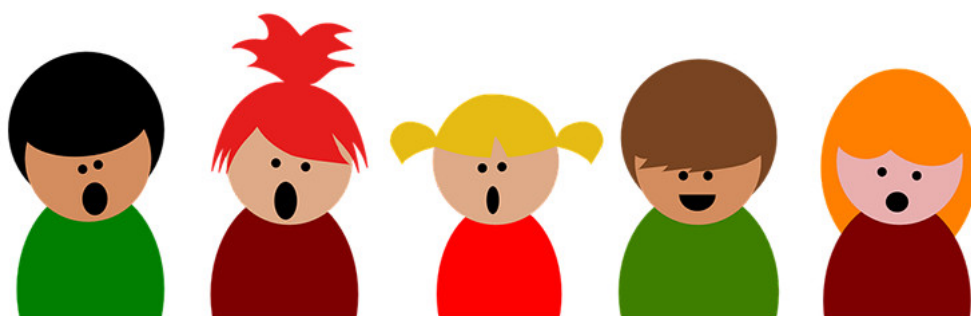# LINK

Feedback in action

An innovative approach to developing primary teachers' attitudes, musical understanding and practices

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My research aims and purpose

My research addresses issues of professional development in music education with reference to a one year 'in-school' programme of training provided by a nationally renowned music education charity in an urban primary school. Previous work (Timson, 2014) identified three significant dimensions of the programme: the situated context of a learning community of early career practitioners; the programme handbook consisting of a singing-based curriculum & related pedagogical methods; and in-service training. This thought-piece explores the concept of 'Feedback in Action', focusing on 'in-class' training and considering ways in which the development of teachers' attitudes, musical understanding and practices are supported through inter-active mentoring.

In recent years there has been an international move away from traditional 'in-service' training events towards a more 'situated' model of professional development in the workplace. The 'Voices Foundation', (a UK charitable music trust), seeks to work with teachers 'in-school' to achieve a level of musical skill that instils confidence and professional agency. It seeks to address the issue of the compensatory training of generalist class teachers of music in the context of an identified deficit in confidence and skills on career entry, and the national insufficiency of primary music specialists (Rogers, Hallam and Creech 2008).

In July 2013, a local urban Primary School began working with the Voices Foundation on a year-long whole-school programme of professional training built on a singing-based music curriculum, inspired by Hungarian educator Zoltan Kodaly (Williams, 2013).I became intrigued by this partnership and sought to research the processes and initial impact of the programme as a process of 'situated' learning (Lave and Wenger 1991) on the thinking and practice of novice teachers in the school. My research aimed to identify ways in which the development of primary generalist teachers' attitudes, musical understanding and practices are supported through the implementation of a singing-based curriculum by 'in-class' mentoring, team-teaching, post lesson discussion and a programme handbook of related teaching and learning resources.

My research approach

A shift in the school wide culture of teaching and learning in music was the stated aim of both my case study school and the Voices Foundation. The Voices proposition is that curriculum music 'needs to provide a carefully structured progression and continuity of learning resulting in deep understanding of music and opportunities for children's personal achievement'(http://www.voices.org.uk/in-school/outlineofthe1-yearprogramme/ accessed 10.10.14). The School might be defined as a 'learning community' of early career practitioners where 'relationships of collaboration' are expected and 'critical practice is ongoing' (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

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I adopted a case study approach to provide insight and illumination into processes of professional development in this situation (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). The Voices Programme (initially one academic year in duration) is the antithesis of a 'short term-project', having 'sustainability' as a key aim. I have therefore adopted a longitudinal approach, focusing on changes over time with prolonged on-site data collection (Newby, 2010).I undertook semi-structured interviews, observations and focus groups. Initial themes were informed by survey data, in a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006).

My findings

I have grouped my findings under a number of inter-related themes. Teachers' pre-programme expectations of the training process revealed substantial anxieties regarding the advisory 'in-class' visits .This professional vulnerability has been well documented in the literature, with Welch (2005:245) noting, 'the voice is an essential part of our human identity: of who we are, how we feel, how we communicate, and how other people experience us'. Anticipated exposure to an experienced vocal practitioner made the teachers' lack of confidence more acute. By the end of the year, however, there was a *universal* and substantial positive trend in self-grading for *all* teachers in relation to perceived confidence in singing and musical pedagogy. Staff strongly identified 'in-class' advisory visits as the key element underlying their increased confidence. I have divided the influential elements of these visits into the themes explored below.

Situational relevance of the teaching context

The advisory sessions were situated 'in-class', with pupils, in the normal working relational context of the practitioner. The Advisory Teacher articulated the 'In-class' process as:

> Starting from where the teacher is: what she is teaching and how she is teaching.
>
> Advisory Teacher Interview

After initially expressing experience-based anxieties including their own lack of confidence, vocal and pedagogical skills, the majority of teachers grew increasingly receptive to the 'in-class' visits and began to perceive themselves as emergent music teachers. (Focus groups).

> If someone was just to come into the music lesson for twenty minutes & observe, give feedback then leave, I do not think it would work as well …but the fact that she does do the teaching, its team teaching, it's not an observation. It's like working with a colleague.
>
> Teacher 6: Focus group

Credibility of 'expert': Musical/ Pedagogical Modelling

The expert mentoring and apprenticeship relationship manifest in 'in-class' visits was layered and nuanced, accommodating the musical understanding of individual teachers and pupils. *Mentoring interventions were 'light touch' and modelled/negotiated alternative strategies.* Teachers perceived that the advisory teacher entered the classroom with 'expert' credibility that *was then embedded in action* 'in the moment'.

> Her modelling of skills and concepts with pupils explained why she did things.
>
> Teacher 3: Focus group

This very significant process of diagnosis, intervention and improvised action I have characterised as 'Feedback-in-Action', a concept discussed further below.

Vulnerability of 'immigrant' expert/conferred legitimacy on novice teacher

A range of relational strategies were employed by the advisory teacher during the 'in-class' lessons. The voluntary vulnerability of the 'immigrant' expert into an 'alien' classroom secured the respect of staff and a more open response of teachers to the mentoring process.

> It has to be someone who is quite open to some of the teaching and taking over, who puts herself out … some of our pupils are quite challenging.
>
> Teacher 11: Focus group

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In turn, the advisory teacher was seen to confer legitimacy on the novice teacher through frequent, extemporaneous feedback. *This feedback 'in the moment', particularly appropriate to an 'of the moment' discipline such as music, facilitated immediacy of response, risk taking and enquiry on the part of early practitioners. Teachers who receive conferred legitimacy for emergent practice from the advisory mentor began to overcome their lack of confidence with regard to singing and develop musical practice (*De Haan and Burger, 2005).

Immediacy, risk taking and development of thinking and practice

The increasing relational security fostered by informed and positive verbal feedback enabled teachers to begin to push performance and pedagogical boundaries with increased confidence.

> I could fly because K would catch me if I fell ….. Like an angel whispering in my ear.
>
> Teacher 4: Focus group

Teacher understanding, autonomy and agency

Teachers felt practice was supported in a way that nurtured their understanding, autonomy and agency:

> When she (the advisory teacher) then comes back, she can see if we have acted on them or actually if it's just been a 'one off'. I find for me it makes me do them, meet the targets and want to progress and to move on from it'
>
> Teacher 7: Focus Group.

The co-professional relationships of trust developed though 'in-class' mentoring (and the verbal discussion and target setting agreed in post lesson target setting) empowered teachers to develop their own agency in relation to the teaching of music in a sustainable way.

Whole school practice - A structured participation framework

Teachers identified the importance of a shared professional development experience. It seems there is something significant about being a full participant in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), which sits well with a 'whole school' approach to a sustained incremental development of musical skills and understanding.

> It might be something about us being a real learning community - it might not work in every school.
>
> Teacher 7: Focus group

'Feedback-in-action'

Claxton (2008) suggests that education is an apprenticeship into ways of learning, with students learning how to learn from the models their teachers offer. I would suggest that the observed process that I have characterised as 'Feedback-in-Action' (an enacted dialogue 'in-the-moment') comprises a unique form of professional learning.

In a discipline that requires instantaneous teacher-pupil interventions, this dialogue allows teachers to push performance and pedagogical boundaries, to take risks, to 'go out on a limb' knowing that they will be supported and signposted to next steps. These 'next steps', a co-constructed repertoire of musical diagnosis and strategies, gradually become assimilated by the teacher. In this study, inter/post lesson mentoring allowed such learning to be co-articulated, promoting 'conscious competence' (Wipple, 2015) and supported novice teachers' discernment and articulation of pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman *et al.,* 1987; Loughran, 2012). *It may be something about the spontaneous nature of musical experience 'in the moment' that lends itself to this form of professional learning, a discourse 'in music not about music' (*Swanwick, 2008:12).

The micro process of 'Feedback-in-Action' between participants in the classroom was supplemented by a macro process of feedback between teachers and teachers and pupils across the 'Learning Community' of the school, exemplified in a Singing Celebration at the end of the Programme.

Discussion and further research

'Feedback-in Action', an enacted dialogue 'in the moment', co-constructs a repertoire of musical and pedagogic interventions, allowing early career teachers to challenge their own performance and pedagogical boundaries by facilitating risk taking and practice enquiry leading to effective music practice. This has notable implications for Music

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education both in Primary Schools and HEI's in the UK. Whilst there is still a place for traditional workshop-based INSET (a major part of pre-service training and the Voices programme) co-participative teaching supported by sustained expert 'In-class mentoring' seems to be a very effective form of professional development. It appears particularly potent when embedded in a socio-cultural practice (the implementation of the Voices Programme) within a whole school learning community. There is, however, a significant resource issue in the scale of investment required to support this type of situated, mentor led teacher learning, which gives rise to questions of sustainability to be addressed in future research in the continuation programme.

A more detailed account of this ongoing research will appear as an article in a future issue of LINK.

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