We have just welcomed the new cohort of fine students on our BEd (Hons) Primary (Music) course. Some arrive with a Music A-Level, some with experience in musical theatre, some are self-taught open mic veterans, and some ‘have grades’. There’s a whole mixture of backgrounds, experiences and abilities. What our student teachers have in common is a love of music. They have some kind of practical musicianship and they have the urge to work musically with children.

As you can imagine, the course is intensive. In three years, our students learn to be all-round primary teachers, but also champions for music in their future schools. Helping them to grow academically is important. But effective professional development in primary music education, whether as a student teacher or an experienced practitioner, needs to be embedded in practical work with children. Only in this way can a teacher develop “pedagogical content knowledge (PCK): that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional understanding” (Shulman, 1987, p8: my abbreviation). As an ex-headteacher, I know how important it is to find and use effective models of professional development that enhance PCK, not just ‘subject knowledge’.

In reality, many of our students don’t get the opportunity to develop their musical PCK when on teaching practice. So, at the Plymouth Institute of Education, we have developed a number of ways...
to allow them to do this in our music education modules. Here is one example that might be of interest to practising teachers. It uses a focus on learning to enhance teaching.

In their second year, the students take part in a small, school-based research project, which involves observing children engaging in music. We encourage the students to focus on how to detect what children are learning musically: “How do we know?”

As part of this project, the students watch experienced teachers at work and teach whole classes themselves, while their peers hunt for evidence of the children’s musical learning. We find that this research approach, with its focus on assessing musical learning, deepens students’ understanding of many aspects of teaching primary music in a very short time.

This year, for instance, we explored children’s beat-keeping abilities. The students knew that they would need to observe, listen and engage in order to discern how well children could keep a beat and what that might depend on. They pooled ideas about what they might notice, but also saw the need to keep an open mind about what the evidence might be.

When it was their turn to teach, the students chose activities that showed that they had borne in mind the beat-keeping focus. Several classes of children were involved in a wealth of musical activities, such as miming rhythmic animal movements to music, dancing the Macarena as the backing track faded out and back in again, inventing raps, singing rounds and playing drum rhythms with or without an audible beat.

The students’ engaging lessons were the direct result of focusing on what and how children might learn about beat-keeping. In other words, they had...
a simple, clear musical objective (OFSTED, 2012). They also built in moments when children worked independently, as they knew that their peers would need to catch glimpses of children’s independent abilities. Thus, they were feeling their way into appropriately musical formative assessment (Fautley, 2010).

The students also learned a great deal when they were observing. They talked about how children’s beat-keeping depended on a host of factors, including the tempo and appeal of music, the kinds of movement needed, previous experience, confidence, concentration and practice. Most importantly, they understood the need to assess musical learning directly, through musical activities, as part and parcel of the lesson.

Students’ PCK around assessing, planning and teaching were all enhanced by this project, which also included reading and discussion about children’s musical learning. Might a focus on ‘How do we know?’ about children’s musical learning provide a useful starting-point for professional development in your setting?

References


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Do you have something to say about music education?

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