A NEW PARADIGM IN MUSIC EDUCATION: THE MUSIC EDUCATION PROGRAM AT THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

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I certify that this thesis is my own work and that all sources used have been acknowledged.
This thesis describes a qualitative action research process undertaken ‘in the field’ over approximately eight years of the development of an alternative paradigm for music education. This new paradigm evolved from a simple, practical approach that was not, in the first instance, designed to be transformational, but which quickly showed itself to have potential for providing a different model for conceptualising musical engagement.

It is argued that the standard and widely accepted approach to music education has aspects that does not encourage on-going music making. This study conceptualises that ‘traditional’ Western approach in terms of a ‘virtuosic mountain’ that prioritises and rewards technical achievement. The concept of the virtuosic mountain is developed in terms of three ‘P’s’: Perfection, Practice and Performance. The concept was developed by not just reviewing current literature but also by analysing that literature in light of the developing new paradigm as a means of comparing and contrasting the approaches.

Called ‘The Music Education Program’, this new paradigm is based on a practical approach to the sharing of music making beyond institutional boundaries like the school gate. Children do not ‘perform’ in the community but seek to engage others in making music with them without reference to age, disability or skill level. The focus is on the social outcomes that derive from music making rather than the improvement of skills, which develop as a natural part of community engagement. In this respect, the approach has roots in community enculturation processes that are no longer prominent in Western society.

The new paradigm is presented with a contrasting set of ‘three I’s’: Intent, Identity and Involvement, which are designed to illustrate how the community ‘outreach’ of the Music Education Program provides a model for consciously reconceptualising our approach to music education through re-visiting what might be regarded as ‘old’ practices in a ‘new’ guise. The three ‘I’s’ are illustrated through a series of critical incidents that highlight the necessary change in
theoretical underpinnings that the practical application of the Program demands. This includes a particular focus on the Intent behind our music making, rather than the ‘quality’ in terms of technomusical outcomes; stress on the individual and group choices that develop musical Identity; and demonstration of the ways in which this paradigm may contribute to voluntary, rather than enforced, Involvement.

The critical incident data is supplemented by some survey and evaluation data which supports the view that the social component of musical engagement provides an alternate focus to musical development than does an achievement paradigm. The range of data collected shows that classroom teachers can take a significant role in the encouragement of music making in the primary school without relying solely on the expertise of those with specific musical training; and that overcoming negative attitudes and experiences can transform not only the teacher’s relationship with music but produce a positive effect on her students.

The model described here has evolved through a longitudinal process that constantly maintains the centrality of the practical operation of the program. In so doing, it moves away from theoretical constructs that often do not seem to relate directly to practitioners but, at the same time, it avoids prescriptive methodology. Theory is elucidated through practice in a way that encourages teachers to develop their own practices that are consistent with underlying principles. This model is transformative in nature, having first a transformative effect on the principal researcher and thence on those teachers engaging in professional development with the Program.

Since the Music Education Program does not yet have students who have exited the school system, this study does not attempt to claim success in the long-term in terms of promoting ongoing engagement through life. Data suggest, however, that it has had an impact in encouraging teachers to reconnect with music making and enables them to share that music making with their students, thereby helping to develop more school-based musical engagement that is also affecting the broader community in the Australian Capital Territory.
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To my mother Kathleen,
where the songs began
and my father, David,
with love and thanks.
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Note re gender: I have used an alternating pattern for male and female personal pronouns except in incidents where the gender of the participant/s is known.