowledge system—that of African Indigenous Knowledge—through which they were able to *know, create, perform, teach* and *experience* through song, movement and drumming. The inclusion of African indigenous music, particularly drumming, easily transcended the cultural differences and feelings of personal inadequacies of the students, thereby providing a cohesive bond that united the different components of the student cohort together. Such an experience not only provided students with new musical knowledge, understandings and skills, but was also used as an 'education medium' through which they gained knowledge of another musical tradition (Nketia, 1988). As global citizens we need to embrace diversity and change not only in our immediate teaching but also in broader policy agendas for the future. Australian tertiary education providers are therefore being challenged to provide inclusive and cultural diverse curricular preparing students to be informed global citizens. The inclusion of African music in this pre-service teacher education course may be seen as a model for effective music teaching that promotes cross-cultural music education and, in the true spirit of *masakhane*, a greater professional and public good in education.

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