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Beginners leading the way: A study of beginner instrumentalists peer teaching.

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Background

Previous research has shown that generalist student teachers lack confidence in teaching music partly because of lack of training and support but also because of perceived lack of musical skills (Hennessy, 2000; Holden and Button, 2006). In an attempt to develop a higher profile for music in primary education the government has supported strategies such as the Music Manifesto (2006) and the 'Sing Up' initiative (2007). The Rose Review (2009) recommendations and their implications for primary schools to develop a creative cross-curricular approach to learning and teaching imply significant challenges for educational practice, policy and theory particularly in the training of primary school teachers to develop secure subject knowledge in all curriculum subjects. There is a need for more research on primary teachers' experience and pedagogy in relation to music (Young, 2009; Hennessy, 2001). This study aims to contribute to the development of pedagogical knowledge in the field of music education.

Research Questions

This paper reports on the initial findings of a longitudinal, qualitative investigation into the experience of a small group of twelve generalist teacher education students in a large teacher education department. The participants were in their second year, had little or no previous music experience and were engaged in a 10 week practical musicianship module as an elective choice. The aim of the module was for students to be able to accompany a children's song on guitar and play a simple melody on recorder in order to develop their skills and confidence in music in the primary classroom. The students were taught recorder or guitar by a tutor and then peer taught this instrument to a partner. In addition students were introduced to basic music theory and significant approaches to music pedagogy.

The focus of this paper has two key agendas: firstly to enable the students to learn how to play an instrument and secondly for that musicality to impact on their teaching in schools. Previous studies have shown that issues such as confidence, motivation, practice, attitude, self-esteem and suitability for the chosen instruments (Hallam, 2006) clearly impact on the learners' experiences when learning an instrument; however this study aims to investigate how and to what extent.

Initial questions identified include 'To what extent can beginner instrumentalists teach peers at the same level?' 'What teaching/learning strategies do student teachers employ when peer teaching?' and 'How effective is beginner instrumentalist peer teaching after tutor input?'

Ultimately the aim is to follow the group of student teachers into their first appointments to ascertain, 'What impact can learning and teaching an instrument have on student teacher's effectiveness in planning for music activities in the primary classroom?'

Methods

Data collected included weekly, ongoing, student reflective diaries that were part of the assessment process; questionnaires; assignment submission; to be followed by interviews and placement self-evaluations in late Spring 2010. Students used Pebblepad, an e-portfolio system, to enter their reflections through a structured framework although this was not compulsory. Each student shared their reflections on a weekly basis, with the tutors and, if they wished, with members of the group. Brown, Fry et al, reference Kolb (1984) when discussing reflection as a means of 'transforming and integrating new experiences and understanding with previous/existing knowledge.' In addition tutors

reflected on their teaching and shared this, through Pebblepad, with the students on a weekly basis in an attempt to encourage 'deep learning' (Biggs, 2003) and develop a learning community. (Wenger, 1998)

An interpretive approach to the analysis will be taken identifying key themes and drafting a coding framework based on the research questions (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). In addition action research approaches will be employed as the intention of the study is to 'understand, improve and reform practice' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 1994: 186) and improve the skills, knowledge and understanding of the participants.

Frame

Theoretical underpinning includes social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1962, Bruner, 1986), experiential learning with regard to practical experimentation (Piaget, 1951) and peer teaching and learning (Green, 2007). Development of independent learning was an important anticipated outcome in addition to completing the necessary skills to meet the assessment requirements. The aim was to challenge accepted conventions of teacher as expert imparting knowledge by empowering the student teachers to develop awareness of their own learning and for them to then apply this to their peer teaching in order to consolidate their skills as both teachers and learners simultaneously. Engagement in peer teaching and learning is likely to be informal and relaxed leading to the development of tacit knowledge which according to Eraut (2000) is 'more likely to occur in non-formal learning settings, but this kind of learning also occurs unobserved in the interstices of formal learning contexts. Tidy maps of knowledge and learning are usually deceptive' (Eraut, 2000: 133).

Research findings

Data analysis is in progress and the paper will present findings on the emerging themes and their interaction including improved music skills, peer teaching strategies, collaborative learning, motivation, self esteem and confidence.

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