

Voices from the space-in-between: international exchange experiences of music teacher students

Maria Westvall

Örebro University – Sweden
maria.westvall@oru.se

Flávia Motoyama Narita

Universidade de Brasília – Brazil
flavnarita@yahoo.com.br

Samuel Karlsson

Örebro University – Sweden
samuel.karlsson@oru.se

Antenor Ferreira Corrêa

Universidade de Brasília – Brazil
antenorferreira@yahoo.com.br

Abstract: This paper discusses how intercultural experiences might shape student teachers' ideas about music teaching. Based on a long-term international exchange program between a Swedish university and two Brazilian universities, our research adopts a qualitative methodology to investigate how students in that program experience, negotiate, and re-signify cultural, educational and musical differences. This paper is based on a focus group interview with six Brazilian students after their first six months in Sweden. Some of the themes that emerged from our initial analysis of the interview include perceptions of relationships between students and teachers, teachers' attitudes (trans)forming students' views of music education, and students' willingness to "bring back home" some of the experiences they have been living in the exchange program. Moreover, their previous experience in the Brazilian scenario and their current experience of music teacher education in Sweden are contributing to re-shape their identities as musicians and music teachers in relation to their translocational positionality (ANTHIAS, 2002; 2008). This allows more fluidity in their roles as future musicians and music teachers, and might therefore prepare them for a more culturally diverse approach to life, as well as in music education, raising awareness of "the others", of themselves, and of the relationship among each other.

Keywords: Music teacher students, international exchange, intercultural competence.

Introduction

Intercultural experiences of Brazilian music teacher students will be addressed in this paper in the context of an academic exchange program named Linnaeus-Palme. Generally, the benefits of or justifications for investments made in academic exchange programs could be summarized, according to Van Hoof and Verbeeten (2005, p. 43), in three main aspects: international experience “exposes the student to different social and cultural environments; changes the stereotypes that might exist; and helps the students become more mature because they live in other cultures and become well-rounded, culturally sensitive adults.” The Swedish program Linnaeus-Palme aims “to raise the quality of higher education by integrating global perspectives into the learning process” and “stimulate long-term collaborations based on the mutual benefit created between higher education institutions in Sweden and developing countries. These collaborations are conducted in project form and build upon teacher and student exchanges” (LINNAEUS-PALME, 2013, p. 3).

This program has been implemented in the field of music in a Swedish university and in two Brazilian universities since 2011. In the following year the first batch of exchange students commenced the programme. Since then, every year, approximately four students from each university stay for a full academic year in the other university. Thus, cultural differences, educational differences, and musical differences, as well as similarities, are part of their socialisation process of becoming a music teacher. Based on negotiations during their interactions, students’ experiences, values and attitudes are re-shaped. We argue that this not only might help them to prepare for a more culturally diverse approach to music education, but also to shape their own “humanness”.

In order to understand the intercultural experiences promoted by the above-mentioned exchange program and investigate how these experiences might shape student teachers’ ideas about music teaching, we conducted a focus group interview with six Brazilian students after their first 6 months in Sweden. The interview has helped us to reflect

on their intercultural processes with regard to their roles as music teacher, musicians and human beings.

Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate music teacher students' experiences from an international exchange. The guiding questions for this research are:

- What does the exchange mean for the music teacher students as musicians, educators and human beings?
- How do intercultural exchange experiences contribute to transform student teachers' ideas about their future teaching practice?

Theoretical points of departure

Intercultural competence

From the 1980's, the concept of cultural competence has contributed to reshape pedagogical approaches. These approaches aimed to consider the students' cultural context within the academic curriculum and received some denominations, such as, "culturally appropriate (Au & Jordan, 1981), culturally congruent (Mohatt & Erickson, 1981), culturally responsive (Cazden & Leggett, 1981; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982), and culturally compatible (Jordan, 1985; Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987)" (LADSON-BILLINGS, 1995, p. 159). What they have in common is the fact of accepting elements, traditions, and other aspects of students' culture. Thus, teachers brought to classroom the issues and the typical repertoire from students' cultural contexts. Within that conception, teachers utilized "students' culture as a vehicle for learning" (LADSON-BILLINGS, 1995, p. 161).

The concept of cultural competence can bring interesting insights into the subject of this paper. If it is possible to talk about a cultural competence, can we also think of a curriculum, or at least part of it, that is oriented towards "intercultural competence"? Before continuing, it would be useful to clarify what an intercultural process is.

Terminologically, intercultural means the mutual influence between different cultures. It is important to note that intercultural processes occur when two cultures interact mutually in a cooperative way. This condition implies that there should be no relationship of passivity among cultures in interaction. It is worth clarifying that "interaction" refers therefore to the actions and relationships between members of a group, and also the actions between groups of a society or nation (SCHIPPERS, 2010).

For this reason, it could be understood that interactive processes, and therefore, intercultural actions, are dialectical systems, since the groups formed within any social context are created by people. The same people will eventually be affected by the behaviour of the group created by themselves. In other words, the ways we assign meanings to things come from the learning of intersubjective agreements within specific social contexts. These personal meanings will subsequently influence and modify the interactions among individuals of the same group and also what they perceive as something meaningful. Differently, a cross-cultural process, for example, has a more passive approach, because it does not require the same kind of interaction between subjects as it is required within intercultural processes.

Having in mind the differences between these terminologies, it is possible to think about the idea of intercultural competence as evolving from a type of learning that comes from the interaction among persons in social contexts that are diverse from the ones that each person is originally used to and/or familiar with.

Translocational Positionality

Based on her research about ethnicity and migration investigating what happens to "identity" in the process of moving locations, Anthias (2002; 2008, p. 5) argues that the understanding of "identity as a possessive attribute of individuals or groups" neither reflects the realities of migrants nor helps us deal with issues of ethnicities. Instead, she suggests the concept of translocational positionality, which "addresses issues of identity in terms of

locations which are not fixed but are context, meaning and time related and which therefore involve shifts and contradictions”.

Not only does migration itself challenge national borders but increasing flows of people, commodities, cultures and economic and political interests turn our attention to a range of social processes broadly identifiable as ‘translocational’. These not only affect people who are themselves directly ‘on the move’ but also the locales in which they settle, converting them to translocational spaces, thereby affecting in different ways all who live within these spaces (ANTHIAS, 2008, p. 6).

Although the author was focussing on a long-term or permanent movement from one location to another, it seemed to us that this notion of translocational positionality could be also used to understand the identities/positions of those Brazilian students in a short-term move of locations experienced through the exchange program. In this sense, differently from a “fixed” notion of identity, we understand that those students are placed “in temporal-spatial conditions which mark them and which they also mark” (FREIRE, 1970/2005, p. 109).

As Paulo Freire (1970/2005, p. 109) explains, “Human beings are because they are in a situation. And they will be more the more they not only critically reflect upon their existence but critically act upon it”. Such a critical intervention in one’s own reality is a result of conscientization, or critical awareness of the situation.

Located in “the space between”

This paper deals with music teacher students’ experiences of being part of an international exchange program. That means that they would generally stay abroad for approximately one year and then return to their familiar context of music teaching. It can be described as a brief encounter with something different (the cultural and educational context), yet familiar (music education) (MATEIRO; WESTVALL, 2013). They cannot identify with being migrants, which would encompass a larger and more long-term change for them.

Instead, they would more “travel” in order to “go away” with the intention to “come back” with new experiences.

The concept of being in the “space between” might capture their experience during their exchange. The “space between” is the definition of a location that may be described as a fluid gap between previous experiences and understandings and future expectations and visions. When strongly held understandings interact with new impressions, a person’s ideas or thoughts can be described to be in a constant flux, or located in two places at once. In relation to taking part of an exchange program in another country, the “space between” might work as a switch between before, now and an imagined future, and may result in previously held ideas being abandoned, maintained and reinforced (WESTVALL, 2009).

This idea is particularly interesting when it comes to future teachers and their experiences of the “unknown” or “new”. In relation to music teaching, teachers often tend to teach similar to the way they were taught themselves. Nevertheless, in “the space between” new values and models are generated and previous held methods and ideas may transform.

Method: Focus Group Interview

The method used for the data collection was a focus group interview. The reason for this choice was an aim to access both individual and collective experiences and views from students who were undergoing the international exchange programme. The method provides an opportunity for interaction among a group of interviewees, and the interview situation allows for various forms of agreements and disagreements among the participants in relation to the research topic presented by the facilitator (PUCHTA; POTTER, 2004; DENSCOMBE, 2007; WIBECK, 2010).

Six students from Brazil participated in the interview session that lasted for about 90 minutes. Four researchers (two from Brazil and two from Sweden) were present during the interview. Before the focus group interview, all four had discussed and agreed on which topics would be presented and discussed during the interview, and they had also distributed

various functions and roles between themselves. One of the Swedish researchers functioned as the facilitator, the Brazilian researchers were observing as well as facilitated for translation between English and Portuguese when required from the participants and the second Swedish researcher took notes. At the end of the focus group interview the researcher who had taken notes, read her notes to the interviewees summarizing the main ideas voiced in the conversation. This summary of the interview was a means to confirm with participants if they “recognised” their voices and ideas. At the same time, this summary turned to be a first organization of themes perceived by the researcher.

Findings

From method to findings – Making sense of the different voices: thematic analysis

Besides the above-mentioned summary of the focus group interview, each researcher individually listened to the audio recording of the interview and made their own notes, coming up with their own themes according to their interpretation of the recording and memory of the interview. In order to organize our ideas and the emerged themes, we used thematic analysis, “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (BRAUN; CLARKE, 2006, p. 79). The themes that were generated were a combination of the topics/questions posed by the facilitator and the discussions/answers of the participants.

Emerging Themes

“We changed a lot here!”

When asked about their thoughts regarding this exchange program, the six interviewees gave us accounts related to their (trans)formation both as music teachers and as persons. Their identities of music teachers seemed to be interwoven with their identities as musicians. They emphasised that in Sweden “there are lots of practising moments” and that they can “practise to be better musicians”, whereas in Brazil they felt there are “lots of

classes and not so much time to practise". They pointed out that the emphasis on musical practices, on "how to do it" even when related to [music] theory was also observed in regular schools in Sweden. This music-making practical approach, in their opinion, is something they would like to "bring back home".

Besides changes in their views about music (teacher) education, the six Brazilians voiced awareness of personal transformation due to their current located position. In the words of one of the students:

Organization here [in Sweden] helps getting a result in a collective way. People work with the same vision. Not being late ... they all have more or less the same way of behaving. It's easier to work this way: how to manage yourself as a member in the group. [We] see examples from them. We changed a lot here! (STUDENT 2)

This statement illustrates how students might adapt themselves according to the context they are immersed in. Likewise, such an influence of the context was also found when they reflected about being a (music) teacher in Brazil. They mentioned that in Brazil "teachers don't love their jobs" and that "teachers are not patient [because] there is no structure, building, instruments, curriculum; [because of the high] number of students, number of lessons per week".

In contrast, they see the Swedish model inspiring them with "small classes of 5 to 7 students, each one playing one instrument". Moreover, they implied that the implementation of the Law 11769/2008, which made music a compulsory content in regular schools, requires more than just "the board and the teacher and students". Another reflection was the emphasis on the collective rather than the individual in Swedish music education context. Some examples were the focus on (rock) band tuition in the classrooms, and the sense of being part of a musical process and community. They also highlighted the experiences of getting musical results in a collective way when the work is organized around the collective. One student expressed that it is within this collective idea the individual can practise to improve as a person within the group.

Transformation of the music teacher students selves

The personal, musical and educational transformations the students have been experiencing are also influenced by the relationships between themselves and their teachers. The students perceived a more “equal” relationship between teachers and students, both at university level and in regular schools in Sweden. One example of this—was that students felt that teachers, during individual instrumental lessons in the school of music, approached them in a way that meant focusing on them, as individuals. During the focus group interview, the students shared that during the lessons they were asked not only what they wanted to play but also in what way they wanted to play it, concerning both technique and interpretation of the music. Students felt valued and respected because teachers cared about what they thought, allowing them to make their own musical choices in performances.

It was also highlighted how they felt involved as well as invited in the whole process artistically as well as pedagogically in the preparation for a concert, for instance. This was expressed on a practical level such as being able to influence the design of a poster for a concert, but also considering to actually being invited or asked to perform in a concert. This freedom and autonomy that they experienced as students and this “more equal” and dialogical relation between teacher and student strongly influenced the students during the exchange. The students felt that they wanted to try and “bring it back home”, aiming at offering their school pupils more freedom and autonomy.

Similar experiences of intercultural exchanges were also found in previous research by Burton, Westvall and Karlsson (2013), in which American and Swedish students accessed a broader repertoire of knowledge with regards to possible methodological approaches, musical content, student-teacher relations. These experiences challenged the students’ understandings about the general role of music education in a society, as well as from a more global perspective. Not only did these experiences give rise to the wish of bringing

something new back home, or of integrating the unfamiliar into the familiar, but they also created a larger transformation of the music teacher student selves.


“The doors are all the time open for me”. A dual relationship of being a musician and a teacher

It was obvious that the students’ experiences of musicianship as part of their teacher education had significant value to them in various instances. The students highlighted other circumstances that emphasised the potential for musical development such as access to instruments and practice rooms at the School of Music 24/7, and lots of practise time instead of a full schedule of classes. They also described how the professors had musical conversations with them concerning the musical material. They mentioned that their opinions about the piece or the playing style were asked for, and expressed the sense of being treated as “musical equals” to their professors. This was much related to the teachers’ attitudes in designing classes on an individual basis so that each student could benefit and develop from his/her musical position. Their descriptions of their teachers were as artistic authorities and pedagogical enabler at the same time. This could be connected to the artistic/musical and pedagogical experiences were intertwined and interdependent in the students’ sense of development.

Concluding remarks

Being part of this exchange influenced the students in many ways as future music teachers. In the focus group interview the students expressed that they wanted to “bring back home” certain content that they had met both in the teacher education and when visiting and observing music teaching in regular schools.

These experiences seem to have influenced the students in an ethical way. As Freire (1994, p. 64) would remind us “it is precisely the political nature of educational practice, its helplessness to be ‘neutral’, that requires of the educator his or her ethicalness”. The students experienced different contents, contexts and approaches, and wanted to bring



these back home on the basis of a kind of ethical perspective, thinking in terms of “How can I make music teaching better for my pupils? How can I improve the way I teach music?”. Participation in this kind of exchange involves a development of intercultural competences. This happens while experiencing a sense of being in a cultural “space between” which could also be connected to the concept of translocational positionality. Students’ willingness to implement these “new” experiences in their home country might encourage them to engage more actively in their own (trans)formations, as musicians, music teachers and human beings. It seems like they – through their exchange experiences – have discovered multiple ways, locations and positions, and in negotiation between these old and new understandings and possibilities, they have internalised a broader approach to music and music education.

References

- ANTHIAS, Floya. Where do I belong?: Narrating collective identity and translocational positionality. *Ethnicities*, 2(4), p. 491–514, 2002.
- ANTHIAS, Floya. Thinking through the lens of translocational positionality: an intersectionality frame for understanding identity and belonging. *Translocations: Migration and Social Change*, 4(1), p. 5–20, 2008.
- BRAUN, Virginia; CLARKE, Victoria. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), p. 77–101, 2006.
- BURTON, Suzanne; WESTVALL, Maria; KARLSSON, Samuel. Stepping Aside From Myself: Intercultural Perspectives on Music Teacher Education. *Journal of Music Teacher Education*, n. 23, 1, p. 92–105, 2013.
- DENSCOMBE, Martyn. *The good research guide: for small-scale social research projects*. 3rd ed. Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2007.
- FREIRE, Paulo. *Pedagogy of Hope: reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (R.R. Barr, Trans.). London: Continuum, 1994.
- FREIRE, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 30th anniversary edition. (M.B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Continuum, 2005. (Original work published 1970)
- LADSON-BILLINGS, Gloria. But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. *Theory into Practice*, Vol. 34, No. 3, p. 159-165, 1995.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1476635> Accessed: 05/03/2015
- LINNAEUS-PALME. *Guidelines for the 2013-2014 and 2013-2015 Academic Years*. Internationella Programkontoret, 2013.
- MATEIRO, Teresa; WESTVALL, Maria. The cultural dimensions of music teachers' professional knowledge. In: GEORGII-HEMMING, Eva; BURNARD, Pamela; HOLGERSEN, Sven-Erik. *Professional knowledge in music teacher education*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013. p. 157-172.
- PUCHTA, Claudia; POTTER, Jonathan. *Focus group practice*. London: SAGE, 2004.
- SCHIPPERS, Huib. *Facing the music: shaping music education from a global perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

VAN HOOFF, Hubert B. & VERBEETEN, Marja J. Wine Is for Drinking, Water Is for Washing: Student Opinions About International Exchange Programs. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Vol. 9 No. 1, Spring 2005, pp. 42-61.

WESTVALL, Maria. *Webs of Musical Significance. A study of student-teachers' musical socialisation in Ireland and Sweden*. Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2009.

WIBECK, Victoria. *Fokusgrupper: om fokuserade gruppintervjuer som undersökningsmetod*. Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2010.