

Involving
Students
In their
Own learning:

The Experience
Of a first year
Curriculum
innovation

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Curriculum innovation**

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by
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Introduction

Irish school leavers in the main show a high level of satisfaction with their basic education; reading, writing and a calculation skills (Hannan and Shorthall, 1991). The level of satisfaction with personal and social development, preparation for work and other adult roles however fall short of the targets reached by basic education. There is no doubt though that since Hannan and Shorthall's research in 1991, much has been done in Irish schools to improve students and to help them grow not only academically, but also socially. Innovations include programmes such as Transition Year, Leaving Certificate Vocational, Civic Social and Political Education and perhaps most importantly the Junior Certificate.

Introduced in 1989, it provided a single unified programme for students based on the principles of breadth and balance, relevance, quality continuity, progression and coherence. Many teachers believed that this innovative programme would give access to Dewey's "laboratories of freedom". Unfortunately, as Callan's research has pointed out, many teachers experienced an absence of in-service support in their efforts to adopt the Junior Certificate Programme and as a result felt isolated and de-motivated as they tried to discover how the subject areas were

different and how they could respond to these differences. The Junior Certificate sought to give a more varied and exciting experience to students however, much of what was envisaged did not occur and as a result little innovation occurred. The module examined in this research study was developed by the teacher as a result of reflection and evaluation of a classroom experience. As a teacher, it had always disappointed me to hear colleagues doubt the insights and viewpoints of their students. It seemed to me that many students felt education was something to receive and not actively participate in. Students seemed not to experience the active learning environment envisaged by the Junior Certificate programme. With an experience such as this, students become “citizens of the learning environment, taking responsibility for each other and the facility they enter each day (Rogers and Freiberg 1994, p.9).

As a result, this thesis will seek to examine the students’ role as an active participant in their own learning. The module was planned as an active learning experience but as time passed, it became evident that some changes were required to ensure that it became a mutual learning experience - a shared endeavour between teacher and students. Over the course of this research study, the module planning, alteration and implementation will be examined with a view to a classroom experience.

CHAPTER 1 – Students Participation in their own learning A Literature Review

This chapter examines the many innovations in the Irish Education System and the efforts made to change the inherited traditions of teaching and learning. The Junior Certificate programme forms the central focus of the chapter, however, other programmes are also evaluated and assessed. The chapter also sets the scene for the examination of the module alongside international perspectives, where the student has been placed centre stage as participant in his/her own learning experience.

CHAPTER 2 The Design and Experience of a new module in Music

The initial plan and methodology for the module is featured in this chapter alongside the teachers' experience with the students. This experience is recounted in a narrative story from which allows for a descriptive account of a curriculum innovation in a classroom setting. Unexpected developments and planning changes are also detailed in this chapter.

CHAPTER 3

Review of issues in the research procedures used.

This chapter seeks to detail and clarify the methods used. It describes the initial plan for the module and the alterations which subsequently need to be made. It describes the use of the questionnaire as a method of eliciting student's views: views which then informed the design of the module. The issue of multiple intelligence teaching and learning is also featured.

CHAPTER 4

Analysis of issues arising from the findings

Many issues arise during this research study and in this chapter they are outlined and examined with a view to teacher and student. The evaluation process conducted during the course of the module is also examined and resulting issues are examined.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this final chapter, concluding issues are highlighted and possible recommendations are offered.

Students Participation In Their Own Learning – A Literature Review

The main focus in this chapter is on students' participation and its absence in their own learning. It examines international research on this topic and the quality of student learning is a key element of the narrative chapter that follows.

Many attempts have been made in recent years to change the inherited traditions of teaching learning and assessment both on a national and international basis. The belief exists that by escaping these traditions, education for both teacher and student will be greatly enhanced. In Ireland, one major attempt in particular was made to provide a different quality of education on a nation-wide basis – The Junior Certificate. Twelve years after its introduction, doubts still exist about the success of the programme and about the lack of congruence between the aims and goals, teaching styles and modes of assessment. In the course of this chapter, it is hoped to examine the Junior Certificate, as it was intended to be and the subsequent evaluations of the programme.

The Junior Certificate : A new quality of educational experience?

In 1989, a new curriculum was introduced for students in the Junior Cycle of Irish post primary schools. This marked the beginning of substantial curriculum change for these schools. This programme was introduced as a result of the many changes which had taken place in Irish life over the years. With universal post-primary education a great diversity of students were attending post-primary school, patterns of employment too had begun to change and new approaches to teaching and learning were required.

Charting our Education Future : White Paper on Education (1995) was the culmination of a lengthy and broadly based consultation process since 1992 and it set out the main paths for Irish education. It signalled a significant change in educational provision including further changes in curriculum provision. Stressing the importance of these changes, the White Paper defined curriculum as follows: “The term curriculum encompasses the content, structure and processes of teaching and learning which the school provides in accordance with its educational objectives and value.” (p18) This definition, which includes content, structure and

process shows a moving away from the old idea of curriculum as a syllabus which was rigidly adhered to.

The White Paper describes elements of curriculum;

The specific elements are those concepts, skills, and areas of knowledge and attitudes which children learn at school as part of their personal and social development. The implicit elements are those factors, which make up the ethos and general environment of the school. The curriculum in schools is concerned not only with the subjects taught, but also with how and why they are taught and with the outcomes of this activity for the learner. (p18).

Such a definition of curriculum challenges many of the old expectations of education. It promotes methods of active teaching and learning, the process – the way in which learning occurs is considered as important as the outcome of learning. It challenges conformist styles of teaching and learning and any concept of assessment designed to weed out and reject certain students.

At second level, the curriculum would be underpinned by “breadth, balance and coherence” and through the introduction of the Junior Certificate it was also hoped to provide equality of access and certification. On its introduction in 1989, the Junior Certificate initiative received a warm and enthusiastic welcome from all the education

partners: managerial bodies, teacher's unions, parents, but ironically, not students, as they had not been included in the consultation process.

The Junior Certificate Programme was and is, based on the curricular principles of breadth and balance, relevance, quality, coherence, continuity and progression. Following the recommendations of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, as set out in its document *A Programme for Reform* (1993 p.26) *Charting Our Education Future* states that, on completion of the Junior Cycle, all students, in accordance with their abilities and aptitudes, will have achieved the following: (p47 – 48)

- Competence in literacy, numeracy and spoken language skills which will allow them to participate as young adults in society.
- Experience in various domains of activity – artistic, intellectual, scientific, physical and practical.
- Formative experience in moral, religious and spiritual education
- Knowledge and supportive guidance in matters of personal health, sexual awareness and relationships
- Competence and understanding in practical skills, including computer literacy and information technology

- Knowledge and appreciation of their social, cultural and physical heritage and environment
- Understanding and appreciation of the central concepts of citizenship

To ensure the new Junior Certificate was successful, teachers were required to design new teaching and learning strategies to meet the new aims and objectives.

In May 1992, researchers at the Marino Institute of Education reported their findings in a national survey assessing how principals and teachers in second level schools managed due to the implementation of the Junior Certificate Programme between 1989 and 1992. Some of the key findings included:

- A remarkably warm reception for the spirit and philosophy of the new programme
- A greater involvement by students in project/field work and discovery learning, but interestingly approximately half the teachers reported not having significantly changed their teaching styles.
- General agreement that the new programme needs a more broadly based form of assessment. (*School Communities and Change: The Junior Certificate* (1992, p1)

Within the first three years of the course, however, the evidence was strongly suggesting that a gap between the intention of the programme and the everyday reality faced by students and teachers had developed.

Reviewing the evidence – failures and shortcomings.

Jim Callan refers to this gap and subsequent unease in his Final Report on the Schools for Active Learning project, (Callan 1994) an initiative commenced in autumn 1991 when the Junior Certificate was in its third year completing its first cycle. Callan's report acknowledged the fact that teachers had been given significant freedom and responsibility to choose their own content and to design their own courses. In addition to this, students were seeing more emphasis being placed on new goals for learning. Callan saw that the Junior Certificate programme placed more emphasis on "the acquisition of conceptual knowledge as distinct from factual knowledge. It also intends that students acquire some knowledge of and skills in a subject, method of collecting, analysing and interpreting knowledge." (Callan '94)

In 1999, the N.C.C.A published their *Junior Cycle Review Progress Report: Issues and Options for Development*. The initial findings of the review indicated general satisfaction with the curriculum, but serious

concerns about the way in which the curriculum meets or rather fails to meet, the needs of some students, particularly the disadvantaged, those who underachieve or leave school without any formal qualification, and also those students for whom daily school life is unenjoyable. The evident mismatch between the objectives of the curriculum as described and defined in the Junior Certificate Programme on the one hand, and on the other, the teaching methods advocated by teachers and the way in which students are then assessed in the public examinations, was found to be of particular significance and continues to underpin an immense need for new approaches to assessment. The Junior Certificate is still dominated by terminal written examinations. Over the years, this inadequacy in assessment arrangement has been criticised as undermining the very principles and aims of the whole Junior Cycle and also for hindering teachers in the development of teaching methodologies they might wish to use. The evidence suggests that very many students have never really experienced the Junior Certificate as it was intended to be experienced. The failure to confront assessment issues has meant that the pedagogical approaches employed by teachers have remained restricted. Currently, the vast majority of students are assessed by a terminal written examination only and by two aural exams in French and Irish. Only a minority of subjects are assessed in part in a practical mode e.g. Home Economics, Art and Materials Technology – Wood, Metal. The effects

of this are very great. Many key skills are not assessed. In languages, oral skills are not assessed. Students who find that their strengths are not in the written language are at a disadvantage because they are not assessed in a way that would allow them to display their real accomplishments. All of this can lead to students becoming unenthusiastic and lacking in motivation. It is very difficult for them to be enthusiastic about a programme which offers them little reward for the full range of their strengths, and thus only limited opportunity for success. Teaching styles too are very often confined. While activity based learning is encouraged in the syllabi it tends to receive less emphasis in everyday classroom activity than those elements, which are more likely to be rewarded in the examination.

Naturally, the terminal examination, in its present form impacts strongly on teaching and learning. An imbalance is created which has serious implications for the way in which a student experiences the Junior Certificate Programme; implications that distort and hinder what the programme was designed to achieve. This also causes major concern for the senior cycle subject options. If, in the Junior Cycle, a student has very little opportunity or encouragement to experience active work in studying a subject, that subject may hold little attraction for the student at Senior Cycle.

Of course all subjects at Junior Cycle are assessed by teachers continually for their own records and to help them make relevant adjustments to the pacing of their lessons. Clearly then, continual assessment is an integral part of all teaching, but it is not used for certification purposes, except in minority of subjects. Consequently the terminal examination takes the power and responsibility of assessment for certification purposes out of the hands of both teachers and student. This type of examination makes no allowance for the student who may find difficulty with the written examination.

Assessing in a terminal examination assumes that:

- (a) conditions for success are equal for all students;
- (b) Students are motivated by the desire to perform well in exams and achieve a high grade;
- (c) All schools can provide students with the facilities to ensure the truth of these assumptions.

Terminal assessment in any case places more emphasis on the product of one sitting rather than the process of education over a period. This product based teaching and learning does not embrace the notion of holistic education. It is relatively easy to see why this is the case.

However, the intrinsic potentials of students are not easy to measure. The notion of educational product is not highlighted in the aims of the Junior Certificate programme and yet this seems to be a preoccupation of the work of teachers. Can we measure and quantify the schooling a student receives? Yes, we can, but can educational experience and its values be measured?. This is a much more difficult task. It is relatively easy to assess a product in a terminal context but the act of education itself, the progress, improvement and process are not formally recognised in this event. A single performance only is assessed. Therefore, all coursework is forced into a three-year target framework, giving no recognition to a model that would include short-term goals and modular courses.

Such a model would ease the stress felt by both students and teachers up to and during the terminal examinations, thereby making the whole assessment process more manageable and person-centred. Students would then encounter assessment in two entirely different ways. In classrooms, they would experience it as part of the ordinary everyday teaching and learning process, with teachers and students learning from each other in the pursuit of knowledge. The students would also encounter assessment in terminal examinations where their own teachers have a lesser role to play and where their individuality of thought and

expression may not be rewarded as much as would preparation for the exam itself.

The Junior Certificate: Issues for Discussion (2000) highlights the increased participation rates in school and also the drop in early school leavers. It concludes that the Junior Certificate, in all its formality, is serving a purpose that no longer exists in the system i.e. the formal certification of students who left traditionally at 15 or so. It also points out that efforts to make the Junior Certificate more learner-friendly have created intractable problems.

Serious problems for schools and an impossible task for those who organise the examinations Problems are particularly acute for school management, which has to deal with the disruption caused by components of the Leaving Certificate and the Junior Certificate examinations scheduled at the same time. Releasing teachers from schools means removing teachers from classrooms, causing serious problems for schools and school management at critical times in the school year and giving rise to genuine concerns and anxiety for parents and students. (p.6)

Due to disruption to supervision and timetable issues, schools have become more hesitant to allow teachers to act as external examiners for the examinations as they are currently structured. Reform is badly needed. What could be provided is a junior cycle where teachers in their professional role are more central to the assessment process, continuing the methods and modes of assessment they are currently using, but also,

allowing these to be monitored and used for certification purposes. As a result of this, the process of learning as well as the product of the learning would be a more appropriate role and also, the student would be given more short-term goals and also less anxiety arising from a terminal examination. This has been further highlighted in the *Junior Certificate: Issues for Discussion* (2000)

Issues for Discussion (2000)

When the assessment leads to certification which is school focused and learner centred, then the participation of teachers in the assessment of their own students can only add to the validity of that assessment and support the placing of assessment as part of teaching and learning rather than as a ritual which takes place when the teaching and learning is complete. In the context of compulsory education, assessment for teaching and learning belongs in classrooms, rather than in examination centres. (p.10)

Older educational traditions are interfering with and inhibiting the introduction of new innovations, not just in Ireland but also in the United States. Carl Rogers (1969) described the American education system as “failing to meet the real needs of society” and also of failing in the development of their “most precious resource: the minds and hearts of our children and young people.” Rogers says that it is the children’s curiosity, eagerness to learn and their ability to make difficult and complex choices that will decide the future of the world.

Ironically, Rogers claims that many American teachers have reverted to “teaching the basics” – they are frightened by creativity. Teachers are hesitant, afraid even, to try anything controversial where a student has to make a decision or judgement, even though these same students will soon be dealing with an uncertain world. This situation has been mirrored in the Irish context at Junior Certificate level, with some teachers hesitant to use more varied methods, due to lack of in-service support and assessment difficulties. Michael W. Apple believes that; “Today’s reforms – boredom and alienation among students, will cause the argument that curricula should be linked close to real life – but “whose” vision”. (1996 p.99).

It must be the students’ vision that is recognised and cherished. They must see themselves as participants in the learning process and not just as “tourists moving through education” (Rogers). Invariably Irish teachers want their students to do well. In order to make things successful, they are catering to student’s needs and many of the new innovations introduced in the recent past have focused mainly on student needs.

A Change for the better – Success

In 1995, the Leaving Certificate Applied was introduced into fifty schools on a developmental basis. *The Report on the National Evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Applied (2000)* was based on reports of inspectors who visited the schools and on the evidence of the views of principals, teachers and students obtained through discussion and questionnaire. A particular focus and encouraging outcome of the evaluation was to verify the considerable positive impact, which the programme was having on students. Inspectors found that the Leaving Certificate Applied was meeting the needs of a particular student cohort whose needs were not being met heretofore. Although some schools reported a drop-out rate due to the success of the work experience element of the programme, the retention of many of these students in school until the completion of Senior Cycle education was evidence of the success of the programme.

The principal conclusions of the evaluation were that

“the realisable short-term goals and immediate feedback on progress which are inherent to the satisfactory completion of modules in the programme were beneficial to Leaving Certificate Applied students and encouraged attendance. The completion of Student Tasks and Key Assignments, which require the application of essential learning experiences associated with a module, kept students working consistently. Curriculum integration was being achieved primarily through the Student Tasks, giving students an opportunity to integrate modules from separate courses. The Enterprise modules also served as a vehicle for integrating knowledge and skills acquired in other courses within the Leaving Certificate Applied.” (p.10). These were viewed as key strengths of the programme.

The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) began on a phased basis in 1994. It was introduced to ensure that the Senior Cycle education remained attractive and relevant for the larger and more diverse pupil cohort. It was designed to foster in young people a spirit of enterprise, adaptability and initiative, developing communicative, interpersonal, vocational and technological skill. The programme contains three mandatory link modules.

- Enterprise Education
- Preparation for Work
- Work Experience

These are separately assessed under an agreed mode of assessment chosen from a range of options, which include

- Project work related to a vocational subject grouping
- A written examination
- Portfolios maintained by the pupil
- A mini-company type group examination

Although the traditional Leaving Certificate examination is the main form of assessment, for the LCVP the value of the link modules and the new forms of assessment used are highly praised by students, teachers and employers.

When new programmes such as these answer or partly answer, the needs of a cohort of students who in the past would have entered the work force earlier, or who would have dropped out of schools, they have very significant merits for all the education partners. The schools that have pioneered these programmes have set about changing a culture. The programmes have an inclusive character, not an exclusive one suited to only a number of students. There is strong evidence arising from the success of the Leaving Cert Applied, to suggest that the education system can be reformed to incorporate and value new educational innovations, as distinct from perpetuating the largely conformist learning of past traditions. If a new programme with a more modular approach and short term goals can enhance some students' learning experience and encourage longer attendance at school, perhaps some of its features could also become incorporated in the education of all students at an earlier stage, exposing students to a variety of learning experiences and teachers to continual assessment for certification purposes.

International Perspectives

In 1998, the Education Act was enacted to “make provision in the interests of the common good for the education of every person in the state”. It contains a commitment to every person for their educational

future. By virtue of this, the Act challenges many inherited traditions of learning. It challenges the education partners who still excuse themselves from responsibility for those who “fail the system” or those whom the system fails. It is quite significant then that some early school leavers become the greatest entrepreneurs and that, in essence, the qualities needed to succeed in this way are not rewarded in the mainly conformist or didactic styles of teaching and learning which still pervade the education system.

These conformist traditions are not exclusive to the Irish education system and they have been recognised by many involved in education all over the world. American educationalist Ira Shor describes how “students come to class expecting the teacher to do education to them” (1996) and that the reverse is also true, the teacher arrives for the class with a plan, knowing exactly what he/she wants to do for that lesson, but failing to see relevance of what the students want to do. He acknowledges that children become experts in the skills most taught by mass education – “spitting out and spitting back the official syllabus force fed to them every year” (1996) (p.x)

Likewise as Dewey questioned and argued over eighty years ago:

Why is it, in spite of the fact that teaching by pouring in, learning by a passive absorption, are universally condemned that they are still so entrenched in practice? That education is not an affair of

“telling” and being told, but an active and constructive process, is a principle almost as generally violated in practice as conceded in theory.

(Democracy and Education 1916, p38)

In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, (1994) “bell hooks” accuses teachers of “enacting rituals of control that were about domination and the unjust exercise of power”. (p.5.) While much of her writing centres on issues of racial injustice in education, it could refer to many different examples of discrimination. She details the change from all-black schools to white schools where black students were always seen as interlopers, as not really belonging. She claims that this taught her the difference between education as the practice of freedom and education which merely strives to reinforce domination and that in some cases the classroom was “prison not promise” (1994) She places much of the responsibility for using non-conformist styles of teaching on teachers. The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility and despite this, many students do not want to learn and many teachers do not want to teach. If teachers are to teach their students to be free, then they must also be committed to a process of self-actualisation which promotes their own well-being, bell hooks claims that; “When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess” (1994 p. 21). The teacher must take a leadership role when it

comes to breaking the cycle of conformist learning. Students cannot be asked to take risks that teachers would not take.

Many of the new programmes in the Irish education system such as Transition Year Programme, the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme, and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme place the focus on the quality of the student's learning, are giving teachers and students more freedom to teach and learn. Teachers are beginning to be the facilitators rather than just the "givers of knowledge" (Rogers 1969). In his book *Freedom to Learn*, Rogers sees constant change as being the only constant and that the goal of education must be the "facilitation of change and learning". The only person who is educated is the person who has learned how to learn. Rogers sought to discover what his students' interests were and what it was that excited them. He recalled his own schooldays, when he claimed no teacher had ever asked him what his interests were. In his opinion, it should be relatively easy for any teacher to find this information, he claims that "although young people have been greatly deadened by their school experience, most do come to life in a healthy psychological atmosphere and are more than willing to share their desires"

(Rogers and Freiberg 1994 p.175)

The innovation detailed in the following chapters is one in keeping with the true spirit of Junior Cycle reform as intended rather than the constrained model which exists.

Chapter 2 – The Design and Experience of a New Module in Music

Initial Plan and Methods to be Used

The initiative examined in this chapter, sought to give first year students the opportunity to experience a module of music and musical appreciation especially designed for them. It was one in keeping with the true spirit of Junior Cycle reform and change as had been envisaged. There were certain features of the module which would be inhibited by time and resource constraints, but generally it seemed possible that as an educational initiative, it could be very successful. The initial module was based on action learning as a teaching strategy and using as many resources as possible to ensure the students full participation. It was hoped that the module would contain as many activity based learning projects and group work initiatives as time would allow. The objective of the module was to observe the level of success that this type of action learning could achieve and the feasibility and possibility of using more project work, discovery learning and different teaching methodologies, as had initially been envisaged in Junior Cycle.

There are two first year class groups experiencing the module in this research. Class 1 is the focus of the study and Class 2 will be referred to periodically. Rather than deprive Class 2 of any benefits attained by Class 1 during the module, it was decided to allow them to also undertake the module and not have them as just a control group. The research method chosen to describe the initiative and review its success does not fall neatly into qualitative or quantitative research. It relies largely on narrative, but a narrative that has an investigative and self-critical character. That is to say it is a form of action research.

With action research of this type, there are certain general expectations at the outset, and a strategy to be followed. But there is also the possibility that in the course of events, these plans might have to be changed. As will become evident, this in fact was the case, and the initial plans had to be reconstructed and certain elements re-thought. The methodological issues raised by this will be revisited in the following chapter.

Planning a new initiative – Expectations and Disappointments.

In the school where I teach, there are approximately 100 First Years enrolled each year and they are divided into four classes. As a consequence of curricular innovations facilitated by an alternating timetable each first year group has an opportunity to attend modules in Art, Music, Speech and Drama, Computers and Typing. The modules are based on a five-month period, (September to January and February to June) and each class samples two modules during each five-month period. I was first time-tabled for the music modules in 1999 and began to plan what was possible within the allocated time.

I was well aware that each first year class had many different learning abilities and I was anxious that the module designed would be both challenging and entertaining. I knew that some students were able to sing and/or play an instrument. However, I felt that due to time constraints and class sizes of approximately thirty, it would not be possible to teach each student how to play a musical instrument. Instead, I planned a music module, which involved more aspects of music appreciation. It would also be possible to show students how to read sheet music and staff notation so that if they decided to learn music themselves in the future, they would be able to recognise it. The module also involved listening to

and learning about various different types of music e.g Classical, traditional, jazz, folk, etc. I had already decided that instead of a textbook I would prepare suitable handouts for each class, dealing with the various topics of that week. In addition, the students would need an exercise copy.

For homework, I had envisaged questions to be given to the students based on each day's class and also some type of research to be conducted by the students for the next class. In terms of assessment, our school uses a monthly test system and I felt that this would be suitable for the modules also. Knowing all of this, I set about designing the first weeks of the module, planning the content and preparing the handouts. I wanted to make the handouts visually stimulating and attractive to the students and the first class was designed to deal with the topic – “What is Music?”.

In preparation for this class, I decided to:

- a) Introduce myself to the class
- b) Tell them what I hoped to do with them for duration of the module
- c) Pose the question – “What is Music?”
- d) Ask them to write their answers on the board

- e) Discuss music as a language, using their answers and show examples of how music is passed from one generation to the next.

At this point

- f) Give handouts to the students and read in class and
- g) Give some homework for the following weeks' class.

I was very happy with my class plans, having invested much time and energy into them, and I really felt sure the lesson would be a success. This, however, was not to be the case. On arrival into the classroom on the first day, the students seemed very enthusiastic and excited about their music class. I started the class following my plan, but I began to sense an unease within the class group when I explained what we would be doing over the coming weeks. When I asked if there were any questions or comments, a number of students raised their hands. Many of the concerns voiced were that they already knew much of what I had planned to do, either from their own experience or from Primary School. Other students then said that they wanted to do as I had intended. Some students expressed dismay and disappointment at the contents of the module, saying that certain types of music were “boring and old-fashioned”, while others only wanted to learn to sing songs and play tunes. At this stage, I felt disappointed that my planning and work seemed to be in vain, but I was determined to get the class involved and

proceed with the lesson. I was very surprised by the sense of passion and conviction many of the students felt about music and the vigour with which they defended their choices, likes and dislikes. However, as I proceeded with the lesson, the initial enthusiasm of the students disappeared. They did take part fully in the lesson, giving answers, reading the handouts and noting the homework, but the energy and excitement that had been so evident in the initial stages had all but dissipated. A similar situation occurred when I met my second group of first years later in the week. While not as vocal, the same concerns and comments were voiced. At this stage, I realised, something different was required.

It would have been easier in one sense to continue with the lessons I had prepared, but I felt this would not have been to the benefit of either the students or myself. Thinking back to the initial reactions, I realised that the students had very strong ideas about what music they liked and disliked. They had already formed ideas about what they wanted from the class, but while some voiced their opinions loudly, others remained passive and were not keen to make an input. I suppose I should have realised that music, more than any other subject, could invoke very strong reactions, both positive and negative, because all students had opinions about what they favoured in music. Music could be enjoyed by all

learning abilities, but differently valued and appreciated. Therefore if, I continued with the module as I designed it, I would most likely get resistance from different groups of students at different times. In ways, it seemed as if I was infringing on their opinions by pre-supposing certain things and I wanted to learn from the students too. I wanted to know why certain forms of music appealed to students and why others did not.

A Change of Mind and Approach

At this stage, I designed a questionnaire, which I felt would tell me more about what the students wanted and expected from the class. I also thought it might be a way to get information from those students in the class who had not ventured opinions. At this point, I did not really think any further than finding out what the students liked, disliked, hoped for and were expecting. However, as the questionnaire took form, an unavoidable question formed which could not be ignored and needed to be addressed:

“What are your hopes and expectations for this class and what would you like to learn about?” This was the most important question (Q. 20) and the response will be dealt with a little later.

If I found out what students knew and what they wanted to know about, then I could re-design a new module based on their observations. I was hesitant and even afraid that to proceed thus would create expectations that could not be fulfilled. What would happen if the vast majority of students decided they only wanted to learn about and listen to one type of music? If this were the case, could I spend most of the module doing this? Could I justify to the class the values of experiencing music that they had already formed negative opinions of? Could I take the risk? And if I failed, could I return to the module I had initially designed? I firmly believed that anything I could learn from the students that could help me design something better would be valuable. I could not return to looking at a class who were unenthused and demotivated. So I prepared a questionnaire for the students. (Full text of questionnaire included in Appendix A)

One week later, the students arrived back to class but visibly not as excited this time at the prospect of music class. The previous week's handouts and homework were produced and putting these to one side, I asked the class to listen. I explained to them how I had been disappointed with the previous lesson, having invested time and energy into it and also that I felt some of them were disappointed too. A few heads nodded in agreement at this stage, so I continued. I told them of my plan to

distribute a questionnaire in which I hoped they would respond as honestly as possible. Only I would only see the questionnaire so the results would be private, but I was keen to see what the students' musical tastes were and how I could improve the class for them. I particularly drew their attention to the question that asked what they wanted to learn in music class and I assured them that the new module design would be based on *their* responses with some input from me. With twenty questions to be answered, I really felt that the students would become tired answering, but I was astounded to find that every student was still writing at the end of the class and that many were giving detailed answers. No questions were asked during the class and every student appeared very intent on giving the best possible answers. I waited anxiously to see what the outcome would be.

Redesigning the module – a new insight with the voice of students

On examining the questionnaires, I was surprised and delighted by the levels of thought and energy that were invested in them. Students answered openly, and I believe honestly, all of the questions. While the vast majority admitted to enjoying pop music more than any other type, some students expressed a liking for other types of music. I felt that at this stage that:

- a) the answers were genuine and honest and
- b) I would not have received the same answers verbally from the class for fear of ridicule from other students.

The vast majority of the answers were different and, most importantly, the students' expectations for the class were quite different. My initial fears of not having enough material to work with were unfounded as I discovered the areas where the students' interests lay. Far from being simplistic, some of the areas of interest were far-ranging and very detailed and would not have been included in my initial module as I would have felt the topics would have been too difficult and of little interest. I believed the initiative was successful so far but now I needed to compile all the information to decide what to do next. I carried out the same exercise with the second group and again, without exception, I received the same reaction and the same detailed answering of questions. The answers obviously were not identical but many of the same issues appeared.

As a teacher, I was delighted and relieved that I had taken this step. I had taken a risk which had been successful and which had been well received by the students, but most importantly I felt that I had given the students a

voice. They had been unhappy with the proposed module and rather than just complain in negative terms they had given me something to work with. I now had sufficient information from them with which to design and build a new module. I also believe it would be very difficult for the students to reject elements of what they themselves had proposed. There was some disappointment for me, however. A small number of items which I had suggested in the initial module were not suggested by the students. I felt these were of particular importance to the overall module and I wondered if, or how, I could include them. Would I be diluting the value of the whole exercise if I was seen to take ownership of the project again, when now, very obviously, the project was a shared one. During the course of the week I met a number of the students from both classes informally, on the corridor or in the schoolyard during lunch. They were very anxious to see what my reactions were to their questionnaires. They seemed genuinely excited and somewhat surprised when I told them I was compiling all the results and would discuss them during the next class.

Testing the new model

I awaited the next class anxiously, as I knew the students would be waiting to see what the new module would be like. I had made a list of the topics that had been chosen by the students to include in the module and I proposed to read the list to the students.

Some of the items proposed by the students in Question 20 were:

- (a) The Rock Business – those involved and the business of setting up a band
- (b) The Record Industry
- (c) The Science of Music – how we hear music, how sound is created
- (d) Sound Reproduction – how music is stored so as to ensure it continues from one generation to the next.
- (e) Film and background music – how is this chosen and its importance

When the students arrived into class, I thanked them for their thoroughness and honesty in completing the questionnaire and gave a brief overview of many of the topics that had been mentioned by them. I assured them that each item that had been suggested would be included in

the module, perhaps not for a full class period but we would address each issue. I had thought that there might be some negative reaction to a few of the suggestions but when the students realised that they were from fellow classmates, any resistance seemed to melt away. I explained that the classes would still have the same format and that we would still use handouts instead of a textbook. Some questions were asked about what the other class group was doing and I explained that they had conducted their own survey and would be following the directions of their own questionnaire. There seemed to be excitement at the prospect that each class was creating its own syllabus. However, I realised that there was in fact very little difference between the two. The students enquired as to why they would not have a textbook and I explained that because they had decided what the syllabus would contain they would design and compile their own textbook.

One of the things I had introduced to the students in the very first class was the idea of creating your own textbook with its own project workbook (exercise copy). I felt that this would eliminate any elements of negative competition between class groups, particularly in terms of groups checking to see how much farther other groups had got in their textbooks. By creating your own textbook, there was no chance of this happening. I was still aware of a number of items I would like to have

included in the module so I broached the subject carefully with each group. I explained to them that while they had chosen the vast majority of the module topics, there were some I would like to include also.

These included:

- (a) Musical ingredients – the basic components of music and its structure.
- (b) Folk Music – I felt that this would be very important for the students as, in many ways, it explained part of their history and recounted times past.
- (c) Staff Notation – From the outset of the module I knew it would not be possible to teach each student to play a musical instrument, but it would be quite possible to teach them how to read music.

I felt that these areas would enhance and overlap suitably with those subjects chosen by the students. I need not have had any inhibitions, as the students readily agreed saying it was “only fair”. Compromise in this ease was certainly easier to achieve with consultation. When all discussion was concluded, I asked if there were any questions or comments. No student had a comment and so I proposed we start looking at one of the issues for discussion, as I had prepared. The class ran very

smoothly, with little or no disturbance and certainly no negative reaction of the kind I had experienced in the very first lesson. I assigned some homework and at this point, a student asked what we would be doing next week. This was an issue I had considered and I decided that it might be interesting to keep an element of surprise for the students each week. I explained this to the class and it received a rather mixed reaction. Among the more able students, there was a sense of disappointment as many of them said they would like to find out some information on the topic for themselves before the next class. For the less able students, it seemed a relief, that for once they would be in the same situation and at no disadvantage to the more able students in their class. One of the positive points about a music class is, however, that all students have an opportunity to “shine”, as much of the activity centres on having an opinion, expressing a like or dislike and there is very little chance that the students can be wrong. For the more able students, it also seemed a disappointment not to have a textbook to read ahead and it was at this point that I began to think about methods of assessment which would allow the more able students, if they wished, to read and work ahead with a purpose.

Initial Reflections on the New Model

I had always been concerned about how successful the school's monthly tests system of assessment would be for this class. It worked superbly for other subjects, giving students a short-term goal and a manageable portion of work to revise. However, having only one class each week, it seemed difficult for students to continue work from one week to the next. For this reason, each class period dealt exclusively with one topic, with no work (except homework) being carried forward to the next lesson. This also proved positive in the case of any student who was absent, because each lesson stood alone, and therefore being absent for a class period did not mean missing the beginning or end of a topic. Due to the difficulties at the commencement of the module I had not given a lot of thought to the assessment procedure, but as the lessons moved successfully along, it was the next issue to be addressed. As the consultation process had been so successful and the module work itself new, I wondered if it might be possible to design a new method of assessment. The students were working together very well and seemingly enjoying the lessons. I had introduced small group exercises and these

too seemed to be successful, but all the while I was concerned that the more able students were not being sufficiently challenged. They too were enquiring regularly about methods of assessment and what they needed to revise. When assessment was mentioned I really felt the less able students became very disappointed. It was as if the class was doing so well that no assessment was necessary. I wondered if a project-based assessment would be successful. It would certainly give the more able students research to conduct if they wanted to work ahead, but would it appeal to the less able students?

I felt it was really only fair to consult with the students on this issue. They had been so positive about being included in the module design I felt that it might lessen the negativity of the assessment procedure if they were also included in a discussion on this issue. Keeping in mind the fact that there are limited assessment procedures that can be used due to time constraints, I decided to offer the option of a project or the monthly test system to the students. I was not at all surprised that the students got involved in a discussion process to decide what they wanted to do.

They were very negative about a test but seemed relatively upbeat about the prospect of a project. Many of the students said they had already been involved in projects in primary school and that they had enjoyed them. At the end of the lesson I told the students I would draw up a list of

criteria and guidelines regarding the project for the next class but that in turn, I wanted them to come up with ideas for their own projects. I was well aware that the criteria for the projects needed to be clear, definite and achievable by all. I did not want to have groups doing projects where some students would have the opportunity to sit back and allow the others to do the bulk of the work, so I decided on individual projects or pairs. My next issue was subject matter and on this I decided that the students could pick any aspect of music, whether or not we had learned about it in class. In this way, I hoped to encourage some students to do some research and therefore other students would have the opportunity to learn from looking at the project. A single topic could be chosen or a general overview of a topic could be researched. On one issue I was definite however, and that was to allow the students to become involved in projects which would give them an opportunity to use different media to create their projects. This too I felt would encourage cross-curricular links and allow students to excel in their chosen medium - writing, artwork, model making, research etc. On the issue of project size I decided to negotiate with the students.

Issues of Assessment

When I outlined the guidelines to the students they accepted them, however, they asked if larger groups could work together. On this issue, we compromised – the largest group would contain three people and the contribution of each person to the work of the project was to be clearly labelled when completed. I was conscious at this point that some groups would have to be monitored carefully to ensure all members of the groups were fully involved in the project work. The project length was also negotiated and I outlined the criteria for assessment namely: presentation, originality, research and content. I was quite aware that some students would have home access to a computer while others would not, so I felt it was important that the students would realise that there would be no bias regarding the presentation of the project. The students seemed quite excited about the project and quickly allocated themselves into teams. There were also some students who indicated a desire to work individually.

The class seemed surprised and delighted by the opportunity to use different media for their project and quickly set about dividing their workload, and deciding which student would be better at doing certain things. I was aware that the students themselves were very informed of

their own strengths and weaknesses and they decided promptly among themselves what needed to be done. I was glad that I had not assigned individual projects to certain students or decided the group membership for the students because I was surprised by the level of maturity shown by the students with regard to what work needed to be done. Also the students knew themselves better as class group, than I did.

The homework assigned for this class was to make definite decisions as to

- (a) content of the project,
- (b) format of the project and
- (c) work for individual team members.

This homework was carried out diligently by the students and all individual and groups reported on their plans during the next class. I was delighted to see that many of the students proposed making a model and to discover that some of them had discussed possibilities of their projects with the Art, Woodwork and Metalwork teachers. These discussions were fruitful and positive and some of the projects would include models of musical instruments with artwork and written research on the origins of the instrument. The class understood that due to time constraints it would not be possible to spend much class time working on the projects, but it was decided that a spokesperson from each group would make a

brief report weekly on the progress of work, and that if it were required one or two class periods would be allocated to project work before the assessment deadline.

At the conclusion of each school year, staff and students present a school exhibition – a celebration of work created during the year. The practical subject areas in particular display their examination projects and work from non-exam class groups also. This exhibition is open to the public for three days and always enjoys a large attendance, particularly on the opening night. I was hopeful that the students would allow their completed music projects to be displayed and indeed, most were delighted to have an opportunity to do this. Some exhibited a sense of hesitancy about “everyone” seeing their work, but the encouragement received from the other groups seemed to ease their fears. In preparation for the exhibition I observed a great sense of unity and teamwork among the students. When the display stand was being prepared they showed great initiative and enthusiasm about having their work displayed in the best possible way. Prior to the projects being displayed, I had awarded grades to each overall project and also to each team member (in the case of a group project). These grades were not written on projects, so those attending the exhibition would not be able to judge the projects on their grade. The students seemed relieved by this, even though, the vast

majority of the projects received very high grades. As I expected, on the evening of the exhibition opening, the students present felt a great sense of achievement on overhearing comments and praise from local officials, parents and school staff and perhaps more importantly, from their peers. During the whole process the importance of an assessment or evaluation for accreditation became overshadowed by the students' enthusiasm and excitement about their projects. They appeared to have a great sense of pride in their completed work, making sure it enjoyed prominence in the exhibition display.

The Views of Colleagues

The complete experience of this experimental module was rather a personal experience between students and teacher but during the process the views of my colleagues were also of interest. Many posed questions about the process and waited for the conclusion of the project before commenting and praising the apparent success of the initiative. Others were more cautious in their comments and views, expressing reservations about the scope of a project such as this and the difficulties present in employing those methods with a Senior Cycle Class. It must be recognised that there was more discretion to plan and innovate in a first year situation such as this because there was not a set curriculum to

follow and no limitations existed to inhibit the development of the module.

CHAPTER 3 – Review of issues in the research procedures used.

The initiative detailed in the previous chapter was designed, as explained earlier, to allow students the opportunity to experience a module of musical appreciation. It was constrained by time and facilities, but there was still an excellent opportunity to produce an enjoyable educational experience. Despite efforts made to ensure the content of the module was challenging and entertaining, when introduced to the students, it did not prove as successful as anticipated. This was a great disappointment as I had planned and developed what I considered to be a successful programme. The students showed great enthusiasm on their arrival into the classroom on the first day of the new module, but this visibly disappeared as I began to explain my plan for the module. The students voiced many concerns regarding the proposed work including:

- A prior knowledge of proposed topics
- A dislike of certain types of music
- Disappointment regarding being unable to learn to play a musical instrument (due to time constraints and large numbers)

Despite being very well prepared it became quite apparent that in this case the approach being taken would not be successful with the vast majority of students. It would have been a great pity to ignore the excitement, knowledge and ideas demonstrated by the students regarding music and to only accept the teachers' plan. Looking around the classroom and listening to the students, it was very easy to see their passion for the subject of music, which was to them, much more than part of the curriculum. Much of the difficulty centred (a) on the students' belief that music was a personal matter which was based solely on their own preferences, and (b) on varying degrees of interest and knowledge within the class. At the end of the unexpected learning experiences, both students and teacher were disappointed. As the teacher, I was frustrated that despite so much work and preparation, this module was not going to be the success I had envisaged. I wanted the students to be motivated and enthused coming to class each week and now obviously, this was not going to happen, at least for the majority of the class. What could be done? The answer obviously did not lie solely in planning and looking forward, but rather in examining what had passed between students and teacher, and in examining the past. The immediate question which came to mind was: should we only research when things go wrong? i.e. when forced to do so by a crisis. This is a key question for any practitioner.

Most teachers do not examine their practice until some breakdown forces them to reconsider their actions.

In the introduction to *Action Research in Ireland*, Jean McNiff describes good professional practice as ensuring that we are acting in a way which is right for the other person, and this we do by watching ourselves and evaluating our practice, by asking ourselves:

“Did I do this right?

and

Could I have done it better?” (p.16)

On leaving the classroom on the day in question, I know I could have done better, but how?

The key to improvement and success lay with the students. I had been happy with my preparation of and plan for the module, but the vast majority of the students had not. I knew that the plan needed to be changed before the next class, so I began to think of new ways in which the lesson could be improved. When a teacher experiences difficulty with a lesson or class group inviting a colleague to observe can be quite enlightening. In this case, however, I did not see a reason for an ethnographer or a critical friend as the students had already voiced their concerns and given the reasons for them. The remedy had to include the

students' views, but would it be sufficient to accept the opinions of the students who spoke? Many had not spoken and seemed not anxious to involve themselves in any discussion. I was unfamiliar with the class group, so I could not establish if this was a normal pattern for them – some students very vocal and others passive. I realised that it would be unfair to change the format of the module merely for a number of vocal students, without the consultation and agreement of all. In his book *Action Research for Educational Change*, John Elliott describes how sometimes teachers reflect on their practice in the light of its outcomes and not while it is on process. (p.11) This relates to the previous point about acting only in crisis. Most teachers reflect solely on content being covered and not on the process of learning. Elliott describes how self-monitoring and evaluation make teachers more sensitive to issues of accountability – not what is taught but rather the way in which it is taught. In their “Action Research, Multiple Intelligences and the politics of educational knowledge”, Anne Fitzgibbon and Anne Fleischmann describe the work that led Howard Gardner to suggest that “all human beings are capable of at least eight different ways of knowing the world” (p.148). Gardner did not claim that the idea of multiple intelligences was a new one, but “rather that it was one whose time had come” (p.148). Many teachers are aware of the existence of the multiple intelligence theory but there are many consequences involved in introducing this type

of learning into the classroom. As reported by Fitzgibbon and Fleischmann some of the major problems perceived by teachers in the Nagle – Rice Project (1993 – 1998) were:

- Lack of time for planning or for trying out new approaches;
- Lack of definite subject “packages” or programmes suited to an Irish situation;
- The dominant influence of traditional examinations on curricula and classroom methodologies (2000 p. 154).

There is no doubt, however, that the inhibiting factors mentioned by teachers do exist. The module detailed in this research study endeavoured to:

- Use the time allocated for a class to try a new approach;
- Create a programme with the students not just in an Irish context but also in an individual class/local setting;
- Make positive progress in the area of assessment

As reported in the Nagle-Rice Project, involving students in an exploration of their own learning having the students exhibit their own

learning for a group or visitor and having short term goals for students and teachers alike, appear to have supported educational change” (p.155). A similar result was achieved in the music module. At the conclusion of her project, Anne Fitzgibbon reveals that “there is not immediate readiness to engage at a level of lived experience,” (Fleishmann & Fitzgibbon (p.158). This, she says is a “major problem for any in-service providers”. She concludes that “before teachers can encourage their students to engage in their own learning from experience, teachers themselves have to do so” (p.158). It can be said then, that a mutually negotiated learning experience, which gives voice both to student and teacher, would provide a greater opportunity for developments in the area of discovery learning.

Robert Tremmel in his article “Zen and the Art of Reflective Practice in Teacher Education” says teachers are driven forward by “the persistent hope that somewhere out there is THE answer, THE formula, THE technology, THE research technique that will solve all our problems and meet all our needs” (p.87). It is this desire to make things better that encourages teachers to reflect on their practice, change their teaching methods and take any necessary risks. The teacher needs to be an active negotiator who tries to satisfy the variety of interests in the classroom, to build curriculum around students’ interests, to foster independence and

creativity and to maintain standards. In order to achieve educational equity and equal learning experiences for all, the teacher's role must be compatible with that of the students.

In her article "Lessons from Students on Creating a Chance to Dream", Sonia Nieto asks "where are the voices and ideas of students in efforts to improve schools and teaching practices?" (p.377). Nieto claims it is all too easy to blame students, their families and their communities for educational failure. Instead schools must focus on where they can make a difference, their own policies and practices. She says that schools with "an enriched and more demanding curriculum, respect for students' languages and cultures. High expectations for all students', and encouragement for parental involvement in their children's education" have a very positive impact.

In the case of the music module in this research study, if the initial plan had been carried out and students had subsequently displayed boredom, lack of motivation and a reluctance to attend in class, then it would be very easy for the teacher to blame the students for not learning and having a negative classroom experience. All of this could have happened despite the very best efforts of the teacher to create an active learning experience. The key difference between the proposed module and the

one finally used in class was student involvement. Nieto claims that research focusing on student voices is relatively “recent and scarce”. She complains that student perspectives are missing in discussions concerning strategies for confronting educational problems. Student voices are “rarely heard in the debates about school failure and success, and the perspectives of students from dis-empowered and dominated communities are even more invisible”. This really is very worrying and disappointing, as in the music module, the students proved the catalyst for change and the subsequent success of the educational initiative.

The student’s opinions and attitudes were, for the most part, very positive and well presented. There were no illogical suggestions made and as a result the teacher had a new “store of wealth” from which to create and shape a more satisfying experience. This experience confirmed that educators could benefit from hearing students’ critical perspectives . In his book *Empowering Education: Critical Learning for Social Change* Ira Shor suggests that “what students bring to class is where learning begins. It starts there and goes places” (1992, p.44). The curriculum in schools is often very different to the experiences and hopes of many students. This was certainly the case with the music module documented here. The students had an impressive knowledge of music and it was chiefly from this that the curriculum was designed and subsequently developed into

other areas and topics. It was hoped that the students would see their work and input as highly valued and therefore approach the learning with positive attitudes. The questionnaire allowed students to break the silence. It brought their knowledge, experiences and opinions into the classroom in a way which could be used constructively. The types of music, and information that some students had would not have been selected by the teacher as topics for inclusion in the lesson. By not including information and topics of interest to our students, we further alienate and exclude them from learning.

Nieto describes teacher's hesitancy to bring up "potentially contentious issues in the curriculum" feeling that doing so could create animosity and hostility among students. She refers particularly to issues of racism and slavery in the context of U.S. history (p.387) but she also acknowledges that many years later the "same kinds of disclaimers are being made for the failure to include in the curriculum the very issues that would engage student's in learning". (p.387). The curriculum can either help or hinder students in their learning. If they are presented with the type of curriculum which allows them to draw on their experiences. This energises them because it focuses precisely on the most important things in their own lives.

Sometimes, students can be critical of their textbooks, commenting on the fact that they are not at all relevant to things they like or are familiar with. Despite this, they hold a certain power and mystery for the students who consider the text book as the solution to all answers. During the course of the module the students were very excited about their weekly handouts or notes which added to their own "textbook". This acting endeavoured to remove some of the mystery from the "power of the textbook". The students commented on how "strange it was to have no book", comments such as "but what will we do?" and "what will we read?" were made. When they began the process of compiling their own information, any sense of discomfort disappeared and they seemed quite at ease using a folder rather than a book. It should be acknowledged however, that an endeavour such as this does take a substantial amount of time on the teacher's behalf, but its positive effects are a valid reward. In her article, Nieto comments on students' views regarding classroom methods used by teachers. They were very critical of teachers over reliance on textbooks, blackboards and didactic methods. The students interviewed spoke about memorable classroom experiences and teachers who impacted positively on their lives (p.390) and it becomes quite apparent that student's do in fact know what works and what does not. Therefore it is rather fool hardy for any teacher not to consult with their students.

Given the very valuable insights students have, there must be a valid way in which students' views can transform schools. The introduction of students leadership groups and student councils in Irish schools will be instrumental in enlightening school attitudes and actions regarding students' requirements. There will still be a need however for student voices to be heard in issues of curriculum. Giving time in the curriculum for teachers and students to engage in meaningful dialogue about genuine issues would be very valuable for Whole School Planning, but the individual teacher can, by his/her efforts, give a valid voice and acknowledgement to students in their classroom.

Nieto acknowledges that "although school is a place where a lot of talk goes on, it is not often student talk" (1999 p.402). Schools can be cold and alienating, particularly if the students believe that their opinions and attitudes are not valid or required. Young people often comment on the fact that adults do not understand them or listen to them and this statement could be justified, however, it could also be stated that sometimes more than listening needs to be done, and for true and meaningful change and development to take place students' opinions and views must be acted upon.

In their article "Did we hear you? Issues of student voice in a curriculum innovation," Ross Brocker and Doune MacDonald ask "Why must students speak? What use will be made of the speech after it is

heard? And who gives voice to whom?" (p.87). I was conscious therefore of not allowing myself to be guided by the voices of only some students and disregarding others. The difficulties in verbal consultation of this nature are mainly constraints of time and resources and it may not always lead to honest responses. This is why I felt a written questionnaire would be most suitable and informative. By using a questionnaire, I hoped to elicit information from all the students and I hoped that by ensuring a level of confidentiality for students through their written answers, they would give their valid and honest opinions. The unavoidable question for the questionnaire was:

"What are your hopes and expectations for this class and what would you like to learn about?"

In order to obtain sufficiently detailed answers, the questionnaire needed to be designed carefully. It is worth noting that a questionnaire did not feature in the initial module plan as described in Chapter 2. In designing the questionnaire I believed that a quantitative survey/questionnaire could make for validity problems. It would certainly limit and inhibit the quality of answers given and also the level of questions, which could be posed. A questionnaire of this type, while relatively easy to design concentrates and focuses on certain specific information rather than eliciting information in depth. The age profile of the student cohort was also a deciding factor in this modification to the research design. As the

pupils involved were young (i.e. inexperienced in answering questionnaires), it would be necessary to phrase the questions as comprehensively as possible, as the temptation to give quick, immediate responses would exist for the students in a quantitative questionnaire. What I hoped would emerge were the real feelings and opinions of the students in all their diversity – this is the real validity issue in qualitative design. The qualitative design of the questionnaire I decided upon allowed for detailed responses from the students and these were interspersed among questions requiring only short answers. Teacher researchers in schools tend to opt for quantitative methods of collecting information when designing their questionnaires. (Elliott p.62). In this instance however, allowing the students to see the teacher working with them for the creation of a better overall learning experience was very important.

The students were given a full class period (40 minutes) in which to complete the questionnaire. During this time I observed the detail and diligence with which the questions were completed. The students had been informed that:

- (a) their answers were only to be read by the teacher;
- (b) confidentiality as to their opinions and answers was guaranteed;

- (c) the purpose of the questionnaire was to involve them in the design of a new module, based on their interests and preferences.

In the light of this, the students seemed very keen to be involved in the design process.

When I analysed the questionnaires, there was great diversity among the responses but it was possible to form common themes and links among the musical areas and from these, patterns in particular preferences became apparent. These patterns reflect the concerns highlighted by Fitzgibbon and Fleischmann (2000) where they focus on common concerns in the classroom:

- “the need for variety in presentation of education inputs
- the value of reflection for the teacher and the student”

The ideas provided by the students proved to be a fund of inspiration for the module re-design. From what had been a difficult situation, a new approach was now clear and one which added a new dynamism to student and teacher alike.

In concluding this review of the research procedure adapted, it is worth calling on a few insights from John Elliott. Elliott believes that “

the more open teachers are to student feedback, the greater their ability to self monitor their classroom practice.” As a teacher, I would certainly advocate the type of investigative action research used here as a viable method of improving classroom practice. Elliott (1991) says that “the fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge.” However, it could be said that by improving one’s practice, the teachers’ knowledge too, is increased. It is vital however, that the teacher and students embark on the journey to improvement in negotiation and consultation with each other. The issues to be analysed in the next chapter will focus directly on such improvement.

CHAPTER 4 – Analysis of Issues arising from the findings

A note on critically reflective practice

Many expectations are met while conducting an action research project such as this. The researcher sets out to discover certain aspects of his/her own practice but very often, other aspects also come to light, which allow further investigation and improvement to take place. The initial plan for an activity based module, as described earlier in this research study was not as successful as had been envisaged and as a result of this, the initial strategy had to be revised so as to include the student's voices in the shaping of a new module. This module is described in the narrative chapter in its planning, implementation and evaluation stages. It is clear, that by evaluating and researching, this music module became a positive activity and endeavour for all concerned. Very often, the beginning of the critical journey of self-appraisal is in recognising the discrepancy between what is and what should be. Reflective practice has its own roots in the idea that we stand outside ourselves and come to a clearer understanding of what we do and who we are by freeing ourselves of imposed ways of acting. "Good teachers" are commonly believed to check the assumptions behind their practice. They are active learners and

inquirers into their own practice. Critically reflective teaching is seen as interactive, democratic and participatory.

Stephen D. Brookfield in his book *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* says “critically reflective teachers learn from the past but live in the present with an eye to the future” (1995 p.265). They continually check what works, what fails and why. The music module described in this project could be described very clearly by Brookfield’s comment. The successful development of the module came from “the past”, looking at what went wrong, but also realistically finding a way forward from day to day and the natural progression of the class. The future success becomes a very important part of the development as issues come to light and a solid foundation is laid to ensure further success.

Becoming critically reflective means finding a medium which reflects back to us a stark and differently highlighted picture of who we are and what we do. There are many methods of seeing ourselves as teachers. The first of these, of course, is through our own reflection. The reflections of the teacher in this project led to a change of mind and approach for the future of the lesson development. Very often, the evidence for a classroom endeavour not being as successful as originally envisaged is discovered by the intuitive skills of the teacher, but in this

instance, the teachers' belief that the class could have proceeded better was supported by the students comments and opinions. The students realised that they were a crucial part of the process to improve the classroom. The students alerted the teacher to critical problems before they increased in importance. The value of looking to students for information regarding teachers or teaching skills is very helpful in that it encourages students to become reflective learners also.

During the course of this educational experience, many issues were uncovered for teacher, student and school. It is proposed to examine these in the course of this chapter.

Students – a voice of truth – The questionnaires

During the course of this new module the students were a source of valuable insights. They led the teacher to make changes in the direction of the lesson and overall design of the module. They were the “critical audience”, whose opinions the teacher used as a gauge to measure future success. Student reaction is a very important indication of success or failure. Detailed in the narrative chapter were the initial reactions of the students on entering the classroom – enthusiasm and excitement. This is

in complete contrast with the change of attitude apparent when the initial lesson design was outlined to them. Feelings of dismay and disappointment were palpable in some students, while others remained quiet and passive. There was a discernible change in the overall atmosphere of the class. Many students were almost instantly demotivated.

“All behaviour is purposeful” (Glasser 1969) yet very often teachers use all their powers to ensure students do their bidding. What they consider to be successful techniques are those which will enable them to force students to comply with their instructions. Sometimes, the simple fact that students work when they want to, goes relatively unnoticed. Glasser suggests that students need to experience “fun, freedom, power, and a sense of belonging” to satisfy their basic needs (1969). And if a teacher is to accept these needs as fundamental to the success of a class, then they must become an integrated part of every lesson. The teacher had endeavoured in the initial plan to have a module which would allow “fun” activities and also a substantial amount of activity based work. In this instance, however, the students were seeking more. A number of students expressed the view, that many of the proposed topics had in fact been explored by them earlier in other classes, in primary schools and in their own personal learning through television,

internet and newspapers. It seemed relatively pointless to pursue a plan of work which in some ways had already been experienced by very many of the students. They seemed to have a store of information and a good knowledge of music, coupled with a strong belief in the types and areas of music which greatly interested them. It became apparent that not “tapping into” the most immediate resource interests would be a great mistake for the teacher to make.

In their book *Gender Equality in Classroom Interaction* Sheelagh Drudy and Maire Ui Chathain comment on forms of interaction between students and teachers. The dominant form used by Irish teachers was questioning – higher and lower order questions to students. Students are generally anxious to contribute to the class whether through questioning or the volunteering of information and as shown in this research study, it is very important for the teacher to accept their opinions and contributions. Drudy and Ui Chathain also describes “invisible” students (1999 p.14) those who may not volunteer any information or respond to any questions. With this in mind, and realising that many of the students were passive during the initial class, it was thought that the questionnaire would be an appropriate method of gathering information from *all* the students, thereby allowing a comprehensive amount of data to be used in the new module design.

By accepting all students' ideas and ensuring that they are all used to some degree gives students a stake in the education process. It moves away from what Carl Rogers and H. Jerome Freiberg describe as "the sameness of school – one size fits all education" (1969). They compare students to "tourists moving through education" seeing the sights, but not really experiencing or living the culture.

When the students realised that their ideas were being accepted and used, they became very excited and enthused that they had "power" in the class setting. The students discovered also that when they used their "power" in a positive way, it would have positive results. Sharing authority and negotiating the curriculum allows students the opportunity to share ideas and information with their teacher and in this way became part of the "learning circle" which should include the teacher. Students now have access to many different sources of knowledge – not just their teacher, and their contributions can often be very insightful and up to date. It is very important though that teachers realise the valuable resource their students are and allow them a more prominent role in the classroom.

The principle reason for using a questionnaire in this educational endeavour was to inform the redesign of the module, based on student input. For this reason certain questions were of specific interest. E.g

Q.1. Who is your favourite group or singer?

Q.8. Do you play a musical instrument?

Q.9. Can you read music?

Q.13 Other than your favourite music, what types of music would you like to learn about?

Q.19 Why is music important in people's lives today?

Q.20 What are your hopes and expectations for this class and what would you like to learn about?

(See full text of questionnaire in Appendix A)

These questions sought to gather very specific information which would give the teacher precise information regarding the students prior knowledge of music and also give guidance to the teacher regarding the creation of a module which would be stimulating and entertaining.

The remaining fifteen questions sought to give the teacher a better "picture" of the students and an overall impression of the student's musical attitudes and opinions.

Questions 1 and 2 were answered by all students and their answers varied from musicians and singers who were enjoying popularity at the particular time of the questionnaire being completed to more of the questionnaire being completed to more well established groups. It is quite likely that without the questionnaire, a number of students who did not select more modern musicians may not have given honest answers for fear of embarrassment and teasing from other students. The reasons for liking the particular musician or group varied greatly. Some students simply liked the music, enjoyed dancing to it or commented on the talent of the singer or musician. Others however, acknowledged the quality of the lyrics used by the musicians and the way in which they could sympathise or empathise with the music.

Similar answers appeared for questions 3 and 4, with students choosing both new and old songs for a variety of reasons. Many selected their favourite songs on the basis of the artist performing them while others chose more personal reasons e.g. (sample of answers received).

- “it reminds me of a certain person”
- “it is a good dance song”
- “I like the beat”
- “Its very soft and moody, her voice is amazing “

- “it has fabulous words and reminds me of people I love.”

The level of answering here was very comprehensive, with students giving detailed answers about why certain kinds of music and musicians were important to them.

Question 5 required the students to identify as many types of music as possible and the average number of music types listed by the class was eight. This was very surprising, as many students had identified types of music that would not be easily recognised and quite likely would not form part of their everyday life. Questions 6 and 7 also were insightful as no particular type of music was selected as being their least favourite. Most students made different choices and gave very different reasons for their dislikes.

e.g (sample of answers received).

- “Opera – because I can’t understand what they are singing”.
- “Classical – it is stiff and boring!”
- “Classical music and country music because they are too slow and old fashioned”
- “Pop – because it is tedious”.
- “Country and Western – because it is too slow and hasn’t a good beat”

A sizeable number of students commented on not liking classical music, however during the module, they listened to pieces of modern music which incorporated classical music and a number of students commented that they now listen to some classical music.

Questions 10 and 11 specifically asked students if they bought CD's or cassettes and if so, how often? The vast majority of students admitted to buying CD's and cassettes as often as they could and to receiving them as presents also. Despite the price of CD's in Question 12 most students agreed they were good value for money and well worth buying for their entertainment value. This information gave the teacher an idea of just how important music was to the students.

The vast majority of answers to question 14, were negative. A very small minority of students had been to concerts, recitals or seisiuns. Very few students had experienced live music and perhaps this explained (i) why they frequently bought CD's and cassette tapes and (ii) why they expressed a wish to meet more musicians and singers in future music modules. This issue is an important one for both teacher and school, as it focuses on the creation of a new learning experience for the students.

Question 15 asked the students how much time they would spend each day listening to music. The answers varied from ten minutes to five hours, with the average being one hour. The important issue here was that all students spent some time listening to music each day. Some

students admitted to listening to music while studying, while others listened until they fell asleep. The role of music in the students' lives was again heightened in the teacher's awareness by this information. Questions 16 and 17 asked the students if they could be a famous person in the music business who would they like to be and why? A large number of students commented that they would like to be a famous pop star with lots of fans and popularity. Some students remarked that they wanted to work in the music business as writers, engineers, managers, publicists or as part of the road crew. Many commented that they hoped they would learn more about the "background jobs" during the course of the module. This was an important issue for the teacher, showing that even at first year level, students are still considering their future career. Question 19 asked if students read music magazines. A large number of students said that they did not read music magazines but they did like to read articles about musicians and singers in other publications. This could prove useful for teachers, particularly language teachers, who could encourage students to read using relevant text about the music industry. All of these questions allowed the teacher to gain a deeper insight into the musical lives of the students.

Questions 8 and 9 were particularly relevant for the design of the module, as they asked the students specific questions about their musical abilities. Again, the majority could not read music and while many had

learned to play a musical instrument at some time they still expressed a desire to again learn to play. As discussed earlier in the research study, constraints of time and class size made this very difficult during the course of the module. However, it is an issue for further exploration.

During the course of the module all students learned how to read music.

Question 19 focused on the importance of music in the lives of people and the answers proved very varied;

e.g (samples of answers received)

- “To make you happy”
- “To entertain people”
- “To entertain and cheer people up!”
- “To relax and bring people together”
- “To put you in a certain mood”
- “To use in film and on television”

The students all saw music as a very positive feature of life not just for themselves but for everyone. Questions 13 and 20 asked the students specifically what they hoped to learn about in music class and as discussed earlier in the study the answers received were very varied and beneficial when re-designing the module.

In short, great levels of care and diligence were taken by the students when filling in their questionnaires. It was obvious that they really appreciated the opportunity to give their opinions and have their “voice” heard. They invested high levels of time and energy into ensuring that their thoughts were expressed in the best possible way. This level of care and responsibility taken by the students demonstrates and recognises the fact that they are whole human beings with complex lives and experiences, a fact that teachers very often forget.

Discipline in Relationships of Learning.

The issues of discipline is of critical importance in all classrooms. Teachers express the belief that if their students were “different” they would be able to use different teaching methods, more innovations, and allow their classrooms to have more “freedom to learn”. This is quite true. It could be said that the disruptive behaviour found in many Irish schools is as a result of not having a more exciting curriculum designed by the students for the students. Having a classroom filled with conflict and confrontation creates a very difficult work environment for both students and teacher and does not allow for a successful learning experience.

Through the course of this research study students' voices have been heard. However, on many occasions in Irish schools, teachers equate hearing students' voices with "not having control". The notion of "children being seen and not heard" is a very old one, but elements of this still remain within the education tradition. The more didactic style of teaching saw the student as the receiver of information and the teacher as the giver. This type of teaching saw learning as a product, a destination with a hierarchical and authoritarian structure. Conformity was rewarded and dissents discouraged. A relatively rigid structure with a prescribed curriculum placing a priority on performance was adhered to. Thankfully, much of this has changed, but there are still more difficulties to be overcome and changes to be accepted. Teaching and learning in Irish schools is now considered more as a process or journey where students and teachers are called on to see each other as people/individuals, not just in a role. There are pressures to make the learning experience more mixed, with flexible structures and varied starting points. Most importantly perhaps is the conception of the teacher as a learner, learning from the student. Teachers will often point out, however, that this type of learning cannot take place without a more open attitude between their students and themselves and that by "allowing" this, some will take advantage and abuse the classroom environment by disruption. This is a major issue, but during the course of this study,

when the students became part of the process, not just recipients of the product, most earlier signs or threats of disruption disappeared.

In the *Report to the Minister for Education Niamh Bhreathnach, T.D. on Discipline in Schools (1997)* Maeve Martin states that research evidence shows that the two main reasons why young people are disconnected with school are:

- (i) a sense of not belonging
- (ii) a curriculum which is perceived to be irrelevant and boring (p.23)

During the course of the educational initiative detailed in this research study, the importance of the curriculum as a motivator in relation to discipline became abundantly clear. The initial lesson with each class group, as detailed in Chapter 2, showed signs of disruption and future difficulty. A number of students were visibly unhappy with the initial proposals outlined by the teacher for the content of the module. Another group were quite vocal in their dissatisfaction, stating that they had already covered some of the proposed material and therefore did not see its relevance. It was unfortunate for the teacher that these feelings of unhappiness were expressed, for there is little doubt that if the initial plan had been put into process, disruption and discipline issues would have become a feature of the classroom environment.

With a very weak class group, their hesitancy or inability to vocalise their dislike of and lack of interest in their prescribed curriculum becomes a learning inhibitor and their misbehaviour or boredom becomes an issue of discipline for teacher and school, rather than a curricular one.

The issue of discipline is not just a pertinent one for schools, but also a growing issue for society as a whole. The social change in Ireland during recent decades has had and continues to have profound effects on many areas of Irish life. In general, there is a lessening in the respect for authority and the same is true in schools. In the past, the teacher was normally afforded respect, whether it was deserved or not. In today's schools, this is not nearly as much the case. Today's young people more often than not make up their own minds when it comes to their likes and dislikes and they demand quality to their own standards. They are experiencing learning from many sources, no longer just school. They can select preferred medium to learn and receive information e.g. television, radio, internet, newspapers, etc. Schools and teachers are competing to capture the imagination and hearts of their students and they will be quite vocal in expressing their preference. Efforts have been made in the Irish education system to introduce innovative programmes and the educational literature also seeks wider participation and inclusion of parents, students and the community of parents, students and the community in school life.

In the past, the comment was often made that the only person who lost out in education system was the disruptive student and much has been done in recent years to make provision for the inclusion of all students. Maeve Martin (1997) reports on the work of Kinder et al (1996). Kinder describes students who are disaffected as experiencing their dissatisfaction through boredom, anger or fear. They see their curriculum content as having a lack of relevance, and a lack of stimulus and teachers as having a lack of variety in learning tasks.

Schools also have experienced a dramatic increase in pupil participation and retention rates. The system is now catering for a very different group of students. They are now coming from very diverse social backgrounds. They bring different expectations, learning levels and experiences and the resulting pressure on schools is very great. Many try to hold fast and stand firm to the traditions of the past, but this a very difficult, almost impossible task. The issue of school size also creates difficulties in providing a suitable and comprehensive range of programmes and initiatives for the whole student population. Perhaps it could be suggested at this point that teachers in their classrooms are in an ideal situation to create new learning experiences for their students, such as the one documented in this project, without requiring large amounts of funding or resources.

The key factors influencing student unhappiness are:

- (i) a sense of not belonging
 - and
 - (ii) a curriculum which is perceived to be irrelevant and boring
- (Martin 1997).

The first of the issues is being addressed, as schools begin to form their own cultures and community. The culture of schools is now recognised as a very powerful force in the successful operation of a school. The issue of community is defined in *Discipline in Schools* (1997) by Rossi & Springfield as “the quality on interpersonal relationships and they identify 10 elements that characterise relationships in schools that are communities.

These are:

- Shared Vision;
- Shared sense of purpose;
- Shared values;
- Incorporation of diversity;
- Communication;
- Participation;
- Caring;
- Trust;
- Teamwork;

- Respect and Recognition;”

(Rossi & Springfield 1995)

These elements when included in each individual class and supported by the school community, create a climate where both teacher and students can learn. The communities of learning that exist in schools where a conscious effort is made to increase students' participation and encourage their input are succeeding in keeping challenging behaviour to a minimum.

In the introduction of the music module, the biggest criticism of the students was the curriculum I had selected. They were not negative in any way about the methods of instruction or teaching methodologies I told them I would use. This was quite a worrying development, as teachers regularly convince themselves that you can make students interested in any topic if you can use different media and learning strategies. The initial plan for the module sought to use group work and activity-based learning methods but the students bypassed this fact and moved immediately to the issue of content. As the teacher, I have no doubt that without intervention and a change of plan at this point, issues of discipline would have become a major problem within the class. Martin (1997) states that “while research shows that curriculum may be a causative factor is disaffection, it also shows that it can be a solution to

disaffection if tailored to meet the interests and ability of the learner”.

(p.23). This is certainly borne out by the findings of this research study, where the students showed great satisfaction when they had a role in the design process of their curriculum. The initiatives detailed in Chapter 1 of this study e.g. Transition Year Programme, Leaving Certificate Applied Programme, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme etc are allowing for students to have a more active role in their learning experience, retaining students in schools for longer periods and acknowledging and embracing all forms of intelligence and learning. One would hope that programmes such as these, and other curricular reforms, will have a continued further positive effect in the Irish Education system but there is a need to acknowledge students’ ever growing role in their own curricula.

William Glasser (1986) in his book *Control Theory in the Classroom* describes the students who are motivated and interested in learning as “the haves” and those who do little work and show less effort as the “have nots”. (p.9). He believes that the “haves” will work hard in school to keep their friends, but “if they are friends with the “have nots” and these friends are as unhappy with school as they are, then their friendship is strengthened by the fact that they all hate school.” (p.11). This issue became pertinent during the course of the module, when it was observed that while a number of students were vocal, an equal sized

group were silent. Introducing a discussion which would lead to students giving their opinions as to what they would like to learn about could indeed have proved very dangerous to the dynamics of the class. This was the motivation for the introduction of the class questionnaire, not alone would this ensure truthful, confidential answers but it would also seek to ensure no alienation of students and it would ensure that no bias or "blame" could be apportioned to any individual when all the proposed topics for learning were compiled. I expected some resistance or comment when the completed list of topics was read to the students, but instead, there was silent consent, with the more vocal students acknowledging that everybody should have the opportunity to suggest a topic and the less vocal students content that nobody would know what topic or issue was of interest to them. Glasser states that in order to get the "have nots" to work, programmes have to be devised in which it makes sense for both groups to become friendly with each other and to work together. The less able students in the class were very happy that they were in "the same learning position" as their more able classmates. This helped to bridge the gap for the students when they became involved in group work later in the project. When the students realised they were (a) all involved in the design process, (b) all starting from the same level and (c) all building their own textbook, there seemed to be less isolation of groups within the class, and when the project groups were selected

some students asked others outside of their circle of friends to be their group-work partners. Perhaps this type of experience would lessen the chances and motivations for bullying.

Many discipline issues arise in classrooms as a result of the students perceive to be “unfair”. They greatly appreciate “fair play” from both teacher and fellow student and many perceived the module to be fair because they were all heard and they all had the same opportunity to achieve in their projects and ultimately in their overall grades.

Glasser (1986) says that “discipline is only a problem when students are forced into classes where they do not experience satisfaction. There are no discipline problems in any class where the students believe that if they make an effort to learn, they will gain some immediate satisfaction”? (p.12). He believes that focusing solely on discipline is ignoring the real problem. “We will never be able to get students (or anyone else) to be in good order if, day after day, we try to force them to do what they do not find satisfying”. He believes that having control over a student will not increase the amount of work that students does. Students need to be motivated, encouraged and coaxed rather than pushed and controlled. He states that almost all students start school with the picture in their head that they want to learn. As long as they keep this picture in their heads, they will continue to work therefore their earliest classes should be educationally stimulating and satisfying. It is hoped

that the module explored and designed in this research project gave students such and experience.

The issues of assessment and discipline are not always considered together, however there is an intrinsic link between them. The threat of examinations is often used on students. Teachers believe that when it comes to exams students will be more attentive and therefore, less prone to misbehave. Some even use the threat of a test as a method of stopping disruptive behaviour. To the students, it therefore becomes apparent that assessment tests, control and discipline are all inextricably linked. Students see assessment as a negative feature of their education and as it is linked to the issue of discipline, both become negative by association. Students are accustomed to doing examinations and being assessed in very formal, silent classrooms or examinations halls. The system of examination/assessment insists on silence and so students see exams and being quiet as a negative experience. The music module examined sought to give students a more active learning experience, but also a different style of assessment and examination. The assessment was neither quiet nor exam based and as a result students did not object to it and in ways, they did not see it as being an assessment but rather another opportunity to express their opinions and views regarding music. The exhibition allowed students another opportunity to have their work “assessed” by friends, family and the general public. Very few of the

students showed any hesitation regarding an audience viewing their projects and those who did were quickly at ease when they observed and heard the praise of the audience.

Martin (1997) makes recommendations for schools in her report on school discipline, she says “schools should consider displaying a variety of student work that represent as range of student activities. Students should be involved in organising and selecting material for these displays. (p.61). For their school exhibition the students did display the work as they wanted and all were very involved in setting up and decorating the display stand. No student “failed” to achieve a pass grade in their project. The project experience gave them success, which seemed to motivate and energise, building self-esteem and promoting good behaviour for future endeavours.

Assessment and Evaluation

As discussed in Chapter 2, the issue of assessment became very pertinent during the music module and it was subsequently decided to use project-based assessment. This had distinct advantages for the students, as it gave each student an opportunity to excel in their chosen area (art, practical work, research etc.) This opportunity existed for all students, even the academically less able. It also allowed the students the

opportunity to assess their own strengths and weaknesses and gave them the responsibility to decide their own roles in their project groups. In this instance, the students were in a much more informed position to assign tasks to each other than the teacher was as many had experience of each other's strengths and weaknesses from their primary school experience. This type of assessment also gave an opportunity for cross-curricular links and subsequently the integration of several subjects into their learning experiences.

As the class prepared for the display of their projects in the school exhibition, the percentage results achieved seemed of less importance. Obviously, the students did have an interest in the grade their project was awarded but in general they were more interested in looking at each others' projects and offering advice rather than asking about grades. Rather than being critical they almost invariably offered advice as to how the projects could be improved. The endeavour was based on co-operation rather than competition, as all students felt they had a responsibility to make the class display as impressive as possible.

While this was a very successful learning experience for the students and teacher particularly, a student evaluation was completed at the end of the module. The assessment procedure and exhibition were

also concluded by this stage. A number of key issues and plans for the future came to light in the course of this evaluation. (Full text of evaluation in Appendix B).

- Students commented on the fact that they had the opportunity to present their projects using a number of media. Forty eight of the fifty-six students surveyed said they would prefer a project as their preferred assessment.
- Eight students said they would prefer a written test – assessment because it would take less work. Other students said they did not like “everyone” seeing their project.

The question posed to students was:

“Did you enjoy working on your project? Why?”

(Representative sample of answers received).

- Yes, because you get to work with your mates and you get to learn about the subject more and it’s better than exams!
- Yes, I loved working on my project because I got to be with my friends and learn lots of new things
- Yes, because we got to do projects very seldom

- Yes, because it was fun to make the model and learn about it

The majority of students said they:

- Enjoyed the project
- Thought it would not take as long to complete as it did
- Made several changes to their work during their project in consultation with others (students).
- Attended the exhibition to see their projects on display.

Only 5 projects involved practical models. However most included artwork.

Included in the end of year evaluation were the following questions;

“What did you not like about this music module? (Q.2).

and

“What would you like included in the music module in future years?”
(Q.6).

The answers here varied greatly depending on individual choice. Many students chose particular topics as the feature they did not like, while others expressed a dislike of having to take notes. Many very useful suggestions were made for the improvement of the module, e.g. meeting musicians, seeing more musical instruments, and getting an opportunity

to play more musical instruments. Some other topics were suggested also. The students expressed surprise that they had an opportunity to complete evaluation sheets (confidentially) and they had an opportunity to express their true opinions and feelings regarding the module and its contents. For the researcher, having an evaluation process not only gave students a second opportunity to express their opinion, but also allowed them an opportunity to be involved in further curriculum development as well as adding a conclusion to the initiative.

Teachers – A Lesson to be Learned

Many important issues for both teacher and students became very apparent during the course of this educational initiative. The role of the teacher through the process was as facilitator in many ways and included in this was taking a risk and allowing the students voice to take precedence at times in the classroom environment. This was necessary when it became clear that the initial plan would not work. Teachers use and accept students' ideas everyday but this module allowed the students a greater level of responsibility, as they were the source of information and opinions to be used. For many teachers, the idea of abandoning their methods and structure would be an issue of handing over "their power" in the classroom, but it must be realised that the power must be shared.

By allowing students to take more responsibility the power relationship is more evenly balanced and therefore is less likely to cause contention with students feeling coerced or inhibited. Rogers and Freiberg believe that all teachers and educators prefer to facilitate a more experiential meaningful, whole-person type of learning. They do acknowledge however that the vast majority of schools at all educational levels are locked into a traditional and conventional approach that makes significant learning “improbable if not impossible” (1994).

Giving students the “freedom” to express their concerns and ideas requires the teacher to be secure in his/her own role, as it is quite possible that what is revealed may not always be to the teachers liking. It means that the teacher has to be prepared to negotiate with the students and allow them a participate role in the design of their own learning strategy. For the teacher, this involves a level of risk-taking. bell hooks (1994) states that “when education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess.” Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow and are empowered by the process”. During the course of the module the learning environment between teacher and students was very much a negotiated one. When the students were given the opportunity they very enthusiastically offered opinions, both positive and negative.

The greatest concern for the teacher was that the material proposed by the students would be unsuitable and that the core areas the teacher considered necessary for inclusion in the module would not be suggested by the students. This in fact, was the case, but the teacher negotiated with the students for the inclusion of these items and the students readily agreed, knowing that they had been given an opportunity and it would only be “fair” to afford the teacher the same opportunity. The role of compromise in this situation was central and lends credence to the old adage – “they won’t always remember what you taught them, but they will never forget how you treated them”. It would be hoped in this case, however, that the learning which occurred because it was largely self-directed, would in fact be remembered alongside the freedom the students encountered.

During the course of the module, the students were given freedom – to learn, research, assess and discover. There was a great opportunity also for the teacher to find freedom – an escape from slavish adherence to the text. While it is acknowledged that the level of freedom observed during the course of this initiative might not have been possible to the same extent with a senior class, or examination class, there is a possibility that students can experience effective learning without being solely confined to the set textbook. What should be realised though is that while

legislation and regulation defines and determines the schooling system, much of the innovation in classroom practice and curriculum came from the discoveries and experiences of teachers. Many of the great educators for instance have been Pestalozzi, Froebel and Dewey have been concerned with the individual learner, and with the attempt to give pupils an individual experience within the context of the group setting. Only more recently has the value of a group as learning promoters been valued and experimented with. By allowing students and teachers greater freedom there is a sense of learning being a process or journey rather than a finished product or destination. Students and teachers are more likely to see each other as people rather than roles. The learning structures are flexible with varied starting points acknowledging the mixed learning experience and perhaps most importantly the teacher as learner, learning from the students.

As was revealed during this module, the students had a very different knowledge of music to the teacher and the teacher did in fact learn a great deal from the students, not just in terms of their interests and preferences but also their knowledge of the subject area. Many teachers who favour a didactic style of teaching find it difficult to accept that students are more questioning and demanding in their learning. They have an opportunity to acquaint themselves with information from many

different sources e.g. television, internet and the media in general. Teachers need to be prepared to deal with this effectively and to acknowledge that they too are learners. If students see a resistance to this on the teachers part, they are less likely to accept the learning environment openly and will consider the teacher a negative a dominating factor in the classroom.

Difficulties do arise however, in the learning environment, when students are accustomed to expressing their opinions and views and in critiquing the methods the teachers use. As observed in this module, students had “power” over their curriculum, unfortunately this was not the case for other classrooms and subjects and students can become frustrated by this inconsistency. John Elliott (1991) describes how on one occasion a teacher’s practice of actively encouraging her students to volunteer criticism about her own actions and efforts, was not appreciated by fellow teachers when students openly criticised and offered advice to them. In this instance, the teacher was “charged” with undermining her own professional status and, by implication, the professional status of colleagues. Her colleagues felt that by looking at her own practice in such an explicit way, she was publicly confessing to shortcomings in her expertise and lowering the image of the profession. (p.59). This is always a dilemma for the teacher and show the importance for a whole school

approach to innovation, however, “nothing succeeds like success” and very often an individual teacher’s discovery or innovation can influence an entire school and encourage a more open attitude to methods of research and collaboration. A key motivation for the teacher in thinking about the issue of assessment was to make assessment fit the students rather than the students having to fit the assessment”. The module was a new initiative with a greater level of freedom in its design and content and the mode of assessment too needed to have a different approach. As the vast majority of the students seemed to enjoy the course content, it seemed very important that the type of assessment selected would not cause the enthusiasm of the students to wane. The more able students too, had to be of concern as they were eager to work ahead and make progress with their revision. The eventual mode of assessment selected ensured that *all* students were afforded the same opportunity for success. Allowing the students to work in groups acknowledged their level of responsibility and maturity as learners. It also encouraged work relationships and team work and gave students the opportunity to excel in their chosen area, thus promoting higher levels of self-esteem. The students were very interested in forming cross curricular links and saw this as in their own words as “a real treat”. It gave them the opportunity to take another subject and forge links with it and music. A number of students invested an enormous amount of time in designing and making a

model for their project because they felt it would give them a better chance to achieve in their assessment, but perhaps more importantly it gave them the chance to “enjoy” working for their assessment. For the teacher, it was refreshing to encounter so many different learning styles and the different approach taken by students in their projects. This freshness and originality is more difficult to achieve in an examination setting. There was a real sense of excitement among the students as they prepared for the exhibition and a number commented on being “part of the school”. The exhibition brought the students to the community and vice versa. The way in which those attending the exhibition commented on the depth of information in the projects was keenly observed by the students and they thoroughly enjoyed hearing the audience exclaim that they had learned from reading the compiled information. The *Education Act* states that teachers shall: “collectively promote co-operation between the school and the community which it serves”. (1998 p. 23). It could be that the link between teachers and the community could promote more than co-operation, a new learning experience for all.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion & Recommendations

Many issues arose during the course of this research study for teachers, students and schools. From the foregoing discussions conclusions can now be shown in relation to the most significant issues. These are set out below under six headings.

Student Enthusiasm and Responsibility

Significant changes in student enthusiasm were observed during the course of the music module. Students showed initial excitement for their learning experience. This quickly disappeared however, when they realised the teacher had a specific curriculum to follow. Their enthusiasm returned again when they became more active participants in their own learning experience. In the area of student responsibility, teachers are very aware of the role students' play in schools. They have an increasingly responsible role in areas of school life through student leadership groups, student councils and in-school organisations. However, the key area in which they have virtually no involvement in the curriculum. To the students, the curriculum is the most important feature

of the schools work, but even in the most innovative of programmes such as Transition Year, students do not have an opportunity to involve themselves in course design. As teachers, we expect our students to be enthused and excited about their school experience, but can we expect this from students who have no part in the design process. Many of the most persistent discipline issues occur in classrooms with some students disrupting the learning process for their fellow students and teacher. For disruptive students, involvement in the building of the lesson and inclusion of their knowledge provides possibilities for eliminating some of their disruptive behaviour. There is little doubt that the exchange of information and knowledge between students and teacher in the music module was beneficial for the order of the classroom.

Student Self-Esteem

The experience of the students involved in this module was a positive one. They appeared to take very seriously their role in the module development. They expressed their delight at being part of a learning process and not just the recipients of learning. Different knowledge and information regarding music was “swapped” between students and teacher and as a result the students showed great excitement in “teaching the teacher”. Of most benefit to the students’ self-esteem was the school exhibition where they had the opportunity to enjoy public recognition and

praise. Their pride in their achievements was visible and undoubtedly beneficial.

Teacher as facilitator

One of the key issues for the teacher which became apparent during the course of the module was the importance of flexibility. This module underwent many changes before it became a learning experience valued by both teacher and students. Despite having invested a great deal of time and energy in the development of the module, the teacher was faced with a well-planned but seemingly unsuccessful venture. This was disappointing for the teacher who had endeavoured to create an action learning, activity based experience for the students. When faced with the students' resistance, the teacher could have continued with the module, ignoring the views of the students, but in this case, another approach was taken. The teacher used a negative experience to create a positive one and it also gave the opportunity to place some of the responsibility for the learning back with the students. By having openness to the students' opinions and points of view, the teacher created possibilities for herself and by working together with the students created a positive learning experience for both. This would not be possible without the teacher taking a facilitative role and "taking a chance". There were risks and worries but in this case, they were far outweighed by the positive experience of all concerned.

The Issue of Time

The issue of time was of crucial importance throughout the module. The module content was inhibited and restricted by a lack of time and while many students expressed a desire to learn to play a musical instrument, this was not possible in the allocated time. This issue will be considered by the teacher for future developments in the module. It must be acknowledged however, that a great deal of time was spent by the teacher in the planning and subsequent evaluation and assessment of the module however, this was fruitful and the work completed can be used by the teacher for other student groups. It is important that schools recognise the importance of the provision of time for teachers' planning and that the job of teaching would be viewed in terms of teaching time and time for planning and review. By allowing more flexibility of time, more innovations and subject packages could be constructed.

The Role of Colleagues

While undertaking educational innovations, it is very important to keep colleagues informed of developments and also to seek their opinions for further developments. In the course of this module, the opportunity arose for teachers to work together and form cross-curricular links. This

proved a very successful venture and one enjoyed thoroughly by the students. By involving colleagues in projects such as this, the school community can be changed. The attitudes of teachers to learning can change and therefore a whole school approach to learning could be focused on. *The Education Act 1998* describes learning as a community event where the Principal and teachers shall “collectively promote co-operation school and the community which it serves” (p.23). This was observed during the module through the school exhibition, where the work of many students and teachers was observed by the public. The work of the school was a public record of endeavour and not just a project completed for a grade.

Assessment

The issue of assessment became very pertinent to the module as the initiative developed. The mode of assessment used was in keeping with the type of learning in that it was an activity-based experience and perhaps most importantly it allowed for student involvement in its design. The format for the project assessment was a negotiated one between teacher and student. As a result, there was virtually no complaint from the students regarding the assessment procedure. The students could work in groups or individually at their own pace,. They had full responsibility for their own work and they had the power to decide the content, format

and presentation of their own project. When the students realised they could design their own assessment; they showed great enthusiasm for the project. They gave advice, comments and constructive criticism to their fellow classmates and rather than be in competition with each other, they worked in consultation. When the projects were returned by the teacher to the students the questions posed by the students did not focus on the percentage received but rather on the length of time required to complete the project, the source for research, the quality of work and the difficulties encountered in the presentation. The assessment procedure became less frightening and more fulfilling as the students consulted with and encouraged each other. The assessment process included the teacher also through a class evaluation. This completed the mutual learning experience between teacher and student and it gave students the further opportunity to guide and assist the teacher with further endeavours of this type. The local community through their attendance at the school exhibition also contributed to the assessment procedure and provided further comment for the future presentation of projects.

Summary of Recommendations

In summary the recommendations for practice that arise from this research study are as follows:

- 1) The possibility for the teacher to become a more active agent in the change process. The teacher in this research study endeavoured to investigate the dissatisfaction shown by the students and through negotiation and discussion change the learning experience to one enthusiastically received by the students.
- 2) The importance of giving students a voice is shown during the course of the music module. The students felt a sense of ownership towards the learning process thereby lessening discipline problems and enhancing student self-esteem.
- 3) The importance of the issue of time has been acknowledged during this study and it is a critical issue for all involved in education. The initiative outlined in this study required planning, implementation and evaluation time however, the use of time was positive and rewarding. The module demonstrated a positive use of time with less emphasis on punitive issues and therefore more time available to the teacher for planning, consultation and interaction with the students.
- 4) Teachers can become insulated and isolated in their classrooms if they do not consult with their students and colleagues. Initiatives

involving all staff and students promote a more open learning experience in the spirit of whole school planning and evaluation giving all, the opportunity to enjoy a community of learning and the freedom to learn.

Appendix A

Questionnaire

Name:

Age:

Class Group:

1. Who is your favourite group or singer?
2. Why do you like them?
3. What is your favourite song?
4. Why?
5. Name as many types of music as possible.
6. What is your least favourite music?
7. Why?
8. Do you play a musical instrument? - give details.
9. Can you read music?

10. Do you buy CD's or cassette tapes?
11. How often would you buy them?
12. Do you think they are good value for money and why?
13. Other than your favourite music, what types of music would you like to learn about?
14. Have you ever been to a music concert, recital or seisiún? – give details.
15. How much time would you spend each day listening to music?
16. If you could be a famous person in the music business, who would you like to be?
17. Why?
18. Do you read music magazines – give details?
19. Why is music important in people's lives today?
20. What are your hopes and expectations for this class and what would you like to learn about?

Appendix B

Evaluation of the music module.

1. What did you most enjoy about music class this year?
2. What did you not like about this music module?
3. Why?
4. Did you enjoy working on your project?
5. Why?
6. What would you like included in the module in future years?

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