

ARTICLE

# The times, they are a-changing: Australian secondary classroom music teachers reflect on their early career 40 years on

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## Abstract

The period 1974–1999 were transition years for government school systems in Australia and New South Wales (NSW), where government agencies issued numerous policies and documents to influence and manage education and resultant classroom pedagogy. During those years, many music syllabi were produced for enactment in NSW, placing multiple demands on teacher accountability. This paper forms part of a larger study involving three generations of music teachers representing different career stages and experiences and presents the voices of the group of experienced music teachers (EMTs), exploring the impact of syllabus change, teacher identity, pedagogical skills, and eventual flourishing as confident teachers.

**Keywords:** Music syllabus change; secondary music classroom pedagogy; teacher identity

## Introduction

In 2020, 10 experienced music teachers (EMTs) from New South Wales (NSW), Australia, were interviewed and asked to reflect on the 25-year period (1974–1999) of their long careers. In the state of NSW, education is administered by the state government. While an Australia-wide curriculum exists, the Australian Curriculum (2010), NSW, while keeping its own syllabi, incorporates some Australian Curriculum content.<sup>1</sup> In NSW, the years of schooling are divided into ‘stages’. Those stages are Primary (Early Stage 1, Stages 1 – 3), Junior Secondary (Stages 4 – 5) and Senior (Stage 6). Junior secondary music constitutes a non-elective 100-h course over two years (typically 12- and 13–14-year-olds) and an elective 200-h music course over Stage 5 (typically 14- and 15–16-year-olds). Senior secondary music (Stage 6) constitutes a choice of two elective courses for music for 17- and 18-year-olds for their High School Certificate (HSC).

The period 1974–1999 were transition years for most government school systems in Australia and NSW, where government agencies issued numerous policies and documents to influence and manage education, influencing classroom pedagogy. In 1973, for example, ‘The Karmel Report’, issued by the Commonwealth Government, focused on such issues as (i) equality of opportunity, (ii) diversity, (iii) private and public schooling and (iv) community involvement (Hill, 1998) and recommended that ‘educational inputs’ be re-named ‘outcomes’; in 1979, a document named ‘Managing the School’ specified ‘that schools were to maintain five documents, including Teaching/Learning Programs, intended to encourage sequential planning of lessons by teachers’ (Barcan, 2010, p. 19). The McGowan Report (1981) was followed by –‘Future Directions of Secondary Education: A Report’ in 1984 (an expanded version of the 1979 document), also named ‘Managing the School’. Finally, in 1989, ‘The Carrick Review of Schooling’ announced significant changes to the year ten credential, called the School Certificate (SC), with updates for students not

wishing to sit for an HSC but to encourage them to continue into Year 11 and providing them with a 'descriptive profile of their attainment, skills, and activities to be of use when applying for employment' (<https://scpp.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/>).

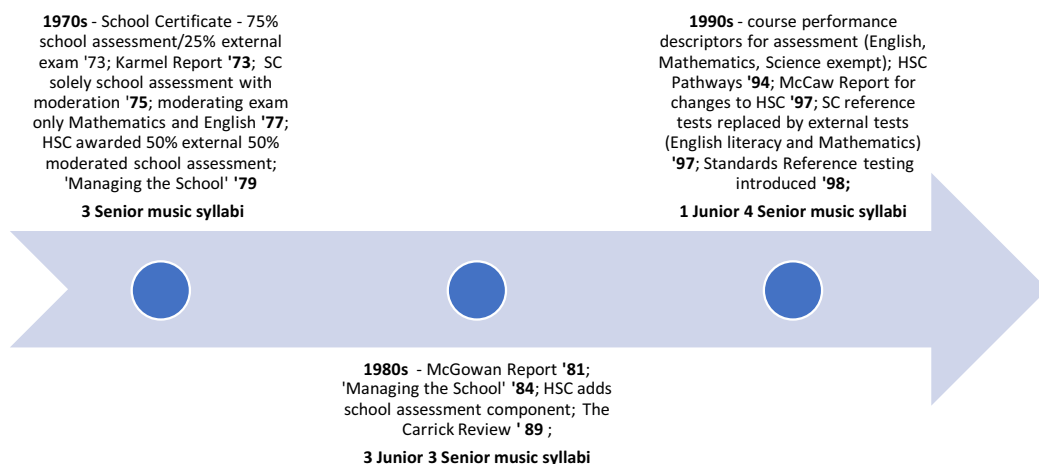
In 1994, a policy titled 'HSC Pathways' was released, which increased flexibility for HSC students and allowed for 'part-time study and work, repetition of individual courses to upgrade results, accelerated progression, recognition for prior learning and credit transfer towards future education or training' (<https://education.nsw.gov.au>). In 1997, a report to reform the HSC, called 'Shaping Their Future', was issued, and a Standards Referencing approach was introduced to marking and reporting student achievement. This resulted in the 1997 'McGaw Report'.

Through all government policy changes, syllabus philosophy and construction underwent alterations and shifts, and assessment and examination requirements were significantly altered. For example, the number of assessment tasks was specified, the minimum number of marks recommended for each task was set, and specifically for the Performing Arts (of which music was a subject), the external HSC examinations held in Performance (for both Music 1 and Music 2), and Musicology viva voces (for Music 1) grew in importance. Both of these syllabi are explained below.

## Music syllabi

From 1974 to 1999, at least 14 music syllabi were produced for implementation in secondary music classrooms in NSW. Over the 1970s and 1980s, the senior music syllabus had *six* revisions, and the junior syllabus had *three*; in the 1990s, the senior syllabus was revised *four* times, and the junior syllabus *once*. Each revision changed terminology, assessment and examination requirements, broadened topic choices, and placed more demands on teachers for accountability with programming, reporting, and assessment procedures to be strictly adhered to. In addition, the classroom shifted from the traditional approach of the 1970s and 1980s, with an emphasis on class performance, listening, reading and writing to the inclusion of a wider variety of musical genres being studied employing an integration of the components of performance, composition and listening.

Diagram 1 illustrates the frequency of policy change and the number of syllabus changes between 1970 and 1998.



**Diagram 1.** Timeline of syllabus and curriculum reform in NSW during the decades 1970s–1990s.

Reid (2004) argues that ‘as teachers, we should actively recall salient aspects of the historical development of our field of study’ (p. 102). He reminds us that ignorance of the professional past restricts an awareness of future development opportunities. This is true of classroom music history in secondary schools in NSW, where EMTs’ viewpoints and documented experiences from 1975 to 1999 have not previously been explored. This study explores the impact of the changes brought about by each syllabus iteration as reported through the EMT participants’ experiences. Their growth in confidence, building their teacher identity and pedagogical skills through the multiple changes that occurred, and their flourishing through facing these changes and willingness to adapt to the circumstances in which they found themselves are described below.

## Literature review

### *Early career and building teacher identity*

The early career period is crucial as teachers build their identity and classroom competence, shaping their ongoing classroom practice and longevity in the profession (Ballantyne, 2007; Ballantyne & Zhukov, 2017). During this period, however, young teachers feel a sense of isolation, experience an inability to cope and feel overwhelmed by the demands of the job (Friedman, 2000; Welch et al., 2011). In her 2007 Queensland research, Ballantyne called the shock of physical and professional isolation within the school as well as the high workload of a full teaching load and of simultaneously running an extracurricular music programme experienced by the participants as ‘praxis shock’, when the expectations of young teachers’ experiences do not match the realities of teaching (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; Ballantyne, 2007; Ballantyne & Zhukov, 2017).

In this study, the EMTs reflected on their classroom experiences and identified several pressing issues such as needing more preparation for the job, physical isolation and full workloads in their early career. Identity formation is a continuous process for early career teachers as they juggle their personal and professional pursuits concerning teaching and music (Rowley, 2014). Bukor (2015) has suggested ‘that teacher identity reflects all aspects of being a teacher – professional, educational and pedagogical aspects’ – and ‘needs to be considered in both pre-service and in-service teacher education’ (p. 323). According to Chua and Welch (2020), ‘music teacher identity is connected to different facets of the self’ (p. 3). Their research made the connection between a teacher’s self-efficacy, resilience and relationship with students, all of which can impact teachers’ efforts. Further, the challenges faced by early career teachers can be amplified when the teachers serve in isolated areas and are the only discipline specialist in their schools (Ballantyne & Zhukov, 2017).

### *Building pedagogical skills through professional development*

Interactions between Department of Education Inspectors and schools kept teachers informed of syllabus changes, assessment procedures, and other relevant curriculum and policy reforms. School inspectors were also responsible for visiting department schools across all areas of NSW – urban and rural – to offer support and mentoring; sometimes, they organised and presented at professional learning courses; and sometimes, the visits were formal or part of what was called a ‘list inspection’ – the procedure followed by teachers when seeking promotion within a school. The teachers who experienced these opportunities reported increased confidence as teachers and musicians, reinforcing their belief in their skills as musicians and educators. This aligns with research suggesting that professional development assists teachers with learning and implementing new skills and strategies for planning and teaching (Davidson & Dwyer, 2014; Ballantyne & Zhukov, 2017).

### **Importance of mentors**

Early career teachers with positive mentoring experiences in schools are less likely to move schools or leave the profession in their first years of teaching than those with negative experiences (Welch et al., 2011; Davidson & Dwyer, 2014). With mentoring, teachers can develop into reflective practitioners in their own right (Ballantyne & Zhukov, 2017). Research by Chua and Welch (2020) has reinforced the thinking that teachers develop their personal identities through belonging to communities of practice, as Wenger (2000) suggested, and their findings have underscored the power of social interactions in contributing to the continued growth of a music teacher's identity (p. 12). Teachers discover these communities through professional associations, online music teacher groups, and teachers and students interacting within the workplace.

### **Adapting to pedagogical change**

Two significant changes in the teaching of music came with the introduction of two new senior syllabi. The first 1978 was called '*Music Syllabus Years 11 and 12-2 Unit A Course*'. This course was designed specially to include students who had not necessarily formally learnt music before. The students' study components were Performance, Composition, Musicology (consisting of a Viva Voce assessment) and Aural Skills. This syllabus had no written examination component for the HSC requiring knowledge of notation skills or set works as past syllabi had. Instead, the written aural examination, the Aural Skills paper, required student responses in prose or dot point form describing the elements of music (now called the concepts of music) through listening to short unknown excerpts of music from any style or genre. This was a departure from the previous music syllabi, which included a written examination requiring listening skills based on Western Art Music (WAM) knowledge, which traditionally included score reading, harmonic vocabulary and compositional skills. The Aural Test information stated:

The multiplicity of choice of units and the many possibilities of study within each unit determines a broad approach to testing. For this reason, a form of Aural assessment will be adopted, in which the candidate's ability to respond to a musical stimulus will be paramount, NOT the ability to write specifically about a particular style of music (p. 6).

Students could choose from performance, musicology, composition or any combination for the practical component. Each component was to be studied in each topic area chosen, of which there was an extensive range of choices from solo instrumental music, music of another culture and Australian music, to popular music and rock music. This syllabus significantly affected the EMTs' pedagogy because it opened the subject to students who may have had no formal music lessons. It also meant that as classically trained musicians, the EMTs had to engage with topics they may not have encountered in their tertiary education. As a result, they had to change their pedagogical practice to include contemporary music-making in their classrooms and their approach to activities in performance. The 2 Unit Course A syllabus was revised thrice – in 1983, 1994, and 1999 – each time with a widening of topic choices and elective configurations affecting examination practice. This syllabus's performance and musicology components have been the most popular elective choices with students. Because of its success in attracting students interested in popular and rock music, the significance of music grew in NSW senior secondary classrooms with a rise in the numbers of students choosing music as a subject for the HSC, which helped music staff increase in numbers in schools.

In the 1990s, another of the critical pedagogical changes affecting classroom practice occurred with changes to the teaching and assessment of composition. Composition lessons for junior elective and senior music students throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s included the teacher demonstrating four-part harmony on the blackboard and then giving the students exercises to

work on with pencil and manuscript paper at their desks. These exercises included setting either a poem to three- or four-part harmony or a melody to piano accompaniment. The composition lessons were reminiscent of the 1950s and 1960s syllabi and traditional theory, where the activity had been called ‘harmony’, ‘counterpoint’ and ‘harmony and melodic invention’. The Australian Music Examinations Branch (AMEB<sup>2</sup>) had been the pathway in schools via the HSC to tertiary education during the 1970s in NSW. This meant students being taught their instrument and theory/musicianship by a private teacher (English equivalents of the AMEB include [Trinity College, London](#) or the [Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music](#)).

For formal HSC examinations in these areas, secondary music students wrote their compositions in the harmony section with pencil, manuscript paper and eraser in silence under exam conditions in a hall. This practice continued until the 1990s when a new syllabus was introduced, which changed this traditional practice. This was ‘*Stage 6 Music syllabus 2 unit (common) – 3 unit, Preliminary and HSC courses*’ (Board of Studies, New South Wales, 1994). Dunbar-Hall (1999, 2002) reported that the significant change in the approach to the teaching of original composition was that it was ‘to be seen as developmental and a continual process which moves from simple, small tasks . . . to longer more complex ones’ (p. 47). Also that there was the ‘expectation that composition activity would be continual throughout the complete K-12 music curriculum’ (p. 47). In other words, composition was to be ‘perceived as the process rather than the product of music education’ (p. 47). The syllabus changes in the approach to teaching and learning composition brought about changes in classroom practice that ‘trickled down’ into the junior elective streams, and composition became a means of increasing the avenues through which school students could gain musical understanding (Dunbar-Hall, 1993).

To find out exactly how these changes influenced educational and pedagogical practice in the secondary music classroom, the perspective of EMTs, who taught through these changes, has been sought through interviews. This research has captured their insights, knowledge and practical experience of the times. Their experiences in establishing themselves and their teaching identities as early career teachers and developing their self-efficacy and pedagogical skills amidst the multiple changes that occurred over the 25 years will be of historical interest to the music community.

## Methodology

The research utilises qualitative methodology widely used in educational research (Divan et al., 2017) and has drawn on various methods to explore, historically contextualise, interpret, evaluate, and understand the perspectives, philosophies, beliefs, and practices that underpin the implementation of the syllabus and music curriculum in NSW.

This qualitative study aimed to explore the pedagogical practices and perspectives of this group of EMTs ( $n = 10$ ) who had begun their teaching careers between the mid-1970s and the 1980s and who have taught through those decades to the 2000s.

Purposive sampling was used to select the participants, recruited from professional connections with the researcher formed over the past 40 years through HSC marking, teacher and professional associations, and music teaching positions. The participants were deliberately chosen based on their extensive knowledge of the subject and curriculum, their willingness to participate, and their ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive and reflective manner (Etikan et al., 2016). Twenty EMTs were interviewed throughout 2020 and 2021, of which 10 were selected for this paper. Each participant was interviewed using semi-structured interviews for 45–60 min during 2020, and due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were held via Zoom. Semi-structured interviews also stimulate open responses that ‘enable lines of conversation to be developed in situ in ways that could not have been anticipated when the interview schedule was being planned’ (Brown & Danaher, 2019, p. 77). The questions were designed as open-ended

**Table 1.** The EMTs – 1970–1980 participants ( $n = 10$ )

Participant pseudonym	HSC year	Teacher education years	First-year teaching
Edie, Martha, Layla, Valerie, Tessie	1969	1970–1973	1974
Rikki, Maxwell	1970	1971–1974	1975
Holly	1975	1976–1979	1980
Cecilia	1977	1978–1981	1982
Frankie	1978	1981–1984	1985

questions intended to catch the ‘authenticity, richness, depth of response, honesty and candour’ and ‘gems of information’, the features of qualitative data (Cowan, 2011, p. 266). The analysis of interview data utilised thematic analysis, a ‘process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data’ (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3352). This study sought to identify participants’ relevant educational music practices while also uncovering underlying attitudes and beliefs that informed and directed these practices.

Each participant received a participant information sheet and signed a participation consent form. In addition, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. The study followed the protocol set out by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Office, which approved the study (2019/971). Table 1 presents the demographics of the participants.

From the interview questions, three themes that emerged through the data analysis have been chosen as the focus for this paper, using quotes enabling the participant voice to be heard. The focus questions were: 1. What were your early career experiences like in the classroom? 2. What professional support did you receive during these early years and do you remember the syllabus changes that occurred? and 3. How did you change your pedagogical practice as each new change came into effect? Findings are reported below.

## Findings

Eight of this cohort were employed in regional, remote or rural schools in various parts of NSW, whereas two were in city schools. Often they were the only music teacher in the school with a teaching load across years 7–10 and possibly a senior music class. As the only music teacher in the school and often supervised by a head teacher from another subject discipline, they found themselves responsible for all decisions about their subject. The start of a new career while facing unknown challenges is an exciting time in one’s life; however, in the period covered by this study, little or no structures existed to support music teachers in the early stage of their careers.

Significant themes emerged from the interviews, which were: (i) the resilience needed in building teacher identity during the early years of teaching, highlighting feelings of isolation, lack of equipment and the absence of collegial support; (ii) the flexibility needed in building pedagogical skills to cope with the challenges in developing and strengthening pedagogical practice with the emergence of new and innovative changes as new music syllabi were introduced.

## Resilience in building teacher identity

Overcoming feelings of isolation and needing professional and collegial support were common themes mentioned in the early teaching period for the EMTs in this study. Most participants reported having little musical equipment in their classrooms. Edie, for example, found herself in a newly established high school, the second high school in a large town in far western NSW,



supervised by the science head teacher. The school had been deemed ready to accept pupils without having anything in the music room except the standard blackboard. Edie said:

On the first day, I had nothing; on the second day, I had a box of chalk; on the third day, I got a stereo. We didn't get a piano until about July or August.

Tessie also found herself as the only music teacher at a school in a southwestern region of NSW with 'one double bass at the back of the storeroom, a reasonable number of records, and some untuned percussion instruments'. Tessie said:

Through word of mouth, I ended up phoning around and persuading people to donate or loan their old, unwanted, unused brass instruments to the school, and we started a band.

At the time, in NSW schools, concert bands and brass bands were popular ensemble activities, and most schools aspired to have one or the other and a choir.

Valerie found that she only had junior classes in her first appointment at a country school, had large class sizes and had very few instruments. To engage the students, she focused on practical work. She encouraged her classes to form bush bands (a popular activity of the 1970s and 1980s with accessible instruments that also aligned with the syllabi's encouragement of studying Australian folk songs). She took them to as many outside-school performances as possible. She also found ways to encourage her students to participate in musical activities by playing the recorder, which in the 1970s was freely accessible to all and a way to include everyone in class or practical group work.

Recorders became important because I didn't have any equipment. We had recorders that drove every other staff member in the school mad, right through to until they hit the electives.

Martha also needed more resources. She said:

There was nothing in the music room except a little suitcase which revealed a record player when opened. The only thing that was in the storeroom was a double bass and a whole lot of broken violins, as well as a whole lot of old books that looked like they'd been in there since 1920. *Sing Care Away* and *Rounds From Many Countries*.

Martha spent all her free time rehearsing with students – not exchanging ideas in the staffroom. This form of self-isolation has also been a research topic on teachers and labelled 'egg-crate isolation' by Lortie (Davidson & Dwyer, 2014). Martha reported:

It was hard because I had no equipment and nobody to bounce any ideas off. There were no other schools around. They had no professional development or anything where you could meet with other teachers and talk about what you were doing.

Connecting with other music teachers is considered to be essential in alleviating professional isolation among music teachers (Davidson & Dwyer, 2014). Maxwell, also in a small country town in northern NSW, was fortunate enough to be appointed in an area with an established Music Teachers Association that comprised a collegiate of music staff who met to discuss music issues in schools and provide in-service courses for teachers as well as weekend workshops and music camps for students. Some staff readily travelled distances on country roads after work to attend meetings in other remote and regional centres. Maxwell said the staff were happy to travel because the meetings allowed professional discussions and built a sense of community and fun. Frankie also said he would travel 80 km (50 miles) or more after work to meet music staff from

surrounding country towns for dinner and then have a Music Teachers Association meeting, which involved swapping lesson ideas and professional conversations.

Rikki, however, admitted he struggled as the only music teacher in a small town in western NSW. He had begun with a high sense of his musical skills, as he was an accomplished musician who had run a successful private teaching studio over the years but found classroom management challenging to manage independently. He was told his principal was concerned about the 'noise' coming from the classroom, but no one ever came to his room to offer support. He was offered some in-service teacher training courses, which he participated in, but he said:

I'd be all enthusiastic after I came back from the course, but when I tried out the ideas, I landed in a screaming heap. I needed someone to actually come in and mentor me and show me over a period of time how I might improve.

Layla's first appointment had been in a city school, where two other older music teachers were already established, yet she also experienced professional isolation. On her first day, one of the teachers handed her a timetable and said, 'you've got Year 10 and Year 11. Your desk is over there'. That teacher then proceeded to sit with her friend, the other music teacher, at the other end of the staffroom, and both proceeded to ignore Layla for the next few months. Layla read through the programmes, knew that she could do the work and realised that the other two experienced teachers were challenging her. Her survival instincts and flexibility kicked in, and as she got to know the students, she began to win them over. They offered her help that was not forthcoming from her colleagues, prompting her on classroom and school procedures and thus becoming her guide and sanity. Her resilience paid off when in the following year, she managed to establish both a senior class and a junior elective class from the students she had taught. The other two teachers began including her in collegial discussions, for which she was grateful. However, as she said, 'I would have liked some support and conversations around programming and planning earlier on as a new teacher who was unsure of herself'.

Holly was appointed to a city school, where she said, 'all I had was blackboards and chalk'. She thought she was a boring teacher because she relied on textbooks, as that was what she remembered school to be. It took Holly a while to realise that she could inspire the students through practical work, and when she finally had access to a keyboard lab and guitars, her classroom approach changed. She began using more performance activities in class to interest students, and she felt she became a much better teacher. Holly was fortunate enough to have colleagues from other faculties who offered her support and encouragement in her early years. She began as an 'extra-numerary' teacher – one above establishment – and moved around to different classrooms and faculties as needed. However, Holly remained optimistic and said:

I can honestly say I've learned something from all the different teachers I've taught with. They all had different expertise, different personalities and different ways of dealing with things.

When she was finally appointed to a school as a full-time classroom music teacher after two years, Holly said that she was again fortunate to have an older music colleague who was very supportive and made the job fun by mentoring her and coaching her in a friendly way.

Cecilia's own school music lessons, which she remembered as being 'regulative and tedious', made her want to be a different type of teacher. She found her niche by teaching more rock and jazz styles, which she felt the students related to more readily. Although Cecilia acknowledged that the 1980s syllabi did not have a performance focus, she also instinctively realised that more creativity was the pathway to student engagement in the classroom.



### Adapting to change and strengthening pedagogy

During the EMT participants' first years of teaching, the junior music syllabus was centred around group performance activities. This syllabus was not revised until the 1980s and was and therefore well remembered by all participants. Singing was the most popular choice in a classroom with few instruments, and rounds and Australian folk songs were popular, per the syllabus recommendations. Recorder and percussion playing were encouraged to facilitate the learning of notation. Listening activities for years 7 and 8 comprised reading single-line melodies while listening to records and playing untuned percussion to a variety of musical styles (mostly excerpts from suites or ballets) while following music charts; for the elective students, score reading activities were encouraged as recommended by the syllabus and titled 'Observation and Analysis'. The suggested 'Reading and Writing Activities' included writing known songs and themes from memory, transposing themes to suit ranges of voices and instruments, writing rhythm and melodic dictations, and creating rhythms and melodies to fit short verses of poetry.

The most significant changes for music teachers of senior secondary music occurred in 1978 with the introduction of the '*Music Syllabus- Years 11 and 12- 2 Unit A Course*', specially designed for students who had not done music in their junior years or indeed had not done any music outside of school. This course attracted the pop/rock musicians and non-music readers to enable access to music learning in the last two years of schooling – a pathway previously blocked to such students. As a result, there were now three separate music courses in play for senior students in NSW. The new syllabus augmented the two syllabi already in place – the '*Music Syllabus and Notes on the Syllabus – Form V and Form VI – 3 Unit Course and 2 Unit A Course*' (1974) and the '*Music Syllabus Year 11 and Year 12 – 2 Unit Course*' (1975). (In NSW prior to 1975, what we now call 'Years' were then labelled 'Forms' – therefore, Form V and VI equate to today's Years 11 and 12).

With the introduction of this syllabus (eventually re-named Music 2 Unit 1), students could participate in music-making with groups of their peers who previously had not had formal music training (private instrumental lessons or theory lessons) and choose their own topics, which included a range of possibilities for studying and performing popular music. In addition, the new syllabus had opened the subject of music to talented drummers, rhythm/lead/bass guitarists, singers, etc., who could achieve success by working hard for their last two years at high school without necessarily having previously learned to read music and had not had the standard learning background in private music tuition.

The EMTs readily adapted their classroom pedagogy to suit each change in the syllabi as it occurred, and classroom instrumental work soon evolved from the 1970s group performances – and moved away from teacher-directed learning – to individual pursuits on electric keyboards and guitars. The EMTs had to learn how to 'let go' of being the leader at the front of the performance group. As one said:

I was the person with the knowledge, and the students needed to be quiet and listen to what I said. I had to learn to let go of that gradually, as I realised that kids could be self-learners and benefit from learning from each other.

With the changes brought to the teaching of composition by the new 1994 syllabus – '*Stage 6 Syllabus Music 2 Unit (common)/3 Unit – Preliminary and HSC Courses*' – core composition became mandatory, and all students were expected to submit an original 2-min composition recording and score for external marking. The syllabus stated:

The marking of submitted compositions is based on both the written score and the recording.  
NOTE: The recording is used as a guide to the intentions of the composer and therefore the technical quality will not be taken into consideration.

Compositions should be of a musically substantial nature and should reflect an understanding of the stylistic features of the topic which it represents (Stage 6 Syllabus Music 2/3 Unit Preliminary and HSC Courses, p. 39).

With composition being accorded equal footing with the other components of performance, listening and musicology (in the senior syllabus), music teachers in NSW realised their teaching of composition had to change. This shift to 'original' composition gave students even more avenues to gain musical understanding (Dunbar-Hall, 1993). Apart from teachers having to take this important pedagogical shift there was a sudden increase in sophisticated music software packages available for students to use, which had an immediate impact on students' compositional choices and end products, not to mention teachers' growth in understanding of the software capacities now available.

All EMTs agreed that they felt unprepared for the challenge of teaching students compositional skills, as they had come from a traditional theory background. The EMTs said that they remembered being taught orchestration and doing activities such as writing a composition in the style of a particular composer or adding a piano accompaniment or a string quartet arrangement, but they also needed to learn how to write an original composition. They acknowledged that they had no choice but to adapt and learn new processes, supporting the statement that teachers 'through experimenting with different pedagogical techniques in the classroom, amass a catalogue of knowledge about what works and what does not work' (Oleson & Hora, 2014, p. 31). Martha reflected that learning how to teach composition was a challenge:

I remember teaching composition at a basic level in years 8 and 9, just building understanding about chord progressions and how to build a melody line on a chord, a bit like music theory. That was about all I knew how to do. I always found it difficult to teach.

The EMTs still endeavoured to explain the harmonic and chordal process to their students, believing they should demystify the compositional process by providing their students with knowledge and skills. Cecilia said:

I find composition teaching challenging because you try and guide them in a certain way, and they've got their ideas and own style, so it becomes a fine line as to whether you get them to go in a direction of your choice or not.

### Concluding thoughts and implications

Each of the EMTs' responses to the challenges they faced varied, but all displayed resilience and flexibility, and a willingness to face the situations in which they found themselves. These findings align with the 2017 research by Ballantyne and Zhukov, whose description of the resilience of teachers in the face of substantial difficulties also fits the EMTs in this study of a different era: 'they draw on personal fortitude, and a wide range of professional and personal skills to foster positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and recognition of achievements' (p. 249).

The EMTs acknowledged the impact of the syllabus changes on their classroom pedagogy. However, they did not remember the specific names or dates of changes, apart from the 1978 *2 Unit A music syllabus*, which changed classroom practices and boosted student numbers in the senior classroom. The advantage for teachers was the growing number of students in elective music. This syllabus increased the popularity of music within high schools and meant that the music teacher numbers in schools also increased to accommodate the subsequent rise in elective numbers. They readily adapted to new technology by pivoting from class performance

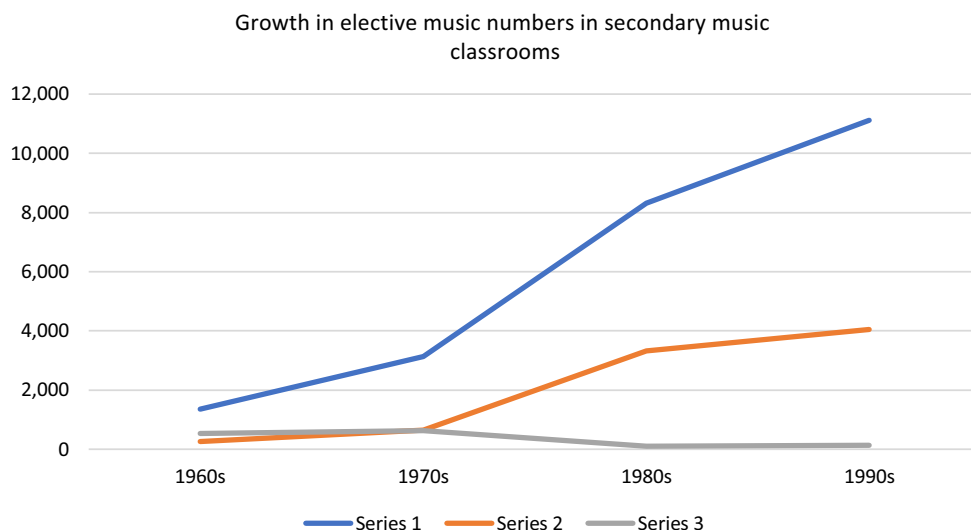
activities with tuned and untuned percussion instruments, as it had been in the 1970s, to individual and group performance with keyboards, guitars and ukuleles. They exhibited a readiness to embrace new ideas brought about by syllabus and pedagogical change through, for example, a willingness to learn how to teach composition using notation software to students effectively.

With the students having more control of their learning and creating, this also subtly shifted into the teaching of all other components in the classroom situation. The participants embraced the new informal learning approach and employed it in the junior elective music classrooms – in teaching popular music, Australian music, music of a culture, etc. All participants readily adapted to the changes in the component structure of each new syllabus as they occurred – from performance, listening and vocabulary throughout the 1970s and 1980s to performance, composition, aural and musicology (for Stage 6) being taught in an integrated way as it is today.

The importance of mentors and professional, collegial support for early career teachers also emerged after reflection from the EMTs as being necessary for early career teachers. All participants mentioned that the instigation of a mentor programme within each school where EMTs could be partnered with the new teachers to assist with strategies for successful classroom management and discipline approaches would benefit not only the new teachers but the entire school. Rikki, who struggled with classroom management because of lack of support as an early career teacher and had left teaching because of the stress, proudly said that he ‘lasted 16 years the second time around’. He attributed this to colleagues – a team of four music teachers with a head teacher who was very supportive of and encouraging with his staff. Rikki acknowledged that he learned a great deal from watching the experienced staff at the school and following their role modelling, which in turn gave him the confidence necessary to persevere when things did not go according to plan. Had Rikki received the support of professional colleagues as teacher models in his early years of teaching, his classroom future and self-efficacy may have had a very different outcome.

All spoke about the feelings of fulfilment and satisfaction experienced from the extracurricular activities they led within their schools, feeling sure that those activities positively affected elective class numbers. All could see the benefits of encouraging as many students as possible to participate and welcoming those who may not have had any previous music experiences through private lessons or elective music. The EMTs maintained their love of their subject by working with cocurricular groups and establishing choirs, folk groups and bands, as well as staging musical productions, thus encouraging students into their elective classes through establishing traditions. Involving parents and the wider school community was deemed important and accepted as part of the job and was seen as offering staff and students a chance to be part of a larger school social group and get to know others outside the confines of a classroom, which in turn enhanced student–staff relations in the classroom.

They insisted that the new pedagogical skills acquired through syllabus change improved and strengthened their teaching in the junior school, where the syllabus closely mirrored the senior syllabus by the end of the 1990s when this research concludes. Through all the above changes, the EMTs had proof of the efficacy of their practice in the form of increased elective numbers in their schools over the 25 years. All music students, both readers and non-readers of music notation, have equal access to music as an HSC subject in NSW schools, and the elective numbers in music secondary classrooms in NSW have continued to grow. Statistics provided by the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA), the current education authority in NSW, the number of HSC candidates studying music grew from **915** in 1979, to **3,120** by 1988 (<https://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au>). In the junior elective years of 9 and 10, the number of students studying music grew from **3,333** in 1979 to **8,312** by 1988 (<https://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au>).



**Diagram 2.** Growth in elective numbers in music in NSW secondary classrooms from the 1960s to the 1990s.

**Key:**

Series 1 – junior music numbers (blue line)

Series 2 – senior music (orange line)

Series 3 – AMEB for HSC (grey line). This course was accessed through private tuition but ceased being an HSC option in 1998 when the candidate numbers were 134.

Music education historian Gillian Weiss (1995) writes that ‘the role of the historian is to reclaim the past for those living in the present and to offer explanations as to how and why things happened and to point out the significance of changes that have occurred’ (p. 55). Weiss goes on to argue that ‘even when desires or intentions are translated into official curricula, what actually occurs in classrooms may be slow to change’ (p. 64). The depth of experience and shared knowledge of participants in this research of NSW syllabus history and implementation, along with their opinions and philosophies over the decades under investigation, can provide valuable information for future curriculum renewal in NSW. The interviewed EMTs provided a unique perspective through their reflections about their experiences over 30 years and the first-hand evidence of the historical impact of multiple syllabus changes on their classroom pedagogical practices. All insisted that their work as music teachers during the 1970s through to the 1990s contributed to the growth in elective numbers in music in NSW schools. As Valerie said:

I think we were like pioneers because some schools had never had a music teacher. I believe we’ve laid a solid foundation for music in New South Wales. Music is now an established and strong subject and part of the culture of all secondary schools

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> (<https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au>).

<sup>2</sup> AMEB: <https://www.ameb.nsw.edu.au>

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