Exploring the potential of music education to facilitate children's cross-community activities in Northern Ireland

Oscar Odena, keynote at the conference *Intercultural Education and Peaceful Co-existence: The Role of the School*

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Introduction: context of the enquiry

- Background:
- 1 - Music as a sign of identity:
  - post-conflict society (McKittrick *et al.* 2007)
  - 'politization of music'
  - two main communities have different traditions: Irish folk music (*Catholic*) & flute bands (*Protestant*) (= *music stereotypes*)
- 2 - Music as means to reduce cross-community anxiety:
  - By playing/singing together, e.g. some orchestras and current music projects
- Exploratory research question:
  - How can we develop music skills while bringing children from Protestant and Catholic communities together?

Methodology

- **1 Literature review**
- **2 Interviews with 14 'key informants'**
  - ◆ **'Purposive' sample following a 'maximum variation' sampling approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)**
  - ◆ **Sample included practitioners from teacher training colleges, school of music, college, secondary, primary school and nursery teachers, a workshop leader and a recently retired inspector**
  - ◆ **Sample included denominational and Integrated schools**
  - ◆ **semi-structured interviews, 25-65 min.**
  - ◆ **Difficulties regarding 'insiders' researching mixed groups in NI (Carlisle, 2007) were avoided due to the researcher's 'outsider' Spanish status.**

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Examples of questions

- **OWN MUSICAL BACKGROUND**
  - **What is your own background, starting as a young music student…?**
- **WORK**
  - **Could you explain what education activities do you provide? (age level, students' background, etc.)**
- **MUSIC AND MUSIC EDUCATION IN NI**
  - **In the past, did you feel that the two main school-communities were using music as a sign of identity? (How? Has it diminished?)**
- **PROJECT ADVICE**
  - **Could you provide some advice for successful music education activities where children from both communities participate?**
  - **When preparing activities do you try to include music from both traditions or do you try to avoid anything to do with them?**

- **3 Thematic analysis of transcripts using the specialist software for qualitative data analysis *NVivo***

- **4 Drafting the discussion and educational implications for the funding body**

- **DISCUSSION: 13 categories emerged; the following four are the most relevant:**

  - *Stereotypes & alienation*

  - *Socio-economic factors*

  - *Project advice*

  - *Music education potential*

Results: *'Stereotypes & alienation'*

- **QUOTATIONS:**

- *The historical background of brass bands is in the British military system…tends to attract more Protestants; similarly Irish traditional music is part of the folk culture of the Catholics.*

- *Flute bands petrify me because to me they signify the Twelfth of July and marching...for many it's a very appropriate way of being part of the community, but it still frightens me because it's an alien culture.*

- *Like any stereotype, once you start to dig into it, you see that that's not the case, but music has been used as a weapon to sort of define communities…it's like gang mentality.*

'Socio-economic factors'

- **Participants acknowledged their views were influenced by their upbringing**

- **The normalization and slow disappearance of segregation in more affluent areas brought with it a wealth of (*de facto* cross-community) music and music education activities:**

  - ◆ *It works on the professional level and the leafy green suburbs...and to a certain extent in grammar schools*

- **But cultural alienation remained in poorer areas**

'Project advice'

- **Singing and composing were regarded as ideal to engage all children. Specifically 'practical activities' that they could easily relate to: '*that's when they get interested…when they're getting involved in actually doing rather than listening or just watching*'.**

- **Consensus to ignore any type of music that could be related to one of the two main communities (exception: Integrated schools and particular denominational schools in affluent areas)**

- **Non-competitive activities, e.g. *Music Makers*, an innovative series of music workshops for all schools (which consequently brings together school children from each community who would not normally meet)...**

- **Obstacles for cross-community music projects:**
  - ◆ **School teachers' insecurities**
  - ◆ **The 'extra work' involved**
  - ◆ **Insufficient funding for transport**
  - ◆ **Reluctance of parents in more polarised neighbourhoods**
  - ◆ **...and some school Principals were curiously perceived as obstacles too:**
    - ☞ *A number of Principals do not understand the value of Music; [they] see it as getting in the way of teaching English, Maths and Science.*

'Music education potential'

- **Certain schools were described as having a good music reputation, attracting parents regardless of their denomination (arguably from more affluent areas)**

- **Nevertheless, the potential to develop music skills while bringing children from both communities together regardless of their area was acknowledged by the participants' many positive experiences in their own education and work with children:**

  - *[Music] is a superb tool for encouraging children to work together…they throw themselves into it wholeheartedly and are quite prepared to work with other people in doing that.*

  - *They can inspire people like no other group of people can.*

Concluding thoughts

- Pettigrew (1998) proposes 3 stages to reduce conflict between communities:

- (a) Initial contact: more anxiety; emphasis on personal identity and inter-personal interaction (in an effort to 'de-categorise' the individual);

- (b) Contact well established: optimal situation with less anxiety in which the old categorization of belonging to a particular group is highlighted, resulting in weakened prejudices that are generalised beyond the activity;

- (c) Final stage: after extended contact, individuals begin to think of themselves as part of a redefined new larger group that comprises all communities (development of the idea of a new community, or a 're-categorisation' of the old ones).

- **SOME IMPLICATIONS:**
- **Analyses illustrate the need for:**
  - ◆ **Schools to get involved in project design**
  - ◆ **Provision of development for teachers**
  - ◆ **Provision of appropriate funding**
  - ◆ **Focus on schools in deprived areas (in affluent areas they seem to come together when they wish to do so)**

- **Focussing on young children appears to maximise project impact: participants remembered first time they came across youngsters from across the divide in musical activities, which helped to dilute stereotypes**

- **Projects would need to offer something that entices children (fun), parents (quality) and schools (status), focussing first on quality musical experiences and leaving 'respect' to develop naturally.**

- **For more information see the full research report or the article in the *British Educational Research Journal* (Odena, 2009, 2010)**

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