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Living the spiral curriculum: using the Swanwick/Tillman sequence of musical development to support music in primary schools in the 1980s

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Abstract

This article aims to capture how the Swanwick and Tillman (1986) spiral model of musical development influenced my work as an Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) music coordinator (advisory teacher). It discusses my professional position in a period of teaching prior to the implementation of the National Curriculum for Music, to illustrate dichotomous pedagogical approaches in a developing re-positioning of aesthetic knowledge in music education. Using the example of two Key Stage 2 (KS2) music projects, a brief reflection concludes how the model of musical development and an adapted pedagogic approach facilitated my work in supporting music teachers to embrace music teaching with confidence and to consider what meaningful musical activity for musical learning is and how this might be planned.

Keywords: pedagogy; development; creativity; musical knowledge

My professional positionality

In 1986, when Swanwick and Tillman published their work on musical development, I was the head of music in an Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) secondary school in the East End of London. The school was situated within an economically challenged and vibrant multicultural community. Music was compulsory until the age of 14 years and I was responsible for designing and implementing the school music curriculum.

A key challenge as a school head of music was to understand the world of a significant number of pupils in Year 9 (13–14-year-olds) for whom school seemed to have nothing to offer but who were immersed in their chosen cultural musical styles and genres. I connected with these pupils in the music lessons through their musical leadership. They evaluated the music they were listening to and identified their own notions of quality and success. They seemed to have an intuitive awareness of ‘how to make judgements, to discriminate and to decide for themselves what felt right’ (Finney, 2002, p. 122). At the time, I did not think about musical progress, because I believed that each time a group of pupils immersed themselves in a rap or a piece that inspired them, the process of crafting a performance deepened their ‘acquaintance knowledge’ (Swanwick, 1994 p.17) and therefore the value of the music they made.

Musical knowledge developed through their music making. The roles of composer, audience and performer were blurred; they were driven by their own and their peers’ musical judgements. As a teacher I made recordings that empowered the interpretive process, rather than solely musical reproduction. I combined acoustic work with recorded work to craft the

final performance of the music. Informal concerts/gigs of pupils' work were attended by their peers, who could often be rather demanding! Successful performances drew instinctive, appreciative, respectful, and positive responses including tongue clicks, finger clicks and one-word adjectives such as 'wicked'.

Whilst Year 9 were immersed in their own musical choices, Year 7 (11–12-year-olds) engaged with the ILEA's emerging model of music teaching and learning. In this contrasting pedagogical approach, a musical amateur preselected a piece of music from the classical Western canon and presented it to enable pupils to recreate their own arrangement and thereby understand how the music works. Knowledge and understanding of repertoire strengthened, because pupils grew to know the piece of music through structural analysis, and through the imaginative ways in which music was creatively explored and engaged with. Each project ended with either a concert or recording of the piece, in the belief that pupil re-engagement with a greater level of musical understanding was now possible. In contrast to the Year 9 pupils, Year 7 pupils remained 'curriculum consumers as opposed to curriculum makers' (Philpott, 2016 p. 84), and the selected piece of music was always from the western European canon. Neither the Year 7 nor the Year 9 curriculum was planned or informed by the details of musical progression or continuing musical development.

The re-positioning of musical knowledge

The pedagogical contrast between the two approaches to music teaching and learning was striking. For Year 9, who understood rap from repeated listening, the complete freedom to musically explore and 'think aloud' was an important part of the process of sharing and crafting ideas with like-minded enthusiasts. They were immersed in music as active participants in the construction of multiple forms of music knowledges that stemmed from fluid social practices (Philpott & Spruce, 2012; Burnard, 2016). Year 7 activities were much more scaffolded. Pupils created and worked with given musical ideas and musical structures, in a musical style and genre largely unknown to them and traditionally associated with propositional knowledge (Swanwick, 1994). Their musical knowledge was expressed by Burnard (2016) as music curriculum knowledge that was 'discontinuous not continuous with every musical experience, especially in terms of the *possibilities of knowledges and their construction*' (p. 102).

When my work as a music coordinator for the ILEA began in 1987, I was confident of three things gained from my experience to that date. Firstly, I believed there were different types of musical knowledge and different ways of knowing, which all deserved respect. I needed to ask myself what I understood musical knowledge to be in the context of teaching content and to examine the depth of understanding I expected of the pupils. Secondly, I held that there was no one single way to teach music. Thirdly, I considered the music curriculum as most effective when the pupils were able to engage with the music they most enjoyed and wanted to explore.

The dominant progressive ideology in the ILEA was the work of Paynter and Aston (1970) whose impact upon the music curriculum was already significant and for many, liberating. As Spruce wrote, 'it challenged deep-rooted and often exclusionary ideas about music education, the nature of music knowledge and how this should be taught' (2021, p. 108). For the generalist Key Stage 2 (KS2) teacher, however, the individual interpretation of the changed dialogical discourse was a challenge. Typically, such a teacher tried to introduce composing into the music curriculum by encouraging the children to form small groups, each group exploring an aspect of music that they could share with the rest of the class. The teacher, already anxious about the high volume of sound, coupled with a lack of subject knowledge, may sometimes have felt unable to begin a dialogue of 'feedback' with her class, or to guide a child to develop

their musical ideas. It seemed inspiring for the generalist primary teacher to enable children to explore and create music, but it remained a huge challenge to be able to understand the work and plan for it on a continuing and developing basis. Learning ‘to ask the right kind of question, to suggest a more relevant possibility, to choose material or suggest an activity that may have more personal meaning and consequence for the individual’ (Swanwick & Tillman, 1986, p. 336) was challenging.

Examples of KS2 music projects

In order to illustrate the influence of Paynter and Aston in the music work I oversaw as an advisory music coordinator, I here include two examples from Year 5 work from the late 1980s. They were 6-week projects that I developed after working with musical amateurs. Both examples centre on creating music and feature musical structure. In project one, the story unfolds through cartoon spoken captions and sound effects. The story is recreated and then reimaged, inspired by the skilled vocal techniques of Cathy Berberian. In project two, The Gnome, Mussorgsky plays with three key musical ideas, combining them in a range of different ways, and the children do likewise. Both examples can relate to the knowledge identified in the spiral (Swanwick, 1994) and in the National Curriculum attainment targets for Music (1988), both of which had begun to influence me by this stage. The influence of the spiral here can be seen in the developmental headings, which in turn set the parameters for the children’s musical making and creating.

Project 1

Developmental Element of Musical Knowledge	Vernacular		Speculative	
	Musical dimensions, phrase lengths, rhythmic and melodic repetition, and sequence			
Musical Activity	Explore different ways to express ‘hello’ and make it mean different things, e.g., a warm welcome, a mysterious find, etc.	Read the comic story aloud through its sound effects (splat, zap, yazooo, etc)	Create a new story using the sound effects.	Record the new story (technology)
			Record sound effects	Notated (pictures and pencil marks) with speech and vocals
			Play with recorded sound effects (play backwards, echo and reverb)	
Attainment Target Level 2	Level 2: Pupils recognise and explore how sounds can be organised. They choose carefully and order sounds within simple structures such as beginning, middle, end and in response to given starting points. They represent sounds with symbols and recognise how the musical elements can be used to create different moods and effects.			
Broad Layer of Musical Knowledge	EXPRESSION		FORM	

Project 2

Developmental Element of Musical Knowledge	Vernacular	Speculative		
Musical Activity	Musical dimensions, phrase lengths, rhythmic and melodic repetition, and sequence	Choose three characteristics to create your own musical 'not very nice' character. Describe each characteristic in sound, to present three different musical ideas, each a different dimension of the not very nice	Each characteristic is now to be performed in half the time you have allocated it. Cut some ideas? (Listen and decide), increase the speed? ...	Combine the three different musical ideas, e.g., overlapping, using sections of the idea, repeating, sort of copying, each at different speeds, etc
Attainment Target Level 2	Level 2: Pupils recognise and explore how sounds can be organised. They choose carefully and order sounds within simple structures such as beginning, middle, end and in response to given starting points. They represent sounds with symbols and recognise how the musical elements can be used to create different moods and effects.			
Broad Layer of Musical Knowledge	EXPRESSION		FORM	

Critical reflection

When the National Curriculum (1988) was enshrined in law, the need for a music curriculum that ensured musical progression was important, and, alongside this, the opportunities for the development for all children, as embodied in the benefits of the work of Swanwick and Tillman (1986), were evident, but the challenge seemed immense. The framework provided a clear explanation of musical development to support confident and meaningful planning and resonated with the government's published attainment targets for music. Each target had a broad opening summary demonstrating musical development: level 1, expected that, 'Pupils recognise and explore how sounds can be made and changed'; level 2, 'Pupils recognise and explore how sounds can be organised'; and level 3, 'Pupils recognise and explore the ways sounds can be combined and used expressively' (1988, p. 188). The work and pedagogic approach of the amateurs that I had experienced as a former head of music department seemed an appropriate choice of music teaching to share with generalist teachers. The musical activity of the projects enabled children to explore musical ideas wherever they were on the spiral. The activities afforded the children the opportunity to make musical progress either by exploring different application of musical elements in any given structure or by exploring more complex structures (Project 1, structure design). Crucially, it allowed children to explore and create their own music in a direct cognitive experience (Reid, 1986) which I believed to be vital if they were to acquire meaningful propositional knowledge. In this way, the work of Swanwick and Tillman, and the spiral they proposed began to influence my work and helped me to find a way to resolve some of the issues of musical development and how to facilitate it.

For generalist teachers, the challenges and anxieties around lack of subject knowledge, low-level music skills and the inability to musically understand children's compositions remained. By working together, however, the generalist teacher, the children and I engaged in recognising the detail of musical structures and compositional devices that had intuitively been selected and used by

groups as they crafted their musical ideas. When we had experienced them, we identified them. ‘All propositional knowledge of music is empty if not based on direct, intuitive, first-hand cognitive experience. Experiential intuition is essential’ (Reid, 1986 in Finney, 2012). When musical devices were recognised, it was possible to comment on them, explore ways in which they were used and, moreover, suggest how they might be used by the children with a deeper level of complexity in future composing. The approach also supported meaningful engagement with the dominant classical music repertoire.

When later reflecting on the global perspective of what counts as knowledge in the multiple diversity of music and music environments, I came to realise there were alternative approaches to musical development. Burnard (2016), for instance, makes strong and valid points around the need for fluid rather than fixed social practices in order to reflect multiple knowledges and multiple cultures. Her argument highlights the limitation of the model of spiral development in music. The spiral ties musical knowledge to a ‘singular or compartmentalised form’ (Burnard, 2016) that supports the domination of the Western musical tradition. Although I later understood the spiral’s limitations in the twentieth-century global society, its contribution to music education at the time was immense, especially whilst I was ensconced in offering professional advice in the ‘swampy lowland . . . whereby lie the problems of greatest human concern’ (Schon, 1987, p. 3). Using the identified sequence of musical development and the pedagogic approaches of the KS2 projects, I was able to lead generalist primary teachers to embrace an aesthetic education and to understand musical development with some level of confidence. This was fundamental to the implementation of the National Curriculum, where planned musical activity and musical learning that retained previous learning, opened possibilities for ‘what might be round the corner’ (Swanwick & Tillman 1986, p. 337). It is those corners around which we still turn, and along the corridors of which, musical development continues to wait to be discovered, just as it did during my work in schools in the 1980s.

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