Music Teacher Education Partnerships as Professional development

Abstract
This paper reports my reflections on a partnership between a school and the university carried out in Semester One 2008 by the music education specialist in the Bachelor of Teaching (Primary/Secondary) Course at a University in Melbourne. The students have a specific ‘situated learning’ experience at a primary school, and their five-week visit during the ten-week semester acts as onsite professional development by both the music teacher and myself. Good exemplars of best practice in music education are a form of professional development for students. I contend that provisions of such opportunities by universities can only improve teaching and learning and better prepare the students for entering the teaching profession.

In this paper I report on my pre-service music education students’ experience as school based music teaching and learning being an effective form of professional development. My reflections are supported by my observations and journal notes and are informed by self-study methodology. I consider the link between tertiary and school partnership as an effective way forward to improve both the teaching and learning of music education skills. Universities in Australia are increasingly encouraged to forge links with schools where students and teacher educators have the opportunity to observe best practice, engage in teaching and learning onsite and reflect on both content and pedagogical knowledge. Such practice promotes educational praxis for a sustainable future.

Background
Since 2001, I have been involved in teacher education programs at Deakin University for both undergraduate and postgraduate courses teaching in music education and education studies. Through my own reflective practice I have often considered what constitutes the best ways to allow my students to learn and how to teach them music effectively. I concur with Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1993) that teaching and learning “is located in neither the university nor the school but in the collaborative work of the two” (p.284).

Over the past six years, I have built a link with a primary school situated close to my University. This school has a professional development partnership with the university. Over these years, I have taken students to visit and observe music lessons at this school. These visits have normally taken place either as a one-off visit or observation of classes over two to three visits. Upon reflection and observation, my pre-service music methods students found this to be an exciting time for them as they experienced ‘music teaching in action’ and they ‘learnt on-site’ per se. Although much has been written about the ways students learn, theories of teaching styles and multiple intelligence, this will not be explored in this paper. Rather I recognized the need to keep abreast of classroom practice and also to be seen as a learner. Nieto (2003) suggests as educators we need to “constantly search for material [experiences] that will excite and motivate [our] students” (p.76). Such visits proved most useful and made my students value their time working alongside a music teacher, seeing themselves as professional teachers and encountering...

The onsite experience allowed students to master the skills of teaching, while helping them to be purposeful and informed about music practice. Emmanuel (2003) is of the opinion that when students are immersed in a ‘field experience’, they are better informed of how to teach. Such an experience then will modify students “attitudes and beliefs of pre-service music teachers” (p.39). Conkling and Henry (2002) in their work with school-based partnerships are “optimistic about the future of professional development partnerships” (p.12) as it not only has a profound effect on students but also on the practice of the lecturer.

It was my intention that my students learn not only content and pedagogical knowledge but also for them to see themselves moving from just pre-service student identity to that of taking on the role of teacher, gaining identity in terms of their role, beliefs and values as teacher’s (Coldrun & Smith, 1999; Connelly & Clandinnen, 1999; Archer, 2000; de Ruyter & Conroy, 2002 and Pietsch & Williamson, 2005). This prompted me to investigate the place of ‘situated learning’ in one school as one form of professional development for my students. Hammel (2007) draws to our attention the fact that school based programs “provide the opportunity to communicate with other music educators on a regular basis” (p.27). Conkling (2007) points to the fact that “by spending extended amounts of time at a school prior to student teaching, pre-service music teachers can develop a clearer image of the kind of teachers they want to be” (p.44). As many of the students do not always get to see good music practice when on their placements (practica rounds), this is an excellent opportunity for them to experience, explore and engage in music teaching and learning specifically at a primary school. In this paper, I reflect on my own observations and journal entries offering what interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) calls “an insiders perspective” (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006, p.103) regarding what my students and I experienced onsite as a form of valuable short-term professional development.

**Theoretical perspectives**

This paper offers theoretical perspectives on situated learning and professional development as part of my discussion as a way forward to build and improve music teacher pre-service preparedness. Research has shown that “excellent teacher education programs provide students with experiences from which they can construct their own understandings of music, education and music education” (Wiggins, 2007, p. 36.). Lee Schulman (1986) makes us aware that there is more to teacher education than understanding just the content and how people learn. He is concerned with the ways the two fields interact. My students observe and participate in school-based teaching and learning to experience both content and pedagogical knowledge as a form of ‘best practice’ and also a form of professional development partnership (Conkling, 2004). Studies in the USA and in Australia have shown that ‘authentic practice’ as a form of ‘situated learning’ helps and improves students’ understanding of how we teach and how we learn to teach music. The relationship of music teacher, lecturer and student forms a professional development partnership resulting in a form of mentoring. Conway (2007) is
of the belief that “researchers should continue to explore mentoring as professional development” (p.59). School-based learning offered my students the opportunity within a socio-cultural context to share their understandings, during which they were able to learn from one another, from both the music teacher and I, then work through what Bruner calls ‘scaffolding’ to fill in the gap between what the student can do alone and what he/she can also do with the music teacher/lecturer support. In this way the teacher offers onsite professional development and we both then form a partnership of mentoring where students can think about “expanded ways of engaging in music and in pedagogy” (Campbell & Brummett, 2007, p.50).

Methodology
The methodology I used in this research project can be aligned to that of self-study reflection. In reflective practice, practitioners engage in self–observation-and-evaluation in order to understand their own actions, and the reactions they prompt in themselves and in their learners (Brookfield, 1995; Thiel, 1999). Reflection and the concept of ‘reflective practitioner’ have been pioneered by Schön (1987) where one does not just contemplate in the ‘ivory tower’, instead one makes links to one’s practice and that of others. This view is reiterated by Amulya (n.d.) who contends that the basic element of reflective practice is knowledge embedded in the experience of one’s work and realising the importance of that knowledge in furthering and improving one’s practice. As such Imel (1992) argues that learning then cannot take place without reflection, as it is all part of the learning process.

Florez (2001) suggests four steps that are integral in the reflective process namely collecting descriptive data, analysing the data, considering how the situation or activity could have been different and creating a plan that incorporates new insights. In her opinion, these steps present benefits (flexibility, practicality, professionalism and sustainability) and challenges (questioning your teaching philosophy, commitment and time) to one’s reflective practice. She further proposes that reflective practice offers practical options to address professional development. I concur with Roth (1989) who asserts that engaging in reflective practice takes time and effort but the rewards can be great if we question what, why and how things are done and what others are doing, consequently seeking alternatives and keeping an open mind as a productive strategy in successful practice.

One of the tools I used aside from observation was keeping a journal of my visits. My students were also invited to keep their own journals, which provided a focus for our debriefing sessions when we met back at the university. According to Loughran (1996) “the use of journals can be a powerful tool for reflection” (p.8). I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as part of my methodology to understand my lived experience and to interpret my entries through emergent themes that arose. The aim of IPA is to “explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world” (Smith & Osborne, 2003, p.52). This relatively recent qualitative research approach is not a prescriptive approach but rather idiographic and committed to a phenomenological understanding in which there is an examination of phenomena as
experienced and given meaning in the life worlds of participants (Smith 2004; Smith & Eatough, 2006). IPA is phenomenological in that it wishes to explore an individual’s personal perception or account of an event or state as opposed to attempting to produce an objective record of the event or state itself (What is IPA, n.d.). IPA as a methodology is not concerned with statistics and variables rather it is concerned with persons and individuals defining their world per se (Smith, Harré & Van Langenhove, 1995; Sansom, 2005). According to Smith (2005), IPA recognises that the researcher goes through a process of interpreting the experience in which they find themselves which was the case for me. It may be argued that diaries or personal accounts are effective ways to collect data when using IPA. For the purpose of this paper only some aspects of my journal keeping and observation will be reported on. My self-study and reflection continues to inform me of “emergent learning processes” (Bass, Anderson-Patton & Allender, 2002, p.67) which I carry to lectures and workshops at my institution.

Background to the study
This study aimed to investigate how final year music education students at Deakin University work within a school (site-based), with a music teacher, her students and myself. This school has a partnership with the university and is situated within 10 minutes from the university. The study was undertaken with 10 post-graduate students in their 2nd year of the B.Teach (Primary/Secondary) degree. Students visited the school for a period of approximately 3 hours per week for 5 weeks during the first semester of 2008. Here the students experienced, explored and engaged with class music content and pedagogy as well as classroom management skills.

The aims of the study were to:
- Identify what students observed as ‘best practice’ at the school in relation to the methodologies of the Dalcroze, Orff and Kodály approach to music teaching and learning.
- Investigate and observe how students learn music and engage in music activities (singing, playing, moving, listening and creating).
- Explore school-based music teaching and learning as a professional development partnership.
- Explore the notion of mentoring pre-service music teachers.
- Encourage students to document their observation by keeping a reflective journal.

The Arts Discipline Studies Three course within the degree focused on primary music education, and students were informed at the beginning of the semester that they would visit a nearby primary school. The teacher at this school specifically used the Orff and Kodály teaching methods, which formed part of my course offering. Very often she integrated Dalcroze ideas into her lessons. These visits took place during the students’ university workshop/tutorial time, so it did not interfere with any other classes. We all met with the music teacher for discussion (either before the classes or during recess time) where we would debrief regarding lesson content, pedagogy, classroom management and the prescribed reading material from Deakin Studies Online (DSO) before observing and or participating in individual, peer or group teaching. On average we observed three to
four music classes per visit. The students’ reflective journals and DSO discussions regarding the onsite visits are not the basis for this paper.

Discussion: What did I Note

This section outlines a few of my observations and journal entries during the five weeks in a situated context. As a teacher educator in music education, I spent a lot of time instructing students about ways of teaching music that can make a difference for learners. I also found that university students are often overwhelmed by theory and pedagogical content, which they find difficult to realize in practice. Robbins, Burbank and Dunkle (2007) writing about partnerships between school and university identifies “knowledge about teaching is produced by outsiders—researchers who look in on classrooms rather than live in classrooms” (p.53). The onsite situated learning experience offered the students the opportunity to experience and explore authentic practices and processes in music education and enabled them to see the link between theory and practice. According to Wiggins (2007, p.36) well designed learning experiences coupled with “appropriate scaffolding (i.e., support) from peers and teacher” allowed my students not just to model the teacher but rather to understand theory and practice in more sophisticated ways. This I observed when the teacher linked content (music elements) and pedagogy (Orff and Kodály) to teach the recorder for example.

My students’ observation of learning taking place in a social context enabled them to learn from one another and from the teacher. Bandura (1997) stresses the importance of observation, modeling and imitation. According to Bandura (1977) “learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do” (p.22). He suggests that individuals learn best when they see functional value in what they do and determine whether the modeled behavior results in outcomes they value. It was interesting to observe when teaching a new concept just how effectively the music teacher taught—very learner focused. The music teacher shared with us her lesson plans prior to the lesson, and to my students’ surprise this was not always followed like a recipe as they had assumed. Students quickly realized in a social and situated context just how flexible one has to be when planning a lesson and or a unit of work. They also learnt and noted how the teacher questions and keeps a record of some of the assessment task. This assists her when she has parent-teacher interviews and also when she has to write reports.

Lave (1988) argues that learning normally occurs as a function of the activity, context and culture in which it occurs (i.e. it is situated). This contrasts with traditional classroom activities, which involves knowledge, and which are often presented in an abstract form and out of context. Lave (1988) contends that learners become involved in a ‘community of practice’ that embodies certain beliefs and behaviors to be acquired. This was most evident when it came to the handling of classroom instruments. Such interaction allows learners to become more actively engaged hence, over time they can assume the role of expert. According to Lave (1988) situated learning is based on the principle that knowledge needs to be presented in an authentic context that requires social interaction and collaboration.
My students observed in most of the lessons just how the teacher started the class, by always having an activity as they entered the music room. Either they did body percussion (clapped, clicked etc), movement or listening. The pupils imitated the teacher and in so doing my students saw how the Orff process of music (see, do and hear) became alive in the lesson. My students observed that the teacher seldom used her voice to instruct her students, rather they learnt to ‘listen’ and ‘watch’. The students also recognized the familiarity of her musicianship by knowing her repertoire and familiarising herself with it in an in-depth way that would engage the learners. She always seemed to have memorised her music especially when teaching the recorder pieces and the melodic instruments (xylophone and marimbas). I noted that the repertoire she chose was fun and interesting, it sounded ‘upbeat’. Children were often asked to play something they had previously learnt as they had enjoyed it so much. My students learnt the value of knowing what works and how to challenge older children with the same repertoire by either adding in new parts or getting them to create their own parts. Such creative music making rhymes closely with the Orff pedagogy that utilizes the rhythmic patterns of music to generate musical activities.

The music teacher demonstrated an interesting way to notate the structure of the piece on the white board. She used the Kodály rhythmic names as well as her own shorthand, which was new learning for my students. She often included hand signs to develop or improve her children’s singing and pitch skills. Here the students watched her teach and thereby learnt just how simply she was able to have her pupils learn a piece called ‘Tango’ without seeing the actual score. As ‘visitors’ we were invited by the teacher to perform ‘Tango’ on xylophones and marimbas in her classes. Her students were mesmerized by the way we had arranged it without viewing the actual music score. Here we had interesting exchange with her students regarding the arrangements of the piece and the instruments we chose. It also was a good experience for the teacher to see my students and I work through her annotated score on the white board and present something different to her students. Once again with the teacher we had conversations about what is ‘best practice’ and I concur with Kreber (2006) that it is the teaching or innovations that produce the ‘best results’. According to Kreber (2006) “best practices, therefore are no more the means by which to bring about desired educational outcomes” (p.89). The music teacher found that by incorporating some activities that she had learnt through professional development, she was able to reach her desired outcome.

It was affirming for my students to hear about the ‘value’ and ‘importance’ she placed on her own attendance of professional development over the years. She shared with us during some of the debriefing sessions that her resources and ideas for use in the classroom were the ones she had learnt from her professional development. Students found this most enriching as they heard of many ideas in relation to the pedagogies of Orff, Kodály and Dalcroze and they also saw some of this ‘in action’. Some commented that they would certainly try it out on their practica. It was useful for the music teacher to share her opinion about the importance of networking and collaboration. Campbell & Brummett (2007, p.50) draws our attention to the importance of mentoring prospective teachers to think about expanded ways of engaging in music and pedagogy. Most of the students had the opportunity to teach micro lessons which both the music teacher and I
observed and provided feedback about. This also allowed for the entire group to see how theory links with practice, offering points they observed in the teaching and the way the class was ‘managed’ per se. Here students were encouraged “to go beyond their initial ideas” (Campbell & Brummett, 2007, p.50) and realise a constructivist way of teaching as a process where knowledge is creation and exchange and not only skill acquisition and rote learning.

Although Conkling (2007) reports that little research has focused on the question of how we learn to teach music, she points out that situated learning is a way to understand learning. It is not a pedagogical strategy says Wenger and Lave (1991) rather “becoming a different kind of person with respect to the possibilities enabled by a community of practice” (p.53.) makes learning possible. Giving students the opportunity to observe such learning with a specialist music teacher over a five week period assisted students in their beliefs and understanding of how pupils learn and the different ways we can teach them. Through discussion with the music teacher and myself, my students will hopefully have developed an “initial repertoire of teaching competencies, comprehend the various dimensions of music experience, understand student learning and study the grounds on which they may build practice” (Campbell & Brummett, 2007, p.52).

**Conclusion**

As there is much to do in so little time, the music teacher partnership as a form of professional development allowed the students to experience, engage and explore music teaching and learning in a ‘real space’. Students gained professional development onsite making links to what Henry (2001) refers to as “linking theory to practice” (p.24) and becoming part of a community of practice as “school(s) are learning communities” (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002. p.949) that can offer students meaningful professional development. Conway (2007) claims that “pre-service students should be encouraged to engage in learning communities as students so that they will be familiar with the concept of sharing ideas with other teachers” (p.58). Although the visits took place over five weeks, they not only focused on content and pedagogical knowledge, they also learnt about the pacing lessons, curriculum, assessment and reporting and classroom management and discipline skills. These aspects were equally valuable for my students as there is no specific course that teaches ‘classroom management’ per se in their degree.

Through the weekly visits it was hoped that students will continue to construct their own knowledge and question the relationships between theory and practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). It was most useful for all in the debriefing sessions to reflect. Even though reflective practice “occurs intuitively… the distinction must be made between being reflective and being reactive; teachers must be able to justify their action” (Henry, 2001, p.27). The combined presence and participation of teacher, university students and myself made the reflective process and onsite professional development viable and manageable. As such this form of collaborative reflection accords with Conkling (2007) who says it “is one of the keys to learning to teach because it allows pre-service teachers to learn from each other and it offers an environment where changes in belief about music teaching might occur” (p.48). It also made me become critical and reflective questioning my “theoretical knowledge” in relation to it being “grounded in the contemporary
realities of schooling” and whether the “solutions for music teaching” are better enhanced and understood through school partnerships (Conkling & Henry, 2002, p.10). Universities in Australia are increasingly encouraged to forge partnerships with schools where students and teacher educators have the opportunity to observe best practice, engage in onsite teaching and learning and reflect on both content and pedagogical knowledge. Such practice can only promote education for a sustainable future.

References


