Transition Anxiety: Student perspectives on starting Year 7 music. (*A school based study*)

Every Year 7 music teacher is well aware of the multifarious nature of classroom music as students with wide ranging skills and experiences come from numerous feeder schools. However, a recently overheard conversation between a number of Year 7 students piqued my interest. The students were discussing how much they enjoy coming to music now. Whilst I was pleased that they enjoyed music, it was the *now* that I was most interested in. Why had students not initially enjoyed coming to music? What had their previous experiences of music been like? And, how many students felt the same way? This small-scale study looked at student perception of the anxiety experienced by Year 7 students relating to reading notation and particularly about singing.

Gathering data:

Anecdotally I was able to ascertain that, prior to starting music, each student assumed others in the class to have more music knowledge than they themselves did, resulting in high levels of stress and low self-confidence. To understand how the students felt at the commencement and conclusion of the semester, all Year 7 students at Haileybury City Campus were invited to participate in a questionnaire that was developed using a Likert scale to measure participant responses. A questionnaire containing 15 questions and a 7-question demographic survey were sent to 37 students with a participant information letter and consent form. The questionnaire was voluntary and students were given the opportunity to provide a written comment on each question if they felt the information would help clarify their meaning. Participant responses were received from 87% (*N=32*) of those invited, with gender balance (Male = 16, Female = 16) and variety of feeder school types represented (Independent School 18.75%; State School 62.5%; Catholic School 12.5%, Other 3.12%; Not identified 3.12%). An initial look at the data indicated two main themes: that previous experience in classroom music was greatly varied and that 31% of students experienced anxiety about starting Year 7 music. As teachers prepare for a new academic year, these insights may assist with preparation for a fresh batch of Year 7 students as they transition into high school.

Access to classroom music programme:

Q1. How often did you have music each week in primary school?

Q1. Lessons per week	**No music offered**	**One**	**Two**	**Three**	**Four or more**
	12.5%	56.25%	18.75%	12.5%	0%

Although 87% of students indicated that they had music classes in primary school, their comments highlighted the disparity between schools and what is identified as a music programme. One limitation of the questionnaire is that it did not clarify lesson length or if music ran for the whole year.

- *It was once every week when you had it but some years you didn't have music at all and when you did, it was only for a semester.*
- *In primary school, we hardly did singing. It was mainly just acting and percussion which all fell under the category of Performing Arts. The school didn't find music important.*
- *We didn't learn that much, we basically spent all of our year on Garage Band.*
- *We did "Just Dance".*
- *It was three times but one was a double and I did extra music as well.*

Confidence measures:

As Haileybury middle school music is influenced by Kodaly methodology, the initial expectation is that students will sing; However, it would seem that this is alien to many students and a source of anxiety and although a number of students identified that they had regular classroom music programmes they commented that the only time they sang was in "Friday assembly" or for church services.

Q9. In the first lesson of Year 7 music you were required to sing (as a group). How confident were you personally?

Q10. How confident were you to sing in a group by the end of Year 7?

	Not at all	Not very	Moderately	Confident	Very confident
Q9. Start of Year 7	9.37%	25.00%	31.25%	12.50%	21.87%
Q10. End Year 7	0%	3.12%	6.25%	37.50%	53.13%

Q14. When you started Year 7 music, and were asked to sing, how did you feel?

Q15. By the end of Year 7, when you were asked to sing, how did you feel?

	Very anxious	A bit anxious	Okay	Confident	Very confident
Q14. Start of Year 7	3.12%	28.12%	53.13%	0%	15.62%
Q15. End Year 7	3.12%	0%	12.50%	46.87%	37.50%

Again, the wide range of classroom music experience is highlighted by the following comments.

- *We had to sing "Fire Flies" every single lesson in year 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. In year 6 we just played garage.*
- *We sang different exercises to improve/warm up our voices.*
- *We played a lot of singing and dancing games because it was easier than getting all the instruments out. We were also assessed on group performances based on singing and dancing.*
- *We just sung them and were not told anything about them.*
- *I never really sang in primary school as I got a bit nervous and wasn't entirely sure how to use my voice.*

Students also rated their confidence as it related to reading and clapping basic rhythms at the end of Year 6 with 28% of students identifying that they were not confident with basic rhythmic tasks on finishing primary school. However, 18.75% of those that claimed to be confident or very confident with rhythm at the end of Year 6 asserted that this was as a result of private instrumental lessons.

	Not at all	Not very	Moderately	Confident	Very confident
End Year 6	9.37%	18.75%	18.75%	31.25%	21.87%
End Year 7	0%	0%	6.25%	28.12%	65.62%

When it came to confidence with reading notation on the treble staff, the results were far more evenly spread. However, as with rhythm, students commented that they did not learn this at school but through their instrumental lessons.

	Not at all	Not very	Moderately	Confident	Very confident
End Year 6	21.87%	15.62%	18.75%	21.87%	21.87%
End Year 7	0%	3.12%	0%	37.50%	59.37%

Conclusion:

Knowing that students come to music with vastly different experiences, is nothing new. Having the understanding that a significant number of students have low levels of self-esteem and a sense of anxiety about music will impact on the way I introduce the course at the start of each semester. By pre-emptively addressing the assumptions held by students around what others know and have experienced, may go some way to addressing student anxiety. It is hoped that this information will help in understanding student experience and perspectives as we start a new year.