Musical Futures and the influence of whole school assessment policies in two music classrooms

Emily Wilson
Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne

Abstract

Musical Futures is an approach thought to make classroom music more engaging for students by drawing their outside musical lives into their school experiences. Consisting of complementary approaches arising from out-of-school contexts, Musical Futures incorporates the learning processes of popular musicians and community musicians. It is characterised by learning that is student-driven with an emphasis on learning through immersion in music making. The larger study from which this article is drawn is an ethnographic investigation of teacher practice and student engagement. Research participants were two music teachers and four classes of children aged ten to sixteen years from two schools in the outer-south eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. The teachers were previously identified as drawing on Musical Futures approaches following their participation in a professional learning workshop. Data was collected through participant-observation of music lessons, interviews and focus groups. This article presents selected findings related to the whole school assessment policies which were influential over the two teachers' day-to-day classroom practice. Summative assessment was an area of interest for the two teachers as their whole school policies were challenging to implement.

Introduction

Musical Futures was established in response to ongoing interest in adopting more engaging teacher practices to address persistent concerns about student dissatisfaction with school music classes (Green, 2008; D'Amore, 2008). Musical Futures consists of complementary pedagogical approaches arising from out-of-school contexts, including those of popular musicians and community musicians. It is characterised by learning that is student-driven with an emphasis on learning through immersion in music making. Musical Futures' informal learning model derives from Lucy Green's (2002) seminal research examining the student-directed learning principles of popular musicians. When this approach is brought into the classroom, the role of the teacher is to stand back and observe and then diagnose and offer support in a responsive manner.

Green (2008) identifies five student-directed principles:

- Learners choose the music to play and set the direction of learning.
- There is an emphasis on aural learning through listening to and copying recordings.
- Learning is undertaken in friendship groups.
- Performing, composing and listening are integrated.
- Learning is haphazard, non-linear, holistic or serendipitous based on immediate student-identified needs rather than planned and sequenced in advance.

Complementing these principles is the Classroom Workshopping approach, emanating from the community music leadership practices of the Guildhall CONNECT ensembles, a large scale community music outreach program run by the Guildhall School in London. D'Amore (2008) and

Renshaw (2005) identify the following community music leadership practices:

- The teacher is a facilitator playing alongside the students, where the music is co-constructed with musical material that reflects the interests of both students and the teacher.
- Whole-class, large-group music making that is inclusive of varying musical experience and backgrounds.
- Creative music making across the areas of performing, composing and listening.
- Music learning is tacit, acquired through immersion in music making rather than talking and explaining.
- Aural/oral learning is the starting point.

Assessment in music education

There is little research concerning assessment and Musical Futures. Teachers are thought to make use of their usual assessment approach when adopting Musical Futures approaches (Green, 2008). However, there is little detail in the literature about the specific teacher assessment practices enacted. In her project, Green (2008) found that an area for further research was to investigate exactly how teachers made use of their existing assessment methods.

More broadly in music education, Fautley (2010) explains that assessment is a difficult and contested area. He identifies that extreme views range from it is impossible and not to be attempted, to establishing an encyclopaedic series of competencies to be measured. Swanwick (2012) advocates for teaching music musically, including assessing music musically. He contends that assessment in music is a natural part of music learning involving formative self-assessment, peer feedback and critique. Assessment most frequently occurs through listening during music making in both reflection-in- and reflection-on-action (Schon, 1983). From general education, Freeman and Lewis (1998) propose a definition of assessment, "to judge the extent of students learning" (p. 9). This connects assessment with teacher judgement intricately woven into the teaching process. Swanwick (1988) contends to teach is to assess, rather than assessment as something extra.

Two broad categories for understanding assessment are formative and summative (Fautley, 2010). Summative assessment is also referred to as assessment *of* learning, it is concerned with the measurement and certification of student achievement and is usually something that is 'done to' rather than with the students (Fautley, 2010). Summative assessment is problematic when it involves tests that are infrequent, isolated from normal teaching and learning or carried out on special occasions (Philpott & Evans, 2016). From a social justice perspective, Fautley (2015) highlights the importance of assessment criteria being negotiated between the teacher and students. He suggests assessment decisions resting entirely with the teacher are problematic and notes this requires a shift in power and "this does not require the teacher to be the sole expert arbiter of quality, but instead democratises the process of valuing" (p. 518).

Formative assessment is also known as assessment *for* learning, it happens when the purpose is to elicit information which will be of use in deciding what ought to be done next in order to develop learning (Fautley, 2010). Strategies for formative assessment include: questioning, feedback, self- and peer-assessment, and the formative use of summative tests (Black et al, 2003). Feedback is formative when there is a focus on the future and improving learning (Fautley, 2010). The teacher observes, diagnoses and problem solves followed by proactive interventions. Feedback may be aimed at product, process, self and self-regulation guided by key questions: Where am I? Where am I going? How am I going to get there? Where to next? (Black et al., 2003). Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD), refers to what students can achieve with assistance. Feedback is crucial in moving students from what they can do currently, to what they might do with the help of a more knowledgeable other (Black et

al., 2003). In music education, feedback includes musical modelling. In some classrooms, playing alongside the teacher or a more expert learner may be embedded throughout music lessons and may be the primary method of learning (Fautley, 2010). The relative status of formative and summative assessment is another issue that impacts education and music education. From general education, Harlen (2005) states that "if we fuse, or confuse, formative and summative purposes, experience strongly suggests that 'good assessment' will mean good assessment *of* learning, not *for* learning" (p. 220, emphasis in original).

Whole school assessment policies

Whole school assessment policies are influenced by broader education systems and policy, neo-liberalism is one example of a politically motivated ideology that has resulted in a rise in benchmark standards and testing (Horsley, 2009). The underlying premise is that for systems (such as schools) to be competitive, they must maximise output (student outcomes) to take advantage of available resources (funding). For music education, this has meant a shift away from student autonomy towards a standards-based curriculum, pre-determined attainment targets and an interventionist role on the part of the teacher, particularly through whole school summative assessment policy (Finney, 2010; Shepherd & Vulliamy, 1994). Typically, these policies concern how and when teachers make judgements about student attainment and monitor progress (DET, 2018). Data arising from assessment judgements is reported at regular intervals to school leadership with this requirement frequently uniform across all learning areas irrespective of curriculum time.

This current performativity climate in schools impacts assessment with a common focus on collecting data and evidence of learning. In turn, this impacts learning and teaching as Fautley (2015) explains, "the first-order effect of performativity in education is to reorient pedagogical and scholarly activities towards those which are likely to have a positive impact on measurable performance outcomes" (p. 142). Alexander (2000) articulates that this will not in itself improve learning, "measuring learning provides indicators or baselines upon which amelioration or remediation strategies can be based but does not of itself ameliorate or remedy" (p. 372). Despite the prominence of attainment targets and data-driven assessment regimes, in Australia and elsewhere, a concurrent emergence of personalised learning, recognition of students' diverse cultural backgrounds and their out-of-school musical lives has occurred. Priorities in this policy context are at times competing and conflicting. The informal, student-centred learning epitomised by Musical Futures is by definition the opposite of pre-determined attainment targets and an interventionist, data-driven assessment approach.

Musical Futures and assessment

Philpott (2012) outlines some issues with the assessment of student-directed learning. Classic assessment *for* learning and assessment *of* learning as described by Black et al. (2003) is interventionist and ownership rests with the teacher. When assessment *for* learning strategies such as questioning and feedback are applied, the teacher usually undertakes the decision making. This is also the case with self- and peer-assessment when the criteria are decided by the teacher. Philpott (2012) argues that for students to have the autonomy over the direction of learning that is fundamental to Green's (2008) approach, students need control over assessment. Thus, self- and peer-assessment should be primary with criteria derived from student-set objectives. Teacher interventions to support student learning should be in response to the students' objectives. Whilst it is not inherently tied to an interventionist teaching approach, summative assessment is frequently done "to" students rather than "with and for" students. Assessment criteria can be student-derived or negotiated. Not intervening is also a valid choice and on occasion no assessment

interventions may be necessary and teachers can trust that learning will occur (Philpolt, 2012).

The primacy of self- and peer-assessment in a student-directed learning situation can also be argued for on the basis of validity which Fautley and Colwell (2012) explain is an important assessment concept along with reliability. Validity refers to how assessment data is used to arrive at the truth. The assessment should evaluate that which it purports to assess by being relevant to the subject matter. Reliability is concerned with consistency and the use of assessment methods that have the least margin of error, for example, between multiple assessors. A balance is needed between validity and reliability as Harlen (2005) explains:

> Attempts to increase reliability generally means closer and closer specification, and use of methods that have the least error. It results in gathering and using a restricted range of evidence, leading to a reduction in validity. On the other hand, if validity is increased by extending the range of the assessment to include outcomes such as higher level thinking skills, then reliability is likely to fall, since many of these aspects of attainment are not easily assessed (p. 247).

The study

The larger study from which this presentation is drawn is an ethnographic (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) investigation of classroom music teacher practice and student engagement (Wilson, 2019). The research was undertaken in a primary and a secondary school in the outer south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. The participants were two teachers and four classes of students aged 10 to 16 years. I collected participant-observation and interview data over a 10-month period in 2016. This article discusses a Year 10 elective music class and an upper primary music class.

The teachers had been identified as implementing a Musical Futures approach following their participation in a professional learning workshop. There were indicators that the classroom music programs were engaging. For example, there was a senior secondary music class for the first time

and enrolments in the co-curricular program had grown from 20 to 120 in a short period of time. I was interested in investigating in-depth what it was the teachers were doing to promote engagement for these students. Assessment emerged as a theme and an area of interest for the two teachers, particularly in relation to implementing their school summative assessment policies.

Formative assessment

To illustrate how the teachers enacted the Musical Futures processes and their formative assessment strategies, I will present two classroom snapshots. Firstly, a Year 10 music class are involved in whole-class creative music making reflecting many of the Classroom Workshopping principles. The starting point was some spontaneous reggae jamming that occurred earlier in the lesson when two of the students first entered the classroom.

> Getting the group moving quickly, Eddie[1] **states the purpose of the session. "Okay, what I'd like you to do is to choose an instrument and set it up in this room so we can make some music together". Enthusiastically, the students select instruments: electric and acoustic guitars, bass guitar, electric piano, drums, keyboards, and ukuleles. As a starting point for the whole-class music making, Eddie states, "I want to challenge you. Within 25 minutes can we make up our own piece of music? We could start with the beautiful sort of reggae music coming from Detroit and Roger".
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> Roger begins playing staccato off-beat chords on the guitar, skanking[2]. Watching carefully and listening, one by one, four other students tentatively join in, establishing a loose and slow-tempo reggae groove, learning through visual and aural copying. They play four chords chosen by Roger, each lasting a bar, and repeat the cycle. After one minute the music ceases as the students lose their place. In the brief pause, Eddie instinctively moves to the whiteboard and writes the chord symbols (G Bm Am and D) for the music

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1   Pseudonyms used for teachers and students.

2   Skanking is the distinctive reggae rhythm usually played by the guitarist playing chords as down strums on the off-beat. They play the 'and' in between beats 1, 2, 3 and 4 in simple quadruple time.

created. Eddie provides a point of access for the students who could not join in by using their aural skills. He explains the root notes and encourages the students playing keyboards to play the notes G B A and D.

Gradually, guiding the group to his objective of maximising participation and creativity, Eddie says, "I'll count you in, try again." On a steel-string acoustic guitar, Roger casually begins playing off-beat chords, Detroit adds a drum beat emphasising beats two and four. Between them, they create the distinctive reggae call and response texture, between the guitar and drums which invites the remaining students to join in. The laid-back and loose groove metamorphises as everyone contributes to the group jam. This accepting classroom culture contributes to an environment where without words, a moment of peer-teaching occurs. Tane, playing the bass guitar, and Rene, playing electric piano, make eye contact. Tane shares a thick and heavy bass line. They swap instruments and continue watching each other for accurate copying.

After ten minutes, Eddie pauses the music with a hand gesture. Interacting comfortably, he briefly states a creative option: improvising using G pentatonic or G major scale. Eddie writes the scale and chords as letters on the whiteboard and rather than using conventional notation. He counts the students in, and they are playing again. The texture is dense, everyone plays continually and contributes something slightly different, prompted by Eddie's request to, "Start putting in your creativity and different rhythms. Layering sounds together".

The music becomes more complex as Eddie points to individuals to play a short improvisation. Ensuring all students are included and audible, Eddie signals individuals to take a solo while indicating to others to significantly reduce their volume. Eddie varies the amount of time he allows for each solo, accounting for prior experience and student confidence. He moves over to Mel playing the keyboard and shows her a short and simple phrase, she copies, he repeats the musical idea, and again she replicates it. Explicit in his direction, Eddie says, "When I point to you, play this one." Pene, Detroit and Roger are leading the whole-class, multi-layered composition, allowing Eddie to support others. These musically confident students continually embellish and develop their ideas through improvisation without teacher support. Eddie is comfortable repeating the

simple four-bar groove almost continuously with minimal teacher talk during the second half of a seventy-minute lesson. The process of repetition allows for the subtle refinement of the co-created music.

This class was the final lesson of Year 10 music in Term 1, 2016. Many of the teacher-student interactions presented in the snapshot are examples of feedback based on teacher judgements about student learning. In response to his judgements, Eddie provided musical and verbal feedback to guide and extend the music making. Verbal feedback was firstly to ensure all students were involved. Secondly, providing creative options to extend the music making and thirdly, scaffolding solos. These decisions were largely in the moment rather than pre-planned. With some experienced students and without explicitly saying so, Eddie involved these students in leading the music making.

Next, I present a snapshot of a primary music class. Students are working in friendship groups to create a cover version of a four-chord song of their choice, reflecting many of Green's (2008) principles of student-directed learning.

The primary students walk eagerly into the large music room and sit on the carpet facing Chris's desk. Sitting amongst the students, I hear, "I wish we had music all the time". It is the end of the term and the last lesson of the four-chord song project. Chris sits casually and explains that the students are to rehearse their chosen songs, answer reflective questions as a group, and video-record their answers and performances using an iPad. Although it is the conclusion of the project, there is no expectation of a finished performance. Chris explains:

"So, what I want you to do today guys, is keep practising, film yourself, answering a few questions and then perform what you're learning. It doesn't have to be the whole song, it can go for about 30 seconds. It's so I can see where you're up to."

The students transfer enthusiastically to playing their songs in their friendship groups without any further teacher intervention. They collect three-quarter acoustic guitars, xylophones, djembes, ukuleles, and chord charts. One student,

Lara, sits on the floor with a guitar while Chris demonstrates how to play the 12 bar blues chords. He uses power chords and sings "Love Runs Out", the song chosen by her group. Chris points to the fretboard so that Lara has a visual cue of where to put her fingers. Chris watches while Lara attempts to play the power chords and rhythm that Chris modelled, then she moves off to play with her group.

Soon, a group of three boys are working together, playing the drums, bass and guitar. Moving to the drummer, Chris asks, "Show me what you can do." Using brushes, Liam attempts a drum beat. Chris intuitively diagnoses and problem-solves. Standing next to the drumkit, he provides musical support by hitting the cymbal and singing. Chris gestures for Liam to move over and then takes over playing the drums. He models a simplified drumbeat, the bass drum on beat one and three, with the snare drum on beat two and four. Chris sings the riff to "Love Yourself" along with the drumbeat, demonstrating how the parts fit together. Chris explains, "I want you to play this on the bass drum."

Around the room, other groups are working industriously on different songs. In one corner a group of girls are also playing "Love Yourself" by Justin Bieber. They are sitting in a tight circle, oblivious to the other students in the class. They are concentrating hard. Two girls playing the ukulele are focussing intently on each other's fingers. They stop and briefly discuss what went wrong. One of them, taking on the teacher role in her group, says, "Again? Everyone OK? Ready? 1, 2, 1 2 3 4," and they begin playing again. Suddenly, Chris says, "Quick, pack up and line up, it is time to go." Both the students and Chris have been so engrossed in the music making, they have lost track of time.

This lesson was the final Year 5/6 music class for Term 2, 2016. Green's (2008) role of the teacher is evident in Chris setting the general trajectory of the lesson and then standing back. This role allowed the students to have autonomy over the direction of learning. The teacher was a musical model and resource providing musical feedback and playing alongside the students to support their involvement in music making. Strategies observed were: diagnosing and problem solving, arranging (re-organising and re-interpreting musical

material), giving musical and verbal feedback and singing. Implicit within the interactions are teacher judgements and musical responses to the questions of: Where are they? Where are they going? How will they get there? The decision making and assessment judgements about student music making were made by the teacher in both examples and thus ownership of assessment decisions rested with them.

In relation to formative assessment, for both teachers their musicianship was integral to their teacher-student interactions and facilitation style with small and large groups of students. Formative assessment was embedded in the day-to-day classroom practice of both teachers and was effective for promoting engagement and learning. Formative assessment strategies were largely tacit. In researcher conversations, when assessment was spoken about both teachers were concerned with summative assessment.

Summative assessment

For Eddie, the whole school curriculum and assessment policy was influential over his classroom practice and much time was spent devising a summative assessment strategy. The school policy required a single Common Assessment Task (CAT) at the completion of a unit of work. Units were long, lasting around 10 weeks (with two units each semester), thus summative assessment was undertaken twice per semester. Designing and implementing a single CAT was mandatory, it was intended as a single task to be completed under exam-like conditions. The policy was not based on a constructivist theory of learning, where students are given multiple opportunities to demonstrate their understanding over time. The CAT was intended to be developed prior to teaching commencing so that all teaching was focussed towards one assessment task.

Eddie modified the policy to make it work for him and his students. Rather than specifying the task beforehand, he designed the curriculum and assessment as the term progressed in response

to student learning. This aligns with Fautley's (2015) argument against tight prescription and that responsive learning and teaching does not usually proceed along a linear and non-deviational pathway. Rather, the teacher begins with some idea of the end point and route and "a good teacher will use the results of formative assessments to play for subsequent pedagogic activity" (p. 522).

The CAT had three parts, a performance activity, a composition, and a listening and evaluating task. The Year 10 students completed a written peer- and self-assessment in the listening and responding activity. For both groups, their responses were used as evidence of the listening and responding strand of the Victorian curriculum. Eddie assessed the CAT over three lessons in contravention of the school policy. Eddie used his knowledge of student understanding acquired across the term to arrive at a final grade. The criteria Eddie communicated to the students emphasised creativity and participation. These criteria shifted the focus to include both the process and the final product. Eddie was in control of summative assessment as suggested in the following quote about the process for assessing the performing activity.

> In the last ten minutes we will record your performance so I can listen to it when I do your assessments. And I'll use that information to help write your reports. There are things you can do here to maximise your result like: following instructions, and stopping and starting at the right times. When you do stop, you allow me to give you some feedback to improve.

Eddie spent significant planning time implementing the school policy of a single end of term Common Assessment Task (CAT). Eddie's implementation of this policy resulted in a complex rubric that assessed the whole Victorian curriculum (VCAA, 2016) in one task with multiple parts. The complex rubric reflects a focus on improving validity (extending the range of the assessment to arrive at the truth) at the expense of reliability (use of assessment methods that have the least error, for example between multiple assessors) (Fautley & Colwell, 2012). Fautley (2015) argues strongly

against single-focus assessment tasks on the basis that the complexity of musical knowledge, skills, and understanding that all students have cannot be evidenced by attainment in a single task or a single lesson.

The complexity and time it took to conform with the school policy resulted in a focus in Eddie's planning time on devising assessment *of* learning tasks and rubrics rather than assessment *for* learning strategies. Formative assessment was tacit or assumed and taken for granted and its significant role was not acknowledged in the school assessment policy. Assessment results were shared with the students at the end of the term, providing a record of their attainment. By necessity, the teacher was in control of summative assessment and there was little room for student input or ownership over summative assessment, which was in contrast to the autonomy the students had over the direction of learning reflected in the snapshots. The school policy conflicted with what Harlen (2005) describes as good assessment practice that promotes validity. He suggests that if teachers make judgements over time during the usual learning and teaching program, they build up a picture of student attainment across the full range of activities which Eddie did by modifying the school policy. This timeframe gives a broader and fuller account and thus provides a more valid means of assessing student learning outcomes.

The school summative assessment policy influenced student engagement. When students were undertaking the CAT, the change in focus and concentration was dramatic within the single lesson designated for the CAT. Questions such as "When is the CAT? Is this for the CAT?" were heard. During an individual composition task, suddenly the students were working almost silently. The change in focus was connected with a reduction in enjoyment, alluded to by a student in a focus group discussion.

> I stress very easily and I like it when it's just a bunch of friends and we're just playing for fun.

For Chris, summative assessment was less a focus although he also had to navigate an complex

whole-school assessment policy. His approach to collecting data with which to make summative assessment judgements was video recording. The students recorded themselves once per term, approximately every ten lessons. This video was combined with self- and peer-assessment with the students answering reflective questions. Chris explained the process and how he was going to use the assessment data at the beginning of a lesson.

> What you are going to do today is film yourself answering a few questions and then perform a little section of what you're learning. It's so I can see where you're up to and I can look at it when I do your reports.

Riverside PS had a "data wall" that displayed student progress in literacy and numeracy in the corridor next to reception. Any teacher, student, parent or visitor walking through the administration area of the school saw this wall. It was a public statement about what was important. The main purpose of the data wall appeared to be accountability, measuring and evidencing progress (Marsh, Farrell & Bertrand, 2016) which conflicts with Fautley's (2015) contention that assessment should be to improve learning not only to provide data for systemic purposes.

The school-wide focus on data extended across learning areas and Chris was required to collect a large amount of data and this resulted in a large assessment workload as he taught every student in the school every week. He had created spreadsheets to record and manage his data and this became the focus of his summative assessment. Ideally, the school-wide assessment policies would recognise and accommodate the differences in the disciplinary nature and the curriculum time of the specialist curriculum areas. Chris managed the whole school requirements and minimised the impact on students largely by flying under the radar. He reflected that being a specialist teacher in a primary school was helpful for keeping a low profile.

> Assessment should not dictate how you teach. We get given approaches and assessment techniques. The classroom teachers get inundated with that stuff. I get a lot of flexibility because they forget the specialist teachers.

To minimise the impact on student music making of collecting data, Chris undertook summative assessment away from the students. This has had the effect of assessment being 'done to' rather than 'with' the students. The video-recorded reflections and music making at the end of the projects was a mechanism through which the students demonstrated their understanding rather than contributing to the assessment judgements about quality. Otherwise judgements were based on Chris's knowledge of the student music making which had been established over a long period of time.

Conclusion

Formative assessment was integral to the teachers' classroom practice and was effective for promoting student learning and engagement. The positive influence on student learning reflects formative assessment's other nomenclature, assessment *for* learning. The school wide assessment policies were influential over day-to-day classroom practice and these emphasised assessment *of* learning rather than assessment *for* learning. One policy was focussed on reporting a single CAT grade and the other producing numerical data. Although unintended, an impact of the policies was to de-emphasise the importance of formative assessment for promoting learning. Instead of celebrating and further developing the effective formative assessment practices alongside summative assessment techniques, much time was spent planning summative assessments, developing rubrics, collecting data, and conforming to or mediating the school-level assessment policies. There is music education research that suggests ways forward for summative assessment in classroom music and student-directed learning that positions formative assessment alongside summative assessment (Fautley, 2010; Philpott, 2012). Rather, the

day-to-day reality for the teachers in this research included grappling with the implementation of whole-school assessment policies that were challenging for the music teachers to implement as intended.

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Emily Wilson *is a lecturer in music education and PhD graduate at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne. Her doctoral study investigates teacher practice and student engagement in classroom music. Emily has more than 10 years' experience as a school music educator. Emily has taught classroom and instrumental music at primary and secondary schools in Australia and the UK, including as Head of Department at the secondary schools in the UK.*