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The Pedagogy of Primary Music Teaching: Talking about Not Talking

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Prior to her career in Higher Education Ruth was a primary-school teacher, school music leader, deputy head and headteacher. Her experience in primary schools spans over twenty years. Qualifications include BAHons(Oxon), PGCE, NPQH, MPhil(Ed) and PGCAP.

An amateur musician, Ruth plays 'cello, piano, recorders, guitar, djembe, kit drum and spoons.

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The Pedagogy of Primary Music Teaching: Talking about Not Talking

In English primary schools, provision of musical music lessons is often lacking. This paper focuses on whether a lack of clarity around primary music pedagogy might be a contributing factor. Some comparisons are drawn with the realm of second-language teaching. A small qualitative study is reported in which three teacher-educators with responsibility for primary music, from different higher education institutions, were interviewed to explore their pedagogical articulacy. There was little evidence of shared terminology or pedagogy and interviewees often struggled to explain effective practice. However, one common theme was the implication that to teach musically a teacher needs to 'feel like a musician' at some level. It is suggested that teacher-educators might benefit from more clearly articulating 'pedagogic content knowledge' (Shulman 1987) for primary music, including the dimension of 'feeling like a musician'. This could, in turn, enhance work with student teachers and perhaps enable more teachers to teach musically.

Keywords: musical pedagogy primary school music teaching

Introduction

The starting-point for this paper is the uneven quality of music teaching in primary schools in England.

According to The Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED 2012a), only ~~thirty three of ninety primary schools~~ (37% of a sample of 90 primary schools) ~~visited between 2008 and 2011~~ were judged good or outstanding for the effectiveness of their music education. As OFSTED ~~points~~ out, 'This is poor in comparison with overall school performance: at 31 August 2011, 69% of all primary schools were good or outstanding for overall effectiveness at their most recent inspection' (OFSTED 2012a, 10).

How does OFSTED describe the problem?

... in too many instances there was insufficient emphasis on active music-making or on the use of musical sound as the dominant language of learning. Too much use was made of verbal communication and non-musical activities. Put simply, in too many cases there was not enough music in music lessons. (OFSTED 2012a, 4)

The opposite of this, presumably, is what the inspectors would like to see: children involved in music-making and other musical activities in order to work in/with/through music itself, with musical sound as the dominant mode of communication and words kept to a minimum. As a primary music teacher-educator working in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) at a Higher Education Institution (HEI), I strive to work musically with student teachers as much as possible. Even at university Open Days, when I am given two minutes to describe primary music ITE to prospective students and their companions, I begin by singing and get the audience to join in. It seems the obvious thing to do, as it makes the points that we will be working 'in music' and that music is for everyone.

Such practical music teaching is strongly advocated in a recent publication, widely circulated and endorsed by ~~a large number of~~ national music education organisations, schools, academies and local authorities:

Music lessons should be musical. That means pupils and students should make music in them, just as they should mainly do active physical activity in PE, or speak French in French lessons. So, in your school's music lessons, when does the music start? How much practical music making is there? (Music Mark 2014, 3)

It seems, then, that there is a reasonable consensus about what 'musical' primary music lessons should be like; but that many lessons are not like this. The mismatch may be due, at least in part, to the fact that many primary-school teachers are not confident to teach music (Holden & Button 2006; Rogers et al. 2008; Adams, McQueen and Hallam 2010; Baldwin & Beauchamp 2014; Biasutti, Hennessy and de

Vugt-Jansen 2014). There are many reasons for this, ranging from insufficient subject knowledge to lack of practical experience. However, the present study has a different focus: it considers whether there might be a pedagogical aspect to teachers' lack of confidence. This focus emerged when a particular analogy was noticed in the literature.

The analogy of second-language ~~(L2)~~ teaching is often adopted in descriptions of musical music teaching. There are hints of it in the two quotations above, while another OFSTED publication clearly states that 'Musical sound should be the "target" language of the music classroom ...' (OFSTED 2012b, 4, quotation marks in original). In ~~second-language-L2~~ teaching, the aim is for most if not all of the lesson to be conducted in the language being learned: ~~the~~ the 'target language'.

Whether, or to what extent, music can be considered a language (Philpott 2001) is not something this paper addresses. However, the analogy has interesting ~~pedagogical~~ implications. For teacher-educators an important implication is this: although ~~school~~ teachers should largely be working in the 'target language' of music, the *educators* of those teachers need also to articulate the what, how and why of doing so, on a number of levels.

In other words, teacher-educators should be exploring the pedagogy of primary music with their student teachers.

A few words are needed here about the term 'pedagogy' since in different countries there are different definitions and varying degrees of consensus about what the word means. In the present article 'pedagogy' is used fairly narrowly, to describe the rationale underpinning teachers' actions. By this definition, 'pedagogy' occupies the middle ground between, on the one hand, bodies of knowledge, theories, philosophies and ideologies and, on the other hand, practical methods, strategies and approaches. It is akin to what Alexander (2004) calls teaching's 'attendant discourse' i.e. 'what one needs to know ... in order to make and justify the many different kinds of decisions of which teaching is constituted' (Alexander 2004, 11). Or as Waring and Evans (2015) put it, 'pedagogy provides an opportunity to make

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explicit the many decisions that are made ... and the potential consequences of them in relation to what things are taught, how they are taught and why they are taught' (Waring and Evans 2015, 27).

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Such discussion of pedagogy is well established in the field of L2 Second-language teaching has a well-established pedagogy, which has an extensive literature, shared terminology and well-developed theoretical frameworks (e.g. Richards and Rodgers 1986; Crystal 1987; University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate 2010, 2011). L2 Language teachers are able to tell you that why they have been using strategies such as 'drilling', 'elicitation' or 'controlled practice', for example, or that why they espouse the 'CLIL' methodology (Coyle 2007). In other words, they can discuss their work in terms of pedagogy pedagogically, relating methods and methodologies to knowledge, rationales theories and philosophies of L2 second-language teaching and learning.

Like second-language L2 teacher-educators, music teacher-educators like such as myself should be using a meta-language of pedagogy to explore, explain and justify what we model and demonstrate, to support every facet of student teachers' experiential learning process (Schön 1983; Kolb 1984). As well as observing and participating in teaching children musically, which Armitage (2003, 33) dubs 'learning-as-experience', student teachers need to engage in discussions and reflections to learn from experience: to consider how children learn musically; what kind of knowledge is involved; why certain strategies and approaches are effective; and what the purpose of the learning is. In this way students deepen and extend their understanding about why and how musical teaching can be effective (Moon 2004). Otherwise they will only ever be able to imitate what they have experienced, unable to make informed decisions, to adapt or to innovate. As Dewey (1910, 14) wrote, 'Thought affords the sole method of escape from ... purely routine action'.

The fact that OFSTED and others use pedagogical terminology borrowed from second-language L2

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teaching to describe ~~musical~~ music teaching ~~could imply~~ implies that primary music education in England today ~~does may~~ not possess a robust pedagogy of its own. Reflecting on my own work as a teacher-educator in this field, I have to confess that this is largely true for me. I fit the description typical of teachers in England who lack a well-articulated pedagogy and instead 'conceptualise, plan and justify their teaching by combining pragmatism with ideology but not much else' (Alexander 2004, 8).

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The present study constitutes a small investigation into whether others in similar roles struggle pedagogically, as I do ~~this is so~~. How do my HEI counterparts talk about ~~the pedagogy of~~ musical music teaching? How eloquent are they? Is there any sense of a shared, articulated pedagogical understanding around the teaching of primary music?

Research Design

There are two research questions:

1. How do teacher-educators with significant responsibility for primary music teaching in ITE verbalise how 'musical' music teaching is done?
2. How fluent and articulate are they?

Since this study is inductive and exploratory (Creswell 2013; Mertens 2015) and not just because words are the data (Punch 2009; Braun and Clarke 2013), it is qualitative, with a fairly tight design (Flick 2015). Interviewing was chosen as the method, in order to capture not just the substance of participants' contributions but also the way they verbalised their thoughts 'in real time'. Their fluency was part of the data. As Punch (2009, 114) points out, an interview 'is a very good way of accessing people's perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality'. It was hoped that the questions would be broad enough to allow the interviewees to respond in their own terms, with follow-up questions used for clarification or to re-orient the discussion when necessary (Flick 2015, 141). Each interview was a 'professional conversation, with the goal of getting a participant to talk about *their*

experiences and perspectives, and to capture *their* language and concepts, in relation to a topic that [the researcher has] determined' (Braun and Clarke 2013, 77, original emphases).

The strategy for selecting participants was purposeful and also opportunistic (Creswell 2013; Mertens 2015). Each interviewee, like me, works in the HE ITE sector in England and has a direct and significant responsibility for educating student teachers in how to teach class music in primary schools. Each works in a different institution.

Interviewee 1 works with undergraduate student primary-school teachers, who all receive 12 hours of teaching about primary music as part of their overall study of the primary curriculum. The teaching includes singing, playing, listening and creative activities and involves some music subject knowledge and terminology. This interviewee also teaches 50 hours with a group of first-year undergraduates taking a specialist module in primary music, which includes direct musical work with children. When not teaching in the HEI or in the primary education sector, Interviewee 1 leads and plays in a professional group.

Interviewee 2 has a similar pattern of contact with non-specialist student primary-school teachers (both undergraduate and postgraduate) but does not teach a primary music specialist module. With many years of prior experience as a secondary-school music teacher, this interviewee also works with student teachers of secondary-school music. Music subject knowledge is a priority, as is the differentiation of music lessons. Interviewee 2 plays an instrument and conducts concert bands.

Interviewee 3, like Interviewee 1, has a modest amount of time to teach primary music with all the student teachers and some more hours for those who opt for a primary music specialist module. Singing, and the methodology of teaching singing, is a main focus, as is composition and how to teach it. Both of these activities lead to performing, listening and evaluative discussions

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during which music subject knowledge and terminology are highlighted. Away from teaching, Interviewee 2 conducts, accompanies and sings in choirs, and plays various instruments.

The sample size is small, partly because the relevant population is also small. Despite this, it was possible to conduct useful thematic analysis of the data (Braun and Clarke 2013).

I conducted and recorded individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews (Punch, 2009), posing three questions:

1. How would you define ‘musical teaching’, as opposed to teaching about music, in a primary classroom setting?
2. What kinds of things is the teacher doing when they are ‘teaching musically’?
3. What might the children be learning?

I kept the wording non-technical to avoid priming the interviewees with any particular stance or terminology. I hoped that these questions would give scope for pedagogical talk on a number of levels if the interviewees were so inclined.

Oliver, Serovich and Mason (2005) discuss the importance of reflecting on one's decisions regarding the transcription of audio interview material. Since one of the research questions concerns the fluency and articulacy of the interviewees, ‘naturalized transcription, where utterances are transcribed in as much detail as possible’ (Oliver, Serovich and Mason 2005, 1275) was deployed, using a simplified version of their shorthand notation scheme to allow transcription of details of how the talk was uttered, as well as what was said.

[figure 1 near here]

Findings

As Braun and Clarke (2013, 225) and Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, 566) point out, themes do not simply emerge, pre-existent, from qualitative data. They have to be created, not discovered, through an active process. I conducted a simple content analysis without prescribed codes or categories. I read and re-read my data, inductively coding and re-coding, then categorised my coded entries. I considered possible themes; referred back to the research questions; re-examined the words and descriptions actually present in the data; and kept an open mind for sudden associations of ideas. Charmaz (2006, 59) states that 'The strength of grounded theory coding derives from this concentrated, active involvement in the process. You act upon your data rather than passively read them.'

Out of this mulling, brewing and checking, four main themes have been developed.

Conception of a 'Musical' Lesson

All three interviewees emphasised children's active involvement; in music-making, listening, experimenting and working together. However with each interviewee different principles seemed to underpin this notion of 'musical teaching'. For interviewee 1, children being active seemed to be fundamental. For interviewee 2 it was all about sound. Interviewee 3 stressed the specific practices that musicians engage in, clearly framing answers from a particular theoretical perspective (see below).

Use of Terminology

All the interviewees comfortably used a wide variety of *musical* terminology during the interviews. However there was great variation in their use of '*teacherly*' terminology [figure 2 near here]. In interview 1 it was limited to notions of group size; the teacher leading and demonstrating; and allowing times for children to work independently of the teacher. In interview 3, again there was description of independent and directed work, with mention also of the teacher modelling musical language and nurturing relationships. Interviewee 2's answers were replete with the technical vocabulary of teachers'

generic practices (see figure 2). This included significant discussion about the need to plan specifically for what the teacher would do, moment by moment, during the lesson. However, when discussing the teaching strategies themselves, interviewee 2's articulation faltered and it appeared that key terms were somewhat confused:

Well, I think you need someone to facilitate what's going to happen. I think the word 'facilitate' is quite ... um, it's a bit, it's difficult - not everybody will have the same definition of 'facilitate' but ... for me, you have to show some music, you have to show the outcome that you want. So it's about modelling the outcomes. Not - not necessarily if it's a creative thing like composing, you wouldn't - you don't really know what the outcome's gonna be, but you have to model some of your ideas, to generate other people's ideas, quite often.

(interview 2)

Only in the third interview was there any theoretical framing of answers, hinting at the interviewee's underlying conceptualisation of music teaching in sociological terms, as inducting children into a 'community of practice' of musicians (after Lave and Wenger 1991):

... if it's musical, it doesn't just have to be the dominant language of the lesson is music, but the dominant practice of the lesson has to be based on what musicians do. So you think, feel, act like a musician.

... it's about - a community of practice, as far as musicians go, are about the languages, jokes, behaviours you know, um seating arrangements - tenors, sopranos go to there, particular places. I mean that's what a musical experience looks like. In our culture.

(interview 3)

Lapses in Fluency when Talking about 'Teaching Musically'

Although all three interviewees fluently described their vision of a ‘musical’ lesson, when asked what a teacher might be doing to achieve such a lesson, two of them struggled:

Um, I think they are – well obviously they ... they are.... looking at ways of ... getting music out of the children, um, and using - I think they’re using their own musicality to do that and I, I think they ohh, I’m not describing it very well!

The teacher is displaying their kind of innate musicality in a physical way, t- t- with the children to sort of demonstrate to the children that – that - that’s what’s happening.

(interview 1)

You can only show it. You cannot - yeah - you cannot tell it. It’s so difficult to articulate some of these things around - it’s the same with dance and art I think as well. And trying to explain to your team things like this and get a dialogue going about stuff like this is really hard. Because you can’t really articulate ...

Because music has - you see this is the problem. This is the problem with trying to explain it to trainees. Effective music teaching has to have an essence of musicality. It’s - there is an expressive element that we have to also exemplify, because good music-making comes from within us, not - it’s - if you just look at somebody, and they teach in a very visual way, that’s not necessarily gonna be enough.

(interview 2)

Interviewee 3 did not lapse in fluency when describing ‘musical teaching’, though the description was quite general:

Well, they may be doing a lot or they may be doing nothing.

Um - I would expect to see some kind of relationship, musical relationship, but a human relationship developing...

And if it was a composing lesson, I expect to see the teacher walking away. I expect to see the teacher taking their hands off and saying, 'Right, you've got three or four minutes. I want you to work on this section and I'll come back and see what you've done there.'

(interview 3)

Relationship Between 'Teacher' and 'Musician'

Interviewee 3 made an interesting observation:

... [schools] are getting musicians coming in. So that must make a difference. Yup. They will see the world very differently from a primary teacher who - well - one, either a primary teacher who teaches music because they have to not because they like it and then this middle thing, this middle beast, somebody who can ... cross the line between thinking like a primary teacher and thinking like a musician, [yes, yes] can draw those two things together and provide a musical experience for children which is grounded in the community of practice of a musician. But equally, attends to the school kind of processes.

(interview 3)

There is a strong implication here that musicians and teachers operate in different spheres; that musicians are better able than teachers to work musically with children; and that unless a teacher is also a musician their lessons are unlikely to be 'musical'.

This 'duality' is implied in the other two interviews:

The teacher is also an active musician, not just a dry person who stands and watches and directs

...

.... they're kind of leading by example, I suppose [yes, yes] and saying 'Look guys, I'm a musician - I may only be able to sing Twinkle Twinkle Little Star or ... beat a drum with some

interesting rhythms, but that's what I can do and you can do it as well, and I need to show you that...'

(interview 1)

... part of [the teacher] being a musician is practising your music.

.... I will say to the trainee sometimes 'Tell me what you did in that lesson that a geography teacher couldn't do? Or an art teacher? Or a PE teacher?' Because sometimes the lessons are not musical. They are.... they're too..... too unmusical!

(interview 2)

Discussion

As someone in the same professional occupation as my interviewees, I am both well-placed and badly-placed to properly hear them (Schostak 2006). A sense of shared understanding of the area under discussion was helpful to the 'professional conversations' (Braun and Clarke 2013, 77), but at the same time will no doubt have prevented various assumptions being analysed. The fact that the interview data is so individual to each participant at least indicates a degree of success in gathering interviewees' own 'language and concepts'. Others may, of course, see different themes in the interview material, having different perspectives and perhaps taking a different approach to the content analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013; Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011). Another reliability issue surrounds what might *not* have been said during the interviews, wittingly or unwittingly (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011). The most significant limitation is clearly the small sample size for this study. Findings have not been 'triangulated' in any way: they are a first exploratory step only. For all these reasons, the following discussion must be tentative. That being noted, some observations can be made in relation to the two research questions.

Taking the second question first, what the interviews do *not* show is an easy, fluent way of articulating pedagogy relating to effective primary music teaching, despite the fact that all the interviewees work with student teachers in this area. The interviewees' apparent difficulty in articulating what teachers actually do when teaching 'musically' is striking. Moreover, only one interviewee indicated any theoretical rationale for teacher actions.

This finding may be due to the nature of the questions asked. Perhaps if the interviewees had been asked 'Why do teachers work in this way?' there would have been an outpouring of pedagogical eloquence. However, the present study appears to support the concern of other writers about the current state of primary music pedagogy, at both methodological and theoretical levels. Fautley and Murphy (2014, 2) write that 'The challenge for today is moving pedagogy forwards'. Finney (2014) asks 'Why is it that we have so little sense of how the [school] subject named music is grounded, the nature of its disciplinary framework, its ontos? How it might be educational and not simply participatory?'

It is not enough to claim simply that with regard to primary music pedagogy we 'know more than we can tell' (Polanyi 1967, 4) or that our pedagogic knowledge is 'knowing-in-practice' (Schön 1983, 49). As teacher-educators we need to make this tacit knowledge explicit, for our students' sakes, as the second-language L2 teacher-educator community has been doing for decades. The knowledge of how to teach primary music effectively constitutes what Shulman (1987, 8) calls 'pedagogical content knowledge: that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional understanding'. Shulman says that teachers' 'wisdom of practice' is often lost because it is not shared, recorded or understood. To understand and become wise to our practice, we, as primary music teacher-educators, need to articulate it, to reflect and deliberate on it, to 'note' and 'formulate' it as Dewey was advocating in the 1930s (Biesta and Burbules 2003, 39). Unless we become more aware of our own pedagogically awarey, we cannot support our student teachers' reflections and we are in danger of being teacher-trainers rather than teacher-educators.

With regard to the first research question, the three interviews do not appear to share much common ground at any ~~pedagogical~~-level. No-one mentioned any of the well-known music teachers such as Orff, Kodály or Suzuki (Benedict 2010) during their interviews. There is little evidence of a common philosophy, rationale, methodology or even of shared terminology regarding teaching methods and strategies (see Figure 2). This finding accords with a study of three primary music teachers by Saetre (2011). He also found three very different ‘educational orientations’ which resulted in three different sets of practices and pupil experiences, even though the pupils were the same age and all involved in musical composition. Interestingly, no-one mentioned any of the well-known music teachers such as Orff, Kodály or Suzuki (Benedict 2010).

There was one theme that *did* occur in all three interviews. Explicitly or implicitly, they all included the assumption that any teacher who wishes to teach musically should ‘feel like a musician’ at some level, with direct experience of ‘how musicians operate’. There is a sense of two domains - *‘teachers’ practices’* and *‘musicians’ practices’* - which may or may not overlap, with *‘musicians’ practices’* seen as more influential in the success of class music lessons. Best of all, however, is when the two domains merge. This finding may help to explain the commonly-heard refrain: ‘I can’t teach music - I’m not a musician’. It suggests that unless a teacher self-identifies as a musician, however modestly, they will not have the confidence to teach ‘musically’. This is consistent with Elliott’s point: ‘Music education ought to be centrally concerned with teaching and learning *musicianship*’ (Elliott 1995, 72, *my italics*).

Could it be that a useful component of primary music pedagogy is the *explicit awareness* of the importance of ‘feeling like a musician’? If teacher-educators generate discussions with student teachers around this idea, related on the one hand to theoretical framings (such as Elliott’s and Silverman’s praxial philosophy of music education which stresses the active nature of ‘musicing’ [Elliott and Silverman 2015, 44]), and on the other hand to deliberations about teaching approaches, they will have instigated the genuine ‘attendant discourse’ (Alexander 2004) that constitutes pedagogical thinking.

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'Musical Futures' is one pedagogical framework for music that is currently prominent in secondary education. It derives from Green's (2008) research into the musicianship of rock musicians. The approach has much to offer in the primary sector too (Musical Bridges 2016). However, there are many ways of being musical, of which this is only one, and the current study would suggest that the important point is for teachers to 'feel like musicians' in whatever way suits them and/or is practicable: no particular methodology is favoured.

On a theoretical level, though, there is one perspective that appears to have great potential as a foundation for primary music pedagogy. With its emphasis on practical action and musicianship, the 'praxial' philosophy of music education (Elliott and Silverman 2015, 13; Jorgensen 2015) stresses both the active nature of 'musicing'—whether that be creating, performing or listening to music—and the principle that the praxis of music educators should be 'guided by an informed and ethical disposition to act rightly—musically' (Elliott & Silverman 2015, 44):

... when music is conceived and carried out ethically, for full human flourishing and transformation, music is not simply a practice, but a social praxis. Music should be conceived as a praxis—as something people do—as a distinctive and widely diverse form of creative and ethical human doing, making, and valuing that combines and depends on the integration of a complex web of people, processes, products, and contexts. (51)

This philosophy of music as a 'doing thing' lies somewhat in contrast to other philosophies of music education that place more emphasis on musical products and aesthetic considerations (Jorgensen 2015). Elliott's and Silverman's praxial philosophy, conceiving of music more as verb than noun, seems eminently compatible with the view of musical teaching described throughout this paper. It could well be productive for primary music teacher educators to base pedagogical discussions and debates on this philosophy.

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Further research would be useful. One avenue could be to investigate the extent to which ‘feeling like a musician’ – for example belonging to a choir, inventing songs or learning to drum in a percussion group – does in fact correlate with teaching primary music effectively. Another could be to discover-explore the extent to which teacher-educators of primary music devote their efforts to whether-providing opportunities through which student teachers can come to feel like musicians, whether or not they can provide the ‘attendant discourse’ as to why they might be doing so. —for example belonging to a choir, developing and recording a composition or learning to drum in a percussion group— helps them to become more effective primary music teachers. A third avenue could be to explore the effect on student teachers of deliberately engaging in pedagogical discourse around the idea of ‘feeling like a musician’ as part of their generalist or more specialist courses in teaching primary music.

Conclusions

The present study is on a very small scale. However ~~two some~~ tentative conclusions can be drawn. The first is that primary music pedagogy seems hard to articulate, even for teacher-educators in the field. The second is that the need for teachers to ‘feel like musicians’ appears to be one point of commonality. I-it may be beneficial, therefore, for teachers of primary music to undertake activities that help them to ‘think, feel and act like musicians’ (interview 3) ~~themselves, so that they can~~ as this may be something that helps them to ‘teach musically’. ~~It is suggested that Elliott’s and Silverman’s praxial philosophy of music education might offer a useful theoretical framework for considering primary music pedagogy, with its focus on teachers’ and learners’ musicianship.~~ may also be beneficial for teacher-educators to engage in the ‘attendant discourse’ around this idea, as one explicit component of primary music pedagogy.

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Figure 1

transcription shorthand notation scheme (adapted from Oliver, Serovich and Mason 2005)

Figure 2

‘teacherly’ terminology used by interviewees 1, 2 and 3