Finding the Balance: Teachers as Recontextualising Agents in the Struggle between Classical and Popular Music in the Secondary School Curriculum

Abstract

Many commentators have argued that western music education is suffering a legitimation crisis. Within the field, approaches centred on classical music traditions are contrasted with alternative conceptions that champion popular music as a means of cultural transformation. This paper considers seven experienced New Zealand secondary school music teachers’ perceptions of the place of classical and popular music within education and applies Bernstein’s concept of recontextualisation to their discussion of curriculum decision making. The paper reflects on the role that pedagogic autonomy plays in maintaining the tension experienced by these teachers as they continually seek balance in recontextualising musical and educational values for pedagogic purposes.

Keywords: secondary school, music education, music curriculum, pedagogic autonomy, pedagogic recontextualisation.

Introduction

Within western culture there is little doubt that a relativistic view of music has largely replaced the modernist account with its emphasis on canonical music and categories of high and low culture (Bowman, 1998; Johnson, 2002). A traditional view of culture is dependent on education as a means of enculturation, a way to bring students into contact with the cultural forms considered to be historically and aesthetically significant (Scruton, 2000; 2007). Popular culture on the other hand is more often linked with potent commercial and entertainment values, and, therefore, appears to be largely incompatible with traditional notions of education and learning (Bowman, 2004). In response to these apparently oppositional narratives of tradition and progress, music teachers are having to make increasingly complex decisions of musical, cultural, and educational value by attempting to balance demands for student-centred approaches to teaching against educational ideals more aligned with traditional accounts of culture and learning. This vying for curriculum value and space is ongoing, as teachers resist or respond to the changing values of society.

Sloboda (2001) has suggested that the relationship between the ‘meaning of music’ and its effective realization within education requires “an implicit agreement between stakeholders … about what it [music education] is for. The ‘meaning of music’ is a constantly shifting function of the discourses of diverse groups which coalesce around a ‘dominant ideology’…” (Sloboda, 2001, p. 243). Hegemonic ideologies, which favour the vested interests of the dominant group in society, began to be questioned within music education literature in the
late seventies (Vulliamy, 1977; Vulliamy & Shepherd, 1984). More recently, a number of commentators from the UK and North America have argued that western music education is in a state of crisis and that any ‘implicit agreement’ between stakeholders has broken down (Allsup, 2003; Bowman, 2004; Carlin, 1997: Regelski, 2005; Ross, 1995; Sloboda, 2001). The recent and ongoing international debate over the conceptualisation of music education as aesthetic education or as praxis, is an example of the struggle over the establishment of a dominant discourse within the field of music education (see Barrett, 2002; Koopman, 1998; Panaiootidi, 2003). However, Walker (2007; 2009) and Bowman (2004) have argued from different perspectives that the role and function of popular music within formal music education has emerged as a most pressing issue in the last few decades2. Walker (2007; 2009) suggests that music education has been diverted towards the world of popular entertainment, where an acquiescence to relevance creates the potential for conflict with broader educational ideals. On the other hand, Bowman acknowledges popular music’s potential for transformation of music education. He suggests that taking popular music seriously will not only change the role of the music educator but will go to “…the very heart of music education and curriculum theory” (Bowman, 2004, p. 31).Â While the influence of multi-culturalism within New Zealand society and within current paradigms of political, educational, and musical practice is acknowledged as significant, it is not the focus of this paper. This discussion explores the challenge to the traditional emphasis on classical music brought about by the ubiquity of western popular music forms, of which contemporary Maori and Pasifika music is a part.

While there is a great deal of polemical argument regarding the current state of international music education (Bowman, 2002; Elliott, 2005; Walker, 2009), there is little empirical research on the work of music teachers, in particular how the pervasive cultural changes of recent times are impacting on the conception and delivery of their work. Westbury (2002) suggests that “[i]t is teachers with their priorities and their ambitions… not curricula or policies, who animate the work of schools” (p. 156). Similarly, Green (2002, p.46) and Finney (2003) suggest that talking to teachers and students is an area largely uncharted by research: “[t]here is a dearth of investigation into the lived experiences of young people and their music teachers. … [r]esearchers have been slow to collaborate with either of these key players” (Finney, 2003, p. 2). This exploratory focus group study is the beginning of a wider research project that seeks to make a contribution to the field by placing teachers, their beliefs, values, choices and experiences about music teaching, at the centre of the inquiry. It is focused on the influences brought to bear on teachers’ curriculum decision-making, on what Apple (2002) describes as the “outside-to-inside” connections, and how they are determined. One manifestation within education of significant cultural change has been the growing contestation between classical and popular music, which is representative of deeper ideological cultural perspectives. The position taken here is that the music curriculum students experience is strongly influenced by their teachers’ beliefs, values, theories and curriculum practices. These in turn are the result of the interactions brought about by the varied influences and pressures brought to bear on the teacher.

Blumer (1969) suggests that a functioning society is the result of “workable relations” that arise out of people modifying their varied values for particular purposes through compromise, duress, self-interest, common sense and “sheer necessity” (p. 76). Such a perspective would suggest that meanings within the world of music education are the result of a web of factors made increasingly complex as they intersect with both educational and cultural fields. The teacher has a central role, acting as a conduit for ways in which meanings from various
sources might be constructed and interpreted. Such an interactionist view suggests that meaning and cultural knowledge can be created through interaction at sites of learning rather than transmitted in a functionalist sense.

Bernstein’s (1990; 2000) concept of pedagogic recontextualisation provides a more specific conceptual frame for bringing understanding to the complex processes and influences identified by the teachers in this study. Bernstein has argued that a recontextualising principle is fundamental to the discourse through which education produces and reproduces the dominant values and beliefs of society. Furthermore, the recontextualisation process “selectively appropriates, relocates, refocuses and relates other discourses to constitute its own order” (2000, p. 33). The process is theorised as occurring in two fields; that is at the level of the state and its agents (the official recontextualising field or ORF) and at the level of pedagogic transmission and acquisition (the pedagogic recontextualising field or PRF). The focus in this study is on the relative autonomy of teachers as recontextualising agents within their schools. The structure-agent dialectic is played out as teachers interact with competing influences from various fields. Depending on the level of autonomy experienced by the teacher, and the level of engagement with that autonomy, their interactions can produce a range of pedagogic and curricular realisations. The pedagogic recontextualising field therefore “has a crucial function in creating the fundamental autonomy of education” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 33).

This small pilot study is the first step in doctoral research that aims to investigate a number of cases focusing on the issues and problems faced by music teachers in relation to musical choice. The purpose of this exploratory study was to gain some initial insight into the ways in which some teachers perceive and manage the apparent contestation between classical music and popular music. Taking part in the focus group discussion were seven experienced music teachers. The logic of the sampling, or selection of cases, was purposive. Rather than typicality or representativeness, the intention was to attempt to capture some of the “heterogeneity in the population” through maximum variation (Maxwell, 2005). Maxwell (2005) and Hammersley (1992) suggest a rationale for sampling that involves identifying aspects of variation most relevant to the study and then selecting cases that represent the most important dimensions. In this research, the criteria for purposive selection was based on the teacher’s musical background and the stylistic emphasis in their teaching programme. The seven teachers were already known to me and they exhibited varying perspectives to their work. Four teachers were from a classical background, two from a popular music background, and one known for an eclectic approach to curriculum. Six of the teachers taught in state single sex or co-educational schools in the Auckland city metropolitan area. One teacher was from a private school out of the main city area. The participants were at varying stages of their careers and included four men and three women.

The focus group was semi-structured, in that a series of pre-prepared questions were used to guide the discussion, but the participants essentially responded to each other and were free to follow lines of discussion as they emerged. Teachers were asked to begin the discussion by talking about their personal musical histories, and then to consider the alignment between their personal conceptions of musical value, the official curriculum and the curriculum their students experience. What is their perception of the apparent opposition between popular music and classical music in relation to their curriculum realisation? Do they perceive it as a dichotomy, and if so how do they manage it? How do they decide what to include in their teaching programmes?
The two hour discussion was transcribed and thematically coded and analysed (Saldana, 2009). While the guiding interview questions provided a framework for the discussion prior to the focus group, the specific concepts were derived inductively from the data. The responses of the various teachers were compared to generate the central themes. The in vivo phrase “finding a balance” was used repeatedly by the participants. It was chosen as an integrative theme, or core construct for how many of the teachers were approaching curriculum decision making. The themes were subsequently ordered by applying aspects of Bernstein’s concept of pedagogic recontextualisation (Bernstein, 1990).

The following section of this paper outlines in more detail Bernstein’s concept of recontextualisation and influences on teacher decision making from the official recontextualising field. It is argued that New Zealand secondary school music teachers experience a relatively high level of autonomy in relation to the official discourses of the state. This autonomy provides opportunities for varied ideologies to come into play as teachers adapt and recontextualise dominant discourses in interaction with schools, students and themselves. Ideology is defined here as a complex set of interacting values and beliefs that influence not only curriculum choices but also the way “in which relationships are made and realised” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 16).Â Ideology permeates not only the content of the pedagogic act but the act itself.Â In such a definition, there is no escape from an ideological position, as both the message and the medium are ideologically implicated. However, through the analysis and acknowledgment of how values and meanings come into being, there is provision for increased critical understanding and potential for informed awareness and choice within educational fields of practice.

The second section of the paper centres on influences from the pedagogic recontextualising field and organises the data into thematic categories related to the key influences on curriculum realisation as identified by the focus group participants. These teachers appeared to be searching for a balance between competing fields of influence within the PRF. These were (a) influences from the local school culture, (b) influences from discourses of learning concerned with valid knowledge, validating student learning, and validating the popular and (c) influences from teachers personal musical beliefs and strengths. Each of these subsections is headed with an in-vivo quote that encapsulates the theme under discussion.

**Influences from the Official Recontextualising Field**

Bernstein (1990) argues that pedagogic discourse is bound by rules of generation and distribution, recontextualisation and evaluation.Â Moreover Bernstein (2000) suggests that pedagogic discourse is underpinned by a recontextualising principle that functions within fields operating at various levels, from agents of the state to pedagogues in schools and other educational institutions. Within the official recontextualising field, the Official Pedagogic Discourse (OPD) of the state produces dominant principles that generate guidelines “about school organization and management, curricula and evaluation – which reflect the political and scientific background of the agents who constitute this field” (Neves & Morais, 2001, p. 455). The discourse appropriated in a given educational setting at a particular time is the result of the dynamic interplay between the “dominant ideology in the official recontextualising field (ORF)” and “the relative autonomy of the pedagogic recontextualising field (PRF)” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 53).
A curriculum can be defined in many ways: as a written document, as a process, what is taught, or what is actually experienced and learnt by the students (Jorgensen, 2002). Curriculum is defined in this paper as a multi-dimensional concept, curricula in fact, encompassing the systemised content of national documents, teachers’ interpretations of these documents, their planning and the teaching and learning that is experienced by students. The curriculum is realised inside and outside the classroom, both explicitly and implicitly, in the instructional and regulative discourse of the school (Bernstein, 2000). In any given instance, curriculum choices define what counts as valid knowledge through inclusion or exclusion. Furthermore, pedagogy defines what counts as a valid means for its transmission (Bernstein, 1975). The curriculum is, therefore, representative of deeper societal patterns of value and authority. In New Zealand the national curriculum is produced by the state’s chief recontextualising agent, the Ministry of Education. Despite its official status The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) appears to exert minimal influence over music curriculum enactment in the secondary school. The document contains a strong regulative discourse in the form of generic core competencies and values, as well as providing sequential instructional strands in eight learning areas including music (a subset of the arts). Essentially the document is presented as a guide rather than a prescription, leaving the way open for teachers to develop localised programmes: “The New Zealand Curriculum sets the direction for teaching and learning … . [b]ut it is a framework rather than a detailed plan … schools have considerable flexibility when determining the detail” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 37). The influence of the official curriculum on the decision-making of teachers in the focus group was shared frankly by four of the participants:

Teacher D: I think it’s almost none.

Teacher B: Yeah, almost none.

Teacher A: To be honest I never look at it.

Teacher E: I’m with them.

It is the evaluative rules, through which the state monitors the adequate realization of the curriculum, which exert a stronger influence in the secondary school. The evaluative rules are contained in the assessment standards for higher school qualifications. Despite teachers’ best efforts, qualifications prescriptions tend to produce a top down effect on the curriculum, and there is a danger that by default the prescriptions “become the curriculum” rather than “promoting accountability or “quality control” for curriculum” (Regelski, 2004, p. 256, emphasis in original).

Teacher B: The achievement standards drive the senior course.

Teacher A: The achievement standard wording and prescription [influence the curriculum], cause if you meet that you know you’re safe and not wasting the kids’ time and you don’t have to fear moderation. 6

Teacher C: It's finding that balance between teaching to the assessment … but also broadening.
While the requirements of assessment place certain pressures on teachers, the overriding generic nature of the achievement standards within the New Zealand qualifications framework (particularly those assessed internally within the school) provides ample scope for teachers to recontextualise curriculum content for local conditions. On the other hand one teacher in the group articulated the frustration that this autonomy afforded:

Teacher B: I think that the biggest challenge that has faced me for quite some time is the lack of resources. There is too much flexibility, therefore too much responsibility on me to find resources, make resources, compile resources and decide what my course content is going to be. I’ve often wanted to quit and go back to teaching Maths.

Texts and resources are produced within the ORF and these contain the ideological perspective of the authors in terms of selection and suggested realisation of the content; in other words, they present both instructional and regulative dimensions: the what (recontextualising knowledge from intellectual, artistic, or manual fields) and the how of pedagogic discourse (recontextualising theories of learning from social sciences such as education and psychology). In this regard, use of such resources from the ORF can limit the potential for teacher autonomy. Nevertheless the reality of the complex and busy lives of teachers indicated that at times pragmatism was a deciding factor in instructional decision-making:

E: Sometimes it comes down to resources, what I have in the cupboard.

B: One of the biggest influences is resources and whether you have to build something from scratch.

Where there is a heavy reliance on officially produced materials, teachers run the risk of becoming technocratic deliverers of curriculum, rather than practising more autonomously as reflective professionals (Codd, 1998). Even so, the selection, adaptation and sequencing of available resources is to some degree an act of recontextualisation. Most teachers in New Zealand undertake such recontextualisation, as there is no prescribed course with ready-made texts and resources.

While the specifications of the New Zealand standards and the curriculum strands remain stylistically generic, resources developed within the recontextualising field continue to stress certain dimensions, such as the development of notational and score analysis skills. Some teachers in the focus group regarded this as a validation of the classical paradigm. In this way “the curriculum doesn’t reflect modern day society and reality” (Teacher A).

Teachers make judgments of value when they choose to include something in the curriculum. Their decisions relay not only which discourses and competencies are valued but also which teacher-learning relations are given preference (Neves & Morais, 2001a). Moreover, “[e]very time a discourse moves, there is space for ideology to play” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 9). Rather than taking for granted a functionalist sociology of schooling, where the transmission of accepted knowledge is seen as unproblematic, these teachers acknowledge the increasing tension between competing approaches to schooling which might be more accurately described as constructivist and transformative. Schools may become places where culture might be created rather than simply passed on.
Within the New Zealand framework, there is the potential for music teachers to develop extended forms of professionalism afforded by their relative autonomy. As recontextualising agents, teachers select “from a number of knowledge bases or domains, such as subject knowledge, teaching knowledge, content knowledge of learners and knowledge of self” (Turner-Bissett cited in Singh, 2002, p. 577), as well as responding to social and cultural fields of influence. However, such an approach carries with it the discomfort and challenge of needing to develop a critical awareness of the multiple influences involved in curriculum construction. The participants in this study provided specific evidence of the way in which ideologies from various domains created a tension for them in their curriculum realisation.

The main influences identified by the focus group teachers are discussed in the following section. These include the impact of the school culture, the influence of various discourses of learning and the personal musical beliefs and strengths of the teachers.

**Influences from the Pedagogic Recontextualising Field**

**Influences of the school culture**

The potential for recontextualisation at the local level is determined by the autonomy of the teacher, which in turn is dependent on the culture of the school and its relation to the official knowledge of the recontextualising field (Bernstein, 2000). In a school with a particular investment in music as cultural and social capital, pressures are likely to be brought to bear on teachers from management and parents to include music of a particular type. Bernstein (1990) has suggested that what is reproduced at this level may well be influenced by the power relationships between the school “and the primary cultural context of the acquirer (family/community/peer relations)” (ibid, p. 199). In a school where there are few expectations regarding music, either within the curriculum or as an extra-curricular endeavour, the teacher may be relatively free to follow personal preferences. Furthermore, in schools which regard music as a subject of relative unimportance, there may be greater insulation from compliance with official pedagogic discourse.

Of particular interest within the focus group was the way in which those teachers who indicated a strong personal interest in popular genre (through their personal listening and musicking) did not always carry this preference unaltered into their teaching programmes. Quite strong pressures, both explicit and tacit, influenced teachers to include classical music in the curriculum. Two teachers identified the culture of the school in which they worked as pivotal in this regard:

Teacher D: I don’t do any classical music with my musicking now…. When I started teaching, I was very much governed by what resources I had, there was a huge amount of pressure on me and I just ended up using [British course materials] and so I formed a habit of teaching quite a lot of classical music because it was so well resourced.

In this case, the influence of the school culture and the availability of resources overrode the personal musical values of the teacher. The influence of the school culture was acknowledged by another teacher:
Teacher E: [A]t my last school there was far more of a focus on the classical, but now I’m definitely leaning that way [the popular end of the continuum] but I still am introducing those classical ideas.

As they moved to new schools, both of these teachers identified a change of emphasis in their curriculum enactment towards popular music. As a result of being in a new setting, teacher E explains her intention to bring a new perspective to the musical culture of the classroom programmes:

The culture of the class is going to change hugely because it was pretty much locked down by a hard core of men with long hair, utter, utter bogans, rigid, blinkered musical listening and this year there’s all these girls, for a start, and there are people who are playing folk music and people who play brass instruments in Brazilian bands and its going to be totally different. I feel like it will come more to a balance point.

Implicit in this teacher’s more transformative ideological stance is a recognition of music’s potential to engender certain types of values and even propagate certain social relations regarded as preferable. Within the culture of her new school, there is the potential for her particular musical and educational perspectives and values to influence the school’s musical culture. In this way, the teacher becomes a co-constructor of the curriculum in its broadest sense.

**Influences of discourses of learning – “valid knowledge”**

Teachers select from a mixture of social, cultural, and educational influences in shaping the what and how of their curriculum enactment. Within the focus group, educational discourses were more dominant than musical ones as teachers acknowledged their primary role as educators. Bernstein (2000) has theorised that teachers’ pedagogic communication occurs via a mechanism he terms the pedagogic device. An instructional component (the selected knowledge, its organisation and evaluative definitions) is embedded in a more dominant regulative component of social order: “the moral discourse which creates order, relations and identity” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 32). The regulative discourse functions ideologically in that it generates theories of instruction and a model of the relation between learner and teacher. Thus, it “not only selects the what but also the how of the theory of instruction” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 35 emphasis in original). Therefore the dominant principles of society are contained within the regulative discourse of pedagogy (Bernstein, 2000).

The concept of “valid learning” emerged as a theme related to the regulative discourse of curriculum conception. Teacher B suggested “one of the key things that music teachers do is that they find the music which has got valid learning in it”. Some teachers suggested that valid learning could be found in music of varying styles, although it was more likely to be found in classical music, the music historically associated with high culture and learning. Teacher B, who located himself clearly at the popular end of the continuum of musical personal interest, suggested “there is more to be learned from the academic study of classical music than from the academic study of popular music”.

The discourse of academic learning is inextricably bound up with recontextualisation of knowledge for didactic purposes, in what Bernstein has described as the creation of “imaginary” subjects: “Pedagogic discourse … is a principle which removes (delocates) a
discourse from its substantive practice and context, and which relocates that discourse according to its own principle of selective reordering and focusing” (Bernstein, 1990, p. 184). The essence of subjects of a more experiential nature, such as music, becomes substantially altered for the school setting, to comply with the hegemonic principles of ratiocination of knowledge which lies at the heart of western scientific method (Drummond, 2003, p. 52). The recontextualisation of music to enable its affiliation within the academy of accepted school subjects can be seen in the preference afforded classical music over popular, the emphasis given to developing skills in musical literacy over oral or practical fluency and the ordering of musical knowledge into “sequential learning, prescriptive goals and materials, tests and national examinations” (Drummond, 2002, p. 54). The resulting pedagogic practice emphasises a logic of transmission rather than acquisition; an emphasis on “states of knowledge rather than ways of knowing (Bernstein, 1975, p. 98, emphasis in original).

Although rational abstract thinking remains more highly prized than practical skills, such narrow conceptions of musical knowledge have begun to be challenged by the increasing recognition of ‘local’ and ‘real-world’ procedural and situated knowledges (Elliott, 1995; Westbury, 2002) or other “ways of knowing” (Drummond, 2003) brought about by the development and acceptance of interpretive and critical approaches to curriculum and pedagogy. Official and unofficial forms of knowledge are often conceptualised as an oral/written, informal/formal dichotomy where they are generally heard as oppositional: “… one form is often seen as the destruction of the other” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 155). These forms are also ideologically positioned and the ratiocination of knowledge has led to “official” and dominant discourses that can silence or exclude others.

The underlying presence of a functionalist approach to the transmission of knowledge that many teachers might argue is appropriate within educational contexts was present as a regulative discourse within the focus group:

E: So there is a basic set of skills that you want your kids to have musically by the time they exit from you … they will learn to read and they will learn to write and they will do some listening and they will do aural and they will do some composing and they will do some playing.

While teacher E espoused quite strong inclusive and critical values in relation to curriculum choice, also present was an underlying instructional discourse of a more traditional nature.

Influences of discourses of learning – “validating their learning”

In the accounts offered by the focus group, teachers’ ideals of what constitutes valid learning interact and compete with a different discourse aligned with more interpretive and transformative teaching ideals. This influence on the regulative discourse espoused by many teachers in the group was a belief in ideals of student-centred learning rather than an acceptance of a functionalist or ‘transmission’ view of education. McGee (1995) identified the strong influence of liberal–progressive ideology in New Zealand education beginning in the 1960s. There was a shift in focus from traditionalist ideologies centred on a particular body of content knowledge, to the student; from knowledge to knower. World-wide this has seen the development of “more expansive, participatory and broadened conceptions of knowledge, involving the development and interests of the student rather than the authority of received knowledge” (McEneaney & Meyer, 2000, p. 204). Â When questioned on how
curriculum decisions were made, particularly those decisions that appeared oppositional to areas of personal value, teacher B suggested:

This route is chosen for me by my students … So if students in the classroom have interests in classical music or popular music then I have a responsibility to validate their own choice by looking at some examples and not being deferential or preferential to the genre.

Within the focus group, the concept of “validating their learning” was strongly connected with liberal-progressive and constructivist modes of learning:

B: [O]ur students bring knowledge to the classroom and if you can allow them to, or provide them with a learning vehicle that allows them to expand that knowledge or further that knowledge, then they are going to be motivated and they are going to enjoy it and they’re going to learn better, rather than the didactic pouring.

Validating student interest was a strong component in the regulative discourse affecting instructional decisions, but teachers also spoke of challenging this ideal to move students out of their comfort zone, so as to provide new and broadening experiences:

C: Start them [with] what they know and then grow them from there is the philosophy that I build my teaching on.

B: It’s a comfort zone thing; they’ve got to learn to think outside that sphere.

Acquiescence to student relevance was also motivated by pragmatic concerns over student numbers. In this regard teachers talked about “advocacy” and the need to enrol students into their music classes. Popular music was seen as a potential tool for “hooking them in”:

B: I used to do periods of art music but I don’t anymore, for that hook-in reason I think, quite possibly…. [I]t’s about the sell, because you’re selling it to those kids and by the time they grow to be NCEA10 age they’ll be in the same class with the classical kids.

The tension between the traditional dimensions of a music curriculum and the need for relevance is a central dilemma for these teachers. They are continually trying to find a balance between these oppositional demands in their work, particularly in instances where music classes might be cut due to a lack of student uptake. Manifested in this way, the choice between classical and popular music represents a tangible contestation.

**Influences of discourses of learning – “validating the popular”**

Traditional views of musical value suggest that music worthy of study and contemplation will be imbued with inherent meaning and qualities of universality, complexity and originality (Green, 1999). Although largely unstated, it is these dimensions of underlying value that teachers look for in music that can provide a vehicle for “valid” learning:

E: [B]ut now I’m at [a new school] it’s definitely leaning that way [towards the popular] but I still am introducing those classical ideas.
Even when popular music is embraced within the curriculum, its potential as a vehicle for learning tends to be described in terms similar to the canonical values that legitimise classical music:

E: Maybe it’s been around long enough to be considered valid.

C: It’s valued; it’s honoured as a real form of music as opposed to something that isn’t perhaps considered to be quality or pure.

Popular music suitable for learning was described by teachers in the group as being validated by having stood the test of time, being authentic rather than simply commercial, and having supporting material written about it to validate it for learning. Jones (2008) describes this secondary material as part of the validation process: a “constellation … that reflects back onto the work itself in a circle of valorization” (p. 49).

On the other hand some teachers identified an essential difference in the world view of popular music in which students could “look the other way”. Compared to classical music its meaning was described as non-academic:

F: [There is a] cerebral approach that is needed for one genre and ostensibly not for another.

A: [I]t’s a completely different world, the way you break down, the way you find meaning in it …. I see popular music as a voice to the people in a way, as reflective of the times that are happening, much more contextual in a way than classical music in a sense.

Teacher E reflected: “… all genres are equivalent or equal, in my point of view anyway”. These teachers seem to be leaning towards interpretive and transformative models of teaching, as against a functionalist transmission of accepted knowledge. Most of the teachers seemed reluctant to ascribe a hierarchy of value to one sort of music over another, but rather preferences were described as existing within a style or genre, and this hierarchy was applied to choices of music for learning. Both classical and popular music have the potential to fulfil the criteria to be considered educationally appropriate:

C: [Students] have to be grown but it doesn’t necessarily mean that you grow them towards a particular genre or instrument or whatever, it’s the holistic development of their musicality.

Bowman (1998) argues for a ‘responsible relativism’ within music education, similar to that espoused by many of these teachers: “Relativism need not contend that all criteria … all assertions of musical worth, are equally defensible” (p. 5). Judgements of value can then be made according to intended use and according to standards of excellence within a given practice, rather than being made in relation to concepts regarded as universal truths. Teacher B suggested musical value depended on “how the music communicates or engages me. Communicates with me or engages me, now that’s unspecific of genre”. These teachers were ultimately recontextualisers for “valid learning” which consisted of finding a balance between music perceived as having some learning potential, acknowledging and validating students’ interests and broadening students’ horizons.

Influence of teacher personal musical beliefs and strengths – “teaching to our strengths”
As if in opposition to placing the student at the centre of their curriculum conceptualisation, teachers also spoke of the need to teach to their strengths and the potential for their personal musical interests to positively influence their teaching: Teacher E: “I have made a bit of a point of teaching the stuff I’m really passionate about even in places where it was maybe slightly uncomfortable”. The very breadth of music as a school subject necessitates some lines of specialisation for the teacher but just as student comfort zones were to be challenged, so too were teachers’:

Teacher B: We teach to our strengths and that’s natural and comfortable but at the same time we like or have a responsibility to move outside of our comfort zone and learn new things and try some things that are outside of our own [experience].

The influence of teachers’ own personal passions can lead to a deepening of curriculum experience for students, as teachers model commitment to an aspect of the field. Teacher E articulated a critical stance underpinned by notions of cultural empowerment (Bernstein, 2000) and talked of the lasting impact this approach had had on many of her students, now adults. For this teacher significant biographical experiences “dug in deep” and created a strong philosophical commitment towards recognition, diversity and empowerment as ideals for teaching:

I remember and enjoy big family parties, Irish family parties, with Nana on the piano and 150 Irish folk tunes, about an hour and a half, and I really enjoyed that because that was the sense of people enjoying making music together which I think kind of really dug in deep as something I like to do…. I suddenly realised that music was for everyone.

Finding the balance between student focus and teacher passion is a further challenge that is played out in the complex interaction of curriculum realisation and recontextualisation at the local level.

Conclusion – “Finding the Balance” – a Mechanism for Recontextualisation

The cultural and technological changes of recent times suggest there is great potential for music teachers to feel adrift amidst a sea of conflicting challenges, needs, and ideals as they contemplate what might, or should, be taught in both the general and elective programmes offered in schools. The seven teachers in this study seemed to intimate that the hegemonic values of classical ‘aesthetic’ accounts of musical value described in the international literature are less prominent in their accounts of their work. Rather, these teachers appeared to be constantly balancing claims for curricular space from competing influences which many of them see as equally valid. The interaction of particular dimensions from various discourses and fields can exert an influence that is varied from school to school, as teachers exercise their autonomy as recontextualising agents within the pedagogic recontextualising field (Bernstein, 1990). The autonomy experienced by the teachers in these interactions is also a source of tension, as they seek to balance the influence of competing ideologies concerning both music and teaching. Consequently, the phrase “finding the balance”, which was used early on in the focus group discussion and picked up by nearly all the participants, encapsulates the explanatory accounts of their work:

Teacher A: I like to keep a balance and I’m a bit stubborn in that I’ve been teaching U2 as well as classical stuff.
Teacher B: I work hard to have a balance.

Teacher C: I work pretty hard to keep a balance I think, I try really hard to keep a balance, especially working [in my school] where a lot of students have played classical instruments.

Teacher D: [L]ike most of you, I try to strike a balance but it doesn’t always work.

Initially, this metaphor was used to describe the process of music selection within the curriculum but it became clear that finding the balance was a mechanism for the negotiation and definition of some these teachers’ attempts at balancing the competing discourses within the recontextualising fields. This core concept acknowledges the dialectical nature of music teaching and the challenges regarding musical and educational choice and value.

A further assertion resulting from the discussion was that the majority of teachers involved in this study adapt their personal musical values for the pedagogical context, at least to some degree, even where they have a strong personal connection with a particular musical style. In other words, personal musical values are to some degree challenged by educational values that place the student at the centre of curriculum conception. This provides a strong impetus to include music perceived by students as relevant. Where the level of autonomy for pedagogic recontextualising is strong, teachers have greater flexibility in managing the balance between the competing fields of influence. In other locations, the collective school culture (official knowledge, management, parents) may allow less autonomy for the teacher. As well as these educational influences, there are musical and cultural influences from beyond the school, characterised by an increasing acceptance of relativism in musical value.

This group of teachers seemed less concerned with a dichotomised contestation between high and low culture and more concerned to find a balance between the competing themes of enculturation (transmission) and student-centred learning (transformation). In this way, they were avoiding both the narrow cultural reproduction of neo-conservative traditionalism and the total acquiescence to the preferences of the learner espoused by extreme relativist post-modern theories. As a result, there is the potential for students to partake in music programmes where any tension between classical and popular music is minimised:

Teacher B: I have never perceived that tension from a student or a parent and, because I never have, I feel that I’ve done my job making their learning valid. I don’t think you would find a student who would say that I think that pop music is stink or classical music is stink or that jazz is stink.

Limitations of the Research

This modest exploratory pilot study, based on a single focus group session, did not research teacher practices in action but rather it explored espoused approaches to curriculum, and applied Bernstein’s theoretical concept of recontextualisation. Therefore, the findings and assertions presented are primarily supported by theoretical constructs applied to limited data. Further investigation and observation is required to explore more fully and in greater depth, the many emergent lines of enquiry, such as what different teachers mean by a balanced curriculum, and what such a curriculum might look like in interaction, and exactly what constitutes “valid learning” and how this is balanced with “validating their learning” and
“teaching to our strengths”. Dialectical oppositions are ongoing and unavoidable as teachers attempt to respond to the changing values of society at large, and as they attempt to find ways to accommodate varying views of culture and learning without uncritically replacing one ideology with another. Moreover, the contradictions inherent in these competing influences on curriculum realisation may become an energising force for the development of extended, rather than restricted, forms of professionalism, as teachers respond to challenges and make decisions concerning musical and educational knowledge and value.

The negotiations and interactions involved in curriculum realisation are the result of a complex web of influences. Present within this web of interaction and recontextualisation is the potential for dialogue and change, as teachers and students interact with the intangible power of music itself. Through the increased validation of student experience, a space may be opened up whereby exchanges of cultural meaning and values are more likely between present and past, popular and classical, teacher and student. Transformation may occur for the teacher as much as for the student.

As ‘recontextualising agents,’ teachers have the potential to be curriculum constructors in partnership with their students, rather than technocratic agents of reproduction. The challenge for teachers is to find a balance that satisfies both the needs of their students and their own need to find value in what it is they can offer as teachers of music.

Notes

[1] Nevertheless, many commentators would argue that commercial values permeate contemporary classical cultural and educational fields as well.

2 Within the context of this study, the term popular, while acknowledged as culturally and historically fluid, is broadly defined as music that derives its essential stylistic characteristics from the developments of twentieth century popular songs and rock and roll and which is widely accessed by young people through the commercial media. Bowman (2004) suggests that, despite the difficulty with defining such a fluid term, some characteristics are generally agreed, such as mass-mediated, commodity character, broad appeal, informal, and youth centred.

3 The author acknowledges that this distinction may be artificial in practice, given the diverse cultural pluralism and simultaneous affinities exhibited by musical consumers in recent times; nevertheless these polarities are used as a mechanism for initiating discussion surrounding changing musical meanings within educational knowledge.

4 Generation and distribution include determining what classes of knowledge are legitimised for transmission to whom and by whom, recontextualisation is the process of how specific discourses are recontextualised at official and local levels and evaluation includes the monitoring of the valid acquisition of legitimate knowledge.

5 In music, these strands are: Understanding the arts in context, Developing practical knowledge, Developing ideas and Communicating and interpreting.
6 Moderation involves schools submitting samples of graded work to the external qualifications authority in New Zealand (NZQA) for checking on an annual basis.

7 Curricula from other countries also influence the realisation of local formal and informal discourses. Curriculum writers are required by the Ministry of Education to scope globally, while individual teachers assimilate influences from international experiences and influences.

8 The term is pejorative New Zealand slang, usually used to describe a person from a rough background, lacking education.

9 The fact that it remains a requirement to complete a score analysis paper, supplementing practical performance or composition evidence, to achieve a scholarship award in the New Zealand school qualifications system is evidence of the lingering discomfort associated with the acceptance of practical knowledge over abstract knowledge.

10 NCEA is the National Certificate of Education Achievement. This national qualification spans the last three years of secondary education.

11 In New Zealand, most students receive a compulsory course of ‘core’ music in their first year of high school. In the remaining years, students elect into a specialist course taught by one teacher that generally comprises a mixture of performance (group and solo), composition, aural, score reading and study of music works. There is a high degree of flexibility available within this general structure, with no nationally prescribed works for study.

References


Biography

Graham McPhail

Graham McPhail is currently undertaking doctoral studies in the School of Critical Studies in Education, Faculty of Education, University of Auckland. He was for 17 years Director of Music at St Cuthbert’s College in Auckland and he is currently the National Moderator for secondary school music with the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). He is also a violinist and president of the New Zealand Suzuki Institute.