Investigating the impact of gender and culture on the Australian instrumental music teaching and learning context

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact that both gender and culture have on teaching and learning processes and structures in the Australian instrumental music context. It focuses on relevant issues pertaining to gender and culture in regard to social constructions and influence. Many (Barton, 2004; Campbell, 1992; Green, 1988; Harrison, 2003; Nettl, 1998; Shepard and Wicke, 1997) have noted the presence of social and cultural influence in music education contexts and believe that an understanding and acknowledgement of these are necessary in order for successful outcomes to be gained. However, little is actually known about the specific function that both gender and culture play in guiding how music teachers perceive their practice in the instrumental or studio context. Zhukov (1999) notes that research into instrumental music teaching is in its infancy and makes a concerted call for more research in this area. This paper attempts to do this by investigating how gender and culture impact on the instrumental music teaching and learning context. Consequently, the paper will highlight the background of both researchers' work and then present a literature review that explores what others have said in regard to gender and culture and the role they have in the music teaching and learning environment. It will then outline two case studies that investigated specifically the impact of these phenomena on the Australian instrumental music teaching and learning context. It will finally discuss implications that arose from the data for the contemporary music education context generally.

Introduction

This paper explores the impact that both gender and culture have on teaching and learning processes and structures in the Australian instrumental music context. There has been much discourse in the research arena where many have noted the influence that both social and cultural aspects have on the music teaching and learning context (Elliott, 1995; Jorgensen, 2003; Merriam, 1964; Small, 1977). Merriam (1964) for example states that "concepts and behaviours must be learned, for culture as a whole is learned behaviour, and each culture shapes the learning

process to accord with its own ideals and values" (p.145). More recently, Fausto-Sterling (1995) believes that "behaviours are learned and that no individual is free from societal influence".

How then do the concepts of gender and culture impact on the instrumental music teaching and learning context? This is what this paper attempts to determine.

Background and Literature Review

The Influence of Gender on the music teaching and learning context

Through a study conducted by Harrison (2003) it is evident that there is little doubt that a stereotypical bias exists in music. Music is perceived as feminine and as such does not enjoy high status. Within music there is a hierarchy of acceptable activities. Soft, gentle music is shunned and males avoid the instruments on which such music is performed: flute, clarinet, violin and singing. Males tended to restrict themselves to a relatively small group of instruments: drums and lower brass were popular choices. Females' choices range more freely across a wider range of instruments and there was clear evidence that females were also assuming musical roles traditionally associated with males. More recently the engagement of boys in playing the so-called feminine musical instruments has been thoroughly investigated (Harrison 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005, Hall 2004, 2005 and Collins 2005).

Stereotyping is therefore perceived as a basis for gendered participation in music. Green (1997), Hanley (1998) and Conway (2000, pp. 8-9) interviewed students and teachers regarding the gendering of instruments. Perhaps of most importance in relation this research was that all students who played a cross-gendered instrument talked about having to deal with some questioning about their choice. Green (1993, p.248) commenting on how both boys and girls are disadvantaged by the gender order stated:

Both boys and girls tended to restrict themselves or find themselves restricted to certain musical activities for fear of intruding into the other sex's territory, where they may have been accused of some sort of musical transvestism.

In regard to education teachers were found to be a major influence in the choice of instrument and in maintaining interest in music making and are therefore major agents for change. In the field of Gender Research in Music Education, a significant body of recent research has focussed on the role of the music teacher (Adler 2001; Delzell and Leppla 1991; Sang 1992; Lamb 1993; Hanley 1998; Lautzenhauzer 1993, Green 1997 Harrison 2004, 2005 and Mizener 1993). Ten years ago, Golombok and Fivush (1994, p.36) reflected that "despite efforts to break down stereotypes, little has changed in the last 30 – 40 years."

The Influence of Culture on the music teaching and learning context

The way that people teach music can tell us a great deal about the cultural context in which the teaching takes place. Campbell (1991, p. 113) argues further that "the style and purpose of music in a society greatly affects its manner of acquisition, teaching techniques and learning strategies". When comparing both formal and informal teaching and learning contexts Barton (2003) found that culture influenced not only methods of teaching but the context itself.

Merriam (1964, p. 146) discusses the difference between formal and informal learning environments where more restrictive formal learning occurs in places such as schools and informal learning situations refer to more unstructured learning spaces where socialisation takes place. Further, Ellis' (1985, p. 38) distinction between 'western' or more formal and informal learning environments concerns the style of learning whether linear and constrained or cyclic and more holistic in nature.

In recent times, a combination of ethnomusicological and educational theory (Andersen, 1991; Campbell, 1996; Volk, 1998) has tried to address the concept of a more "contextual approach" (Walker, 1998 and 2001) to music teaching and learning. While this may be the case, a number of authors (Leong, 1999; Stowasser, 1997; Walker, 2001) have continued to acknowledge the tendency of music education practices to reflect Western values and conceptions of music.

Expanding this, Shankar (1969) and Glickman (1996) believe that the methods and resources used to teach music from cultures, which are predominantly aural/oral ones, by requiring students to read and write music from these cultures, loses the important meaning behind such musical cultures. Smith (1998) agrees that this focus ultimately limits students' learning experiences, especially if they are from culturally diverse backgrounds. With this view in mind, a number of intercultural approaches to music education have been offered in the literature (Boyce-Tillman, 1996; Rose, 1995; Smith, 1998; Walker, 1996) with many still acknowledging the need for

further research.

To this end, Walker (1996) suggests a more contextual approach to music education where the socio-cultural meaning behind particular 'musics' becomes the focus, rather than the meaning it may provide to the individual in the form of its contribution to the listener's emotional response. Walker (2001, p. 13) consolidates this framework later.

For a theory of music to underpin a philosophy of music education, it must, I argue, deal in what a culture believes music is and how music functions within the culture. A study of music in any culture requires no less than a thorough immersion into the value systems of that culture.

Methodology

The presentation of the following two case studies provides multiple lenses on the music teaching and learning context. The data provided highlights a number of approaches and values the input of various stakeholders such as students, teachers, past-students and community members; allowing the research to engender opinion from a broad range.

Case Study A - Gender

The author undertook a research project that examines the gendered nature of music in Australian schools. A number of case studies were undertaken of successful school musicians who subsequently undertook further study in music. This work is based on elements of research structure employed by Green (1993) and Hanley (1998). One of the main aims of this aspect of the research is to investigate further the reasons for gendered instrument choice.

The data collection for this project was almost entirely undertaken via email. Using email provided the researcher with access to a wide variety of subjects across a broad geographical range. As there was no fixed schedule of questions, the respondents were invited to talk in their own words about their experiences as students.

Case Study B - Culture

A comparative study was carried out to explore how culture is reflected in music teaching practices. A number of strategies were employed in the collection of data to gain a picture of

instrumental music teaching practices. Firstly, journals were kept that documented observations made in the learning situations. In each of the journal entries the ethnographic setting was described, the number of students in attendance noted, and the processes used by the teacher to transmit knowledge were recorded. Music content was also dictated and/or transcribed using appropriate notational systems where necessary. In addition, tape recordings of the events were made where permission was given by the teachers so as to provide an additional mechanism for confirming the accuracy of observations.

As such five teachers of Karnatic (south Indian) music were compared with five teachers who taught in the Queensland instrumental music context. For the purpose of this paper however, the cultural influence on the Western teachers from the Queensland instrumental music context will only be discussed.

Results

Influence of gender on the instrumental music context

The context of the school is significant in the way in which gender is enacted in the learning environment. Many subjects from this study gave positive responses in respect of their experiences of school music. For some the positive role music played in the culture of the school was significant. Further, evidence that a hierarchy exists among musical activities was discovered. An example of this was where subject 13 stated that "the school fostered many extra curricular activities and because of competition successes, interstate tours and supportive music staff music became one of the higher priorities within the school context".

Two other subjects conversely registered an opposite point of view - "The school I went to was definitely not set up with people like me in mind. The school was so big that (it's [sic] students) would attempt to pull anything different into that 'normal' area" (Subject 16); and: "My school wasn't a place for young male singers" (Subject 1).

Perhaps the most significant role in relation to the creation of a school context is that of the teachers. Many subjects commented on the contribution of teachers to their perseverance with music. Two subjects noted the importance of having strong relationships with the individual teacher, the class music teacher and/or the music director. Subject 1 notes that competence as well as enthusiasm was relevant and an important feature in music teaching and learning contexts.

The subject of relational attributes involved comments that some staff actively discouraged involvement in music. This would appear to correlate with indications of Hillier et al. (1998), Skelton (1996) and Mac An Ghaill (1994) who indicated that staff could assist in entrenching stereotypical views of masculinity by complacency or more vigorous means.

For Subjects 20 and 19, it was purely the teachers who were responsible for bullying: Subject 19 for example commented that: "Overall I wasn't given a tough time about being a musician by anyone at school (except for the usual teacher digs about throwing my life away)". Music teachers were seen to inadvertently discourage students in the early stages discussed above. An insensitive music teacher, it was found by Higgins (1999, p.20) could subject a boy to the "risk of humiliation" for a seemingly insignificant event, like cracking on a note when singing or squeaking on a clarinet.

The possibility of the student becoming better than the teacher is one some music teachers face in the execution of their duties. In music it is often apparent at a relatively young age. In this instance, it may only be Subject 16's interpretation of the situation, but there is little doubt the problem exists and could conceivably be enabled through the abuse of power found in bullying.

Certain teachers were known in Mac An Ghaill's (1994) study to have a problem with students who don't participate in competitive sport. They preferred the "yobbo" footballers. They'd be tough with them, at the same time passing on the "boys will be boys" code. Hillier et al. (1998) referred to the compliance of teachers with this image and the contribution it makes to the construction of masculinity by commenting on the cases of homophobic abuse that occurred with the knowledge of teachers and other school authorities.

Influence of culture on the instrumental music context

Culture influenced the music teachers studied in a number of ways: on the teachers themselves; on the methods of teaching and modes of communication used; and on the surrounding context in which they taught. For the purpose of this paper the third concept will be discussed.

Context

In the main, the reason why the Queensland instrumental teachers taught music was for a source of income whether it was the only source or as a second job. One of the teacher's main professions for example, was performing; however, he felt that the need to earn more money through teaching was necessary. Further for three of the teachers, teaching became the only option for income as they indicated that there was limited need for professional musicians in full-time employment therefore this led them to teach for an income. Therefore, the driving monetary force behind the teachers' employment reflects the economic pressure placed upon people working and living in Australia. Further, despite the teachers appreciating their experience in music and in the teaching and learning environment, they all indicated their desire to do things other than teach.

The relationship between students and teachers in the Queensland instrumental music environments was an important issue. This varied according to the age of the student, numbers participating and confidence, expectations and style of the teachers themselves. With a number of the teaching environments recognition of the teacher as having more knowledge was expected in the form of respect and remuneration, yet the teachers often complained that this was not the case. In each of these learning environments reliable payment was an important concern of the teachers. Three of the teachers complained about parents not paying on time. Another concern arising from this context was the fact that students' attitudes towards learning were deteriorating. Many of the teachers felt that it was the parents' choice for their child to learn music and although they paid money (in fees and/or accessories) for the privilege, the teachers were still dissatisfied with the students' amount of practise and parental support generally.

In regard to the teaching and learning environment, most of the teachers said that they tried to create an enjoyable situation for their students to learn in. The relationship between student and teacher was one showing mutual respect and more of an equal understanding. Being able to develop this, they believed, highlighted qualities of a 'good' teacher. This was attributed to the nature of the student in the Queensland context with the teachers saying that if the students are not enjoying learning they will not continue their involvement.

Alongside the cost of the lessons payment for set tutor books and various accessories, such as strings and reeds, are required in these contexts. For more advanced students' texts (sometimes being just one piece of music) could cost between twenty and fifty dollars. The participation in external examinations with either the Australian Music Examinations Board or Trinity College

Association was also an aspect accepted by the teacher, student and parents and considered a natural progression and indicator of skill level, when learning music. These combined makes learning an instrument in this situation a costly exercise for parents and may not be an option for students who could not afford the privilege.

Conclusion and Implications for Contemporary Practice

It is argued that an understanding of the impact of both culture and gender on teaching and learning processes is essential. This is particularly pertinent in the contemporary music education context. It has been strongly evident in the literature that when educators consider such issues it is more likely that student's needs are met. It has also been highlighted that students of music have grappled with restraints relating to gender stereotyping as well as assumptions about cultural and social influence. Further, it has been shown that engaging in the study of music places many expectations on both students and teachers. It was found in the study by Harrison that assumptions made in relation to gender were extremely prevalent. Aspects such as instrument selection, expectations in regard to performance and generally approach and attitude by schools, individuals and community were impacted upon by gender stereotypes.

In Barton's investigation of teachers and students in context, it was shown that culture influences not only the teaching processes but the learning environment greatly. Similar to Harrisons' outcomes, expectation as a result of cultural restrictions on both the students and teachers were common. Of most note is the elitist nature prevalent in instrumental music environments. This is evident through the cost of learning an instrument; the concept that to learn an instrument is delegated only to those considered capable; that the instruments offered are those of a 'western' orchestral nature; and the music selection in lessons tended to be restricted to 'western' repertoire.

Studies such as these provide vital information about music teaching and learning. It is argued that an acknowledgement and understanding of how both gender and culture affect the approaches and attitudes of teacher, students and community alike, is increased by those involved in the music education arena. The implications of this study are more than about the increase in awareness. Philosophy without practice has no meaning and therefore concrete strategies for improving awareness and practice of diversity and inclusion are essential. Consequently, it is suggested that intensive professional development of teachers and parents be encouraged,

addressing pre-service teacher education programs be considered, and encouraging professional and community organisations to become politically active in these expectations. Only then can both cultural and social stereotypes and restrictive constructs start to be deconstructed in the music education context.

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