

Working towards educational transformation through action research with Botswana's music teachers

Sheelagh Chadwick

Brandon University, 270-18th St., Brandon, Manitoba, Canada, R7A 6A9

chadwicks@brandonu.ca

Contrary to government policy, schooling in Botswana remains largely teacher-centred, with music teaching being no exception. However, other possibilities for classroom dynamics arise under the pressure of practical examinations and when some students have better instrumental facility than their teachers. This article describes initial explorations into action research with music teachers in Botswana and outlines the possibilities and potential for change – both in teachers' views of their work, and for approaches that bring students' knowledge and skills to the forefront of music classrooms. Researcher mistakes and learning are also explored, demonstrating the need for ongoing critical reflection and adaptation in this complex setting.

Context: Music education in Botswana

While Botswana was officially a protectorate¹ rather than a colony, the educational legacy was no better for this difference in status: teachers as authoritarian deliverers of content and students as passive receivers who learn the importance of obedience, conformity and memorisation early in their education (Fuller & Snyder, 1991; Fuller *et al.*, 1994; Prophet & Rowell, 1993; Prophet, 1995; Tabulawa, 1997, 1998). In music, this view of education creates a particular distortion in that the focus of teaching has been on theoretical content rather than practical music making, delivering information rather than doing or interacting musically (Chadwick, 2012). While in recent years assessment procedures in schools have put increasing emphasis on practical music-making, the teachers' college preparation remains such that music teachers are often not ready to teach in this area.

Once in schools, the teachers do not feel in control of their work. Rather, they strive to deliver a syllabus they did not write, to have students pass exams whose content they did not determine, and they struggle to persuade principals, colleagues and parents of the importance of what they do (Chadwick, 2014a). The teachers often do not have the basic conditions necessary for teaching, such as a permanent room, instruments, or even electricity. Moreover, their instrumental skills (keyboard, recorder and guitar) are not developed to the point where they are confident teaching the practical elements of the junior secondary music syllabus (Government of Botswana, 2010). However, there are some teachers who have learned to play instruments such as guitar, marimba or keyboard on their own, and who are confident to use these instruments in their classroom teaching.

But those who rely solely on the college preparation rarely emerge with instrumental skills adequate for the demands of the classroom.

The music syllabus in Botswana was created by external consultants to the curriculum department. It has been revised several times since its inception as a pilot in 1999, and the general trend has been towards making it shorter, more manageable for the teachers, and responding to some of their feedback by eliminating many objectives such as those involving composition, improvisation, movement and student research (Government of Botswana, 2010). The document that remains is still shaped around many detailed behavioural objectives, largely determined by Western classical content and theory. There is a listening paper as part of the assessment, as well as practical papers where students are expected to perform, and sight read from notation on a variety of instruments and singing.

The teachers' relationship to the document is one of implementer or deliverer, rather than interpreter or creator (Chadwick, 2014a), with the primary goal being coverage of objectives to enable students to pass exams. This view of education results in teaching styles that are prevalent throughout the country in all subject areas: teacher lecture, whole class questioning, 'banking' delivery² and little student input or interaction either with the teacher or with peers. While students may have been exposed to different teaching methods and philosophies at college, new graduates usually return to the teaching style in which they were taught in school and consider the banking paradigm as the sole educational practice, in spite of their preparation at college (Tafa, 2004).

The potential and challenges of action research

Action research facilitators in Africa confirm the challenges for teachers in post-colonial countries as they re-imagine their work outside a technical paradigm (Walker, 1988, 1993, 1996; Zeichner *et al.*, 1998; Dahlström *et al.*, 1999; Robinson & Meerkotter, 2003; Robinson, 2009). Colonial education was created to serve the colonisers and produce the labour force necessary to run the colonies. Rather than foster pride, strength, self-reliance, and independent, creative or critical thought, education served to marginalise, if not eradicate, local cultural knowledge and practice: language, music, dance, as well as values and beliefs. Teachers became a middle class in this process, the overseers, whose role it was to 'transmit the values of the colonial system' as it would have been 'dangerous and risky to dare to exercise agency and autonomy' (Assie-Lumumba, 2012, p. 28).

It is time for transformation in the education system for the good of students and teachers alike and action research could constitute a promising intervention in this educational landscape:

On the surface, this international professional education movement [action research] can be seen as a reaction against a view of practitioners as technicians who merely carry out what others, outside of the sphere of practice, want them to do; it can be seen as a rejection of top-down forms of reform that involve practitioners merely as passive participants. (Zeichner, 2009, p. 72)

Zeichner argues that rather than being active in accomplishing other people's goals – teachers must themselves 'play active roles in formulating the purposes and ends of their

work' (p. 72). And through the investigation into and reflection on classroom practice that constitutes action research, the teachers could work to challenge current banking views of education and traditional teacher-centred approaches. The intersection between action research and post-colonial education systems offers many possible routes for exploration (Chadwick, 2014b). Action research asks questions of both traditional research and traditional education and seeks to undermine, challenge, address and transform unequal educational hierarchies. Rather than method, what is important are the opportunities for agency that are created when teachers become the researchers, asking questions about their own work and how it might be better accomplished – how they might do better by their students. The political potential of action research moves beyond reflective practice, to the systematisation and rendering public of knowledge by and for teachers, further working to change the educational landscape. Noffke (2008) describes three overlapping and interconnected dimensions of action research: the personal, the professional and the political. The personal centres on the classroom – changes in teacher practice as related to personal beliefs and for the purposes of self growth and development; the professional focuses on knowledge generation and development, but also action research as a 'way of knowing' (p. 10) that combines theory and practice to create knowledge for other teachers to use, and the political infuses all dimensions with a focus on power relationships and social justice and change (Noffke, 2008). It is in and through these three dimensions that the power and potential of action research lies which serves as a reminder not to limit understanding or use of action research to just one dimension.

The research

A year ago I began a project to encourage and foster action research with music teachers in Botswana. This decision came after six years as a teacher educator in the country, and after constructing several research studies with music teachers where their views on and challenges with music education had been made very clear: teachers do not control the content of the syllabus they have to follow, and more specifically they find it too theoretical; they work in a largely unsupportive context where both the subject and needs of the subject (for example specialised equipment) are misunderstood; and inadequate preparation for teaching in content and pedagogy leaves teachers feeling unconfident (Chadwick, 2008, 2012, 2014a). One teacher summarised their frustrations by saying: 'You don't teach very well when you are angry.' The overall aim is to re-shape teachers' notions of professionalism through the integration of action research. As a result of their involvement, teachers began to question and resist their subservience to curriculum, working instead to interpret, reinvent and experiment with the syllabus content through research, and will eventually change their role from servants of curriculum to knowledge creators, and from receivers of knowledge to owners.

My role is to facilitate this work as collaborator and teacher while also reflecting on and writing about the research projects as a whole. I had interest from teachers in five schools and began regular weekly visits with those individuals to work on their projects. The teachers articulated an issue or question of importance to them in their practice, explained why their question or issue was important, considered alternative approaches to addressing it in their teaching, trialled those approaches, and then reflected on and evaluated those

approaches. It was interesting that during my preliminary visits, teachers were definite and almost immediate in their decision as to what issue they wanted to prioritise. I have read about action research studies where teachers spent six months refining a research question – and while we did not have that luxury of time, teachers did not hesitate to identify, in most cases, practical music making as their top concern.

Glimpse of a classroom

What follows is a description of one music class I visited during the research period. This vignette of my work with a particular teacher illustrates the potential for action research in Botswana to confront teacher-centred practices in music, and to begin shifting the paradigm towards student-centred classrooms. When I met with the teacher for the first time, she indicated that she wanted my ‘help’ with the exam pieces her students were learning.³ There are 12 students, but only two keyboards; the group meets twice in a six-day cycle for 80 minutes each time, but class often starts late because lunch is held in the same room as the music class, and because students have to carry the keyboards from secure storage to the room where there is an appropriate electrical supply and then return them at the end of class.

Vignette

A group of music students are working towards end-of-year performance exams, trying to learn Botswana’s national anthem on the keyboard, playing the melody with the right hand from a single line of notation, while harmonising by ear with the left. The teacher – I will call her Tshepo⁴ – is unable to play this music and has stepped away from active teaching, watching from the side. But there is that one kid – that quiet guy in the corner – a student who is just waiting for his opportunity to shine. I will call him Thato.⁵ In this case, Thato is also a student with albinism which means he is often ignored or ostracised; socially and academically invisible here.⁶ However, Thato can play the national anthem on the keyboard, with most of the chords. He is emerging as the teacher – providing the musical model while the other students watch, listen and start to imitate him. I observe another small boy who has learned the music very quickly – but I don’t know how he was doing it as none of the students appear to read from the exam papers. I ask, ‘where is your [printed] music?’ – but the students don’t seem to know – it is the national anthem so they are learning it by ear. Those students who do have sheet music leave it unused on the end of the keyboard. I see students painstakingly go from the beginning of the piece each and every time they make a mistake. One girl I observed may have learned one bar out of 16 during that class period.

Interpretation

It is possible to see, understand, and interpret this classroom observation through Grundy’s (based on Habermas’) knowledge interests framework (1987): technical, practical and emancipatory. Each view or interest highlights a different understanding of the nature of knowledge and therefore of education. The technical view is positivism, defined as ‘a

fundamental interest in controlling the environment through rule-following action based upon empirically grounded laws' (Grundy, 1987, p. 12). The practical is an orientation towards understanding environment in order to interact with it (p. 13) and marked by a shift from asking what can I do? to what *ought* I to do? It is defined as 'a fundamental interest in understanding the environment through interaction based upon a consensual interpretation of meaning' (p. 14) and this interest centres teacher judgement (p. 15). The emancipatory view is 'a fundamental interest in emancipation and empowerment to engage in autonomous action arising out of authentic, critical insights into the social construction of human society' (p. 19).

When I come into the situation described above, Tshepo seems to be predominantly seeing through technical lenses, meaning that the end point of teaching is fixed; better teaching tools will enable better products (students); and knowledge is a commodity to be transferred from teacher to student. Tshepo is worried about getting her students prepared for upcoming exams (fixed endpoint) and is concerned that she cannot play any of the exam pieces on recorder or keyboard (tools for teaching). She is distraught that she cannot read music and therefore cannot *deliver* the content as she believes, and the system has taught her, a teacher should (knowledge as a commodity). It would be possible therefore to interpret this moment as one of educational failure: college preparation has not given this teacher the knowledge or skills to fulfil her assigned role – to deliver or 'bank' information that can subsequently be assessed. Her actions are driven by a desire to meet prespecified outcomes determined elsewhere rather than to use her own judgement as to what might be best in terms of either teacher action or content.

This vignette could be seen another way – from a practical standpoint (Grundy, 1987) where the outcome is 'the good' as determined by the teacher through judgement, and the aim of this perspective is to understand. This understanding emerges through interaction and a focus on process rather than end product. As illustrated, gaps in Tshepo's knowledge and skills create a space for students to step forward and become the know-ers and do-ers in music. The students in this class are trying to get on with the task of learning the national anthem, and in the absence of a 'teacher' they have turned to a student as a role model. The students are finding ways to solve this problem on their own, ways to learn through interactions that do not involve the teacher. Through these experiences they are possibly building musical independence.

To see this vignette through emancipatory lenses (Grundy, 1987) would be to ask such questions as: What knowledge is being privileged here? Who gets to determine curriculum and assessment content? Who gains from these arrangements and who loses? Batswana (citizens of Botswana) are proud of their national anthem; students sing it every day at the start of school, harmonising according to their vocal ranges. They have learned to sing and harmonise through multiple hearings and by gradually joining in. This is music they *know*. Yet, when the anthem is presented to the students through notation, and for performance and eventual assessment on a keyboard, most of them cannot play it. They are trying to read the notation and struggling with music that should be as familiar to them as breathing.

Not all aspects of this observation can be neatly labelled as one or the other view of knowledge and education. An important theme in this music class is the students' resistance to learning to read music. The student resistance could be seen practically as a learning style preference, and therefore an idea to be better understood by the teacher and used

subsequently for the students' benefit. Alternatively student resistance could also be seen as an assertion of traditional aural/oral learning over reading notation, a challenge to Western subject knowledge and ways of learning music, in other words an emancipatory standpoint which poses a critique of the colonial influences in education.

My own observer stance here is also open for interpretation. Is the vignette written as if describing some 'truth' from one clear unobstructed view, as if through a camera lens? Or is there evidence that my own priorities, values, prior experiences and purposes change the way I see this scene and describe it for others. I will say more about my role below.

Discussion

Interpreting this vignette from different viewpoints makes it possible to see both its complexity and its potential. While decades of research in Botswana have confirmed the predominantly technical nature of teaching and learning in all subject areas and age groups, the possibility for paradigm shift was also present in this classroom. While the teacher saw technical concerns – her shortcomings and the need to learn more about music and acquire musical skills – I saw that her students were learning how to play the exam music in other ways – without her input.⁷ However, for these students' potential to be realised, for their musical independence and initiative taking to be more than a missed opportunity, the potential needs to be recognised, acknowledged, understood, and nurtured by the teacher. Action research could play an important role in this process.

Music students in Botswana have the capacity to learn independently and even pass exams with far less teacher input than the teachers currently believe is necessary. In fact, given the opportunity, students can surpass the very limited and limiting objectives of the curriculum – while not ignoring them – to generate meaningful, useful, practical knowledge and experiences in music. They are informed about, involved in, interested in, and passionate about music, although not usually the music of the classroom. Through listening, singing along, collecting songs, participating in rituals, community and family events, childhood games, dance, and a host of other musically focused activities in a wide range of contexts and purposes, many students actively pursue music on their own for pleasure and to participate in social gatherings and community events through music. In the vignette above, the students are becoming independent of the teacher and figuring out for themselves how to play the music. While they have had little or no experience of student-led, interactive work during their schooling, they are inventing ways to accomplish their musical and educational goals together. Accounts of Sugata Mitra's experiments with 'hole-in-the-wall' computers (Mitra, 2007) document an extreme approach to constructivism where young people have computer access and learn in the absence of adult teachers, even though they have no prior experience of computers and how they work. When left to their own devices, young people can learn successfully with little or no adult intervention. I am not proposing this example as an exclusive way for students to learn, but as a way to demonstrate that this approach to learning is already drastically changing the experience and outcome of schooling for students in other places (Davis, 2013).

Tshepo's education has served to make her aware of how much she *doesn't* know; through her teacher preparation and employment, through teaching a syllabus she does not completely understand and through the colonisation of music in formal education by

Western classical knowledge, any passion for, interest in and involvement with music has not been recognised in her schooling, leaving her to feel unsure, unqualified, unskilled, and alienated from her work (Tabulawa, 1997). Education has served to suppress and even destroy teacher musicality. Nzewi puts it this way:

To introduce Africans to modern music learning and appreciation of European music thoughts, contents, practices and pedagogy is a radical, de-culturating process which continues to produce the crises of cultural inferiority, mental inadequacy, and pervasive, perverse cultural-human identity characterizing the modern African person in modern social, political, educational and cultural pursuits. (Nzewi, 1999, p. 72)

It is paradoxical that as international attention in music education has turned towards the inclusion or even centring of 'informal' pedagogies in classroom teaching (Green, 2008), in Botswana, where students traditionally learn music in communities, through listening and gradual participation, informal student-centred music practices would be seen as bad teaching or not even teaching at all in the music classroom. Tabulawa observes that 'Interactive teaching/learning methods (such as group discussions and role-playing) which characterise a learner-centred pedagogy come to be viewed as dysfunctional' (1997, p. 201) in this technicist paradigm. Schooling's colonial history means that knowledge perceived as Western, in this case reading from notation, is privileged over local knowledge and ways of learning. Yet, teachers' perceived lack of practical skills could hold one of the keys to pedagogical transformation, a new relationship where students learn music from other students, and teachers learn from and with students. In other words, teachers stepping aside to allow students to learn music their own way, recognising students' musical strengths and capitalising on the skills they have built outside the classroom could initiate a paradigm shift. What is perceived locally by teachers as a deficiency, that is the lack of ability to 'teach' practical music making, to model what the students need to do – play at sight and learn a selection of short melodies – and the resulting student 'takeover' would be seen as progressive internationally *if* the teachers recognised what the students are capable of with different kinds of instructional input from them; and *if* the teachers could move beyond self-doubt, fear, and guilt for not being the model teacher that is required of them by the system, instead seeing student skills, knowledge, experience and even passion as an opportunity and huge advantage rather than as a threat or a problem.

While full of potential, these research moments are as yet possibilities; and they will not simply translate into change of teacher actions, or views of knowledge and education. Nor should excitement about this potential be misinterpreted as an argument for lack of teacher knowledge, skill and preparation in music which somehow forces them to the sidelines. However, since top-down educational policies and curricular initiatives have failed to capitalise on the potential of teachers and students to shift the educational paradigm, as a bottom-up, teacher-driven initiative, I believe action research could become an important means of educational transformation. Action research would initiate reflective conversations with teachers to describe what is happening in their teaching, what they want to happen, how it might happen and ways to bring the classroom reality closer to teacher values and ideals. Action research could facilitate recognition of what students are

already doing and accomplishing and move teachers towards questioning, experimentation and reflection on new teacher–student relationships based on students’ knowledge and skills.

I have found that teachers are clearly interested in the idea of examining their own work and are willing to be involved in research. They also seem to appreciate time spent talking about their teaching and their students. The teachers who revealed their problems and struggles while involved in this study all seemed genuinely concerned to improve teaching and learning in music. However, action research is a tradition with roots in educational systems where teachers see curriculum creation and research as part of their professional responsibilities, and teachers in Botswana do not yet see themselves or their role in this light. Thinking differently about the nature of knowledge and education poses a significant challenge for teachers who have grown up in colonially shaped classrooms. The ‘point of engagement’, as Walker says, is the teachers’ desire to improve teaching and to close the gap between values and practice (1993, p. 98). Many of the teachers I work with are perplexed and frustrated that their students struggle to read notation while playing recorder or keyboard when they can name the notes on the staff. Yet the musical culture on their doorstep is aural and participatory. The teachers’ immediate and pressing concern is a room full of students who are not learning to read music, and who have to pass exams in a matter of months, in other words technical, skill-based concerns. Action research could bring forward other questions to consider: to what extent is learning notation relevant to the Botswana child in school? And for what purpose? Why is it necessary to struggle with notation at the expense of rewarding musical participation facilitated in other ways? Is note reading the ultimate aim of music education? Or is active, life-long enjoyment of and participation in music the goal? As Robinson (2009) found in South Africa, there are spaces within the language and intentions of the new curriculum but it will depend also on how these statements, intentions and ideas are interpreted and enacted by the teachers. If teachers feel constrained by assessment structures then they will be more likely to focus on how to get their students through the next round of testing or coursework, and far less likely to ask questions such as ‘what does social justice mean? And what does social justice mean for my students and their context?’

Researcher role

My role in this process must also be examined. Initially I am the one presenting the idea of action research to the teachers, and assuming the responsibility for facilitating their research. While the vignette above illustrates the potential for changing the educational paradigm in music, it also marks my failure to foster a research relationship with this particular teacher. She needs immediate solutions to very real (technical) problems, and while her urgency is not lost on me, it seems to be in conflict with the project values. One of my primary research goals is increased teacher independence, yet this teacher wants someone to guide her and provide information, skills and knowledge about music (‘help’). Reflective discussions about how her teaching can be improved, undertaking research or imagining other possibilities do not seem appropriate at this point in her journey as a teacher. While we do share a point of intersection – the desire for change in her situation – we each see that change differently. The teacher wants change in terms of her musical

skills in note reading and keyboard playing, whereas I locate change in practical and emancipatory views of education and research. I want to make her concerns and goals the focus of our interaction, but I do not see how learning to play keyboard and read music can be an action research project. In addition, her use of the term 'help' puts me in a position that I am reluctant to occupy, that is one of 'white, Western-born and educated woman rescuing African teacher'. But on the other hand, I could and do want to help her become a more skilled and reflective teacher and I have the knowledge and skills to do so. My reaction is to retreat from the idea of action research, concerned that I cannot be asking teachers to participate in this project when they have so many more pressing concerns, and instead I consider how I can 'help' her, rather than how to make 'help' part of the research, or how to reframe 'help' as learning to help oneself.

Here was a missed opportunity. Rather than falling into my comfortable 'educator' position in response to the teacher's view of the situation, we should have reflected together on how we could change her situation while honouring action research values. I didn't shift the paradigm myself. I could have asked: 'What was good about the class? Was learning taking place? If so, how? And could you be part of that learning? What do you want to change here?' Whether because of our experience in certain kinds of power relationships that prevent us seeing alternatives, or an unwillingness to give up the status that comes with being the one who knows and knows how to do, or simply panic that we were outside of our comfort zones and set of expectations, we were both complicit in keeping me in an 'outside expert' role and not seeing the potential for change in this situation. I continued to see 'help' as me doing something for her that she could not do herself, but also I took help to be something outside the realm of action research when it could have provided an important beginning for developing reflective practice and eventually action based in research.

Although my aim in facilitating this research has been to counter technical rationality in research and education, I short-circuited the possibility of moving beyond that view by taking the teacher's focus on fixed aims and development of skills as the only avenue or the only interpretation of this scenario. In following the teacher's priorities, I neglected to encourage the teacher to look beyond this priority to a different approach, or even a different way of seeing this priority as a strength, rather than a weakness.

Noffke (2008) cautions against action research that unthinkingly re-inscribes power imbalances rather than examining and questioning current practice. While I agree based on my experiences in both education and research, these are not straightforward goals to accomplish. Davidoff suggests that:

it is crucial for us to start with where teachers are, and where they are is not necessarily located in a tradition of innovative and reflective practice. For those of us working as facilitators or teacher educators, or teachers interested in action research this can be the only real starting point, rather than a preconception of what constitutes real emancipatory research. (Davidoff, 1993, p. 80 cited in Robinson & Meerkotter, 2003, p. 459).

This idea of starting where the teacher is and moving gradually along a continuum, keeping the teachers' issues, concerns and questions at the forefront, while not giving up the bigger

ideas and goals of action research, striving to maintain these in tension is a significant but worthwhile challenge. This inclusive view of action research would have enabled me to interact differently with the teacher, starting with a description of and reflection on the vignette above, and to support her in understanding her technical issues as research questions.

I do believe that action research will make an educational paradigm shift possible and that it can become a way to identify, address and ultimately challenge and transform educational issues in music. I am sure that given more time for questioning, reflection, research and experimentation that teachers can come to see their teaching and their students' learning in another way – a way that not only reflects global changes in music education that centre students' knowledge, skills, questions and problem solving, but a way that gives them the agency to adopt new roles as facilitators of learning, curriculum creators and champions of more socially just educational practices.

Notes

- 1 From the late 1800s until independence in 1966.
- 2 Paulo Freire's (1970) term for delivery-style education that assumes students are empty vessels waiting to be filled by the teacher.
- 3 She is newly qualified and this is her first year of teaching. She did not anticipate being placed in a music job and explains that she had not really spent much time or energy on her music studies at college, believing she would be teaching her major subject. This is a common occurrence – teachers are placed in jobs by the government, sometimes without regard for their qualifications or preference for subject.
- 4 Tshepo is Setswana for trust.
- 5 Thato is Setswana for will or desire.
- 6 Dart *et al.* (2010).
- 7 In this same room I also worked with two or three girls who had opted to practice their recorder music; they too had almost learned one of the exam selections, seemingly without teacher input.

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Sheelagh Chadwick is an Assistant Professor of Music Education at Brandon University in Manitoba, Canada where she teaches courses on community music, high school general music and foundations. She facilitates music teacher professional development through action research in Botswana, where she was also a lecturer in music teacher education for six years. She graduated with an MA in Music Education from London University's Institute of Education, and holds a PhD from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana.