

Improving teacher confidence – evaluation of a pilot music professional development program for primary teachers

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Abstract

Good musical education has been shown to have benefits across the curriculum but its delivery in schools is still extremely variable. Part of the problem is that many primary teachers lack skills and/or confidence to offer engaging music programs. In an attempt to find possible solutions to this problem we ran a pilot program of a short series of professional development workshops and evaluated their impact on the participants. The five, hour and a half workshops covered most of the primary music curriculum but focused on singing and composition, as areas that are integral to the curriculum and in the case of composition the area of most trepidation amongst teachers. After the workshops we discovered noticeable improvements in confidence to deliver music programs in all areas but particularly in composition, probably mostly due to participants becoming aware of simple yet effective activities they could use. Some participants successfully tried out workshop ideas in their classrooms, while attending the workshops, suggesting that a close relationship between learning and implementation will enhance the learning experience. The pilot program demonstrated that even comparatively short programs can be effective and provided some indications of useful strategies for delivering supportive and efficacious programs and potentially useful content and resources.

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While there is increasing evidence of the benefits of good musical education across the curriculum the situation with regard to its delivery in schools is still extremely variable. Private schools often, though not always, provide specialist teachers in primary years. But where there is no systemic provision for specialist music teachers, for instance in government primary schools in New South Wales (NSW), music education depends on the skills, knowledge and confidence of generalist classroom teachers. In some cases these do an excellent job but in other cases there is considerable room for improvement, which could

be seen as creating a significant equity issue for students, with some students, simply because of the skill sets of the teachers at their schools, or the way staffing is managed, receiving very little of the concomitant benefits of good music education (Brasche & Thorn, 2016).

The amount of time dedicated to music in pre-services courses is declining significantly (Thorn & Brasche, 2015) with some courses including only a single unit that covers five creative arts subjects: Music, Dance, Drama, Visual Arts and Media Arts. Western Sydney University, for instance covers these with six 2 hour lectures plus a 1 hour introductory

online lecture and six 2 hour tutorials plus one hour for face-to-face presentations (Western Sydney University, 2017) which means only four to eight contact hours of music, as compared to at least 135 contact hours in 1951 at the Armidale Teacher's College (Armidale Teachers College, 1951). Even the better cases, where four creative arts are covered in two units, provide quite limited scope, maybe only 12 contact hours, for developing music related skills, knowledge and confidence. Unless the pre-service teachers already have a good musical background it is difficult to expect much skill development in that time and programs focus on specific activities and developing the confidence to try them out in the classroom. About a third of teachers play a musical instrument, a figure that matches that of the general population (Thorn & Brasche, 2015; Schippers, 2007), but that does not mean that all of these feel confident about performing on that instrument or teaching music in the classroom. Those without a musical instrument are also handicapped by lacking a secure background in music theory, and this will also affect confidence. Music has been identified as the subject where teachers feel least confident (Alter, Hays & O'Hara, 2009) and a consequence of this is that it often becomes an activity that is treated cursorily or ignored despite being an integral part of the curriculum.

What can be done about this situation? Is it possible to implement programs that address the shortfalls in skills, knowledge and confidence, and in self-efficacy so that teachers will actually apply these? And what sort of impact might these have? And what might they look like, since there are several possible models that could be used?

One approach that is showing promise is mentoring, such as that being implemented by the National Music Teacher Mentoring Program, where interim research findings are that 'unequivocally, mentoring has significantly improved the confidence and competence of classroom teachers in teaching music' (Barrett, Zhukov, Brown & Welch, n.d.).

Other approaches are also possible, and it is worthwhile looking at alternatives that may be easier to implement and cheaper. Following on

from our previous work related to this topic (Thorn & Brasche, 2015, Brasche & Thorn, 2016) we looked at how targeted professional development could help. Initially we conducted a pilot study around a 7.5 hour professional development course run over five weeks. Two of the weeks were devoted to singing and singing repertoire and identifying and utilising resources, two were devoted largely to composition with some movement linked to listening. Some basic instrumental playing took place in all weeks but was not a specific focus of the program. The final week gave the participants the opportunity to engage in peer teaching in any area that had been included. The program aimed to cover aspects of each key curriculum element (singing, instruments, movement, organising sounds and listening). Singing was chosen as a focus area because of its importance as a fundamental musical skill, and one that can be practiced anywhere without need for equipment. Composition was chosen because of the importance of developing creativity, which has been identified as identified as a key employment skill by the World Economic Forum (2016), in fact as likely to be the third most important skill by 2020. Also our previous research indicated that it was the area of music where teachers felt least confident and were consequently least likely to teach (Thorn & Brasche, 2015).

Participants were surveyed before and after the program to assess what impact the program had had. Because of the small numbers involved all participants who completed the program were included in the data. For the pilot program a simple written survey, mostly consisting of rating questions, was considered to be the most effective and least intrusive method of collecting data, but this was supplemented by observation (aided by video recording of the sessions) and informal discussions. Participation was voluntary and all data collected complied with ethical jurisdictions determined by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans and

internal University of New England Human Research Ethics protocols.

Background to pilot study

Armidale is a town of about 23,000 people in northern NSW. It has a university and previously had a teachers' college that amalgamated with the university in 1988, a TAFE college, a Regional Conservatorium, three K-12 independent schools, one 3-12 independent school, two government high schools, a Catholic high school, a Catholic primary school, a K-8 Steiner school, one independent K-6 primary and six government primary schools in town as well as a number in surrounding villages. Music is an important part of the cultural life and is well supported and resourced in the independent schools, who do employ music specialists in primary schools. Students at independent schools therefore receive regular classroom music from specialists as well as access to extensive extra-curricular opportunities. The situation in government primary schools, however, is variable, with regard to both staffing and resources, and often dependent upon the presence (or not) in the school of skilled and dedicated teachers. A good music program in a school can disappear overnight if a single teacher moves or retires. For this reason, we decided to focus our attention on the government sector and only offered the professional development program to government schools. We do however acknowledge that there may also be a need for professional development in music for generalist primary teachers in other sectors.

The program was offered to teachers without charge. It did however take place during the normal school day and was supported enthusiastically by the relevant principals who were happy to provide relief from face to face teaching for the participants. This in itself was an indication of the need for this sort of program. We had 11 participants ranging from early career teachers to those with up to 26 years experience. Most were involved in some creative pursuits, not necessarily music, though

in two cases this was limited to school activities and two listed no creative activities. With regard to music they had a range of starting points in terms of comfort and confidence from the inexperienced to being quite skilled and passionate but in all cases they were interested in developing further skills.

Results

In the Before and After surveys the first part involved rating a number of statements (all phrased positively) on a 7 point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 4=neither agree nor disagree, 7=strongly agree). In this study we have mainly looked at mean ratings for each question, with the mean scores indicating a group tendency in the same terms as the individual responses. It is however sometimes useful to also look at the range of responses. The most revealing results were obtained by comparing the mean scores in the Before and After surveys, where a change of more than one in the mean scores could be considered significant and a change of more than two very significant.

The statements were divided into three categories: Skill Set, Initiative, and Creativity. Because of the small numbers involved some care needs to be taken when assessing the results.

The most obvious result was that for all statements there was an improvement in the mean score between the before and after surveys. Individual responses ranged between 1 or 2 and 7 for most questions. In the Before survey the only question that had a minimum rating of 3 related to confidence in playing simple percussion instruments.

Skill Set

In this section we asked about both musical skills and teaching confidence across several musical areas. The following table shows the mean scores of both Before and After surveys and the difference between them. Changes of over 1.5 are bold.

In this set of statements, the lowest initial mean

Table 1: Changes in basic skill set.

| Skill Set | Before mean | After mean | Difference |
|---|-------------|------------|-------------|
| 1. I have good overall musical skills | 3.7 | 4.8 | +1.1 |
| 2. I am confident singing solo in public | 3.2 | 3.9 | +0.7 |
| 3. I am confident singing in a group in public | 4.5 | 5.9 | +1.4 |
| 4. I am confident teaching singing in the classroom | 4.3 | 5.6 | +1.3 |
| 5. I am confident teaching composition/ organising sound in the classroom | 3.0 | 5.8 | +2.8 |
| 6. I am confident teaching listening in the classroom | 4.4 | 6.0 | +1.6 |
| 7. I am confident teaching movement in the classroom | 3.9 | 5.6 | +1.7 |
| 8. I am confident playing simple percussion instruments (hand drums etc) in the classroom | 4.4 | 6.1 | +1.7 |

rating of 3.0 was given to confidence in teaching composition/organising sounds. This was not surprising and is consistent with previous research (Thorn & Brasche, 2015). What was interesting was that in the After survey this improved by 2.8 to 5.8 (the fourth highest rating). While it is tempting to attribute the improvement to fantastic teaching, it is in fact more likely due to the participants becoming aware of quite simple activities that they could do in the classroom and realising that they could do or facilitate them.

Other areas where there was substantial improvement were: confidence in playing simple percussion (4.4 to 6.1), confidence in teaching movement (3.9 to 5.6), and confidence in teaching listening (4.4 to 6.0). The lowest rate of improvement was for confidence in singing solo in public (3.2 to 3.9). This is not surprising and was certainly not a focus of the program, but confidence in singing in groups (4.5 to 5.9) and singing in the classroom (4.3 to 5.6) both had significant improvements.

Table 2: Changes in initiative

| Initiative | Before mean | After mean | Difference |
|--|-------------|------------|-------------|
| 9. I have a high level of initiative in music classes | 4.4 | 5.0 | 0.6 |
| 10. I am confident in sourcing musical repertoire for the classroom | 3.3 | 5.4 | +2.1 |
| 11. I am confident in finding musical resources for the classroom | 3.3 | 5.4 | +2.1 |
| 12. I am confident in adapting everyday items to be used in music classes. | 3.7 | 5.7 | +2.0 |
| 13. I am confident about being an agent of change in my school | 5.2 | 5.3 | +0.1 |
| 14. I am comfortable with the amount of music currently taking place in my classroom | 3.9 | 5.0 | +1.1 |

Initiative

These statements were related to self efficacy and confidence in generic skills. The aim was to assess these generic skills as they can be applied to classroom music teaching.

In this set of statements there was substantial improvement in three areas, each of which was directly addressed in the program: confidence in sourcing musical repertoire (3.3 to 5.4), confidence in finding musical resources (3.3 to 5.4), and confidence in adapting everyday items for music classes (3.7 to 5.7).

Creativity

These statements focused on individual creativity. As previously mentioned, creativity can be one of the key employability skills that can be developed through music education and through the other creative arts. Developing a creative mind set that can approach problems and situations in new ways is therefore important across all domains and can greatly enhance teaching practice.

Table 3: Changes in creativity

| Creativity | Before mean | After mean | Difference |
|--|-------------|------------|-------------|
| 15. I am a creative person | 4.1 | 5.7 | +1.6 |
| 16. I am confident in producing creative lessons | 4.3 | 5.6 | +1.3 |
| 17. I am involved in creative pursuits outside the classroom | 3.9 | 6.0 | +2.1 |
| 18. I enjoy singing | 5.8 | | |
| 19. I enjoy teaching music in the classroom | 5.4 | | |
| 20. I enjoy integrating music into other learning areas | 5.7 | | |

We did not include the last three questions in the After survey on the grounds that they were likely to remain constant. This may have been a misjudgment.

The program does seem to have given the participants more confidence or awareness of their own creativity with ratings again improving in this area. Having said that, to some extent we were dealing with fairly motivated teachers, who had chosen to participate in the workshop, and who already enjoyed singing (mean rating 5.8) and using music across the curriculum (mean rating 5.7). All except one spontaneously sing at home or alone, though interestingly fewer than half consider themselves to be 'musical'. One participant, who identified themselves as a non-singer, did end up participating enthusiastically, and gained enough confidence in their musical ability to subsequently initiate a marimba group in their school.

Another interesting result was the increase in the number of participants involved in creative pursuits outside the classroom. It is difficult to think of any obvious causal link here, other than the participants simply becoming more aware of creativity and

how fun it can be, but this is certainly an area that deserves future study or monitoring.

Self Perception

These questions focused on self perception in terms of music activities. They were included because of the potential impact that self-image and self perception can have on teacher's willingness to engage in activities outside their comfort zone. They were rated on a three point scale (1 = no, 2 = not sure, 3 = yes), Numbers in the table give percentages in each category.

One interesting result in this section of the survey was that although there was no change in whether or not the participants liked the sound of their singing voice (and more than half didn't) there was less self consciousness about their singing in three of the participants (two moving from being self conscious to not self conscious and one moving to not sure – though this was balanced by two moving from not sure to being more self conscious), almost certainly related to two sessions of singing in a fairly small and supportive group.

Table 4: Changes in self perception.

| Self Perception | Before % | | | After % | | |
|--|----------|----------|-----|---------|----------|-----|
| | No | Not sure | Yes | No | Not sure | Yes |
| 21. Do you like the sound of your singing voice? | 55 | 11 | 33 | 55 | | 44 |
| 22. Do you spontaneously sing when you are at home or alone? | 11 | 11 | 77 | 11 | | 88 |
| 23. Are you self-conscious about your singing? | 22 | 33 | 44 | 44 | 22 | 33 |
| 24. Do you consider yourself to be a musical person | 44 | 22 | 33 | 44 | 11 | 44 |
| 25. Do others consider you to be a musical person? | 44 | 22 | 33 | 44 | 22 | 33 |
| 26. Do you feel comfortable being spontaneously silly? | – | 44 | 55 | – | 22 | 77 |

Other questions and data

Participants were also asked what parts of the program they found most useful and enjoyable (more than one response was possible). The most useful aspects were fairly evenly divided between composition, singing, and musical resources that were provided, and the most enjoyable evenly divided between composition and singing, which suggests that our dual focus was well targeted.

When asked what they would like more of the responses were in order: composition, singing and instruments and when asked about things they would like that were not included the replies included: choral conducting, music theory, drumming and marimbas. All these responses are consistent with the areas that participants identified as wanting to develop in the Before survey. What this indicates is that while we provided a very successful professional development program there is still scope for developing such programs in different directions as well as reinforcing what we did. A more comprehensive program would probably be longer than 7.5 hours.

We were also able to observe how participants made immediate use of the material presented. Several did in fact try out some of the composition activities in their own classes the next day and the success of this would have had a strong impact on their confidence. This possibility of applying skills and ideas immediately in the workplace, and therefore reinforcing learning in a practical way, suggests that the in-service professional development model may be a powerful way of up-skilling. It demonstrates that despite current provision of pre-service music education meeting the accreditation requirements of graduates, for teachers to effectively enact the curriculum, further in-service training is useful (if not required) particularly if it can bring the three stages of observing, doing, and implementing close together in time. This is a potential weakness in pre-service courses, and particularly on-line courses, where these stages can be spread over time.

Another source of data for the efficacy of the program was video recordings of each of

the sessions. In these we were able to observe participation and engagement by the attendees. Unsurprisingly with a group that had chosen to participate we observed that they paid attention and participated in all activities consistently and attendees were keen to ensure that they received relevant resources and also prepared to share their own resources and experience. This added another dimension to the program. We did not observe any noticeable change in engagement over the course of the program, though we had considered the possibility of this. Being in a supportive environment did seem to help confidence, and willingness to try things, with participants being able to sing simple parts and create simple harmonies at the end of the program when some had been very uncertain of their ability beforehand. Some participants were initially already confident and skilled and their presence in the program of course helped the less confident.

Another positive outcome was the generation of collegiality and enthusiasm to continue the learning process with a Facebook page being created by one of the participants to maintain contact and provide an avenue for relevant information and resources. It was also proposed to arrange future meetings at least once a term to continue to share ideas and activities.

We have done this and started a series of workshops – one a term that focus on specific skills. So far we have covered guitar, piano, marimbas and drumming and they have been well received and we hope to continue these and use them for future research.

We do have some initial evidence that the effect of the professional development workshops is on-going. In a follow up survey collected eight months after the initial workshops, compared to the before survey one teacher showed increases in her confidence in teaching composition (increase of 3 points on the 7 point Likert scale), teaching listening (increase of 2 points), teaching movement (increase of 1 point) and teaching simple percussion (increase of 2 points). The only reason there was no improvement in teaching singing was that she

was already very confident, but she had taken on conducting the school choir and sent us a photo of her performance at the local eisteddfod with the following caption:

Thank you! Imagine me trying that a couple of years ago!?

Actually, you have empowered me so much with all the music PD I feel confident I could run through marimbas 101 with the punters!? (personal communication)

She also gave strongly agree ratings to the following questions:

I have incorporated more music in my classroom this year following workshop activities.

My confidence has increased in delivering music in the classroom.

While basing firm conclusions on a single case study is problematic, this suggests that pursuing this pathway may be effective.

What can we conclude from our evaluation of this pilot program?

1. There is current and future need and demand for good quality professional development targeted at specific musical skills.
2. Such programs, even ones with limited duration, can have immediate effect on teacher confidence and can have immediate input into teaching practice.
3. Teaching composition is the area with poorest levels of confidence and greatest potential for improvement. However, there is also potential for significant improvement in other areas.

4. Singing confidence is greatly affected by it taking place in a supportive and helpful context.
5. There is demand for sharing resources and repertoire tailored to specific stages.
6. There is potential demand for professional development in both basic music knowledge and theory and in practical applications such as choral conducting, drumming and marimbas.

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