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Enhancing student agency in the primary music classroom through culturally responsive practice

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ENHANCING STUDENT AGENCY IN THE PRIMARY MUSIC CLASSROOM THROUGH CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

In Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia work is ongoing to upskill teachers in culturally responsive practice as a way of addressing inequalities for Māori and Aboriginal students (Macfarlane, 2004; Morrison et al., 2019). Through supplementary materials to the New Zealand Curriculum, such as Tātaiako and The Hikairo Schema (New Zealand Ministry of Education & New Zealand Teachers Council, 2011; Rātima et al., 2020), cultural competencies and culturally responsive teaching and learning practices have been schematised. Internationally, student agency has been theorised in the context of addressing inequities in learning outcomes (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Many of the teaching practices embedded in active music-making approaches, such as Orff and Kodály, are characteristically agentic. However, for a number of reasons, specialist teachers in primary schools may be isolated from current educational philosophical trends and imperatives. Drawing on the literatures of culturally responsive practice and student agency, this article identifies themes that resonate with and potentially enhance active music-making in the classroom. Based on years of practice as a classroom teacher and my current role as an Orff-trained primary music specialist, I offer examples of ways music teachers can enhance student agency informed by cultural competencies. These include approaches to group and individual tasks, cross-curricular creative projects, sourcing and curating content and integrating digital learning.

Keywords

Culturally responsive; student agency; identity; music teaching; Hikairo Schema

Introduction

The impetus for this article arose from a suggestion by my non-music colleagues in my Auckland primary school to adapt my music teaching to accommodate developments in their Year 5 and 6 Modern Learning Environment. I was asked to provide a timetable of music lessons that gave students more flexibility and choice than previously. Instead of delivering the same lesson to five different groups of children, I prepared for five different lessons, each with a particular focus.

As a primary music specialist, I have found myself less up to date with current educational thought and practice than I was as a classroom teacher. There are a number of reasons for this. Being a specialist in a primary school can be isolating, both geographically and in terms of curriculum. I was aware that a commitment to increasing student agency was behind my colleagues' request, but I was not sure that simply offering a variety of music sessions was the answer.

To inform my own development, I reviewed the local literature on culturally responsive practice and international findings about musical agency and student agency in music learning contexts. I wondered how the call to enabling student agency would be worked out, in practice, in music lessons and also how much culturally responsive pedagogy had in common with agentic practice.

In this article, I discuss agency and culturally responsive practice. Themes from the literature will be drawn out and applied to classroom music teaching. Identity is articulated as the common theme that

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links these two fields. In the final section I offer five personal vignettes of practice that exemplify enhancing student agency and apply the principles of culturally responsive practice.

Musical agency

Agency has been defined as “the capability of individual human beings to make choices and to act on these choices in ways that make a difference in their lives” (Martin, 2004, p. 13) and “the initiative and capacity to act in a desired direction or toward desired goals” (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012, p. 2). Learner agency is about the learner having the inclination and power to act and thus be active in the learning process, making decisions about what, how and where they learn (Wall, n.d.; Wenmoth, 2014). We can define children’s musical agency as “their sense that they can initiate and carry out their own musical ideas and ideas about music” (Wiggins, 2015, p. 103).

Where they are, who they are with and what they are doing give children differing types of agency (Dean, 2019). Bruner considers that “since agency implies not only the capacity for initiating, but also for completing our acts, it also implies *skill* or *know-how* [emphasis added]” (Bruner, 1996, p. 36). This leads to the conclusion that musical agency and musical know-how are mutually supportive. Drawing on Bruner’s statement that “we need to conceive of ourselves as ‘agents’ impelled by self-generated intentions” (Bruner, 1996, p. 16), Wiggins asserts that musical learning requires both personal and musical agency (Wiggins, 2015). Karlsen calls for a sociologically-inspired understanding of musical agency—one that focuses on the learner’s experience and perspective. She argues that a focus on process rather than outcomes, and an understanding of the interplay between formal and informal ways of learning, will enable students to carry their musical skills and engagement outside the classroom into life (Karlsen, 2011).

Culturally responsive practice

Culturally responsive practice is teaching and learning that makes sense to students who are not part of the majority or dominant culture (Klug & Whitfield, 2003). It uses the cultural world of the student, including their experience, prior knowledge and strengths, to make learning more relevant and effective.

Gay (2018) asserts that good teachers place culture at the heart of their understanding of education; thus, effective teaching cannot be decontextualised from the ethnic and cultural heritages and identities of the students. It is a strengths-based approach (Gay, 2018; Macfarlane et al., 2019; Rātima et al., 2020) that builds bridges between academic learning and the prior knowledge, language and values of students (Klump & McNeir, 2005). Morrison et al. (2019) characterise culturally responsive pedagogy as requiring a shift to recognising students’ identities and backgrounds as assets for learning.

Although culturally responsive practice may well reference cultural practices, artefacts and language, it is not the same as “deriving content from culture” (Macfarlane, 2004, p. 81). This distinction is important in the music classroom, where it may seem easy to tick boxes of cultural responsiveness through repertoire choice.

Identity

The construct of identity is a significant aspect of agency that connects it to culturally responsive practice. Since music is deeply entwined with identity, the way we approach music learning and teaching impacts on students’ agency in music and in life. In her landmark study of children’s musical experience, Campbell found that children use music to understand themselves, their experiences and their relationships (Campbell, 1998). In a similar vein, MacDonald et al. (2017) assert that

all music making, all music listening, all music talking, all musicking is essentially an identity project. Music provides a forum in which we construct and negotiate our constantly evolving sense of who we are, and our place in the world. (p. v)

It might seem at first glance that agency is all about the individual. However, this identity formation may also be collective, as music is often used to signal and cement group membership (Karlsen, 2011). Poon (2018), a commentator on public education in the United States of America, also calls for a more collective view of agency. She suggests that a highly individualistic interpretation of student agency is culturally bound and detrimental to some students.

Goals and characteristics of music programmes

Culturally responsive practice neither precludes nor privileges any particular teaching and learning approaches, but calls for adaptive expertise characterised by flexibility and sensitivity to context (Berryman et al., 2018). Context and teaching approaches are largely determined by the goals of music programmes, which may emphasise either presentational or participatory goals (Harwood & Marsh, 2012; Lawton, 2020). Reimer (2007) is critical of a system of music education that concentrates on large ensemble performances. His solution is to assert that the popular music of any culture has the most potential for engaging students with moral and ethical issues. Harwood and Marsh (2012) also explore the difference between a music education whose goal is to prepare repertoire for an audience and one which features the equal and valued participation of all. Drawing on Turino (2008), they acknowledge that neither approach is better or more natural than the other, suggesting that effective classroom learning is found in a common ground, since children develop musically in unique ways across both participation and performance.

Notions of formality and informality are also at play here. The invitation to adopt informal musical practices in the relatively formal context of a music classroom is widely acknowledged and has been explored with students of different ages (Cremata & Powell, 2017; Harwood & Marsh, 2012; Karlsen, 2010; Muhonen, 2016). Cremata and Powell (2017) explored high school students' experience of informality in music classes through collaborative projects in "deterritorialised" online spaces. They advocate for a pedagogy that responds to the culture of the young person's digital world and identity by enabling them to cross borders and cultures in the way that real world musicians do.

It is my assertion that, at the lesson level, it is desirable to combine the best of both formality and informality. Students will appreciate the predictability of a structured lesson with clear expectations and, nested within this, opportunities to listen, learn and collaborate in more informal ways.

Repertoire

A commitment to enhancing student agency in the music classroom necessarily requires a critique of both repertoire and curriculum. A first step in going beyond a well-intentioned multiculturalism is to critically examine materials and songs that we use in our lessons. Accuracy, appropriateness, balance, bias and context are all to be considered (Klug & Whitfield, 2003).

As far back as 1998, Campbell was advocating for inclusion of music that is meaningful for children in school music curricula in consultation with the children themselves (Campbell, 1998). Klug and Whitfield employ the metaphor of a suitcase that children bring with them, asserting that "we have the power to allow children to unlock their cultural suitcases and use the materials within them" (Klug & Whitfield, 2003, p. 112).

In music, there are ways we can be intentional about supporting children to unpack those suitcases and safely share the contents. With reference to choice of pieces, Shaw (2012) poses some helpful questions:

- What music would build upon my students' prior experiences?
- What pieces would capitalize on their cultural knowledge?
- What selections could my students experience through their preferred learning styles?
- What would showcase their culturally informed performance styles? (p. 76)

Relevance, balance of power and scaffolding in a music programme: Five examples from practice

In the first two decades of the 21st century, the call to teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand to demonstrate cultural competencies has intensified. The related scholarly discourse has been informed by research initiatives and articulated in documents such as *Tātaiako* (New Zealand Ministry of Education & New Zealand Teachers Council, 2011) and *The Hikairo Schema* (Macfarlane et al., 2019; Rātima et al., 2020).

Internationally, curricular models based on indigenous world views typically highlight a holistic approach to life, well-being and learning (Morton, 2012). Framed from a Māori world view, *The Hikairo Schema* (Rātima et al., 2020) offers practical advice schematised within seven dimensions: *huataki* (begin affirmatively), *ihi* (demonstrate assertiveness), *kotahitanga* (establish inclusion), *āwhinatia* (build connections), *ira manaaki* (engender care), *rangatiratanga* (enhance meaning), and *oranga* (the pulse). It is emphasised that these dimensions are inter-connected and in practice may merge with each other.

Central to this model is the dimension of *oranga*, which comprises three core principles: relevance, balance of power and scaffolding. *Relevance* concerns aligning the learning (context, content and approaches) with the values of the learners and with their cultural and personal identities. It involves both representing non-dominant languages and cultures in the environment and learning programme, as well as providing experiences that help students to understand and have a sense of belonging in their learning environment.

Balance of power speaks to the capacity of a learning programme to build autonomy in learners. It is concerned with students having genuine opportunities to exercise choice, to work collaboratively with others, to engage in dialogue and negotiation, and to learn by leading others.

Scaffolding is about providing the resources and support that are needed for students to experience success. The way that tasks are designed, introduced and carried out can support success in various ways. Scaffolding may be evidenced in intentional pairing or grouping of students so that they can support each other, and in providing various resources that offer multiple ways to engage with the content or to demonstrate understanding. These three principles underpin the examples from my own practice that follow.

1. Leadership: The song leaders group

The part-time nature of my position offers perhaps unexpected opportunities for students to develop and demonstrate musical leadership. Whole-school assemblies are held on Fridays—a day I do not go to school. The song leaders group provided a connection with the whole school singing that happened in assembly. Typically, this singing is accompanied by music videos projected on a big screen, usually with lyrics. Every assembly has a focus related to the school values, e.g., diversity, excellence.

As a group we took on the task of re-invigorating the singing. This involved finding new songs and resurrecting old favourites. Together we developed a list of features we agreed were important for assembly singing videos. These included elements that were important both to me (appropriateness, singability, inclusion of Te Reo Māori) and to the students (fun songs, actions, readable lyrics). I had previewed some videos and offered suggestions that foregrounded New Zealand music. In pairs and groups, with their devices, students reminisced (e.g., “I remember doing this song in year one”), searched, sorted and shared their findings. Each week we would view videos, sing along and make recommendations for the next assembly. Sometimes a group of volunteers would prepare some actions with which they could lead the school.

This was not a choir, but a group of enthusiastic singers who took on the responsibility to choose appropriate songs and share them with the school. Student voice was strong in this activity. Their

leadership development was scaffolded by setting starting points and clear expectations for the group activities, co-constructing the filters and values we would apply to song choice, structuring times for feedback and discussion about the songs, and making time for review and reflection following each activation (i.e., the school assembly). I am reminded of Berryman’s description of *ako*: “We call it ‘Ako’ because it is about everybody being a teacher and a learner, a learner and a leader” (Berryman, 2018, para. 39).

2. Links to other learning: ‘My Safe House’ artworks

In addition to considering students’ personal and cultural identities, the relevance of music programmes can be enhanced by intentionally connecting with the students’ experience in the rest of their lives, at school and beyond. In the words of *The Hikairo Schema*, to model relevance involves “forming experiences that help ākongā to understand their physical and social environments—and themselves” (Rātima et al., 2020).

When we returned to school after the first pandemic lockdown in Auckland in 2020, our Year 4 students made some drawings depicting their homes and gardens. This was a well-being-focused activity capturing the places where they felt safe during the early stages of the pandemic, when schools were closed and there was much uncertainty. Each student created something very personal but also very detailed.

The amount of graphic detail and the personal connection made these drawings a perfect starting point for creative musical work. We started by engaging with just one or two of the drawings as a whole class, so that I could model ways to explore the piece. This included acknowledging the artist and, with their permission, interpreting the graphic details vocally and rhythmically. Some useful prompts for an activity like this could be:

- Which shapes and details do we want to focus on?
- Where shall we start?
- Which direction shall we go in?
- Would this curve represent a change in pitch or a change in volume?
- What rhythmic ideas does this give us?
- What would people be saying in this place?
- What environmental sounds might you hear?
- How could we represent these with a rhythm, melody or a choice of instrument?

The group work that followed built on this model and was eventually shaped into a coherent series of soundscapes which were recorded and played to accompany the exhibition of their art.



Figure 1: Students work in groups to create soundscapes based on their artwork.

In this series of lessons, scaffolding was provided by modelling the creative process to the class as a whole before they worked on their own or in a group. Balance of power is evidenced where students bring to the activity their own musical ideas, their choices of how to interpret the artwork, and their choice of sounds. By contrast, a more traditional lesson might have dictated which rhythmic elements were being learned and which sound sources were used.

3. *Collaboration: Creative work in groups*

A similar process may be applied to group work relating to topics of inquiry. One class I worked with in a previous school had been studying the life of Sir Edmund Hillary. Starting with a brainstorm of what the students knew about his life, working groups were established to work on music that represented each important event or fact. Using the instruments available in the classroom, voices, body percussion and found sounds, each group considered whether the idea they were working with was best represented by a soundscape or a melody. Melodies were crafted from limited note sets, chosen to represent either sad or happy events in Hillary's life.

Each session followed a similar structure: plenary briefing followed by work in groups, sharing progress and agreeing on next steps. In this way phases of relatively informal group work were nested within a more formal, predictable structure.

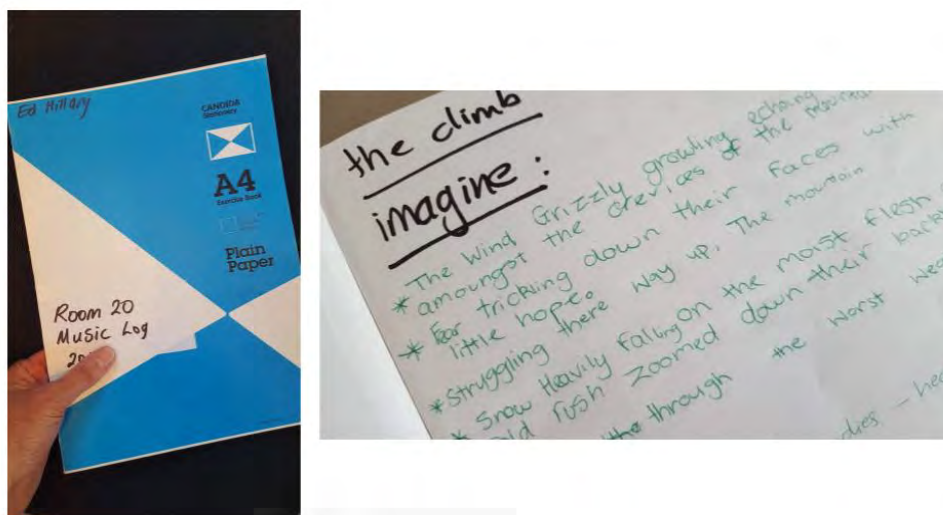


Figure 2: The creative process is modelled and recorded in a log book.

I found the use of a “modelling book” very helpful to record questions, problems, suggestions and as an aide memoire for group membership, instrument choice and so on. This gave visibility to the process. Group work takes the focus away from the teacher at the front of the room. It allows students to move about and to engage meaningfully with their classmates to solve the musical problems the creative tasks present. Returning to Bruner, who called for the classroom to be reconceived as a “subcommunity of mutual learners” (Bruner, 1996, p. 21), I find it illuminating that his metaphor of choice was (perhaps unintentionally) musical. In this “mutual community”, learners would scaffold each other in various ways “with the teacher orchestrating the proceedings” (Bruner, 1996, p. 21).

This is a timely reminder of the expertise required to lead such a process sensitively but with sufficient assertiveness to give a clear structure to the session and keep it moving along. The notions of *ihi* (assertiveness) and *āwhinatia* (“staying on track with connectedness, smoothness, and momentum” (Rātima et al., 2020, p. 32)) are certainly at play here.

4. Building connections with family and community: The family marimba group

A few years ago, when I was teaching in a culturally diverse school, where families were very supportive of their children’s music learning but had limited financial resources, I took the initiative to start a family marimba group. The premise of the group was that students could attend if they had an adult family member with them. We started off learning some familiar songs and marimba pieces, then moved on to creating our own pieces. The composition work followed Orff-based processes, similar to what I would have used in my classes.



Figure 3: Family Marimba Group performing at the Marimba Festival.

There were many heart-warming moments in these afternoon sessions. I noticed how parents (or in some cases aunts and cousins) were able to observe their children’s competency as they played and as they learned new material. Often it was the child who demonstrated musical agency, taking a lead and teaching something to their parent. The adults in the group willingly put themselves in a position of learning something new or learning in a new way. Of course, it was messy at times as attention spans were quite varied. Often, we adapted as we went along to include younger siblings as well. In the end we were able to perform at the Auckland Marimba Festival¹ in a “front-of-house” space with proud school and family members in the audience.

As a result of meeting together over an extended period of time, relationships in the group were warm and supportive. This experience demonstrated meaningful engagement with whānau as advocated in *The Hikairo Schema*, and particularly exemplified the idea that “effective engagement is affective engagement” (Rātima et al., 2020, p. 41).

5. Pivoting to asynchronous access: Ukulele lessons

During the pandemic lockdowns of 2020, in common with many other music teachers, I set up a Google site with a range of activities and materials for students to access. Some of these activities were “unplugged”, while others utilised online content for singing, moving, instrument learning and for creating music. In their designated music time, Year 5 and 6 ukulele students are now encouraged to come to their music lessons with their devices: the ukulele page of the music site is a starting point for their work at school. Having this resource has supported moving to a more flexible approach to in-person lessons.

Of course, the online resources are available at any time and can be accessed from home as well as school. Some students still prefer to use the printed materials that are available (e.g., lead sheets, chord charts). Others have found further ukulele resources online and work with them.

The power balance has certainly moved, as students can choose who they partner with and what songs and skills they will work on, but I have not abdicated my responsibility to my students' learning. Scaffolding is present in a number of ways, both from fellow students and from me. I still lead the lesson in terms of expectations: asking questions, offering support and structuring brief sessions for feedback and sharing progress.

What I am looking for here is engagement, perhaps more than technical ability. I see transferable skills developing, such as working alongside someone to practise a particular skill, developing an idea for an original song, finding instructional materials online, and deciding what is useful and relevant. I have witnessed some wonderful *tuakana/teina* moments where students scaffold each other's learning. At times I have been quite intentional about setting up such partnerships. At other times, they have developed without my intervention. These may not have been evident had we stuck with a "We all strum and sing the same song" approach.

A combination of online and paper resources has made this flexible approach possible. I have learned to be comfortable with the school's BYOD (bring your own device) protocols and to trust my students to use their time and access appropriately. As Basye (2018) suggests, the cultivation of trust that allows learners to increase their autonomy is "a process that unfolds over time" (Basye, 2018, para. 13). Students also take the initiative to find materials they want to use, whether in English or their home language.

What is at work here is akin to the "moments" for student agency and increased engagement that come about when a music programme is less formal (Monk et al., 2013). This informality has been said to reflect a more "real world" approach to musicking, such as popular musicians might engage in (Cremata & Powell, 2017; Karlsen, 2010). It bridges the gap between the digital and non-digital worlds, and between in-school and out-of-school learning with the teacher's role redefined, but far from redundant.

Conclusion

The common ground between agency and culturally responsive practice is expressed in the idea of identity. Music contributes to both individual and collective identity. Student agency in music lessons can be promoted by teachers who consider and apply three core principles of culturally responsive practice: relevance, balance of power and scaffolding. These principles can be put into practice in classroom programmes that build learning communities through a balance of formal and informal activities with both presentational and participatory goals. Repertoire choice and teaching approaches should reflect and capitalise on the strengths and interests of students.

Adopting a culturally responsive approach in the music classroom will certainly be messy, circuitous and iterative. Music teachers must be prepared for the shifts required in their own thinking and practice as well as in relationships and repertoire. It is important to come to terms with ourselves, our biases and our uncertainties. Meaningful and sustainable progress will not happen in a vacuum but must be responsive to the school and wider contexts. It is our responsibility to develop our understanding of students' strengths as individuals and as members of particular cultural and social groups. Many of the themes explored are best applied with a "both/and" rather than an "either/or" mindset which accepts that, for example, both formal and informal strategies and both presentational and participatory goals have their place in school music programmes. The artistry and professionalism of the teacher practitioner is revealed in one's agility: knowing which approach is right for each situation, for each student, and for each moment.

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ⁱ See <https://onza.nz/festivals/>