

spring of 2011 at Southridge School in Surrey, British Columbia, a co-educational independent school for students in K-12. The students chosen to participate in this project were 44 Grade 7 students from two beginning band classes. They participated in a two-phase project for 10 sessions that took place weekly over several months.

In phase one, the students formed friendship groups and worked collaboratively to learn to play a song of their choice “by ear” without the use of notation or direct instruction. The objective was to have the students emulate the real-life learning practices of many beginning popular musicians. In phase two, the students wrote about their experiences in learning to play a piece of music by ear and then took part in an inquiry-based research project. The objective of phase two was to allow students to explore issues such as authenticity, repetition, dedication, and future musical opportunities. This project employed qualitative research, as students were observed and videotaped throughout the learning process, and their written reflections were analyzed using a thematic, grounded theory approach that examined themes and the meanings that emerged through the learners’ accounts of their experiences.

#### Phase 1 - In at the Deep End

In this initial phase of the project, students were “dropped into the deep end” as they worked collaboratively over five 50-minute sessions to learn to play a piece of music without the use of notation or direct instruction. The students were given the freedom to choose their working groups of four to five, as well as a piece that was appealing to their group. All groups selected popular hits such as Lady Gaga’s “Born this Way” and Cee Lo Green’s “Forget You.” The students were told that their task was to learn to play their chosen piece as a group without the use of any sheet music. They were allowed to use any other resources and any process that they chose; they could also use any instrumentation, as long as everyone played at least a part of the piece on their assigned band instrument.

As part of our research-practice collaborative work, both researchers and

teachers acted as facilitators and resources that the students could tap into to help them learn their song and arrange it for their own combination of band instruments, and undertake their own research and reflections on the informal learning process. Student-led research was also encouraged to help the students learn more about their song (e.g., discover different versions and information about the bands and the genre of the song) and the techniques that they needed to learn (e.g., using the internet for playing tips and fingerings or their computers to record different parts of the song). Throughout the process, the students were asked to record their ideas and inspirations and to think critically about and reflect on the process they were going through to learn their song.

The students worked in their groups to deconstruct and ‘reconstruct’ their chosen pieces, often listening to a recording that they started and stopped as they worked to pick out the basic melodies. In a written reflection, one female student described what she calls the “trial and error” learning process as she and her group worked to learn their song: “...we had no music to look off of, so we had to try different combinations... If we didn’t get something right, you had to keep trying again until you got it right.” Several students used a keyboard to play the melody and then transferred this to their band instrument. They often needed to learn new fingerings as they did this, and depending on the instruments in their group, they sometimes also needed to consider transposition.

Once they had their melodies figured out, several student groups added harmonies, creating arrangements that were both complex and musically mature. It was inspiring to walk into a practice room that the “Don’t Stop Believing” group was using and hear a ‘Glee’-like arrangement being played on their flutes and clarinets. Several groups considered instrumentation and effectively incorporated guitar, bass, piano, percussion, and even singing to make their pieces truly their own. This showed the project’s ability to promote true musical thinking, in which the worlds of school music, private lessons, and creativity were able to meld.

During the sixth session, the groups

played their songs for each other and offered each other supportive and constructive feedback on their performances. One girl described the positive, team-building nature of this performing experience: “Our final performance that we did was spectacular, because after all the time of trying and failing, we finally got it and when we performed all of the parts fit really well together. Throughout the performance, we worked together really well, and helped each other out if we did something wrong or got confused.”

Four groups also volunteered to play their songs at a year-end band concert for their parents, and the audience loved their arrangements. One longtime school parent commented that this was her favourite Grade 7 band concert because of the inclusion of these student-centered performances, and several parents noted the upbeat feeling that came from incorporating these collaborations in the program.

#### Phase 2 - Youth-led Participatory Action Research

Phase 2 of this project involved four further 50-minute sessions in which the students were involved in two inquiry projects designed to deepen their awareness and understanding of informal music learning. Each student wrote an account of “What I did to learn to play a song by ear” followed by a collaborative project that engaged them in thinking about how this learning compares with other ways they learn music and their experiences of working together as a band. Students researched their chosen songs and the original artists, watched YouTube clips of other performances of their chosen songs, and compared their arrangements with the original version of their chosen songs. These inquiry projects were based on the principles of youth-led participatory action research (YPAR), which is a student-centered approach that encourages youth and adults to work together in partnership on issues of importance to youth and their community (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). A key focus of YPAR in our study emphasized the active role of learners who had “ownership” in the pursuit of transformative educational goals. We used YPAR to encourage the students to be active

problem-solvers, agents of change, critical consumers of research, and generators of their own knowledge.

The main themes to emerge from their inquiry projects were then used to produce a visual representation (word cloud) of their experiences, which they shared with the other groups. Each group was also involved in a “press conference” activity where the friendship-group bands came to face their classmates’ questions about their informal learning experiences using a real-life press conference format. This event was used to help the students make further connections with the experiences of popular musicians so that they might see parallels with their own experiences in phase 1 of this project.

This added layer to the Musical Futures project enabled students, teachers and researchers to work together on an inquiry-based project into student engagement in informal music learning. The students reflected on the process of informal learning and the specific challenges and enablements that they encountered in a way that brought them into sharper focus. The findings indicate that when students reflect on and analyze multiple pathways to music learning they begin to imagine possibilities and connections to a wider range of learning opportunities that will help them reach beyond where they currently are.

#### The Value of Musical Futures

Participating in the Musical Futures project challenged students to think of the different ways that one can learn music. Many students who had never played music without reading it experienced success playing by ear, often to their own surprise. Several came to understand that playing by ear is a different skill than reading music off the page, but no less valuable as a musician. One male student explained this, noting the musical freedom he found in this process: “Learning music by ear is different than reading it off a page. For some people it could be more difficult but for some people it is easier than reading it off a page. For me it is easier and more fun because you can bend the rules a bit in the sense that not every note has to [be] exactly right...” The opportunity to play by ear was freeing for some and scary for others, but in

either case, it challenged the students to see music in a new light. In fact, several students expressed a recognition that they could now figure out other melodies by listening and working with others.

For many Grade 7 students, purposeful listening to music was also a new experience. One boy insightfully explained that through this project he had seen the value of careful listening: “What helped me learn the most was listening to [the song]. When you listen to a song, you get a ‘feel’ for the music.” Both phases of this project required the students to listen carefully as they considered melody, harmony, and instrumentation both in their own arrangements and ‘cover’ versions of their chosen songs. It is very likely that many will hear music, including their favourite pop pieces, with a new, enhanced ‘awareness’ as a result of this project. They are now listening – and thinking – like musicians.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of this project is the fact that almost all participants enjoyed participating in it, and several were inspired by it. Enthusiastic comments such as “I am looking forward to doing projects like this in band next year!” were not unique to this female author. Many students came to the music room to work on their projects on their own time, using lunch hours to practice, particularly in the days leading up to the phase one performances. Several loved the opportunity to arrange and perform, such as the two boys who weren’t even in a group together, but stayed behind at the end of one performance class to ‘jam.’ This awakening in some students, as they came to identify themselves as musicians, was exciting. Indeed, it is what we all strive for as music educators. This was the first year for Musical Futures at Southridge School, but it will not be the last. In fact, a similar project is now an annual part of the school’s Grade 7 music program and it has also been adapted for use in the senior grades. If you are interested in learning more about Musical Futures, or would like to download the free Teacher Resource pack, go to: <http://www.musicalfutures.org.uk/>

#### References

- Cammarota, J., & Fine, M. (2008). *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Dewey, J. (1933/1998). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the ed-*

- ucative process. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Green, L. (2001). *How popular musicians learn: A way ahead for music education*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Green, L. (2008a). *Music, informal learning and the school: A new classroom pedagogy*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Green, L. (2008b). *Lucy Green Responds [Response to panel. Special edition - Beyond Lucy Green: Operational theories of informal learning]. Visions of Research in Music Education, 12(1)*. Retrieved from <http://users.rider.edu/~vrme/v12n1/index.html>
- Frierson-Campbell, C. (2008). *Beyond Lucy Green: Operational theories of informal learning. Visions of Research in Music Education, 12(1)*. Retrieved from [http://users.rider.edu/~vrme/v12n1/vision/EDITORIAL\\_Volume%2012%20-%20Green.pdf](http://users.rider.edu/~vrme/v12n1/vision/EDITORIAL_Volume%2012%20-%20Green.pdf)
- Jaffurs, S. (2004). *Developing musicality: formal and informal practices. Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education, 3(3)*, 17 pages. Retrieved from [http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Jaffurs3\\_3.pdf](http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Jaffurs3_3.pdf)
- Mans, M. (2009). *Informal learning and values. Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education, 8(2)*, 79–93. Retrieved from [http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Mans8\\_2.pdf](http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Mans8_2.pdf)
- Nagel, N. G. (1996). *Learning through real-world problem solving: The power of integrative teaching*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- O’Flynn, J. (2010). [Review of the book, *Music, informal learning and the school: a new classroom pedagogy (2008)*, by L. Green]. *Journal Of The Society For Musicology In Ireland, 5(0)*. Retrieved from <http://www.music.ucc.ie/jsmi/index.php/jsmi/article/view/73/70>
- O’Neill, S. A. (2005). *Youth music engagement in diverse contexts*. In J. L. Mahoney, R. Larson & J. S. Eccles (Eds.), *Organized activities as contexts of development: Extracurricular Activities, After School and Community Programs (pp. 255-272)*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

#### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the students and Steve Burrage, a music teacher at Southridge school, for participating in the project. We also thank Co-investigator, Dr. Yaroslav Senyshyn and Project Coordinator for Research for Youth, Music and Education (RYME), Deanna Peluso for their contributions to the research.



Susan O’Neill is Associate Professor in Arts Education at Simon Fraser University and Director of Research for Youth, Music and Education (RYME). She is Senior Editor of the *CMEA/Acme Biennial Book Series, Research to Practice*. Her research focuses on artistic and musical learning and the way young people value music making, as well as the impact of youth arts engagement on motivation, well-being, identity, and cultural understanding. You can contact her by email at [sao@sfu.ca](mailto:sao@sfu.ca) or visit [www.rymeyouth.com](http://www.rymeyouth.com)



Kevin Bespflug is a music and English teacher at Southridge School. He is also a workshop leader and site visitor for the International Baccalaureate’s Middle Years Programme (MYP). Kevin graduated with his PhD from Simon Fraser University in 2009. His research and teaching interests include integrated arts education, authentic performing arts experiences for children, and community building through the arts.