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Music Education and the Draft New Zealand Curriculum

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I share strongly the Metanz concerns about the implications for Music and Music Education in New Zealand of the draft New Zealand Curriculum's "discretionary" approach to the teaching of the Arts and Music in particular in schools. There is a real danger that, in an overcrowded curriculum the Arts, and Music in particular are to be given lip-service recognition only. The potential disappearance of Music as a compulsory area in primary schools will mean that it will be easy for educational institutions to deal with the complexities of the area by marginalising it further.

Music in the Draft Arts Curriculum

What I have written below represents my deep concern about the state of education and particularly Music Education in New Zealand. My reading of the draft for consultation document 2006 of The New Zealand Curriculum did not make me feel any better about the direction that Music Education is taking. I believe that some of educational decision making in recent years has been philosophically flawed, and represents distressingly unclear thinking. The consequence is that, at a time when Music Education can do with all the clarity and sense of purpose it can generate, it has not been able to generate in the curriculum and NCEA documents in particular clear and sustainable pathways.

As an example of what I mean I refer in the draft document to the defining paragraph on page 14 (Arts) relating to Music. I have written below a commentary to indicate the clouded nature of the thinking embodied in the paragraph. I believe that it is imperative that this statement be rewritten in a more coherent and intelligible manner.

Sound Arts - Music

What are the *Sound Arts*?

I understand the discrete nature of the disciplines that are included in the Visual Arts and which are referred to under Visual Arts: drawing, sculpture, design, painting, printmaking, photography, and the moving image. The paragraph relating to music makes no attempt to provide equivalent examples of 'sound arts'. I am unable to imagine any possibilities that may be intended. Music can be categorized into genres, styles, forms etc., and in the old syllabus it was conceptualised into modes, but these all relate to Music as a single art.

The sound arts are expressive ideas and forms practised in natural, acoustic, and digital sound environments.

This "definition" is illogical.

Is shouting an expletive outdoors, in a bathroom, or into a digital microphone an example of one of the sound arts? It conforms to the definition as given above.

Even when interpreting the word "sound" as a synonym for Music, the definition does not hold good. The opening motif of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is an expressive idea and also a formal principle, but it is not an example of a whole art form or discipline.

In literature an expressive idea as may be contained in a sentence does not equate to an art form, nor is a visual idea or form an example of one of the visual arts. So why should an expressive idea or form constitute one of the "sound arts"?

By learning to make sense of sound.....

Sound is not in itself meaningful. It merely is. The only "senses" that can be made of sound are from a scientific point of view – as a description of the nature of sound, or perhaps from a philosophical point of view, such as if one were to consider perhaps whether there is any sound in the absence of a listener. I am sure that this is not what is meant.

In order for sound to have any "meaning" there has to be a musical intention in the composer or arranger of those sounds, or at least the capacity in the listener for responding to the

possibility of intention. Unstructured sound, therefore, in itself has no “sense” since no meaning, in a symbolic or aesthetic sense, is generally intended. If students are encouraged to make “sense of sound” we are inviting imaginative fantasy, which may have personal value, but has little to do with music. On the other hand, “developing a responsiveness to and an understanding of a range of music” may be an appropriate way to use our musical sensibility.

.....students can appreciate and value the aesthetic qualities of music.....

This is a non-sequitur. Merely by engaging in the endeavour to make sense of sound (as opposed to music), we do not automatically become musically sophisticated. Before appreciation and valuing can occur at a connected level, there has to be responsiveness. I can appreciate the work that has gone into making a painting, and I can value the contribution painting makes to society, but unless I have the capacity to engage with the painting then nothing of real value has occurred on the aesthetic plane. Appreciation is primarily a “head” function, and important though it may be, the arts and Music in particular have as their main goal a responsiveness which may involve appreciation, but will also hopefully engage at a variety of emotional levels. We cannot teach responsiveness, but we can create the climate where it will be nurtured by providing rich musical experiences. Responsiveness to the aesthetic qualities of music is a more “musical” goal than “valuing”, which comes after a sustained period of significant musical experiences.

....and express feelings, ideas.....

Another non-sequitur! Learning to make sense of sound is **not at all** a precondition for expressing feelings and sounds. Indeed it is not necessarily related at all to expressing feelings, unless they happen to be through the vehicle of musical ideas. The notion of **musical** feelings and ideas assumes musical intention. The exercise of attempting to *make sense of sound* can have no impact on one’s ability to express feelings and ideas, whether or not they are musical ideas.

....and identities.

What is meant by *expressing identities*? I have no idea.

Students develop literacy.....

The jargon assumes that the reader knows and has accepted the reconceptualising of the word *literacy* as meaning in music something akin to *understanding* or *familiarity*. Unfortunately it also leaves its earlier meaning - the ability to read and write music - without a discrete word. It is true, of course, that if students do all the range of activities described, which represent the old *modes* of the old Syllabus, they may develop a language of music, and therefore be literate in that sense.

I endorse the emphasis on *listening and responding, singing, playing instruments, and creating music*.

...by reading and recording sound, symbols, and notations;

I hope this is merely an error of proof-reading – a matter of a redundant comma.

One cannot “read” sound. I am not even sure what would be examples of sound symbols and notations as opposed to **musical** symbols and notations.

Even in soundscapes using natural objects, any written symbols for sound-making devices, and the sounds they produce still serve a musical purpose, and may therefore be regarded as musical symbols.

Is the word “recording” intended to cover writing as well as sound recording?

....and by analysing and appreciating musical forms.

Students do not analyse musical forms. They may analyse music to disclose the form inherent within. What we might hope will be appreciated, and even experienced as a result will be the expressiveness of the music itself, and not just the form.

They learn to communicate imagination and personal understandings.....

This is again woolly thinking. How do you communicate imagination?

One may use one's musical imagination to express musical ideas and expressive intentions, but the only way to "communicate imagination" as such is on a verbal level, which has little to do with music. Similarly, how does one communicate *personal understandings* through music, except perhaps through the words of songs? One can access music via understanding, but music is not the vehicle to communicate personal understandings. That vehicle is the power of words and verbal concepts.

....as they connect aural thinking,

What is that? I have never thought with my ears. My ears are the sensory portal to my brain which then processes what I hear, but I have only ever thought consciously from my brain or its related nervous system. Does the writer mean aural responses?

...perceptions, and musical practices.

It is unclear what is meant here by *musical practices*. Neither is it clear how the connection of aural thinking, perceptions, and musical practices will necessarily lead to the communication of imagination and personal understandings.

My greatest concern is in the new definition of Music as *Sound Arts*.

The title is not just meaningless, but is unsupported by any clarifying explanation.

If Music educators have so little confidence in the integrity of their discipline that they cannot name it as it is – Music - and resort to clever but meaningless substitutes, there should be no surprise when the sector is not taken seriously.

Music Achievement Objectives

Level 1 Music Achievement objectives use the word *sound* six times and *music* or *musical* only three times. A literal reading of the Level 1 objectives would see students doing a lot of talking about sound and perhaps music, but doing very little appropriate music making, especially singing. The term *Sound Arts* reinforces the concept that teachers can do experiments with sound as a substitute for genuine music education.

The level 1 Developing Practical Knowledge listening activity is singularly inappropriate, in that it invites an unmusical approach to teaching at this level. Instead of requiring an environment in which music is to be experienced and enjoyed for its own sake, the "objective" encourages teachers to use music only as a vehicle for exploring how sound is made. What is implicit is that the experience of music only has value if some intellectual concepts can be drawn from it.

I do not understand the intent of the phrase *through a variety of processes*.

The paragraph continues its confusion. It speaks of the means for exploring how sound is made, as, not of *listening for* musical elements and techniques, but *listening to* them, which appears to me to be an absurdity. Neither do I understand the way in which the discovery of how sound is made can be facilitated through listening to musical elements and techniques.

The Music Achievement Objective levels that follow tend to use subtle language add-ons to indicate distinctions, one from another. The language is so general, however, that it tends to offer obscurity rather than clarity. An outsider to the world of education would be at a loss to understand the distinctions between the levels of each strand.

This is possibly a generic issue across the different subject areas.

Generic Issues

The language issue is a major concern about the draft as a whole. When the present curriculum and the NCEA were first introduced, the intent, as I understand it, was to provide an objective way of evaluating student success by shifting from a course approach to an outcomes emphasis. The drivers of the new system wanted to know not so much the activities

that students were engaged in on any course, as the fact that they will have achieved at a level of mastery. Hence, the introduction of achievement objectives and standards. The reality, which should have been self-evident is that complex areas of study like music can not be reduced to statements of simplistic performance outcomes.

The paradox is that the present draft document, like the current one, does not offer real achievement objectives at all, but merely describes very generalized spheres of activity.

We have made the most extraordinary leap into unreality and self-delusion by describing the loose statements contained under the strands as achievement objectives.

Whereas in the present document there is some attempt to give concrete examples of what activities were intended, many of them inappropriate for the levels, the draft has abandoned such detail, no doubt in the name of clarity.

Given that each school is now given encouraged to *design and implement its own curriculum....* and *schools have considerable freedom in deciding exactly how to do this....* the draft document as a whole appears suggests that the task of defining a curriculum based on achievement objectives is now considered impossible, and even undesirable. I think that fact needs to be faced honestly, and that is at present not being done.

The draft document on page 28 continues to assert the current ideology of outcomes focused education. What has been lost in the drive for apparent accountability in education is the reality of process in education. There is no real education without process. All outcomes are mere stepping stones on a path, and have only passing value. Yet we have been so fixated on assessment and the mirage of outcomes that teachers have found they have little time for real measured progressive teaching. In music, in both NCEA and the present curriculum document, objectives have been set in place without any real mechanisms to ensure pathways to real success. Lack of time, caused by the demands that an outcomes emphasis makes for ongoing assessment and teacher accountability, have made real process work difficult, or even impossible in Music.

Another aspect of the unreality of the draft document is its preoccupation with vision, principles and values. Not that these are undesirable in themselves, but in a curriculum document they should indicate some relationship to the manner in which the teaching of these is to occur. The foreword asks that the new document *clarify how schools are intended to implement the intent of the document*. Nowhere in the draft is there real clarification of how the schools will achieve the high goals.

The vision statement (page 8) is broad in its description of its model students. But it also has alarming gaps. Under *Confident* it omits such important qualities as *independent* and *balanced*. Under *Connected* it makes no reference to *reflective, sensitive, compassionate, responsive* etc. Under *Actively Involved* it does not mention *healthy*. In such a vision statement what is omitted is as significant as what is excluded.

Yet this "vision" and the Key Competencies raise the question of whether schools are adequate vehicles for taking responsibility for these areas, as they might for subject learning. What are described in the first three key competencies are personality characteristics and values which are primarily expressions of individuals and their experiences at home and their environment. Schools have a modifying and balancing role, but they are not equipped to take absolute responsibility for these areas. In my experience values tend to be caught, not taught.

My purpose has been primarily to express to members of Metanz the breadth of my concern about the document in question. I have no confidence that any representation to the Ministry of Education I might make will make a difference to the direction that has been taken. I have more hope that Metanz might be a vehicle for change at least at the Music level.

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MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

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Dear Guy Donaldson

Thank you for your submission on the *New Zealand Curriculum: Draft for Consultation 2006*. Your views will be added to the feedback we are gathering to help produce the final New Zealand Curriculum document, due to be released in mid 2007.

Yours sincerely

Hilary Low
New Zealand Curriculum Project Support

