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"I Will Count My Sheep" Creativity and the "Everyday Life Project"

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“I will count my sheep” Creativity and the “Everyday Life Project”¹

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Abstract



This article reports on a project called, *Everyday life as a perspective on music education in the classroom*.² Part of this project involved the construction of texts and lyrics by a group of students from year 5, in weekly music lessons at a regular primary school from Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul State, Brazil. The article describes the response of students to an illustrated musical canon, and how students approached the activities of listening, execution, and composition. The findings of this project suggest that by using a multiliteracy framework, educators can demystify examples of musical ability and facilitate critical musical ability in students by incorporating scenes from student’s everyday life.

1. Music Education in this context: a brief summary

We start this paper with a description of the site where the research project was undertaken and discuss how the context has influenced this study. This text is part of the project, *Music education and everyday life: theoretical conceptions and practices* and was conducted in a private Primary and High School in the city of Porto Alegre, in Rio Grande do Sul State, Brazil. The school is located in a middle class area and enrolls approximately 1000 students from kindergarten through the final year of high school, Year 11.

The music education of students in this school involves weekly lessons as part of the regular curriculum, which is delivered by teachers who are music education specialists. Although art and music have defined places within the school curriculum, their position is peripheral. When compared to other schools in the locality, this is a relatively privileged school. Class sizes are small and there are appropriate resources

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their position is peripheral. When compared to other schools in the locality, this is a relatively privileged school. Class sizes are small and there are appropriate resources for music education, such as a music room and some musical instruments: most public schools in Brazil would lack even these resources. For the greater part, Brazilian schools lack the material resources and the human and physical infrastructure to offer a dynamic music education as part of the curriculum. Students, teachers and parents subsequently relegate music to the margins of schoolwork. It is usually ‘showcased’ in an end of year Christmas performance and on Parent Days. Thus, despite a popular international image of Brazil as a nation where music synergies abound, the status of music in the formal education system remains low.

We set out to examine how music activities can be shifted from the day-to-day lives of students and teachers into the classroom. To this end, this project inquired: How do individuals articulate their musical preferences? How do these preferences change over the course of their lives?

Cook (1998) points that:

Every music is different, but every music is music too. There is a level at which you can talk of ‘music’, but it isn’t the ABC level. To talk about music in general is to talk about what music means – and more basically, how it is (how it can be) that music operates as an agent of meaning (p. vi).

Using early musical socialisation of music teachers as a starting point, we explore how the meanings surrounding music are constructed, and how these meanings shape the musical subject. The role of music in teachers’ everyday lives, their preferences, and how these change are thus explored.

In this connection, concerns of the Mayday Group, such as the recommendation “to affirm the central importance of musical participation in human life and, thus, the value of music in the general education of all people” resonate with

some central concerns of our group, *Music Education and Everyday Life*. Both groups raise questions related to musical experiences acquired in other spaces and its relation to the school. *The Everyday Life Group* also deals with communication technologies and new musical practices established in the field of music education.

2. Mapping the Theoretical Terrain

The *Music Education and Everyday Life Project* (MELP) of which this study is a part, created opportunities for a group of Brazilian music teachers (from Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul State) who teach from kindergarten to university level to be part of a cooperative learning circle. The teachers met to discuss articles of interest, to explore their own musical socialisation, and how these experiences articulated with music in their everyday and professional lives. This project attempted to establish links between theory, the emergent ideas of students from classrooms, and media discourses such as TV. Also examined were issues such as the existing music curriculum, types of classroom activities that could be used, and ways to experiment with style, beats, sounds, and possible fusions that could extend our musical repertoire. The group was founded in 1995 by Dr. Jusamara Souza, our coordinator from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, and is still researching topics in music education, in a diversity of contexts. Today, thirteen music educators are involved in the group.

The work of Heller (1982), Souza (2000), Tedesco (1999), DeNora (2000) and Pais (2003) was used to inform major points highlighted in this paper. For example, Heller's (1982) research concerning the 'everyday' conception argues that "everyday life is the life of every man and the life of the whole man" and her foundation is everyday language and objects and their use, such as costumes.

According to Souza (2000), a Brazilian music teacher and the research coordinator of this project, the musical experiences of the students can be related to or associated with their social experiences of the world and the politics of everyday life

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by articulating the social and cultural reality of children and adolescents in classroom music education. Sousa emphasizes aspects of everyday life as a field for social analysis, and points out that in all the theories of everyday life we can find some points of convergence.

In her discussion of music in everyday life, DeNora (2000) notes that:

Music is not a merely a ‘meaningful’ or ‘communicative’ medium. It does much more than convey signification through non-verbal means. At the level of daily life, music is power. It is implicated in every dimension of social agency. Music may influence how people compose their bodies, how they conduct themselves, how they experience the passage of time (p.17).

Musical activities at school, starting from early childhood, can be related, then, to social and cultural aspects of children’s everyday lives. Early music socialization can thus affect and give teachers confidence to innovate and to inspire their pupils through musical activities.

Stellaccio (1997) has coined the term ‘culturally relational’, to describe and emphasise the importance of musical consciousness, musical memory, and connectivity with the everyday lives of both teachers and students. Students and teachers both need to “appreciate the role of music in their own lives, and at the same time, understand how music is valued and functions as a world wide phenomenon” (p.117). A similar standpoint is offered by Fonterrada (1997), who encourages music educators to extend the activity of listening to different landscapes. Expanding composer R. Murray Schafer’s metaphor of opening ears to the auditory realm, Fonterrada cajoles us accordingly:

Open! Open your ears for the existing sounds, the missing ones, the dreamed, the fruition...for the everyday sounds, for the city, the country, the machines, the animals, the body, the voice...Open your ears for the sounds of life” (p.10).

Similarly, Souza (2000) has highlighted the importance of connecting the reality of children's lives with the music classroom. It is this experience of everyday life that holds the key to creating a phenomenological space for children's musical creativity and development.

Bennett's (2000) work on youth also offers useful perspectives for this study by identifying adolescence as a key juncture for the development of musical identities. In this respect, music educators have significant opportunities for using music as a means of constructing and consolidating social groups.

The New London Group (2000), Luke and Luke (2000), Luke (2000) and Durrant and Green (2000) offer further research on and discussion of such matters. These authors describe the *multiliteracy* involved in constructing and consolidating social groups as multidimensional and plural, and as functioning socially in a diversity of contexts. The concept of literacy pedagogy used in the present study is related to a multiplicity of discourses, articulated in connection with globalized societies and the multiplicity of information and multimedia technologies (The New London Group, 2000). The New London Group involves ten educators, "who met for a week in September 1994 in New London, New Hampshire, in the United States, to discuss the state of literacy pedagogy (Cazden, Courtney, Cope et al; 1996)." The group discussed such questions as the challenge of cultural and linguistic diversity, pedagogical tensions between immersion and explicit models of teaching.

3.a The Project

The project's aim was to develop music literacy and creativity through the weekly music lessons of three classes of Year 5 children. For this article, we relate the process and results of one of the three classes, including a total of 27 students aged between 10 and 12 years who participated in this study. The general music programme for students of this age group, as organized by the school's music teachers, includes

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activities such as exploring and analysing regular and irregular rhythms, different sounds and textures, working with listening, improvisation, and composition of a 'jingle'. Additionally, students learned about the construction of musical instruments, sang, played instruments, and learned multiple ways of reading and writing musical codes, ranging from the 'traditional' to the 'analogue'.

An important component of this project was to work with the children in composition, linking some aspects of music education, literacy and creativity, using a canon in three parts - structured as A, B, C – having a 3/4 meter. The original lyrics of the canon were in Spanish, but we decided to work only with the textless melody and a picture which features a shepherd with a flock of sheep set against a background of mountains—an image familiar to students everyday lives. It was hoped that this artwork might serve as an inspiration for using images to inspire sounds. The intention was to use concepts from a multiliteracy framework to analyse how the students composed the lyrics, in particular, their understanding of text analysis, poetry, and rhythm.

3.b What was done in the classroom

To introduce the canon to the class the melody was played using a soprano recorder while the students listened. Each part of the song was sung and explored along such lines as:

- Identifying the musical meter, with a range of six notes from do to la, practicing the intervals and the melodic movements, and representing the shape of melody with hand gestures.
- Singing using the names of the notes, taking turns with different groups of students, and accompanying it with percussion instruments.
- Playing the melody many times on the soprano recorder and xylophone.
- Performing melodic question/answer dialogues using parts of the melody.

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- Executing the canon, stopping at different notes and prompting students to mark these stops in their paper; then playing it while having the students clap their hands to identify the notes they previously marked.

These exercises were intended to familiarise the students with the canon, a necessary step that preceded the creation of their own lyrics for it. By providing students with a piece of music, accompanied with an illustration, the aim was to stimulate their imagination so that they could associate sound with image. This association has been described by Almeida (1994) who emphasized that we can hear the sounds and also visualize the forms, movements and colours in music (p. 19). This multiliteracy framework of sounds and images was used as described by the New London Group (2000):

Now becoming increasingly important are modes of meaning other than Linguistic modes, including Visual meanings (images, pages layouts, screen formats); Audio meanings (music sound effects); Gestural meanings (body language, sensuality); Spatial meanings (the meanings of environmental spaces, architectural spaces); and Multimode meanings (p.28).

3.c Students working with peers

The students explored the melody over the course of two classes and, later, started creating lyrics by working either in small groups or individually. Most students preferred to work in small groups with friends and colleagues. Concerning their preference for small groups, as Jeandot (1990) commented, “after 11 years old, their enthusiasm is the most characteristic trace and they are attracted by collective tasks and assessments” (p.64). There was no group of a mixed gender. Green (1997) argues:

Gender enters the delineation of the music with which girls and boys are associated, and from there gets inside the very listening experiences, and indeed the very performance experience, of pupils and of teachers (p.192).

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In the third lesson, the groups worked on lyrics to present and sing to their classmates. The melody was played again, part-by-part, repeating the entire canon many times. At the end of the class, all the students had almost finished creating their lyrics and many had already been sung to their peers. With the fourth lesson, students took turns singing and recording their versions of the canon. After each performance and presentation, the students applauded and then critiqued the works. This offered the opportunity to share their different performances, texts and ideas about the same melody, and to hear student's comments and suggestions.

This work involved some aspects of musical listening/analysis, vocal execution, and composition with the intention of diversifying the subjects and exploring many possibilities for doing this. Ideas from the cultural and sociological fields were linked with arguments by Froelich and Paul (1997):

Today, schools are shifting away from the product driven concept of learning as information toward a process oriented concept of learning as reflective thinking. In music this means understanding the value of *doing* music for its own sake and supporting the student's active engagement in music study, regardless of the skill level at which such engagement takes place (p.vi).

Although music in the regular curriculum at the school has the classes separated into two small groups, called A and B, in the final performance, recording, listening and evaluating, A and B groups were gathered together as a kind of 'grand finale' that valorised their works.

4. Results

On analysing the results of students' creative efforts, different types of composition and creativity emerged:

- A direct relationship was observed between the lyrics and the structure of the melody (i.e., following the original melody to create the lyrics, with words and syllables for each sound; e.g., Example D1):

Today I am going to work, to work
And my cattle I will take care, will take care
Sun, sun, sun, sun, sun, sun.

- A mixture of improvisation and revising the original melody, (i.e., changing parts of the original rhythm and adding new pitches to the canon; e.g., Examples D2, D4 and D10):

I will dance, jump and sing with the sheep
The wolf is bad, too bad and eats sheep
The bad wolf is coming.

- An articulation between the theme of the illustration and the lyrics (i.e., the visual was very influential because twelve of the works presented lyrics with the words shepherd/sheep/mountains and only one chose another subject ‘unrelated’ to the picture; e.g., Example D11):

At this day with much gladness, with much gladness
Blowed, blowed one nice melody
Do, do, re, re, do, do.

- An interpretative, ‘up to date’ reading (i.e. using ideas from the literacy studies and the textual analysis fields; e.g., Example D8):

It was a day counting the sheep; I have already counted one thousand
They are too big and we counted
I made coats from the sheep

- A linking with an ‘idyllic world’, involving both perception and contemplation, (i.e., creating a world of *dreams and ideas*):

In this ranch with many sheep. We raised sheep.

They are in the mountain so healthy
One, two, three sheep.

Today the daylight he sun is streaking (Yes,)
The shepherd is counting sheep on the hill
One, two, three, five, six.

5. Conclusions

The overall lesson not only involved creating and presenting their own works, and critiquing the works of their peers, it also included students' oral evaluations of the lyric-creating activity. Students' suggestions were compiled in order to develop other options for complementing this activity with other classes in the next year.

The analysis of students' creations incorporated multiliteracy studies, which offer both a theoretical and methodological basis for examining the multifaceted nature of such music activities; for example, multiple styles, revision of lyrics, parodies, creation of jingles, and critical analysis all emerged in the classroom. This project has opened new possibilities concerning how we might work with children to stimulate their imagination and interest in music. Such new possibilities provide opportunities to examine how groups of children compose lyrics, and how they construct musical subjects and texts. For example, such possibilities might include:

- choosing a different melody for each group to create new lyrics;
- choosing the same melody for all the students, but without an artwork, or perhaps with a different artwork;
- choosing a melody or a subject with the class, for example from their everyday lives, to be the theme of the lyrics;
- asking each student to bring a favourite song and to communicate the meaning of the lyrics to the class;
- sharing listening experiences and discussing their meanings afterwards.

Such alternatives would allow students to articulate their musical choices and tastes with their musical identities (Torres, 2003). Hudak (1999) described how social communities depend on music in terms of shared and self-interests, including musical identities. Furthermore, Luke (1997) emphasised the inclusion of texts from everyday life:

I believe that if schooling refuses to deal with the texts of everyday life – which include media and school texts – then educators will indeed separate, not bridge, the experiential and knowledge gap between both teacher and students “aliens” (p.47).

The perspectives and approaches to education will change depending on the context of the class, and the interest and diversity of students and teachers. The following perspective from The New London Group (2000, p.30), though brief, offers much food for thought :

Our view of mind, society and learning is based on the assumption that the human mind works is embodied, situated and social. That is, human knowledge is embedded in social, cultural and material contexts.

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Notes

¹ The Everyday Life Music Project was organized and conducted by Professor Jusamara Souza.

² *The Group of Studies and Research on Everyday Life and Music Education* is part of the Post Graduation Program in Music (Master and PhD) of The Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul/Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), and is coordinated by Prof. Dr. Jusamara Souza. Created in 1995, initially the *Group* consisted of two music teachers, Cecilia A. Torres and Silvia Nunes Ramos, who were invited to integrate a research project financed by The National Research

Council/Conselho Nacional de Pesquisas (CNPq), the theme of which was: “The everyday life as a perspective for music class: conceptions and practical examples”. This project lasted two years and was finished in 1997. Since then, other teachers and post graduation students were incorporated, and today the *Group* has a total of thirteen participants. Our search has been focused on describing the musical pedagogic phenomenon, each time with methodologies more perfected and particular to this area. Our concern has been to propose a music pedagogy coherent with reality, with constant updating. The project has been constructed in a collective way over these years, always with the concern to articulate the situations of life and readings and discussions that are conducted by all in the *Group*. As our next step, our project is to offer courses for music teachers and to publish papers with didactic contents that have the everyday life theme as their focus.

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