

ARTICLE

‘Chasing every mark’. High stakes assessment and curriculum narrowing: the case of disciplinary literacy in the Irish secondary music classroom

Jennifer Hennessy^{1*}  and Sinéad Corr²

¹School of Education, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland and ²Thomond Community College, Limerick, Ireland

*Corresponding author. Email: Jennifer.hennessy@ul.ie

Abstract

The critical role of disciplinary literacy in enhancing understanding and engagement within arts-based subjects has drawn increased recognition amongst researchers and practitioners alike in recent years. The successful integration of disciplinary literacy into the classroom however has been challenged in equal measures by a prevailing sense of confusion and misunderstanding surrounding the concept of disciplinary literacy and by the concurrent, deep-rooted pressures of performativity experienced by teachers and pupils operating within regimes of examination intensification. The result of these tensions has been a documented increase in reductionist classroom-based approaches to the development of disciplinary literacy. Given the frequently cited importance of engaged disciplinary literacy encounters in the music classroom, a review of the dominant pedagogical practices in this field is germane. This paper reports on the findings of a study exploring the integration of disciplinary literacy in the Irish secondary school music classroom. The findings of this research demonstrate a dominance of listening and performing strategies in classroom-based literacy development initiatives and an aligned relegation of student verbalisation in the music classroom. Recommendations for more disciplinary engaged, student-centred approaches in the development of music literacy within the secondary classroom are outlined.

Keywords: disciplinary literacy; pedagogy; music education; verbalisation; high-stakes examinations

Introduction

Associated with each academic subject taught in schools is a specialised genre, vocabulary, tradition of communication and standard of ‘quality and precision’ (Shanahan, Shanahan & Misischia, 2011, p. 395). Researchers in the field of disciplinary literacy suggest that secondary school teachers should develop awareness of how such knowledge is constructed within their discipline in order to better support the development of subject-specific learner expertise (Moje, 2007; Shanahan et al., 2011). Attention to disciplinary literacy requires the teacher to engage in instructional strategies that move beyond the contextualised application of generic literacy strategies and to consider the creation, communication and sharing of subject-specific knowledge (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012). In the case of music education, it is contended that all resources used in the classroom including both ‘print and non-print texts’ (Draper, Broomhead, Jenson & Nokes, 2012, p. 382) should be considered in the development of students’ music literacy. Burton (2017) also stresses the importance of engaging students in musical dialogue through imitation and improvisation in order to expand their burgeoning music vocabulary. Burton’s guidance echoes the conviction of Waller (2010) who stressed that exposing students solely to texts written by others leaves ‘mere [music] readers at writers’ mercy’ (p. 40). Similarly, Fautley (2017) stresses that

students 'have to be able to speak music, not just read it' (p. 123). The critical importance also of integrated approaches to music literacy development is highlighted by Feret and Smith (2010) who note that 'infusing literacy skills, as integral elements of the secondary musical classroom, impact performance on many levels' (p. 16).

The translation of this ambition into practice however is not without challenge. In the first instance, the perceived divergence between the nature of subjects such as physical education, music, art and mathematics, which do not fall within the parameters of traditional language-based subjects, and the concurrent, contracted vision surrounding the nature and function of disciplinary literacy education, poses ideological contention for even the most pioneering of educators (Ming, 2012). Additionally, the well-documented, trans-disciplinary intensification of teachers' work (Bath, Daubney, Mackrill & Spruce 2020; Conway & Murphy 2013) has encouraged a predictable narrowing of the curriculum (Bath, Daubney, Mackrill & Spruce 2020; Hennessy et al., 2021) and aligned reductionist approach to classroom-based pedagogy affecting 'not only *how* they [teachers] teach, but also *what* they teach (Fautley, 2019, p. 147)'. The shackles of educational intensification have not evaded the music classroom. Over a quarter of a century ago, White (1996) delineated the 'impact of educational theory, the pressures of ideology, the demands of school programmes, and the crisis of identity within the humanities' as 'terror'-inducing aspects of the professional lives of music teachers (p. 271). Accordingly, the potential for music teachers to successfully negotiate the often-competing requirements associated with the provision of music education in the secondary classroom appears challenged.

Owing to the tensions emergent between national policy frameworks and contemporary performance indicators, limited success has been evidenced in attempts to integrate literacy instruction into subject content areas, with many teachers viewing such strategies with scepticism and opting to disengage from associated pedagogical strategies (Cantrell & Callaway, 2008; Fisher & Ivey, 2005). However, given the well-documented benefits of engaged approaches to music education on the intellectual, social and personal development of children (Hallam, 2010; Swanwick, 1989), the relegation of aligned disciplinary literacy strategies within the music classroom is a notable cause for concern.

Developing disciplinary literacy in the music classroom

While extolling some virtue to the benefits of generic literacy approaches, Heller and Greenleaf (2007) contend that although general purpose reading strategies may be useful across the disciplines, disciplinary-specific literacy strategies tailored to the unique demands of individual subjects are essential. Similarly, Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) draw attention to the need for disciplinary literacy to support the diverse comprehension strategies demanded for engaging with texts from diverse fields of study. The application of subject-specific literacy strategies therein is attested to better support the development of students' thinking, reading and writing skills in discrete fields of study. Accordingly, the inductive role of disciplinary literacy in inviting students 'to join a club' (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014, p. 629) is becoming increasingly recognised. With specific reference to the music classroom, Broomhead (2010) asserts that 'since all interactions with music are interactions with a music text of some kind' (p. 71), the development of music literacy is central to students' meaning making processes. Commonly employed definitions of music literacy demonstrate strong alignment with the reading and writing of music notation (Asmus, 2004; Waller, 2010). Additionally, the role of listening in music literacy is also beginning to achieve prominence within this conceptual frame (Dunn, 2006; Smialek & Boburka, 2006; Zerull, 2006). Extending on these classifications, Broomhead (2010) offers a definition of music literacy as the ability to interact (perform, listen, contemplate, create) appropriately with musical texts, acknowledging the necessity for critically engaged and responsive approaches to music. Supporting the development of engaged approaches to music literacy, Saccomano and Saccomano (2015) assert that the processes present in the music classroom should include 'hearing and manipulating sounds,

reading symbols and encoding and decoding those symbols' (p. 30). The importance of deepening and broadening students' vocabulary is advocated in this endeavour (Flowers, 2002; Walby, 2011) and is increasingly reflected in more expansive definitions of music literacy which propose for example that,

... literacy, in situations related to Western classical music, occurs as a result of children having developed their capacity to make music, reflect on the music in which they are engaged, express their views on music which they play, hear or create, speak about and listen to music in order to form judgements, and read, write, comprehend and interpret staff notation (Mills & McPherson, 2006, p. 155).

Cautioning against approaches to literacy development which do not provide support for students endeavouring to engage with 'the mental hurdles that surround challenging, focused vocabulary and listening activities', Walby (2011, p. 59) contends that such reductive approaches to music education result in the loss of powerful and engaged educative experiences for students. This outcome, according to Gee (2004), is all too common within current educational structures where consideration afforded to situate learning activities is frequently relegated.

Music literacy education in Ireland

The study of music in Ireland at secondary level is based upon three interrelated strands: Listening, Performing and Composing (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2018). Students are required to study 'all three essential activities' (DES, 1996, p. 5). Central to the advancement of these strands is the development of students' music literacy skills. Senior Cycle music (15–18 years) is offered at two academic levels, Higher Level and Ordinary Level. The terminal exam for Higher Level Senior Cycle music comprises via four equally weighted components: performing, composing and listening as well as an elective option. The elective option affords students the possibility of selecting a performance, listening or composition element so that they may 'gain up to 50 per cent of the total marks in the musical activity that best suits their talent' (DES, 1996, p. 4).

The introduction of a national literacy strategy *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011–2020* (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2011) resulted in a strategic elevation of the place of literacy across all academic subject areas, including music. This policy highlights the critical role of the teacher 'in developing and consolidating students' ability to use literacy and numeracy' (DES, 2011, p. 11). The concurrent reform of the national curriculum in lower secondary education in Ireland, introduced on a phased basis from 2014, has also served to advance this imperative through the promotion of 'literacy and numeracy as key skills across all aspects of the junior cycle curriculum' (DES, 2015, p. 14).

Challenges to the integration of literacy teaching in Irish music classrooms

Not impermeable to the effects of the global neoliberal movement, the pressures of performativity within the Irish education system are well documented (Conway & Murphy, 2013). Critiquing the narrowing of curricula within the performance-driven Irish educational context, Hennessy and Mannix McNamara (2013) argue that 'depth, deliberation and criticality are often sacrificed at the altar of educational efficiency' (p. 9). Similarly, Ó Breacháin and O' Toole (2013) highlight a drift towards 'blinders of political expediency and educational amnesia' (p. 415) within the Irish context which has served to silence engaged debate on effective approaches to literacy and numeracy development in this context. Juxtaposed against a policy framework which ascribes

the development of students' literacy as a critical learning requirement and 'among the most important life skills that our schools teach' (DES, 2011, p. 5) the pervasive tensions existent between endorsed and enacted literacy practices within the Irish educational context are evident.

Exploring the implementation of disciplinary literacy into the secondary classroom in Ireland, MacMahon (2014) found that teachers' definitions of literacy centred mainly on the ability to read (with many confining this definition to the reading of words alone), often advanced through a reductive 'pedagogy of telling' (p. 11). Reported in this study also was a perception amongst teachers that literacy serves as 'transportable basic skill' employed across all subjects, rather than constructed within 'specific social practices for particular purposes' (p. 9). As such, literacy strategies are often treated as unwelcome and considered to be the concern of the English or language teacher (*ibid*; Murphy, Conway, Murphy & Hall, 2014).

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, one year after the implementation of the national Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, the Chief Examiner's Report for Leaving Certificate Music highlighted a notable deficiency in examination candidates' literacy skills, particularly in the listening component of the examination. The report noted that 'Candidates responded well in questions where a choice of answers was presented to them but experienced difficulty in questions requiring descriptive or explanatory answers' (State Examination Commission [SEC], 2012, p. 11). This insight may serve to explain the documented reluctance amongst students in Ireland to choose an elective component other than performance in their Leaving Certificate exam (McCarthy et al., 2019; SEC, 2012). Recommendations for the development of music literacy in the Chief Examiner's 2012 report included, ensuring that 'students are provided with the vocabulary necessary to answer questions on different musical styles' and ensuring that students acquire the appropriate musical vocabulary necessary for more detailed explanations in their responses (SEC, 2012, p. 13).

The reductive approach to literacy development in Irish music classroom has also demonstrated considerable ripple effect beyond the parameters of secondary education, extending to impact the provision of music education in third level education also. In a study conducted by Moore (2013) exploring the musical backgrounds and experiences of undergraduate music students and lecturers from 11 higher education institutions in the Republic of Ireland, the majority of lecturers highlighted shortcomings in students' music literacy.

Perhaps exacerbated by the strains of professional intensification (Conway & Murphy, 2013; Hennessy & Mannix McNamara, 2013) and the perception of student literacy as an unwelcome burden in an already congested role (Perin et al., 2009), the challenge of integrating effective approaches to the development of disciplinary literacy into the secondary school appears to hold both philosophical and pedagogical challenge for teachers. Kennedy (2013) highlighted the invigorating potential of the 'new emphasis on literacy' in Irish education in the advancement of education for all children. However, research into the integration of literacy at secondary level in this context remains limited (MacMahon, 2014). This study aims to provide an enhanced understanding of nature and status of disciplinary literacy development in the Irish secondary school music classroom.

Methodology

This study sought to explore the attitudes of Irish post-primary music teachers towards the integration of disciplinary literacy in the music classroom. The study adopted the use of a mixed method sequential explanatory design (Creswell, 2009) comprising both semi-structured questionnaires (phase one) and in-depth semi-structured interviews (phase two) to explore participant perspectives. Demonstrating commitment to the principles of social constructivism which posit that participants' knowledge is the product of social interaction, interpretation and understanding (Vygotsky, 1962), 'priority' (as detailed by Ivankova, Creswell & Stick, 2006) was afforded to the latter qualitative phase of this study with the former quantitative phase of the study designed to

contribute to the development of the 'priority' phase. Convenience sampling was employed across a cluster of post-primary schools in the South of Ireland to achieve a final sample of twelve phase one and five phase two participants across nine post-primary schools. The music teaching experience of participants ranged between 7 and 25 years. Full ethical approval was granted by the authors' Institutional Research Ethics Committee prior to research commencement.

Phase one

Phase one employed the use of a semi-structured questionnaire to glean a 'general understanding of the research problem' (Ivankova, Creswell & Stick, 2006) in order to identify significant themes and issues pertinent to the development of the phase two interview schedule. Drawing on key literature in the field, the semi-structured questionnaire comprised four areas of inquiry; music teachers' perspectives on literacy education, music teachers' perceptions of disciplinary literacy teaching, pedagogical approaches to literacy education in the music classroom and literacy teaching and high-stakes examinations. A total of twenty-three questions, both open and closed (dichotomous and 5-point Likert Scale based), were developed to explore these themes.

School principals in each of the sampled schools were contacted in the first instance to invite their participation and that of their staff to partake in the study. Where principal consent was achieved, email contact was made with the music teacher(s) in each school inviting their participation in the study. The voluntary nature of the study and associated confidentiality measures were outlined. Where teacher consent was achieved, the questionnaire, information sheet and associated consent form were thereafter distributed to the participant. Participants were afforded one week for questionnaire completion. Questionnaires were completed anonymously and codified upon receipt, with 'P1' denoting a phase one participant and each questionnaire also being numerically categorised e.g. P1.5 (phase one participant, questionnaire 5). Descriptive statistical analysis was employed to identify from the data key priorities and issues associated with literacy education in the researched context. These items were thereafter drawn on to inform the development of the phase two interview schedule.

Phase two

Informed by the findings of phase one, phase two of this study aimed to refine and explain the results from phase one by exploring participants' views in greater detail (Ivankova, Creswell & Stick, 2006). The semi-structured research instrument, comprising seventeen open-ended questions, extended to refine understanding on the following areas of inquiry; music teachers' professional identity, music teachers' perceptions of literacy, generic and disciplinary literacy strategies employed in the music classroom and the impact of high stakes assessment on the integration of disciplinary literacy in the music classroom.

Phase two recruitment was conducted via an invitation to participate at the end of each phase one questionnaire. Where consent was achieved, the researcher presented to the school of the participant to complete each interview at a pre-scheduled time. Each phase two interview extended to approximately fifty minutes in duration. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim supporting the bracketing of assumptions (Bryman, 2004), and pseudonyms were thereafter applied to participant transcripts. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, adopting a six-phase approach as per Clarke and Braun (2014). Respondent validation of the interview data and themes was conducted to verify the accuracy of the collected data (Clarke & Braun, 2014; Creswell, 2009). It is important to note that this small-scale study does not aim to generalise beyond the population of music teachers recruited but sought instead to explore the experiences and perspectives reported by this population as a means to inform future research into the implementation of disciplinary literacy in the music classroom (Figure 1).

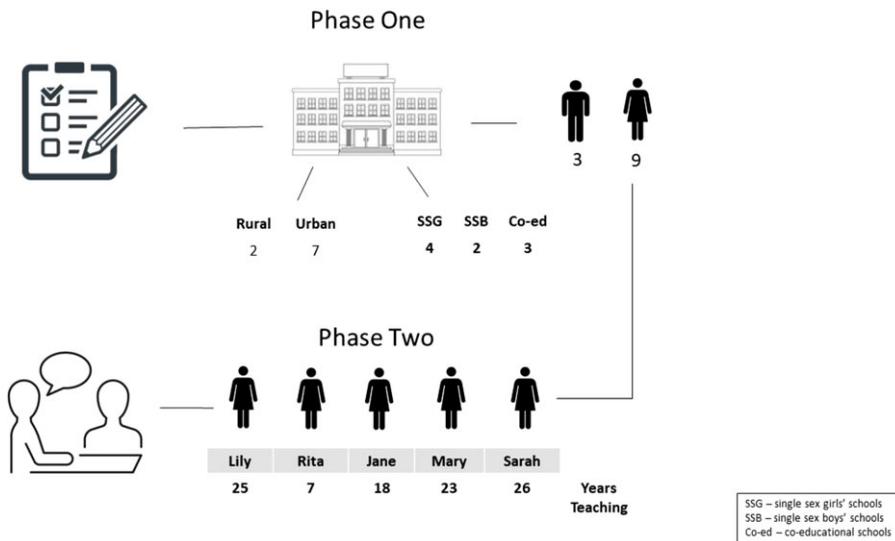


Figure 1. Participant overview.

Findings

Teacher role and identity

Demonstrating strong commitment to development of student literacy, 11 out of 12 (92%) participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the DES (2011) listed statement that ‘all teachers are teachers of literacy’. This finding was reflected upon in phase two by participants who cited a sense of professional alignment between their role as educators of both literacy and music, as evidenced in the following extracts,

I think it's a given that you are a literacy teacher anyway because you are teaching them how to express their answers to things, how to describe what they can hear. (Jane)

You have to find a way to build it [literacy] into your subject because if they don't understand the terminology in your subject, then how are they going to go on and do the exams. (Rita)

I think any teacher who just leaves it to the English teacher is definitely wrong. It's kind of all our jobs . . . I mean it's very unrealistic to think that some of the terms for example in music, things like dynamics, pianissimo, or any of the tempo markings, that you would expect your English teacher to teach the kids to understand them. (Sarah)

Defining literacy

Phase one findings demonstrate a definition of literacy amongst respondents predominantly associated with the skill of reading, with 8 out of 12 (66%) respondents defining ‘literacy’ primarily in terms of ‘reading’. Only 2 participants expanded their definition of literacy to include oral work or the verbalisation of knowledge. The data also revealed however minimal use of reading in the music classroom, suggesting a fundamental distance between teachers’ valuing of literacy as cited in earlier responses and the implementation of literacy development strategies within the classroom. In particular, reference to the place of books in the music classroom was frequently downgraded, with teachers highlighting a preference for practical approaches in the explanation of musical concepts, as demonstrated in the following interview excerpts,

I don't think there is as much [reading] as in other subjects, definitely not. They have their books, but there's great emphasis on listening really. (Jane)

If you start with the 'choice works' chapter, you no longer have to read through the book and look for the stuff, you can watch [YouTube] and learn that way. (Lilly)

Literacy and examination

A common theme in music teachers' reflections on literacy was the impact of music literacy on students' exam performance. The development of students' verbal skills (description, discussion and elaboration) with respect to musical concepts and terminology was acknowledged by the majority of respondents as a significant challenge to achieving performance success in the summative exam,

Some of them [exam questions] you'll see the way it's structured and you can just write a quick answer. But there are, for the questions to get the As, they're the ones where 'discuss the following' or 'compare and contrast', they are the questions that the students will fall down on. (Lilly)

If you look at the listening paper and the very high grades, to be able to achieve that, it's the description, and it's honing in on those key details and if they are not able to describe them, then they don't get the marks for them. (Rita)

At Leaving Cert if I'm correcting exams, that's the main problem, you know, they give you a two-word answer, you know, and not develop it clearly, even though they are aware of what the term means. (Jane)

Strikingly, two respondents asserted their reduced commitment to the development of students' literacy skills to be directly aligned with the low weighting of associated skills in the Leaving Certificate examination,

It comes down to 25% and I would have students, we'll say, across the board who might be an average C student or a D student who can achieve a high B in music. So that shows me that you don't need a very high level of literacy. (Lilly)

... if you are going to weight the practical components, because it is important to weight them strongly, because let's face it, it's a practical subject, but if you're going to give two marks, three marks or four marks, for literate answers, but you're going to heavily weight something at the other side of the spectrum, then it's going to skew things. Like why would I bother learning off all the terms, I mean I'll do my best, but there's not much at stake there. (Mary)

Approaches to literacy development

The development of literacy was frequently noted by respondents to be an 'innate skill' that is, and should continue to be, tacitly nurtured within music teachers' pedagogical practices,

I think you kind of do it without even knowing you're doing it. And that's the way it kind of should be done, it shouldn't be, kind of, if you lay it on heavy, with regards theory, and 'this is how we're doing it, and this is what it is, and this is where you use it'. You know the kids just zone out straight away. (Rita)

That's where I think in music, the whole practical, and the 'doing' comes into it. If you are doing and you say to a student, 'those dynamics are just way too loud', then you see, 'oh, so that's what dynamics are!' If we can keep doing it, that's where we might fill in that comprehension gap. (Sarah)

Where explicit literacy strategies were noted, the data revealed a strong tendency towards the teaching of literacy through listening and performing in the music class with less emphasis afforded to reading, writing and verbalisation as evidenced in the following participant excerpts,

Again, coming back to the performing, listening, composing and you do try and put that in as much as possible. but I'd say, reading very little. Should we be doing more? I don't know. I always try to take a practical approach. I just feel that 'doing' just helps so much more and if you can teach literacy through 'doing' then 'happy days'. That to me is the ideal. (Rita)

I suppose I approach it first through listening, if we can hear it and then we put the word on it, so that they can identify the sound and then have the word. (Jane)

A propensity towards generic literacy strategies was also noted in phase one with teachers citing the use of keyword walls (P1.7), crosswords (P1.4), dictionaries (P1.4), close tests (P1.11), word searches (P1.2), word squares (P1.2), posters (P1.6), journals (P1.6), highlighting the word (P1.9), 'explanation' and 'putting it in context' (P1.9) as key literacy strategies in their music classrooms. Participants also highlighted the use of audio-visual resources such as YouTube as a 'fantastic' (Lilly) alternative texts to support explanations related to musical terminology and for 'bringing things to life' (Sarah).

Challenges to literacy development

Verbalisation

Participants in this study highlighted a strong level of disdain and lack of proficiency amongst their students related to the verbalisation of music responses. Students' antipathy towards verbal work (discussion, dialoguing, response articulation) was cited as a key challenge in the development of students' music literacy,

They hate being verbal about anything, but even in their work, they'll use the key words, but not necessarily have a fantastic understanding of them. So, I think, sometimes you can see, 'yes I've got the key word, yes I can spell it', but that comprehension is just lacking. That's where we are losing them a little bit. So, I suppose, reiteration, and keep at it. (Rita)

I find that the definitions for the Leaving Certs, they have an idea about the definitions but they really can't explain it properly. (Lilly)

Despite the fact they are doing a lot of creative writing in primary school, I think music students in secondary school- they are very skills oriented, playing a scale, play a song, they are little bit further removed from articulating through sentences. (Mary)

Participants also highlighted students' lack of understanding of basic non-disciplinary literacy, 'simple things like writing 'thought' instead of 'taught' (Mary) as a significant challenge for teachers aiming to encourage meaningful engagement with disciplinary literacy,

Often students at Leaving Cert Level don't understand what has been asked in a question, 'compare and contrast', simple terms like that, even. So, you have to go back to basics and explain, as a music teacher, language that's not even music related, sometimes. (Lilly)

CPD engagement

Although not articulated by respondents as a challenge to literacy development in the classroom, it is noteworthy that only 4 out of 12 (33%) respondents had ever attended in-service training on literacy education. Of those who had engaged in CPD, half had completed this training as part of

their newly qualified teacher (NQT) training and half had attended as part of Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) training. Highlighting a dearth of provision in this field, the limitations of generic literacy development strategies were detailed by one respondent as follows,

We have done a couple of after-school literacy and numeracy course, generic ones, where the whole staff was covered. You know, teaching key words came up, but it's very hard, because they're not making it subject specific. I really would like if they could make it subject specific, it would really, really help. So if those courses were being offered, I definitely would jump on it. I think it's fine if it's a generic one, but just every topic is so different. You want to know what's best for yours. I will say 'hands up, there's more I could be doing' but I would love some professional development on it and targeting your specific subject would really help. (Rita)

Exam weighting

Respondents also highlighted the assessment weighting of the state music exam as a motivational deterrent for students. Respondents highlighted an acute awareness amongst students that a candidate may be successful in the exam without demonstrating a strong level of literacy proficiency. This insight was asserted by teachers in this study as a strong pedagogical influence for them. Respondents outlined that time spent on the set works 'chasing every mark' (Jane) in the listening exam was of more benefit and concern to students than attention to the lesser weighted literacy-related elements of the course, as evidenced in the following interview excerpts,

It is just so unbalanced, because you spend all your time teaching the set works and then the [literacy] question is only worth ten marks. They kind of think, oh God, we haven't this work done, or that work done, and I say, don't worry about it, the big things are the melody and harmony questions. (Sarah)

You are chasing every mark and even though it seems that you get very few marks for studying all the set works, then the aural skills and Irish music, it is compensated for by the fact that there is 50% practical . . . So I don't think that it is too onerous a task to do the listening paper then, because you have that 50%. (Jane)

If you are going to weight the practical components . . . because let's face it, it's a practical subject, but if you're going to give two marks, three marks or four marks, for literate answers, but you're going to heavily weight something at the other side of the spectrum, then it's going to skew things. Like why would I bother learning off all the terms, I mean I'll do my best, but there's not much at stake there. (Mary)

Ultimately, it's that thing of, understanding how things are marked and weighted, and students figure that out very quickly. If it is rewarded accordingly, then they will do it. (Mary)

Discussion

The findings of this exploratory study indicate a strong professional commitment amongst post-primary music teachers to the development of students' literacy skills. The majority of respondents asserted agreement with the Department of Education and Skills (2011) statement that 'all teachers are teachers of literacy'. This finding demonstrates a notable shift in teacher identity from that identified by Draper (2002) who surmised that content-area teachers believe that it is someone else's responsibility to teach reading and writing. However, teachers' definitions of literacy as reported in this study appear to fall considerably short of the broader frames which have been used to define the ambitions of disciplinary literacy education in recent years. In addition to the

traditionally acknowledged skills of reading and writing, literacy education now commonly extends to incorporate a broad range of skills including the ability to use and understand spoken language, print, writing and digital media (DES, 2011) in acknowledgement that ‘music is both a practical and academic subject’ and as such ‘musical learning is about thinking and acting musically’ (Fautley & Daubney, 2019, p. 3). Yet, the definitions of disciplinary literacy extended by music teachers in this study reflect a narrowed frame of reference, limited largely to the development of student reading, echoing the sentiments of Spruce (2016) who observed that ‘we have come to think of musical literacy in very narrow terms: the ability to read staff notation’ (p. 26). Given the well-documented role of verbal interactions in supporting students’ musical meaning making processes (Cooke & Spruce, 2016), this study poses cause for concern. Moreover, acknowledging that ‘music education participates in the construction and perpetuation of ideologies about musical value’ (Green, 2003, p. 208), the findings of this study demonstrate the existence of a hierarchy of musical literacy attributes in the classroom, in which the value of performance and listening is extolled and the value of student-led dialoguing and concept verbalisation is persistently relegated.

In her survey of the roots, development, and aesthetic foundations of Irish music education (1831–1989), McCarthy (1990) documented the stranglehold of various doctrines including, the religion of Catholicism, of nationalism, and of linguistic ethnocentrism on Irish music across the last century. She notes that it was not until ‘1961–1989’ that ‘music liberation’ was achieved, after which ‘Irish traditional music in all its forms was introduced into the school system’. The findings of this study provide evidence of the emergence of a new doctrine guiding the provision of music education in the Irish classroom, namely the influence of high-stakes assessment in the form of the Leaving Certificate exam. Central to the value attributed to disciplinary literacy by music educators in this study was its potential to positively and substantially impact exam performance. Respondents reported that students often failed to articulate effectively and elaborate on their responses in exam settings, an occurrence that was noted as a considerable challenge by teachers given the requirement for students to ‘articulate their perceptions in a musically literate manner’ in the Leaving Certificate exam (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1996, p. 2). Music teachers in this study voiced concern that students were losing marks in the ‘listening paper’ of their terminal music exam owing to their inability to elaborate beyond one- or two-word answers, where much more detailed explanations were required. This finding aligns closely with excerpts from the Leaving Certificate Music Chief Examiner’s Report (SEC, 2012) which noted low levels of literacy proficient answers in the exam as a concern and highlighted the need for greater attention to literacy development in the music classroom. Hennessy and Mannix McNamara (2013) suggest that in exam-driven contexts, schools may lack the necessary space for the development of skills requiring ‘depth, deliberation and criticality’ (p. 9). Accordingly, they argue that certain skills hold reduced value in navigating through a matriculation system dominated by technicism and the pursuit of examination marks. In the case of music education, the findings of this study suggest that the development of disciplinary literacy within the music classroom may have succumb, through a considered process of curriculum selection, to the trends of academic devaluation. Given the perceived low weighting of disciplinary literacy-dependent responses in the terminal exam, many teachers in this study reported an aligned reduction of attention to the development of such skills. This finding is supported in the State Exams Commission Report (2012) in which it was noted that over 99.7% of higher level candidates chose a performance elective over a listening elective, the latter of which would require demonstration of key literacy skills, adding to a growing body of evidence highlighting the relegation and omission of literacy-related educational strands within the music classroom.

Militating also against the development of students’ music verbalisation skills, according to respondents in this study, was an entrenched resistance amongst students to the development of such skills. Respondents noted with frequency that their students ‘hate being verbal’ and are often unwilling or reluctant to engage in dialogue-based tasks in the music classroom.

Respondents asserted students' aversion towards verbalisation-based tasks as a critical factor also in their relegation of such tasks and their concurrent prioritisation of performance-based approaches. In an education system buoyed on the expediencies of pedagogical technicism and reductionism (Hennessy & Mannix McNamara, 2013), such finding is perhaps unsurprising. Running contrary to the ambitious rhetoric of national policy, the reduced prioritisation of literacy skills in high stakes examinations, as in the case of music education within the Irish context, serves only to support the persistent devaluation of literacy within the classroom.

The development of literacy was asserted to be an 'innate' skill by the majority of teachers in this study, something that *'you kind of do without even knowing you're doing it'*, a perspective possibly also attributable to the low levels of literacy-based CPD attendance noted by teachers in this study. As such, explicit literacy development strategies did not present as a common feature of the music classroom according to participants in this research. Where explicit literacy strategies were noted, they tended to pertain to non-disciplinary-specific strategies or disciplinary listening and performing tasks. Discussing the latter approach, Walby (2011) describes the 'mental hurdles' involved in demonstrating deep understanding of a musical concept through 'focused vocabulary and listening activities' (p. 60). Such approaches according to Gee (2004) promote a 'learning by doing' pedagogy which was evident in many of the responses gleaned in this study. When viewed through the lens of practical application tasks, this study reveals considerable evidence of teachers encouraging their students to leap over such 'mental hurdles' employing only the use of listening and performing as vehicles for literacy education. Participants described how their students learn about musical terminology through strategies of listening to musical examples, playing musical instruments and singing, or watching YouTube clips for a visual and/or oral explanation of a word or concept. The practical literacy strategies listed also involved teacher-led naming and explaining while performing, teacher-led identification of concepts during choir practice, the elicitation of one or two word student responses during a singing or listening exercise, or the use of third party explanation of concepts on YouTube for example. Such strategies demonstrate evidence of the provision of listening and performance-bound learning experiences to which students 'can tie the words and structures . . . to experiences' (Gee, 2004, p. 3). However, the findings of this study also present evidence of a gap between students' relative proficiency in recognising and naming musical concepts and their concurrent ability to articulate their understanding of that concept in a literate manner. In many cases, music teachers recounted their students' ability to 'listen purposefully to a wide variety of musical styles and genres', a key requirement in the Senior Cycle music syllabus (DES, 1996) but acknowledged that many students failed 'to articulate their perceptions in a musically literate manner' (DES, 1996, p. 2). Comparing the processes of reading and listening (decoding) with those of speaking and writing (encoding), Marzano (1998) explains that when learners express themselves through speaking or writing, they need to retrieve prior knowledge, as 'the more a student knows about a topic, the easier it is for them to speak about it' (Marzano, 1998, p. 47). This suggests that hearing and naming a musical concept – a frequently alluded to literacy strategy in this study, does not successfully demonstrate understanding. Rather, the integration of student talk and dialogue is increasingly being recognised as a critical tool supporting teachers' understanding of the thinking processes and interactions of young children engaged in musical tasks (Major & Cottle 2010). Indeed, Mercer and Littleton (2007) advance that dialogue lies at the heart of how children learn and develop through classroom experiences. The relegation of student dialogue within the music classroom, as evidenced in this study, poses cause for concern in this respect.

The advent of a new music specification as part of the Junior Cycle Reform in Ireland provides opportunity for a paradigm shift towards more learner-centred, collaborative classrooms where active learning and dialogue are encouraged as an integral part of students' learning experiences. Close review of the implementation of this new curriculum will be required over the coming years to evaluate its impact and efficacy, particularly with respect to the development of students' music literacy. The findings of this study suggest that enhanced and engaged approaches to disciplinary

literacy education advanced through a conscious implementation of simple student-oriented literacy strategies could align well with the existing strategies adopted within the music class. Approaching literacy education using dialogue and strategies which challenge learners to think for themselves and articulate their responses may contribute to empowering students with the knowledge and critical thinking skills to alleviate some of the literacy challenges articulated by teachers in this study. Moreover, the adoption of a more balanced approach to the development of skills of listening, performance and speaking in the music classroom could contribute towards a greater awareness of disciplinary literacy in music (MacMahon, 2014; Moje, 2007; Nagy, Townsend, Lesaux & Schmitt, 2012). The role of both Initial Teacher Education and Continuous Professional Development initiatives is critical in this respect (Philpott & Spruce, 2012). Notable with respect to the former however are the findings of Moore (2013) who found that within the Irish context ‘in some cases an accredited undergraduate music degree could be acquired with minimal music literacy’. The imperative to engage in a cross-sector review of the practices associated with literacy education and the levels of proficiency required at each level of education appears pressing.

As evident from the findings of this study, music students are already accustomed to taking an active role in their learning through listening, composing and performing. The recent reform of the Junior Cycle curriculum presents an opportunity to grow the roots of creativity already present in the music classroom through an enhanced concurrent focus on the development of students’ skills of verbalisation and dialogue. The development of authentic literacy learning experiences as part of the reform within the Irish education system remains at this time a laudable ambition, and its translation into practice will be tied closely to a reduction of fragmentation surrounding the value and status of literacy across the current system, from curriculum to assessment.

National strategy asserts that ‘teachers of all post-primary subjects have an important role to play in developing and consolidating students’ ability to use literacy and numeracy’ (DES, 2011, p. 11). The findings of this study reflect a desire amongst music teachers to support this ambition. Moreover, current educational reforms appear to provide a novel pathway to move beyond the narrowing of thinking, curriculum and opportunity (Fautley, 2019) to the inclusion of more engaged literacy development practices in the classroom. The effective translation of ambition into practice however is oft contentious. Yet, the potential dividends to be gleaned through the adoption of more immersive and student-centred literacy experiences in the music classroom provides a compelling case for action.

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