Strategies New Zealand teachers use to counter the tension between time and content in the Junior Music Classroom

RACHEL SWINDELLS

Abstract

New Zealand Secondary School music teachers face a challenging task in preparing their students for the rigours of assessment, especially given the wide range of ability and experience students bring to the classroom when they start high school. This article examines what difficulties music teachers face, and what strategies teachers are currently using to address these challenges.

Historical context to the New Zealand teaching environment is given, followed by the results of a survey of current music teachers. The survey’s results and the comments made by the participants are then discussed, and the author makes a number of recommendations based on these: namely, that back planning, a holistic approach, integration, co-curricular activities, and effective itinerant teaching are vital to student success in classroom music.

Biography

DR RACHEL SWINDELLS holds a MusB (Hons) in organ performance and PhD in Musicology from Otago University, where she studied and then worked until 2012. After teaching privately for some time, she embarked on a Graduate Diploma in Secondary Teaching through Massey University in 2017. Rachel is interested in classroom teaching and research in education, particularly the use of evidence-based strategies in the classroom.
There exists a significant body of literature that tells us how students benefit from learning music. We are already familiar with the broad findings: music education has been linked to ability in mathematics, improved executive functioning, and cognitive abilities (Eide, 2015), as well as accelerated auditory processing (Habibi, Cahn, Damasio, & Damasio, 2016). Music researcher Susan Hallam has found, through examining large numbers of studies, that there is a ‘strong case for the benefits of active engagement with music throughout the lifespan’ and that benefits from music include improvements in ‘language development, literacy, numeracy, measures of intelligence, general attainment, creativity, fine motor co-ordination, concentration, and other areas’ (Hallam, 2010, p. 269). (What the implications for music’s benefits might be is outside the scope of this article; nevertheless, it is important to note these benefit value from the outset.) Benefits notwithstanding, music has its own, inherent value – it would be a cold, colourless sound world without music, and as music educators it is important to remember this value, as opposed to defending music for how it benefits other domains.

And yet – it will surprise few to learn that New Zealand Music Education specialist Linda Webb sums up findings from the 2006 UNESCO International Arts Education Conference in this way: ‘[Researchers] highlighted a mismatch between music education policy expectations, teacher education resourcing and practice, and the increasing dominance of literacy and numeracy, in lieu of creativity, as key international themes’ (Webb, 2016, p. 2). Webb’s research also points to the Cambridge Primary Review, which highlights worrying trends in the UK for music with the narrowing of the curriculum. Similar narrowing has also taken place in New Zealand, which I will discuss shortly.

Following on from this, it would be easy to paint a picture of doom and gloom when considering how much time music is given in most New Zealand Secondary School timetables, and indeed, this can anecdotally be extrapolated out to include all arts subjects (or perhaps even all non-STEM subjects) in a New Zealand context.

Recently, much has been made of the coming addition of digital technologies into the technology learning area (“Nikki Kaye reveals digital shakeup for school curriculum,” 2017) and I hypothesize there will be a continued need for Arts teachers around New Zealand to battle for classroom time and resources. This paper examines how New Zealand Secondary School Music teachers handle this difficulty, and suggests some approaches to help ease their load.

Changes in New Zealand Education

Drawing attention to the previous paragraph, I have used the term ‘battle’ in reference to time and resources; I concede that this may be a loaded term, but it may well be the most appropriate one, given current school circumstances. In my view, there have been three major changes since the 1990s in New Zealand that have had a negative influence on classroom music time at all year levels:

1. The curriculum changes which took place from the mid-1990s to early 2000s relegated music into the Arts learning area, grouping it with drama, art, and dance (Ministry of Education, 2000). This is not to suggest that drama, art or dance are of lesser value than music, but rather to recognise that music, previously having its own syllabus, was now considered as part of a group. Though the recognition of Arts as a learning area can be viewed as a positive move, Judith Donaldson notes that the consequence was less time for music in Years 9 and 10 (see Donaldson, 2012). I contend that there were positive elements with some of these curriculum changes – such as the emphasis on diversity in music and the opening

1 STEM here refers to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.
of the music curriculum to embrace Māori music forms. However, time is the ultimate resource, and there was consequently less of it.

2. In 2009, the New Zealand National Party-led Government contentiously brought in literacy and numeracy testing at Primary School level, which are generally referred to as National Standards. Though few of us would disagree that literacy and numeracy skills are fundamental for students, there are many arguments against testing, predominantly: (a) testing alone does not lift achievement; (b) teachers already know which students need more support, and need more money to support them, rather than this money being spent on National Standards, and; (c) because results of the tests are published, teachers come under pressure to have their students perform well, and consequently, more classroom time is devoted to them. The knock-on effect to music – and indeed, all other subjects – is that less time is spent on it in the Primary classroom; music becomes a nice-to-have, rather than an essential component of the curriculum (Gerritsen, 2017).

3. Finally, New Zealand Primary teachers now only receive nominal training in music – about 6 hours over three years (Armstrong). Unsurprisingly, few Primary teachers report feeling confident teaching music (see Donaldson, 2012, and also Webb, 2016). Though it is important to acknowledge that many primary schools and individual teachers run excellent music programmes, what music happens in primary schools varies enormously from school to school. (This observation is borne out from the survey results, which will be discussed shortly.)

As part of a professional inquiry into music teaching, I recently sought to investigate the tension between time and content in the junior (Years 9 and 10) music classroom. I decided to focus on the tension between time and content in the junior school, but more specifically, I wanted to find out how teachers working in New Zealand today actually handled the problem. To put this another way, I was looking for practical solutions to the scenario New Zealand teachers face – how to prepare music students for NCEA Level 1 and beyond when music is afforded so little classroom time in Years 9 and 10. The response I received from the survey and the subsequent interest in it from New Zealand music teachers have made me realise that this is an area of great interest to many people, here and beyond, and convinced me that making the results more widely known is worthwhile. I raised awareness about the survey via an email through Musicnet, a forum which many secondary school music teachers in New Zealand belong to. The survey received 51 responses.

How much time do music teachers actually have with students, and what are the timetabling issues?

The first four survey questions were time-specific, asking how many hours per week Years 9 and 10 students have in music, and for how many weeks music courses run. I used this information to calculate how much time teachers have with students over the two years comprising Years 9 and 10. There was, as expected, a wide variation, summarised below:

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2 In a New Zealand context, Years 9 and 10 refer to the first two years at High School, where students are typically aged between 13 – 15. NCEA Level 1 refers to the first external examinations which take place at High School, taking place in Year 11. Itinerant teachers, as referred to in this article, are those who teach instrumental and vocal students, either individually or in groups, during school time. This role is sometimes taken on by the classroom music teacher, or by a non-classroom teacher with a LAT (Limited Authority to Teach) who comes into the school weekly.
Table 1.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Approx. Hours: Year 9</th>
<th>Approx. Hours: Year 10</th>
<th>Total Hours Years 9 – 10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean:</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>92.2</td>
<td>139.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median:</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode:</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest vs Lowest:</td>
<td>120/0</td>
<td>160/27</td>
<td>240/38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most Year 9 classes ran for either a term or two terms, and most Year 10 classes ran for either two terms or a year (for full survey results referred to in this article, see Swindells, 2017).

How classes are delivered, particularly in Year 9, differs a great deal. Some schools have music as an option, whilst for others it is a core subject; it seems that in Year 9, it is now common to run ‘taster’ courses (in which students try all option subjects but only for short periods of time; frequently as little as 6 – 7 weeks). One respondent’s school did not offer Year 9 music at all; another did not run music as a class but rather as a band and orchestra programme. Interestingly, that particular respondent strongly agreed their students were ready for NCEA Level 1 after Years 9 and 10 music.

Of more concern, though, is continuity. Although a large number of respondents ran music courses for a half-year, or even a full year in some cases, many ran only for a term or even less. Leaving aside the school with no music at all, six respondents’ courses ran for fewer than ten weeks (often the ‘taster’ courses referred to above). Although those with fewer weeks were usually given more hours per week, this raises the important question of how to establish continuity in learning. Students taking music toward the start of Year 9 may well have forgotten a great deal by the start of Year 10, yet those at the end of Year 9 may also be at a disadvantage, as the requirement to be in itinerant music lessons if they wish to take Year 11 Music may well have passed them by (that is, if they are not in private lessons).

The survey did not ask questions about itinerant music specifically, though many teachers mentioned itinerant music in their comments. As New Zealand music teachers are well aware, NCEA Level 1 Achievement Standards in Performance stipulate that students need to be at a level that ‘should reflect the equivalent technical and musical demands of at least a third year of study through itinerant lessons’ ("NCEA on TKI: Level 1 Music Assessment Resources," Achievement Standard 1.1). If a keen student only begins itinerant music lessons in term four of their Year 9 schooling, and is then assessed on Achievement Standard 1.1 in term two of their Year 11 year – which would not be unusual – then that student would only have received seven terms (at best) of tuition.

Survey respondents were also invited to answer what the specific difficulties in timetabling were:

What are the main difficulties with timetabling sufficient class time for music in Years 9 and 10? Please indicate all answers that you agree with.
Reason for timetabling difficulty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for timetabling difficulty</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Timetabling pressure from other option subjects</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>59.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timetabling pressure from non-option subjects</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>53.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timetabling pressure from needing to provide Religious Education classes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music is not taken seriously as a subject</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other time pressures in the school</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are no difficulties in timetabling sufficient class time for Years 9 and 10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16.33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents were invited to comment on this question. Tying to the responses above, one person noted: 'Our school offers all options at year 9 - taster courses. [This] may be good for other subjects but not Music as Level 1 is '3 years' of music classes.' Most teachers expressed resignation about the amount of time they were given: 'We get the same as all other option subjects at this point in time so while it is never enough, we won't be getting more.'

However, what is most significant here is that only 16.33% of respondents indicated that there were no difficulties in timetabling sufficient class time for Years 9 and 10. This indicates that over 80% of teachers who responded agreed that there were timetabling difficulties – a worryingly large majority.

Prior knowledge and preparedness for NCEA Level 1

The survey then asked about the level Year 9 students were at when they arrived in the music classroom. After all, students will have been at school for eight years; it would be reasonable for an English teacher to expect them to be able to read and write, and for a Maths teacher to expect them to add, subtract, and multiply. Yet, in music, little or no prior knowledge at Year 9 is often the norm, as indicated in the results summarised below.

How many students studying music in Year 9 have significant prior knowledge that assists them in the music classroom?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All or nearly all students</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than half of students</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About half the students</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than half the students</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>47.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None or almost none of the students</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>31.37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Survey respondents were invited to comment on this question, which many did. A great deal of those surveyed noted that prior knowledge was more likely to be from private lessons outside of school than from primary or intermediate, and although those at schools which included Years 7 – 8 were usually at an advantage, only one respondent mentioned that they had a relationship with an intermediate school with a good music programme. One teacher noted: ‘Often students’ experience of Music in primary school is just singing in the end-of-year production.’ Another said: ‘We are lucky if they come in with curriculum level two.’ Many respondents also noted that whilst some students had practical music skills, their theoretical knowledge lagged behind – and in some cases, this even included those taking lessons: ‘Some students have private instrument lessons but their teacher isn’t teaching them any reading skills or even names of the chords.’

Following on from this question, I asked:

**Do you agree with the statement: “Students who complete Years 9 and 10 Music successfully at our school are well prepared for all elements of NCEA Level 1 Music”?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>41.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.84%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More than half of survey respondents either strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement, which on the surface seems positive, but there is still a significant minority who felt that their students were unprepared for Year 11 Music after completing Years 9 and 10. I feel confident that this respondent summed up the views of many music teachers: ‘NCEA Level 1 requirements mean that most students who only take option music at years 9 and 10 would struggle to reach Achieved level [Pass] for most standards. Our Level 1 students are those who have worked hard on their own time to reach the required level.’ This is despite the fact that the curriculum is (supposedly) designed so that students can do just that – begin instrumental or vocal tuition in Year 9 and be able to reach a suitable standard of performance for level 1 by Year 11. I contend that the scenario currently being faced by many teachers is that the class time is insufficient to achieve this goal for many students, and indeed, this respondent agrees: ‘a successful itinerant scheme is very important for NCEA success. Students have to be skillful on an instrument to pass the solo and group performance standards. Generally this cannot be taught in classroom music. Often the most successful have parents that have paid for private lessons.’
Strategies used to prepare students for NCEA Level 1

The final and most significant questions in the survey examined strategies used by teachers to prepare students for NCEA Level 1, and how extra and co-curricular music activities feed into this:

What strategies do you use in Years 9 and 10 music to help get students to the required level for NCEA Level 1? Please give as much detail as you wish.

As this was the focus of my research, I have summarised the findings into the following points:

1. Many teachers – about 35% of respondents – noted that they treat Year 10 like a mini-Year 1, like this respondent: ‘I treat Year 10 Music like a mini-NCEA course and scaffold them through all the skills they will need to be successful at Level 1.’ To my thinking, this is a practical and effective idea, although given the scarcity of time it would be very important to do this in a holistic way (linking to my second point). In a similar vein, another respondent noted that they provide: ‘similar conditions for assessment [to level 1] and back planning the marking so that it is in alignment.’ This means that students in Year 10 begin to appreciate the conditions for assessment at Year 11.

2. Take a holistic approach. This is generally a sound teaching strategy for all subjects, but when teachers are constrained by time it becomes even more crucial. One respondent said: ‘I try to offer a holistic approach to learning music. i.e. [students] are playing music and reading it and composing and performing and researching. Or I have units that touch on two or more aspects listed above.’ Another noted that their classroom activities include: ‘Listening analysis of a huge variety of genres, Itinerant lessons, Co-operative learning, Performance opportunities, Tech and gear maintenance, Theory 101.’

3. Focus on theory and music software skills. One respondent described how: ‘every lesson we do 10-15 minutes of theory before getting in groups and playing,’ and indeed, theory was an issue identified by many respondents. One summed up the views of many: ‘It is hard work getting the theory diet right without turning them off and keeping it fun. It is a fine balance.’ Nevertheless, for students to be successful at Year 11 – particularly in the external standards – having well-rounded theory knowledge is essential. Several respondents also mentioned that they start using music software early, and if resources are available, this could be an excellent idea. The wealth of websites and apps that reinforce theory concepts, along with the fun and interactive ways that music can be made on programmes such as GarageBand should be embraced by teachers (and this links into digital technologies as well). For those with devices but no means to purchase music writing software such as Sibelius, MuseScore and Noteflight are free and absolutely capable of doing anything all but the most advanced students at Years 9 and 10 could want. However, whilst working with students using these programmes, it is important to integrate this learning holistically.

4. Encourage students to learn an instrument, either privately or through an itinerant programme. This is a significant issue, also identified by many respondents. One noted: ‘Instrumental learning is the big problem as students are not learning instruments at primary school and there is less take up at secondary school.’ Another said that: ‘Instrumental learning is the biggest problem. There needs to be a rethink around how and where instrumental learning happens.
at primary school level. The Sistema programme needs to be expanded nationwide. Few music teachers would disagree that instrumental lesson uptake is more beneficial when it takes place early, at Primary or Intermediate school. Yet, presently, there are potential difficulties in keeping itinerant schemes running even at a high school level (see Dastgheib, 2016), without venturing beyond this into the Intermediate and Primary sectors. I suspect that many secondary music teachers may want to get involved in schools in their community, but are lacking in time and energy. Yet, investment in this area may see the biggest payoff later on, if programmes and connections can be implemented.

5. **Keep in good contact with parents.** We know this is good advice in education generally, but it is good to bear in mind. One teacher notes: ‘we [...] keep in contact with parents to let them know how their child is going and the potential they are showing. [This] helps to get them practicing.’

6. **‘Advanced’ music offered as an additional subject, or individual programmes at Year 11:** Naturally this is resource-dependent, but potentially beneficial to teachers if the option is available. At one school, a teacher describes how: “advanced” music is offered at both years 9 and 10. Students can take both beginners and then advanced music.’

Finally, the survey asked about extra-curricular and co-curricular music activities specifically, as these can be such a fundamental part of music-making at school for many, and for the most part, take place outside the classroom. I asked:

**Does your school have any extra-curricular music activities which assist students with classroom music at all Year levels? If yes, please briefly detail.**

Unsurprisingly, there was a big variety in responses, from ‘none’ or ‘hardly any’ to hugely varied offerings. Although several teachers noted that ‘all’ extra and co-curricular music assisted students in the classroom, one teacher wrote that: ‘Co-curricular groups only help students with prior knowledge’. I suspect that whilst students with prior knowledge will probably fit into co-curricular groups more easily, those with less prior knowledge also stand to benefit.

However, a number of other suggestions worth considering came out of this question. The first of these was to take advantage of school performance opportunities early in the year to assess student performances. The Year 10 semester begins in the second half of the year so the students are encouraged to sit solo and group performance during the first half at opportunities such as House Music cup, chamber music, rock quest etc. [which leaves] the second half of the year freer to cover [everything else].’ As mentioned above, getting Year 10 students ready for the rigours of NCEA standards can be a good idea, and having this take place early in the year – when possible – leaves more time for other classroom study. However, it must be noted that this requires students to be at a level where they are able to do the performance early in the year, and may also be time-intensive for teachers in organisational terms.

A second suggestion is utilising or creating outreach programmes. One respondent describes how this works at their school: ‘We have an outreach band programme running. This is based out of CSM [Christchurch School of Music]. It is highly effective with reading, performing, and understanding theory. If students opt into this programme (which starts at Year 5) they are well and truly prepared for NCEA Level 1 Music. One boy who had been going a year sat Grade 3 trumpet. It just gets the students reading and playing straight away.’ Schemes or outreach programmes like

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this could also be used for specific elements of the curriculum; for example, another respondent noted that they ‘also had a mentor from the NZMC [New Zealand Music Commission] for 10 hours this year who focused on Composition/Songwriting.’ This would be particularly useful if a classroom teacher felt less confident in that area.

Finally, one respondent described having a ‘senior volunteer mentorship programme’ which offered extra instrumental tuition to junior students. It worked like a buddy system, with senior students tutoring junior ones on their instrument of choice. For schools who have more students wanting itinerant lessons than they can offer – or for students wanting a little extra – this could be an excellent way of both providing lessons and giving seniors the opportunity to get some teaching experience. As well as this, it helps foster the types of relationships we want seniors and juniors to have; a positive partnership embodying the principle of tuakana–teina and recognizing the value of ako.

Conclusions and recommendations

I have summarised the survey findings as follows:

1. Teachers working with students in Years 9 and 10 should be prepared that the majority of students will have little to no prior knowledge, depending on the school makeup and its feeder schools;
2. Students can be assisted to reach NCEA Level 1 through a carefully planned programme, including:
   1. Having Year 10 mirror Year 11 by back planning;
   2. A holistic approach;
   3. A focus on integrated and applied theory and music software use;
   4. Plentiful and varied co-curricular activities, which feed into assessment opportunities when possible;
   5. A supportive and effective itinerant programme
3. To assist future outcomes, secondary school teachers should, where possible, create links with Primary and Intermediate feeder schools to potentially set up instrumental music schemes, and/or access outside mentoring and assistance programmes available to them.

At this point, I must acknowledge that classrooms in all countries are fraught with difficulties that theoretical best practice does not take into account. The demands on teachers’ time are unlikely to cease in the near future, and I have already seen the importance of balancing planning, teaching, and organisation with personal needs and self-care, not to mention other school demands. What I have attempted to do in this article is outline, through the survey respondents’ ideas, how teachers might use their time most effectively to achieve the best outcomes.
References


Swindells, R. (2017). Years 9 and 10 Music Survey. from https://www.surveymonkey.com/analyze/hapLhoW7ZiiA15a7g5Mess4FZi2YnnNPEV8ZNR5uT8_3D