

**CREATAHOLIC**

# **SCHOOL OBSERVATION REPORT: ISSUES IN MUSIC EDUCATION**



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**~ School Observation Report ~**

**MUSI 3600: Issues in Music Education (Summer Term 2005)**  
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**92 100 033 6**  
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**School #1**

Castlebridge Public School  
Mississauga, Ontario  
Peel Board of Education  
Mrs. Murrell

**School #2**

John Frasier Secondary School  
Mississauga, Ontario  
Peel Board of Education  
Mr. Elcombe

## **Learning Environments**

Castlebridge Public School is approximately 7 years old and is fortunate to have a large, spacious music room with portable risers and plenty of open floor space for dancing and games. In addition, there is a fully equipped multi-media centre and a large bin organizer that runs along the side wall containing every rhythm and pitched percussion instrument an elementary school teacher would want. Castlebridge benefits from its active parent council and numerous fundraising drives. On the back wall of the classroom span two bulletin boards. The first, “How to Take Care of the Frog in your Throat” is decorated with colourful pictures and posters that include suggestions such as, “Drink lots of water” and “Stand up straight”. The second displays information relevant to the “Composer of the Week” (Brummet-Taylor Listening Program), showing historical, biographical and pictorial accounts of the composers life and compositions. This is definitely a welcoming, enriching and positive learning environment.

John Frasier Secondary School is approximately fifteen years old. Mr. Elcombe is extremely fortunate to have an enormous music room with twenty-foot ceilings and additional practice rooms through the back door. Also, there is a classroom next door that he utilizes for the guitar program equipped with two pianos (donated to the school), computer stations, and a storage room for student’s guitars. The rooms are sparsely decorated, but plans are under way through the student-run Music Council to paint murals on the walls in the music room in order to make it more vibrant and inviting. The guitar program room appeared to be used by several different teachers for a variety of classes throughout the day making it difficult for one teacher to decorate due to its multiple uses. This problem is not faced by elementary teachers as they stay in one room with their classes every day and all year, while secondary schools may be semestered in addition to rotating classes.

## **Teaching Styles**

Mrs. Murrell works with classes in the range of 25 – 30 students including students with special needs. She displays a keen sense of “Withitness” (Kellough and Kellough, 2003: 34) in her teaching style and is aware of “everything that is going on in the classroom, at all times, monitoring students for signs of restlessness, confusion, frustration, anxiety, and off-task behaviours”. She is able to maintain on-task behaviours with all of the students, including the exceptional learners who require additional attention. When asked to describe her teaching style for the younger grades, Mrs. Murrell commented that it was like being “Raffi-for-a-day” due to the number of songs and dances that must be executed and performed with, and for, the students. Mrs. Murrell appears to make this look very easy.

Mr. Elcombe works with classes, observed today, of no more than approximately twenty students, which is considerably less than Mrs. Murrell’s classes. His classroom management style is much more relaxed than Mrs. Murrell. I would assume this is due to the fact that older students are expected to be able to work more independently than six- and seven-year-olds, although this is not always the case. Mr. Elcombe exhibits characteristics of “facilitating teacher behaviours” as described by Kellough and Kellough (2003:49) such as:

- maintaining a relaxing atmosphere through the use of humour
- acting as a mediator for students to encourage self-directed problem solving
- being supportive, validating, and listening to students

All of Mr. Elcombe’s students seemed to be very comfortable and relaxed in speaking with him. This was important when individual testing was occurring as students felt they were in a secure environment and seemed to be unafraid of making mistakes. On a personal note, I would be uncomfortable with the level of familiarity in Mr. Elcombe’s class, but in retrospect, I have also been told that in some aspects, I am more of an authoritative teacher. When asked to summarize his teaching style, Mr. Elcombe explained that he provides the students with the choice of success or failure. He provides ample opportunities for students to succeed in a supportive and collaborative environment, and if the student chooses to succeed, they will. He mentioned that “the only students who fail in his class are those who choose to do so”.

## **Multilevel Teaching**

Mr. Elcombe moved to John Frasier from Erindale Secondary School and brought with him a guitar program that is currently being established at John Frasier. Each student chooses,

with the help of the teacher, their guitar level (beginner, intermediate, experienced, advanced) and then proceeds with music and playing tests appropriate to the chosen level regardless of the actual grade level they are enrolled in. The students may complete the tests in any order and have access to a binder that contains a checklist of the tests completed so that they can keep track of their progress. The tests vary in genres from blues progressions, rock tab, folk finger picking, classical studies and duets. If a student would like to attempt a test from a higher level they may do so, often with the help of a more advanced classmate or Mr. Elcombe. This enables Mr. Elcombe to effectively manage the diverse levels and preferred genres of his students.

### **Cross-Curricular Lesson Planning**

Mrs. Murrell attends regular meetings with the different grade level teachers so that she may help to reinforce current curriculum units in the music program. Due to a monthly assembly, which resulted in shortened class time during my observation Mrs. Murrell used songs that had already been learned throughout the year. Instead of singing the original words, the students were asked to formulate new words that rhyme with the existing lyrics. While standing in a circle, Mrs. Murrell would ask for a word and numerous hands would fly into the air with bodies jumping up and down hoping to be chosen. After the word was chosen, the entire class would sing and dance the actions. Grade one students learn about rhyming words, and this lesson therefore reinforced the language arts curriculum taught by their regular classroom teachers.

### **A ‘Hands-On’ Approach to Music Education**

Jorgenson explains that training musicians is “procedural,... and because it is experiential and contextual it brings knowledge of self, world, and what may lie beyond...” (Jorgenson, 1997:11) In addition, John Dewey was a great supporter of hands-on, “student experience-centered education” (Dewey, 1916). Both teachers have designed programs that are heavily weighted in ‘hands-on’ approaches and ‘experience-centered’ approaches. For example:

- a) Mrs. Murrell is directly involved with the choreography of the monthly assemblies in addition to her regular class schedules and planning. She has a group of students who volunteer to be I.T. specialists before and after assemblies. It’s really quite amazing to watch grade four and five students set up microphones, stereos, amplifiers, laptops and projectors and then disassemble them, all within about 10 minutes. The students learn about

responsibility and technology, also known as ‘real-life’ learning, and seem to thoroughly enjoy the experience.

- b) Students are assigned to performing groups in each of Mrs. Murrell’s classes. Each week a group is chosen and students individually perform on the piano or guitar. This program is designed for all students, not just those receiving private instruction. Students who do not have prior knowledge of the piano or guitar are encouraged to improvise after being asked, “What emotion from the bulletin board are you going to play today?”. It was surprising to see that even children with private training (some of the students attend our music school in the community) chose to improvise rather than play a piece of music they had been studying. All of the students who played received a standing ovation and “Bravo’s!” from their classmates. If the student improvised for too long Mrs. Murrell, would animatedly ask to hear their “Grand Finale” and they would quickly come to an end in excitement of showing her. This reaffirms the original observation of a safe and encouraging learning environment.
- c) The Music program at Castlebridge is also “assisted” by the other teachers in the school. For example, Ms. Madget’s grade five students have been working closely with Gregg Lawless to compose a song. The song was premiered today at the monthly assembly for students and parents. “I believe” was the title, with the lyrics composed by the students, encouraging sharing and respect for all of the cultures of the world. This composition will be performed at the Mississauga Living Arts Centre, Hammerson Hall, this month. This exercise certainly encourages “hands-on music making” and shows students what can happen with hard work.
- d) Mr. Elcombe has started a “Music Council” due to the large number of students who wanted to “hang-out” in the music room on Friday afternoons. These students are now responsible for decisions pertaining to band uniforms, concert planning and execution, class trips, fundraising, refurbishing/maintaining/painting music stands and instrument cases, and painting the classroom murals. The students welcome the responsibilities and each year younger students learn from the senior students allowing them to assume the role of “senior” the following year.

In conclusion, both teachers exhibit different traits and characteristics within their teaching styles but maintain safe, enriching and effective learning environments that utilize ‘hands-on’, ‘student-centered’ learning techniques.

## Works Cited

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