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Multiculturalism in arts education: Engaging schools in effective and authentic pedagogies

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Abstract

Serious questions have been raised by arts educators and community members about the effectiveness of multiculturalism that is usually enacted in Australian school settings by multi-arts festivals and related classroom activities. By exploring resources available to teachers, snapshots can be created of school practices that purport to be multicultural. Often these are only thematically integrated interdisciplinary exercises that do not reflect the complexity and diversity of multiculturalism. Australia has for some time positioned itself as part of the global community. How this has been enacted in schools' multi-arts practices demonstrates our changing understanding of multiculturalism. The recent Australian National Review of School Music Education (NRSME) (2005) exhorts us to recognise cultural diversity, encourage participation and engagement and form partnerships, connections and networks. To achieve this we need to demonstrate authentic practice. Tucker (1992) has created an authenticity checklist that argues that materials should be prepared with the involvement of someone within the culture and include cultural context. Without this, we risk stripping the arts of much of their meaning. In this position paper the authors contend that it should be possible in 21st century Australia to create authentic, meaningful arts education practices in schools given the rich cultural mosaic that forms our contemporary society.

Introduction

Contemporary arts educators are challenged with the teaching and managing of students from diverse cultural, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. As society becomes increasingly more complex and diverse, Australia has moved from a monocultural environment to one of pluralistic multiculturalism to which each culture or subculture contributes in its own unique way. This tapestry of cultures weaves "shared knowledge and belief systems" (Mushi, 2004, p.181) that does not necessarily strip meaning from any particular culture but finds an educational salmagundi where there is the opportunity for interchange of effective and possibly authentic multi-arts practice. Recently, the Australian National Review of School Music Education (NRSME) (2005) identified that we should recognise the impact of Australia's "diverse and complex cultural factors" on school music (p.ix). The Review continued to argue that stakeholders should focus on valuing music and prioritising music in schools to improve and sustain consistency and quality. The Review also acknowledges arts education as a dynamic field and stresses the importance of the contexts in which arts learning occurs.

Russell-Bowie (2006) states that: "the arts are an integral and important component of our everyday lives. As such, they need to be a vital part of our children's education" (p.2). As Aland (2005) also notes that we are involved constantly, consciously and/or unconsciously, in arts-based experiences that are an integral and significant component of our daily lives through which we come to understand ourselves and others. In the arts students gain "powerful tools for understanding human experiences both past and present" (Mahlmann n.d. in Russell-Bowie, 2006, p.22). In contemporary society the arts are used as ways of understanding and communicating our identity, culture and heritage. Further, by engaging in arts practices, it is hoped that teachers and students can change stereotypical attitudes and create understandings between peoples of different cultural backgrounds. Such engagement in arts education (music, dance, drama, and visual arts) can foster respect, tolerance and an increased appreciation of our own culture, as well as that of others. As Australia continues its multicultural practices, positioning itself as part of the wider global community, meaningful arts education practices in schools can enrich the cultural mosaic of contemporary and future society.

As a position paper, this brief discussion will consider theoretical perspectives on the notions of multiculturalism and multicultural education particularly in the arts. The concept of culture and the 'other' and authentic interdisciplinary pedagogies as enacted in Australian educational contexts are succinctly discussed.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism became Australian government policy with the release of the position paper, *A multicultural society for the future* in 1973 (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Australian Government, 1973). Multiculturalism was defined as both ethnic diversity and a social ideal. Mr Al Grassby, the Minister for Immigration in the Whitlam Labor government, argued, that Australia was a "mosaic of cultures ... to recognise ethnic diversity" (Lack, 1999, p.442). The issues implicit in multiculturalism have generated discussion and debate. Current governmental opinion is that "multiculturalism has been a great benefit to Australia. It has enabled migrants from very diverse societies to contribute fully to their new country... By accepting difference, multiculturalism strives to avoid confrontation" (Abbott, 2006, p.13). Such diversity widens the opportunities for schools to engage in effective, multi-arts educational programs.

Multiculturalism and arts education

Nieto (2002) argues that "multicultural education is a philosophy, a way of looking at the world, not simply a program or a class or a teacher" (p.39). Multiculturalism is a multifaceted and complex approach to education that is often ill-defined. It is not an 'optional extra' added to the school programme. Rather, multicultural education is a "total school reform effort designed to increase educational equity for a range of cultural, ethnic, and economic groups" (Banks & Banks, 1993, p.6). Similarly, Lemmer and Squelch (1993) define multiculturalism as a multidimensional education approach recognising all cultural groups. Multicultural education is part of the changing the nature of teaching and learning that endeavours to create suitable learning environments for students and teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Multicultural education should move away from simple lessons on ethnic festivals, an approach which typified many early efforts. For example, Honey, Piatkowska and Brown (1988) commendably provided thematic materials on festivals from different cultural groups represented in Victoria and stated that these could "be used in the classroom to help recognise and appreciate Australia as a largely immigrant nation, and to explore and share many cultural heritages" (p.iv).

Nieto (2002) identifies multicultural education as, by definition, "inclusive. Because it is *about* all people, it is also *for* all people, regardless of their ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, religion, gender, race, class or other difference" (p.38). More recently reflecting this, multicultural education is seen as assisting teachers "acquire knowledge, skills and dispositions that serve all children and youth, especially students whose interests have been historically marginalized by institutions and people in privileged positions" (Vavrus, 2002, p.1). Educators in Australia, should accept and acknowledge this diversity when designing inclusive multicultural curricula that include arts education.

In western educational paradigms, the arts are often seen as minority subjects, given undesirable teaching times, few resources and little recognition. However, the arts enculturate, socialize, and, as Johnson (2004) suggests, they are "more than an expression of and commentary on culture" – they are a means of cultural transmission and reproduction (p.119). Research undertaken by the Centre for Arts in Basic Curriculum (CABC) confirms that education can be improved by the integration of the arts into school curricula. This research is based on the principles developed by Harvard University's prestigious Project Zero established by Howard Gardner to explore the concepts of multiple intelligences. The underlying principles include that: "the arts are cognitive domains that trigger multiple forms of learning" that engage students in "long-term, open-ended projects that integrate production of original works with the perception of the work of others" (Oddleifson, 1994) CABC upholds the belief that arts hold promise for community development by enhancing cultural and civic pride, fostering intercultural understanding, and giving professionals in the community opportunities to mentor public school students" (Oddleifson, 1994). Ideally this should occur in every school and every educational context in Australia. Although the current NRSME presents exemplars of effective or best practice, in arts education in both Australia and overseas these are too few and too far between. Ideally, every child should experience the CABC principles in practice in a way that is inclusive

of the cultures and subcultures that permeate our society and thus our classrooms. Education in and through the arts is a particularly effective way to engage with different cultures and the notion of 'the other'.

The notion of Culture

The word culture and concept of 'the other' (Joseph, 2004; Joseph, 2005) are all related to the notion of multiculturalism. Nieto (cited in Conteh, 2003) defines culture as what people do in their daily lives. She identifies seven attributes of culture – it is dynamic, multifaceted, contextually embedded, influenced by social, historic, economic and political factors, socially constructed, learned, and dialectical. Culture is fluid and very significant. This is multiplied in a multicultural society. Reimer (1993) points out that in Australia, with its multi-arts culture, we should be careful not to marginalise or patronise the arts of one group over another. Many educators understand multiculturalism as a broad spectrum with assimilation (relinquishing one's own culture or merging it with a dominant culture) at one extreme and cultural pluralism or cultural diversity (in which each person's culture is honoured, valued and respected) at the other (Erwin, Edwards, Kerchner, & Knight, 2003).

Elliott (1989) warns that although a community may perceive itself as multicultural, it may not "uphold the ideals of multiculturalism or pluralism" (p.14). Hence, Nieto (2002) argues that many people believe that by having a multicultural curriculum they must be, by definition, antiracist but this is not the case. Having a multicultural policy does not preclude racism. However, multicultural education is an important first step towards a move from the cultural supremacy of the popular belief that 'west is best'. From such a singular perspective, all different cultures may be conceived of as 'the other'. The 'other' is often constructed as a homogenised category, which Thompson (2002) refers to as that which is "static to geographical spaces" (p. 16). This, the authors contend, is far too simplistic an understanding in today's global community. Once we acknowledge that culture is not monolithic but a cohesive whole we can then begin to develop educational programmes to explore these many worlds. Such learning encounters should not only be limited or isolated to what Hogan-Garcia (2003) refers to as 'cultural studies' but should be explored in classrooms in an effort to promote greater tolerance, understandings and the acceptance of diversity and 'the notion of other'. By providing a variety of multicultural arts programs, teachers not only facilitate this notion of 'other' but design learning experiences that encourage growth and development for all – both students and teachers. It is only when we move out of our own framework and into 'the other' that we begin to cross boundaries and make the cross-cultural connections. Nettle (1992, p.4) points out that, "understanding music in turn can help us to understand the world's cultures and their diversity". This is true for all art forms both taught as single disciplines or in integrated, interdisciplinary approaches.

Interdisciplinary Learning in the Arts

Interdisciplinary curriculum is often considered a first cousin to integration. Increasingly, in today's classrooms, teachers are adopting an interdisciplinary approach to their teaching. According to Davis (1997), an ideal interdisciplinary unit or course begins with a problem to solve, an inquiry, a great idea and or a topic that employ the discipline/s in a new way to explore and examine learning. As such "an interdisciplinary curriculum improves high-level thinking where learning is less fragmented and students are provided with a more unified sense of process and content" (Ellis & Fouts, 2004, p.24). Hence, teaching through an interdisciplinary approach in the arts requires a change in attitude, rethinking instruction, content, context and assessment for teachers and provides students the opportunity to create a community of enquiry.

Educators need to be cautioned about providing what Burton (2001) calls the 'potpourri and polarity' that typifies integrated programs where students are either given 'random samplings of knowledge' or infused with 'territorial specialist knowledge'. In the past, materials for teachers have provided just that – random samplings. For example, in the *Asia Wise* materials created by the Department of Education and the Arts, Tasmania in 1989, the broad ranging content includes cultural material focused on celebrations and festivals to encourage empathetic engagement such as "A feature of life in any Asian country is the importance that people place on festivals. This shouldn't be all that surprising. All people, in all countries, share this need to celebrate. Australians take holidays just as 'seriously' as anyone else" (p.53). Patronising statements such as this 'dumb down' the notion of cultural transmission. The text continues to provide a worksheet entitled "Why not enjoy an Asian New Year?" which mentions Japanese decorations, and recipes for Sukiyaki, Nasi goreng and Satay (Department of Education and the Arts, 1989, pp.54-55).

Despite the intention to foster cross-cultural transmission, materials such as this do not envelop the spectrum of processes, both formal and informal, that Campbell (2001) argues as the frame in which culture is acquired and learned. The concepts of cultural learning should be seen as a continuum of processes not just products. Hall (1992) contends that such processes must accommodate the transmission, reception, preservation and invention of culture. The NRSME (2005) exhorts us to recognise cultural diversity, encourage participation and engagement and form partnerships, connections and networks. To achieve this, we need to demonstrate authentic practice. Unfortunately, the same national report notes the severe reduction in the time given to music in initial teacher education programs (NRSME, 2005). Teachers are often unrealistically asked to teach interdisciplinary programmes without much training in each of the separate art forms or in the culture that is the focus. It is often impossible for an individual teacher to offer authentic interdisciplinary, multicultural arts experiences.

Team teaching is frequently offered as a solution to this dilemma that can provide learning experiences that extend beyond the resources of the individual. Team teaching can provide students and teachers with a wide range of challenging and eye-opening viewpoints (Tan, 2002). However, the authors contend that having more than one arts discipline in the teaching space does not necessarily indicate authentic interdisciplinary, multicultural practices. Tucker (1992) has created an authenticity checklist that argues that programmes and materials should be prepared with the involvement of someone within the culture and include cultural context. By removing symbolic gesture from one culture and presenting it in the symbolic gestures of another we may strip much of its meaning. It is essential, the authors contend, that when teaching multicultural arts education, there must be an authentic voice in the development of what could then be effective pedagogy.

Conclusion

The authors contend that a major hurdle to enacting authentic multicultural and multidisciplinary arts education is the paucity of current teacher preparation, either pre-service or in-service, in this area. Given the vast range of possibilities and the limited number of arts educators, resources need to be developed to assist teachers in creating appropriate arts educational programmes. The further we move from our cultural norm, the more challenging it is to produce authentic experiences for students and teachers, therefore “culturally responsive and relevant teachers need professional development from institutions committed to multicultural education reform” (Vavrus, 2002, p.1).

Currently, in endeavouring to redress such shortcomings, many educational settings now invite artists-in-residence and members of local communities to work with teachers and students to learn about ‘other’ arts in order to develop effective and authentic pedagogy. As well as accessing authentic knowledge beyond their own experience, many teachers undertake professional development to expand their own skills and understandings of art forms. This transmission of learning must be embedded within its cultural context to authenticate the learning and teaching transaction.

Given the cultural richness that is reflected in Australian classrooms and the wider community that surrounds them, there is the possibility of creating authentic and effective pedagogies that reflect a wider and more far-reaching multiculturalism. Hookey (1994) concurs that, curriculum materials need to be designed and programmes need to be developed that “take into account ... the potential knowledge and cultural background of those in the classroom” (p.87). There is a danger of a watered-down curriculum in which we teach about the arts of other cultures in isolation. This is often exemplified as programmes that teach around a theme and culminate in a decorated classroom and a festival of dance, music, drama, visual art, crafts, and food. While this is better than nothing, it is not an authentic approach to multicultural education in which we should teach “*within* diverse cultures, not ... *about* them” (Hookey, 1994, p.87).

A culturally embedded approach to multicultural arts education “calls for a divergent (global) rather than a convergent (Western)” approach in education (Johnson, 2004, p.136). Australia does not exist in splendid isolation, rather, “our world is increasingly interdependent, and all students need to understand their role in a global society” (Nieto, 2002, p.48). In accord with this purpose, multicultural arts education can contribute to “a process that goes beyond the changing demographics in a particular country” (ibid.). The authors contend that it is possible to create authentic, meaningful arts practices in educational settings given

the rich cultural mosaic that forms our contemporary society. This already occurs in some educational settings where local educators have formed partnerships that recognise and celebrate cultural diversity (NRSME, 2005). In this way, we create engaging, effective and authentic multicultural, interdisciplinary arts pedagogies.

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