

Inspiring music teachers: A study of what is important in practice

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Abstract

What are the characteristics of an inspiring music teacher? What do students value as important in the interaction and enjoyment of their music classes? This paper explores these questions through the lens of two experienced music educators who give insight into what they believe are the inspiring qualities of music teacher practice. The research comes from a larger study by the author (Robinson, 2015) and seeks to understand what is valued in music teacher practice. This paper reveals five characteristics of inspiring music teaching: knowledge with passion, the importance of connection through music, relational capacity, facilitating reflection and empowerment.

The results of this research reveal to music educators what can be transformational for students through their practice and shed light on what must be highlighted in music teacher education to develop teachers who will inspire.

Key words: music teacher education, inspiring, empowerment, classroom practice

Introduction

Music education in Australia has been enriched by hundreds of passionate music teachers over many years. Some have had the opportunity to reflect on their teaching influences and their own teaching practice to understand what is important in the delivery of music lessons within the classroom. Many share these successful teaching strategies with their colleagues. A representative group of leaders in music education, labelled in this research as National Treasures, shared their experience of who influenced them as music teachers and how that experience, and their subsequent classroom encounters, have shaped their own teaching practice. The participants reflected their understanding of what it is to be an inspiring music teacher.

Literature Review

To inspire is to “emanate feeling, a response, to animate” (Turner, 1987, p. 555). A person who inspires another enables them to make a response. This response may manifest itself in

a skill, an understanding or a desire to pursue further learning. For the learner, this may have a life-long impact on them. Jorgensen (2008) states “Inspiration moves from an impulse and desire to action” (p. 24).

In the classroom there are several factors at work which could influence inspiration – the personality of the teacher, the teacher’s passion for their subject, the way the teacher relates to his/her students and the teacher’s creative classroom practice. Other factors include self-efficacy for both student and teacher (Bandura, 1986, 1997), transcendence (pointing to something better), evocation (inspiration that is evoked and unbidden) and motivation (to express or use something newly learned) (Thrash & Elliot, 2003, 2004).

There are many research articles that describe the characteristics of successful teachers (Lautzenheisen, 1992; Pembroke & Craig, 2002), passionate teachers (Fried, 1995; Metcalfe & Game, 2006), effective teachers (Stronge, Tucker & Hindman, 2004; Schmidt, 1989; Brand, 2006) and expert teachers (Hattie, 2003, 2012; Findell, 2007). They do not fully address the inspirational element so

often looked upon as a desirable characteristic of teaching practice. Booth (2009) and Dolloff (1999) include the word inspiring and extend it to be an aspect of teaching that is life-changing that has the most impact on individuals. Booth (2009) relates that being inspirational is our “teaching artistry as humans” (p. 4). They do not reflect how a student may be inspired and what may have influenced them in their learning.

Another factor is the richness of music as a subject where a deeper connection can be made to the content through the exploration of musical interests. Music connects people experientially and can be a powerful element in the lives of students – in their leisure, enhancing their mood and stirring their interests. These factors can provide a natural connection for the teacher to the students in the music classroom. The research of Jorgensen (2008) and Georgii-Hemming, Burnard & Holgersen (2013) support the richness of the subject and its value in student learning.

Through the growth of narrative inquiry in qualitative research (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009), personal stories of students who have continued to pursue music (Madsen & Kelly, 2002; Pitts, 2009) as an interest or a career, provide rich data that can shed light on what inspires students in the classroom. The sharing of a ‘peak experience’ (Maslow, 1954) where things come together for the learner and moving from impulse and desire into action (Jorgensen, 2008) reveals profound insight into inspiring teacher practice and facilitation for the learner. Csikszentmihalyi’s 1990 concept of flow and theory of optimal experience also supports how to understand points of inspiration.

In the Australian context, there is little research that explores inspiring music teaching. Initiatives such as ‘Great Teaching, Inspired Learning’ (NSW Department of Education and Communities [NSWDEC], 2013) seek to facilitate inspired learning, and the National Review of School Music Education (Department of Education, Science and Training [DEST], 2005) revealed through their case studies music teachers that were inspiring and passionate.

Case studies on film also support the understanding of music teaching that lifts students to reach their potential (Barry, 2008; Connelly & Raymond, 2011). These examples provide insight into the importance of inspiration but do not provide a theoretical or pedagogical model on how we can be inspiring in our teaching practice.

This review revealed little literature that addressed the inspirational element in music teaching, both in Australia and internationally.

The research questions for this study were:

- A. What makes a music teacher inspiring?
- B. What are the common traits within the art of music teaching that contribute to inspirational teaching?
- C. What information can be drawn from responses that can be used to influence future teacher education and practice?

Methodology

The qualitative research design selected for this study incorporated multiple case studies. The case studies were used to reveal and explore the understandings, motives and interests of the participants (Burns, 2000).

The participants from the original study by the author (Robinson, 2015) comprised National Treasures (N=6), being nationally recognised music educators selected because of the number of years they have spent in secondary schools and tertiary institutions and recommended by their peers; award-winning secondary school music teachers and their secondary school students. This paper focuses on the responses of two of the six National Treasures (NT2 and NT5), whose responses most clearly articulated the characteristics discovered in the broader study.

The National Treasure interviews took place in their home or by phone. They were one hour in length and recorded by digital video camera and audio devices. Semi-structured interview questions were used and focussed on their own

music teacher influences and musical journey, their motivation for being involved in music education, how they connect and best support the students that they work with and what they perceived were the characteristics of inspiring music teachers. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using open, axial and selective coding (Cohen Manion & Morrison, 2007) with themes revealed in the content analysis. Triangulation, including space and within-method applications (Cohen et al., 2007) enabled comparison between the experiences of the participants. The research utilised the principles of grounded theory (Creswell, 2014). The voice of both participants can be heard in the findings section.

Findings

Philosophies, strategies and approaches

In the interviews, the participants shared responses that have been categorised into their philosophies, strategies and approaches to music education. These perspectives provide a background to their understanding of what is important in the music classroom. The following are summaries of these findings:

National Treasure 2 (NT2)

NT2 believes that all music has value. He believes we teach children how to think and learn and make deductions and judgements themselves. The contribution of the child must be valued, and the teacher must recognise ignorance and do everything to obliterate it. NT2 wants students to have access to as much music as possible of the highest quality so they can have a critical view and make decisions about it. His strategies include asking lots of questions, so students come to terms with how they think about the music, examining the music minutely and leading students to think. His approach includes thinking about the approach but not consciously going in with a

plan, receiving and valuing all answers and asking students how they think they are going.

National Treasure 5 (NT5)

NT5 believes:

You must love teaching, be a good musician and show your love of music and love for your students.

A music teacher needs to be knowledgeable and to keep working at their craft. He also stresses the need to be demanding and responsive to students' needs and that growth comes when they take charge of their learning. NT5 understands that the secret of great teaching is self-determination theory – a sense of empowerment of students. His strategies include knowing the student beyond the name, questioning and probing for deeper understanding and thinking in groups of lessons (not a single lesson). His approach embraces relatedness, confidence and autonomy.

In your preparation, know what you are going to do. You don't script it too much and allow for spontaneity.

Inspiring music teacher characteristics

Through analysis of the interview data, five characteristics were discovered. These were: knowledge with passion, the importance of connection through music, relational capacity, facilitating reflection and empowerment.

Knowledge with passion

The participants most clearly emphasised the importance of teacher knowledge delivered with passion as the foundational characteristic of an inspiring music teacher. Knowledge was developed in both participants through their formation as musicians and music teachers. NT2 spoke of his teachers at the NSW State Conservatorium of Music and in high school: Each one (teacher) was an individual. What I loved was [at the NSW State Conservatorium] this collective of strong individuals. They all had views and they all had opinions. At school, rather than

say influence, I would say [the teachers] impressed me with their knowledge. One could quote poetry and I liked that, 'cause I love poetry.

The lecturers at the NSW State Conservatorium of Music in the 1970s were also a great influence on NT5:

What they stood for, the image they gave, their passion and confidence as music teachers, what they had achieved and who they were – we aspired to be like them.

It was not just the powerful influence of knowledge, but humility which was admired in the high school music teacher of NT5. She was honest in sharing her limitations:

She seemed to be this fountain of knowledge and she was so modest about her musical shortcomings – she gave me the impression she knew everything, and I wanted to tap into that.

Knowledge, when delivered with passion, was seen to have a major impact on these national treasures. A peak experience, where a life-changing moment occurs or a trigger to learn more, was evident in the participant responses (Maslow, 1968; Mills & Smith, 2003). NT2 explained the strength of his response to his teacher's approach:

That [his depth of knowledge] made me thirsty and made me want to know. In that sense, it was influential. But not necessarily in the way of teaching but in the way of knowing. Wanting to know.

NT5 spoke of the depth of learning that he has retained:

I was enthralled by it. I can still remember every note of the set works and the versions of the records we had too.

The participants noted that learning never stops and knowledge grows as one experiences and engages with others. The effect of role models that inspire and the pursuit of best teaching practice to continually improve knowledge and pedagogy were key factors shared by the participants. NT5 explained:

You have to be knowledgeable and keep working at your craft and evolving as a teacher. That is really important. If you are still teaching the same way as you were ten years ago, that is not a good sign.

The passion in delivering knowledge was evident in the teacher's classroom delivery. Features of this delivery included spontaneity, challenging material and the need for balance – between the receptive and the demanding. These themes are supported by the research of Hattie (2003), Miksza Roeder & Biggs (2010), Pembrook & Craig (2002) and Teachout (1997, 2001) and are addressed in the Quality Teaching Model (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003).

For NT5, knowledge and creativity were important because:

You need to be on top of your subject area – you need to know what you are going to cover but you have got to let the spontaneity emerge.

The importance of challenge that does not overwhelm the student was clearly articulated by NT2:

So that you throw them in at the deep end but there is a lifeline. You don't let them drown and if they don't know it is the deep end they swim. I mean you offer the challenge, knowing there is a very good chance they will sort it out.

Knowledge when delivered with passion formed the strongest response from the participants as a characteristic of inspiring music teaching. The energy and excitement in sharing their experiences with people of influence was evident.

The importance of connection

The second characteristic highlighted the importance of connection through music. The subject has qualities that communicate at a deep level for the individual (Georgii-Hemming et al., 2013). Music also has the power to connect teachers with their students. An inspiring music teacher will make use of those connections to build their students' musical understanding (Robinson, 2015).

NT5 focussed on the individual experience:

Music is more personal. It is the subject – it is an attitude – you feel good about this.

NT2 stressed the importance of Music as a subject, how it impacts learning and the role of the music teacher within:

My considered view is that all children should have access to as much music as possible of the highest quality from which they can make deductions and evolve enough aural appreciation to have a critical view of the music and make decisions. That is what I would call the wisdom of learning – teaching children how to think and teaching children how to learn. You try and give them the musical skills in a music education from which they can make deductions and judgements *themselves*. The teacher is there for the child through the subject – we teach music to children and we don't teach children music.

NT5 supported his view with research: Early teachers weren't remembered by their students for being great musicians but what they remembered was that they showed their love of music and they could communicate with the kids. (McPherson, Davidson & Faulkner, 2012)

NT2 reflected on his own practice and how he enables students to enjoy their learning. He shared how he connects with students in the music classroom, enabling them to make their own discoveries:

The connection is made by getting children to think and I also ask a lot of questions about the music, so they have to come to terms with how they think about the music and I tell them why I am doing it.

Music as a subject can connect with students on multiple levels and music teachers can use these connections as a way of building relationship with their students. An inspiring music teacher will make use of these connections to enhance learning within the classroom.

Relational capacity

Relational capacity describes the teacher's ability to relate to the students in their classroom (Robinson, 2015). It includes interpersonal skills such as rapport, humour, understanding, patience and respect. It values the students and creates a warm, comfortable environment for learning.

NT5 described the importance of connection: Got to love kids – love the age group that you work with.

The kids felt that they could talk to the teacher – they weren't scared. Knowing the kid beyond knowing the name – not a friend but someone you care about and they care about you is a really important connection to make.

NT2 stressed the importance of the teacher's ability to discern the learning needs in the class and to value student responses:

An inspiring music teacher would want to be able to recognise the individuals in the class, what they can and can't do – and how to get the best out of every one of them, valuing the contribution of the child. You value the answer because if it is wrong we can turn it this way and that – if it is right, we can extrapolate and do more and more.

The strength of dynamic relationship between teacher and student was revealed as another characteristic of inspiring music teaching by the participants in this study and through high school teacher and student voices in the larger study (Robinson, 2015).

Facilitating reflection

This characteristic of inspiring music teacher practice emphasised the importance of student feedback. The participants stressed the need for students to analyse what they have done themselves and to suggest ways forward in their learning.

NT2 stated this as an inspiring characteristic: Inspiring teachers ask children how they think they are going – 'how do you think that was – how do you think you played that?'

NT5 related to his students and his teaching style: I love it when they dialogue, and I see when they are trying to understand what I am doing or are trying to really reflect themselves about it and they will ask question after question and they show they are probing themselves to reach this deeper understanding – that is what it is all about.

The facilitation of reflection was important to both national treasures and it allows for deeper learning. It also enables students to feel they are in partnership on their learning journey. Inspiring music teachers will include reflection in their daily classroom practice.

Empowerment

The final characteristic of inspiring music teaching revealed by the participants was the inclusion of specific moments of empowerment. This could be simply achieving the understanding of a concept in the classroom and mastery of it. It could also be giving the student leadership and trust through leading an ensemble. It is the confidence gained by students being given a task that leads them to connect to it.

NT5 shared an experience at school:

When I was at school I used to conduct the band and I really loved it and I was lucky to have those sorts of experiences really early on. That is important – it is self-empowerment and it gets people into roles that aren't student roles.

NT2 decided to emulate his lecturer at the NSW State Conservatorium of Music in his approach to music analysis. It has shaped his on-going practice:

My lecturer at the Con used to say Grieg does this and Schumann does this and I thought I am going to do that. I am going to learn to do that, and I do.

NT5 felt empowered through the learning scaffold provided by his music teacher:

The way she taught – start with something simple and put it in a context and you understood, so music was more about both what you had been doing and the context itself, and then going on to do something creative with it and feeling empowered to do that. The feeling of empowerment is really important.

The realisation of understanding in the music classroom and the facilitation of experiences beyond the music classroom allowed students to feel empowered. These moments had a life changing effect on the students involved.

Conclusion and Implications

The characteristics of inspiring music teaching revealed in this research – knowledge with passion, the importance of connection through music, relational capacity, facilitating reflection and empowerment give us insight into what is important in teacher and student interaction within the music classroom. These are the

characteristics identified that inspire students to pursue the study of music in more depth or as a career for the future.

Music teachers have the potential to encourage their students to engage in music at a variety of levels. Music as a subject allows for students to progress at their own pace and encourages students to achieve in a classroom dynamic and ensembles with mixed abilities. Music teachers can expose students to a wide variety of experiences within the classroom – through performance, listening and composing or in ensembles and other co-curricular activities. The connection with classroom and co-curricular activities can be a powerful conduit that strengthens relational capacity and provides avenues for empowerment.

The insights of the two National Treasures presented in this paper, inform music teachers about best practice, both personally and in their delivery within the classroom. They encourage music teachers to build their knowledge, realising that learning never stops. Knowledge delivered without passion will not connect with students. Believing in the subject matter and its importance is crucial to teacher delivery in the classroom.

Music has a rich capacity to make connections at a deep level which allows students and teachers to relate to the subject and each other. Building on this, music teachers would benefit from analysing the strengths and weaknesses of their relational capacity to ensure supportive and caring classroom environments that enrich student experience. This links strongly with the practice of facilitating reflection – the teacher's analysis of what is working in their lessons and programs, to provide avenues for student feedback and an active working partnership within the classroom.

This research also challenges music teachers to provide opportunities to enable their students to be empowered – leading sectional rehearsals or conducting or providing leadership roles within the classroom. These moments can have a profound effect on the student, enhancing their self-efficacy and possibly leading them to pursue music as a career.

The five characteristics of inspiring music teaching revealed in this paper could also be modelled in pre-service music teacher education to highlight what can be inspiring in teacher practice in the music classroom.

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