

Musical imagination and the development of the artist in Ireland's primary school system.

In this paper I explore the notion of musical imagination in the context of Ireland's primary school system. Drawing on documentary evidence, I show how structures put in place in nineteenth-century Ireland's education system have shaped musical knowledge as a series of prescribed curricula and have portrayed teachers as a homogenous group sharing a common practice bias. Within the system, elements of knowledge tended to be imported which were defined at the political centre (England) and implemented on the ground by the practitioners. Key issues were the development of numeracy and literacy.

I argue that the impact on the development of musical imagination in primary education - at both pre-service and in-career levels- has been considerable and persists in contemporary education. In particular, it has led to a lack of attention to the development of an 'artistic voice' in teachers and pupils alike. In examining the extent to which a relationship between teacher and music which feature aspects of both alienation and allegiance, I point to the need to balance the preparation of teachers to work in a centralised system with the development of the individual as artist. In conclusion I point to challenges presented by recent changes where the emphasis has moved towards defining music in terms which can facilitate the development of musical imagination. I discuss the implications of such a policy on conceptions of practice with particular reference to tensions between policy and practice.

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A national system of education was set up across the island of Ireland in the early part of the nineteenth century. The aim was social cohesion and structures were put in place to establish a curriculum and the means whereby it would successfully be implemented. As with similar systems elsewhere, priority was given to putting templates in place to establish and maintain a particular conception of knowledge, one which was standardised and defined at a macro level. This was achieved by the presentation of prescribed practices in the form of standardised syllabuses. Music was included from the outset for its emphasis as a 'cheery influence on school life generally'¹. The commissioners focused on the promotion of musical literacy and performance. They imported the ideals of Hullah which were based on a series of steps which would allow aspects of the subject to be introduced in a natural and logical order. The aim was to offer a foolproof method of instruction for both teacher and pupil alike and one which would be steered to success by adherence to the manual.

Part of the plan for education in the national system involved the instigation of pre-service schools where the body of teachers could be trained to implement the ideals promoted in the system. The level of competency required for the implementation of the new system was set out in textbooks where content and method were clearly laid out, sequentially prescribed and focused on development of literacy skills. Model schools were set up and instruction in teaching was given through the publication of manuals of instruction. By undergoing the programme of training, teachers were equipped with knowledge and skills necessary to implement the curriculum. Thus the training was regulated and the teacher was equipped to implement the content of the manuals of instruction and textbooks. In the case of music, this involved the importation of the Wilhem-Hullah² method to Ireland. This focused on song singing and the development of music literacy. Class teaching was teacher-directed and certificates of

competence were issued to teachers who had mastered the skills necessary to implement the prescribed syllabus.

From these origins, there are two characteristics in respect of music education in the primary school which have been retained to the present day and have as yet remained largely uncontested. One of these is the portrayal of a conception of music in primary education as a body of knowledge which can be transmitted from expert to novice, largely by rote. Allied to this is a second characteristic regarding the role of the teacher as one of conduit or curriculum implementer. The teachers tended to be seen as conduit of an 'alien' culture to a group of people thought ready to assimilate it and appreciate it, namely the pupils.

In the Irish context, this has had a particular resonance where, in the school system, those practices were promoted which were imported and did not form part of the oral tradition.³ From the outset, the implementation of the curriculum was focused on a particular conception of music education as prescriptive and objectives-based. Little room was given to the personal or the idiosyncratic in education. Not surprisingly, this led to tensions among those charged with delivering the contents of the prescribed curriculum, namely the teachers. At the time there were, in essence, two distinctly different situations in existence, namely 'hedge schools'⁴ and schools run by Societies. The 'hedge schools' were under the direct authority of their teachers, generally owned by them and always depending for their existence upon the fees paid by pupils. Here the curriculum was created by the master and the teaching style was individual and idiosyncratic, drawing on the particular strengths of the master. The 'hedge schools' generally tended to foster local knowledge and the master enjoyed a good reputation with the parents of the children. In contrast, the schools provided by the Societies were mainly of a collective nature and concerned with providing a uniform standard of religious education. Some of them (like the Kildare Place Society) were very influential and stimulated the foundation of many schools throughout Ireland which incorporated the monitorial system of Bell and Lancaster. The monitorial system had a popular appeal, not least because it was cheap and efficient and, as argued by Parkes⁵ (1984) one school master could teach up to a thousand boys. Thus, the national system of education grew from a mixed bag of ideas, where teaching practices were on the one hand, individual and non-denominational and on the other hand, collective, absent of local flavour and denominational.

In a framework such as this, knowledge may be seen as external to teachers (at least initially) and becomes embodied in textbook and syllabus. Teachers become readily interchangeable, members

of a homogenous community, sharing a common practice bias. In the context of music in the national system, the content from the outset elevated the status of notated music and so defined music as product-led while the process of music making was secondary. Consequently, it becomes difficult to equate music education with a practice which can promote the development of the musical imagination. For the purpose of the present paper, I want to focus on the notion of musical imagination as it might be applied to that area of music education named in the literature as 'composing'. Against this background, it becomes clear that an appraisal of the development of musical imagination is a difficult one. Teachers are prepared who are generalist and come to the profession with a set of formative experiences in music which have been varied. These experiences - personal and idiosyncratic - have not, as yet been visible in the system.

Since the beginning, there have been changes in emphasis but the framework has remained largely unchanged. This framework is one in which the knowledge base of music has tended to ignore the idiosyncratic aspect in favour of a 'one-size fits all' conception and the opportunity to pursue the musical imagination of pupils and teachers alike has not been taken. Instead, music education has been held hostage to various ideologies, whether concerned with the promotion of cultural nationalism (in the turn of the twentieth century) or with the promotion of the Irish language. Even within the more recent past, there is evidence in official reports⁶ to suggest that little attention is given to the multiple realities which exist in the classroom. It would appear that little has altered with regard to how the perception that what happens in classrooms can be discussed in the abstract. This is all the more ironic given the celebration of the primary school as a place where the uniqueness of the child is cherished and where music is held as one of the ways of expression of this uniqueness.

In current policy, as espoused in the 1999⁷ curriculum, music is held as a unique form of communication and as a means by which feelings and interests are organised and expressed. Music is presented in the context of arts education as a universal part of all cultures reflecting the social and cultural context and the era of its creation. Most significantly, the emphasis can now move from the notion of music as a set of prescribed practices in design and content. In design, music is now presented as part of an arts curriculum, together with physical education, drama and art. The curriculum is organised into strand units which can offer teachers latitude on which to base the teaching and learning of music in the classroom. In content, two broad areas are presented, namely those of concept development and strands. Concept development describes the musical concepts that the child should develop as s/he engages in musical activity while strands

refers to three components Listening/ responding, Performing and Composing. Listening emphasises the importance of purposeful, active listening - listening *for* rather than listening *to*, which is considered passive – in order to elicit physical, verbal, emotional and cognitive responses. A personal response is central to the listening experience. Performing involves ‘song singing’ and playing instruments as a means of developing musical understanding. Performing dwells on the importance of using the voice, in both familiar and unfamiliar songs. Tied in with performing is the area of literacy and particular the areas of pitch and rhythm. Playing instruments provides opportunities to demonstrate growing confidence and understanding in making music using other music sources. Composing involves improvising and creating as well as talking about and recording music in a variety of ways - ranging from graphic, invented, simplified or standard notation to electronic recording.

This change in emphasis offers both challenges and opportunities to those concerned with music education as a means of enhancing the musical imagination of pupils and teachers in equal measure. Firstly, in broadening the view of music, it challenges the teacher to reassess the ‘knowledge’ base from which musical imagination comes. By describing the area of ‘composing’ as ‘imaging in sound’, this is more than possible. Where earlier the individual and the idiosyncratic was discouraged and all but abolished, in the current policy, it can become the defining characteristic and can place the individual response at the heart of the musical encounter. By drawing on the experiences of the pupils as lived out in the classroom, the world of imaging in sound can therefore be opened up as never before. It can thus allow as many imaginative responses to music as there are persons engaging in the imaginative encounter.

A further challenge may be found in respect of evaluation. An attempt to include the process of making music as part of the curriculum in primary school was made in the 1971⁸ curriculum but was unsuccessful as evidenced by the failure to find a way of evaluating it. Where previously, evaluation consisted largely of the quantifiable and the generic, contemporary curriculum demands that the level of individual is captured and celebrated in a manner that respects the artist and the artistic endeavour. By its nature, this must involve the process and the product. In addition, it will need to take into account the variables in context of practice, including the formative experiences of the teachers as well as the milieu in which the teaching occurs.

One of the most compelling opportunities within the current policy is the extent to which the teacher is encouraged to take a central role in the development of musical responses in their

pupils. By extending this to the development of musical imagination, teachers can re-shape the course of the musical encounter. Composing can offer such an opportunity where the emphasis is on imaging in sound.

In the area of teacher education, this is especially true insofar as it provides space for a role of teacher as one who fosters this musical imaging in the classroom. While this idea is not new, it has not heretofore been effective. In the booklet 'Notes for Teachers'⁹ which was the textbook used in all the training colleges up to 1970, the aims of the school music course which had been stated in the 1939 programme were articulated for the benefit of the teachers. Among them was the suggestion that a national school of composition be established. Having stressed the need for composition, no further mention was made of it in the programme. In light of the fact that there is at present a further attempt to include the *process* of music-making as an integral part of the music programme, as evidenced by the place of 'composing' in the 1999 curriculum, it seems reasonable to assume that there is, at policy level, at any rate, goodwill towards the 'idea' of music as imaging in sound. Whether or not this will become a reality remains to be seen.

It is my belief that of the three strands it is composing that provides unique opportunities around self-expression and musical imagination for teacher and pupil alike. There are important implications for teacher education at pre-service and in-career levels which involve making available the resources needed to bring about such activity. In order for the policy to be put in practice, such priority needs to be given.

¹ As reported in Durcan, T. (1972). *History of Irish education from 1800 with special reference to manual instruction*. Bala, North Wales: Dragon Books.

² See Rainbow, B. (1967). *The land without music*. Rainbow, B. (1967). The land without music. Musical education in England and its continental antecedents. London:Novello. The adaptation by John Hullah of Wilhem's Manuel Musical for use in England is described. Strategies included the notion of fixed solfa, the 'musical hand' for pointing melodies and the handsigns by means of which tones and semitones were respectively indicated by opening and closing the fist when singing the scale. (p.123).

³ For an account of how these differences originated and became polarised, see the author's 'A song to sweeten Ireland's wrong: music education and the Celtic revival'. In James Murphy and Elizabeth Fitzsimon (2004). *The Irish revival reappraised*. Dublin: Four Courts Press.

⁴ The term 'hedge school' referred to the places where schooling took place, namely on the sunny side of a hedge. For a colourful account of how the hedge schools were run, see Dowling, P. J. (1968). *The hedge schools of Ireland*. Dublin: The Talbot Press.

⁵ Parkes, S. (1984). *Kildare Place, the history of the Church of Ireland Training College 1811-1969*. Dublin: Church of Ireland College of Education.

⁶ Among the more prominent of these are the following:

Irish National Teachers Organisation. (INTO). (1976). Curriculum Questionnaire Analysis. Dublin: INTO: Department of Education. (1983). Tuairisc ar theagaisc an cheoil sna bunscoileanna [report on teaching of music in the primary schools]. Unpublished.

Conference of Convent Primary Schools in Ireland. (1975). Evaluation of the New Curriculum for Primary Schools. Dublin: Ardiff Printers Ltd.

Herron, D. (1985). Deaf ears? a report on the provision of music education in Irish schools. Dublin: The Arts Council and

Review Body on the Primary Curriculum. (1990). Report of the Review Body on the primary curriculum. Dublin: NCCA/Department of Education.

⁷ Department of Education and Science (1999) *Primary Curriculum* Dublin: Stationery Office

⁸ Department of Education (1971). *Curriculum na bunscoile: primary school curriculum. Teacher's handbook, parts 1 and 2*. Dublin: Browne and Nolan.

⁹ Department of Education. (1953). *Oideachas Naisiunta. (National education) Notes for Teachers. Music*. Dublin; Stationery Office