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CPL Podcast: Using the Language of Music K-8

Host: Kate Ambrose
With: Graham Sattler

INTRODUCTION:

You are listening to the CPL podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning. Here's your host, Kate Ambrose.

Kate Ambrose: Welcome to the Centre for Professional Learning podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation. I'm Kate Ambrose, I'm the Director of the CPL. Today I'm talking with Graham Sattler the Executive Director of the Mitchell Conservatorium about exploring the musical concepts as identified and discussed in the New South Wales, creative arts, K-6 syllabus. Graham, welcome. I believe this is about the third podcast you've recorded with us and it's always really wonderful to talk with you about music education.

Graham Sattler: It's an absolute pleasure Kate. It's fantastic to talk about stuff that I love and stuff that we, that we discuss a lot in face-to-face training sessions and we have done over the last gosh, it's nearly seven years with the Centre for Professional Learning and look it's just great to have an opportunity to once again, have a chat.

Kate Ambrose: So Graham, why this podcast, we talked about exploring the musical concepts. You suggested that we talk about this. Can you tell us why you've suggested this?

Graham Sattler: Yeah. Sure. Look, the concepts, the names for the concepts, they're really just labels. And I guess this is in a way, it's the building blocks of the syllabus and of the curriculum actually with music in the creative arts curriculum, creative arts music, as we say, and often in face-to-face training sessions with K-6 teachers. There's a, almost a sense of kind of awkwardness, we try to get rid of that pretty early on in the piece, but just in terms of teachers' confidence with what the labels are, what they mean. There's almost a sort of an assumption that people should magically, miraculously know what these things mean, but of course that's not really a reasonable expectation for people to have of themselves, I don't think, you know, they are just labels. They're good labels, they're useful labels, they're kind of meaningful. But you know, it's fair for people to be informed about what they mean and so I thought that as this comes up at actually every training session we do through the CPL, it would be a great thing just to kind of, to look at discussing in some detail.

Kate Ambrose: So what do they mean?



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Graham Sattler: A great, what a great question. Okay, cool. So look, there are five, five concepts there's duration, and again, they might sound kind of, you might think they're a little bit obvious and self-apparent, but they're not really, so there's duration, there's pitch, there's dynamics. So, this is the K-6 curriculum dynamics there's tone colour and there's structure. The suggestion is that those five concepts essentially cover everything when it comes to talking about analysing, discussing music and they kind of work, you know, they're pretty good, but again, they're not absolutely apparent necessarily. So I thought, as I say, I thought it was probably a good thing to talk about them and explore them a little bit. See if there are some holes or gaps, if you like in terms of sufficient language to, to discuss music or whether really these, you know, they do cover them pretty well. Of course, the interesting thing is that when we get to stage four, we get to the 7-10 syllabuses The same labels are used, but one more has slipped in, which is interesting really because you think, are we saying that when kids get a little bit older, they can be exposed to, a more sophisticated element, and that's not really necessarily the case, but yeah, there is one, one extra one that slipped in when kids get to high school.

Kate Ambrose: So these labels as you call them, do they provide any confusion in relation to other non-musical meanings the words may have?

Graham Sattler: Well, I think it's possible. Let's investigate them one by one. If we, for instance, go to all, let's say dynamics, right. So, dynamics, we've got duration, pitch dynamics, tone, colour structure. Dynamics is really talking about louds and softs now obviously music is an aural art form, you know, it's what we hear, and we produce, you know, when we create, but it's appreciated through listening. So dynamics is an interesting one louds and softs and then all of the, kind of the gradations, if you like between the louds and the softs and a really interesting thing is that when we think of dynamics louds and softs, and then we think of, pitch. Which is another one of the concepts and that's highs and lows, frequently, particularly with young children, high and low and loud and soft for instance can be confused. I think that's a totally reasonable thing. When you think about turning, well, this is a great example, actually turning the volume up, I mean, which is, you know, you do that on a bit of sound equipment or whatever that's can be immediately very confusing. So is high loud, no, in some cases you would think, oh yeah, you turned something up high it's loud. But with these musical concepts that are quite separate things. So for instance, reaching for the trustee ukulele, which may be in tune, maybe not, who knows.

Kate Ambrose: We love the ukulele.

Graham Sattler: And we do luckily, we do actually, it's a really super useful classroom instrument, of course. So, if we're thinking again, we'll talk about dynamics right louds and softs. So this, I'll play one note at a time. Okay. So the difference is here, getting louder and softer, right. So that's not high and low. If I'm to think about pitch, here's... "*music plays*" getting louder and softer right? So that's not high



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and low to then think about pitch. Here is a low note ... *music plays* musically speaking right? That's a and here... *music* is a high note. So going low to high, *music... this ...* is soft to loud.

So, you know, that's, I think a great example of how it can be confusing. Of course, it's great obviously, the teachers need to, because they're teaching this, understand that but also small children need to essentially be told the difference, you know, this is loud and soft, this is high and low.

Kate Ambrose: Listening to the aural example of it makes a lot more sense than explaining it in words for me anyway, so I wonder, and it's going to be different for different students.

Graham Sattler: It is and isn't it interesting because you're absolutely right. Why have we bothered to create a language for it? Why do we bother talking about it when it's about hearing, it's about creating, but it's appreciated, through hearing and, you know, as an aural form. Of course, one of the important, one of the significant things, again, in the syllabus and outside of the syllabus also is being able to talk about it. So music is the art form that is invisible. I mean, you can see an instrument you can, you can write down, you know, musical notes and things on a page. So in that way you can, there's a visual aspect to music, but actually music itself is invisible. So, you know, therein lies that the challenge, and that's why we need a language so we can talk about it. But again, I think in explaining these things, and that's why we're coming right back to these building blocks, as you know, I think of them that the concepts, that's why we really need to understand what the labels are. They're just tags, labels, words for the different, the different things and they do make sense. So, but that's, that's a great example of some confusion that can, that can take place. Again, going back to dynamics, I mean, what, what does the word quite apart from the musical meaning, which is always the one that I think our first, but what, what does the word, you know, how would you describe the word dynamic or if you came over, came across the word dynamic, you know, what, what does that make you think of? What's the meaning of the word dynamic, do you think?

Kate Ambrose: I think about it in terms of its relationship to something else. The relationship between two things.

Graham Sattler: Okay. Great. Fantastic. That's really interesting.

Kate Ambrose: What does it mean in this one though?

Graham Sattler: Yeah, that's right. And then as a musical concept, it's simply, it means louds and softs. So it's just, it's, it's the word that we use to describe that phenomenon of there being loud sounds and soft sounds. So again, it's not, you know, it's not immediately apparent totally reasonable that it, that it needs to be explained and explored and therefore understood. Again, because music is a, an aural art



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form at a, at a Sonic thing. It relies on variations in various things and one of those things is of course, louds, and softs therefore we need that. We need that tag. So because music is an aural art form, then it's, it's not just the sounds that we hear that make it interesting and that make it meaningful. It's the changes, it's the difference, it's the contrast and again, when we come back to the musical concepts. They identify aspects that vary within music. So it's kind of the bag of the, of, of the elements. and none of them are static, none of them say the same or it gets very, very boring. So again, if I reached for the trustee ukulele, let's see. Yeah, cool. If I do this right: *music...*, hang on I'll make it a little louder.

That's not fabulously interesting. So that's all of them, the five musical elements, if you like with no variation. Right. So same rhythm, same pitch, same dynamic, you know, same level of loud or soft, same tone colour, no variation and the structure is just very, very straight forward.

Kate Ambrose: I've heard you talk about these concepts in CPL courses previously and I've wondered about how some of them like seem to relate more clearly to the visual sense or even the sense of touch rather than hearing. So what's the go there?

Graham Sattler: Yeah, that's fantastic. And of course, because again, music is invisible, we have to kind of borrow descriptions or descriptors from the other sensors and try to align them. What I think is fascinating is how easily, how easily, people accept those kind of visual or tactile references and a great one there is one of the concepts we haven't spoken about yet and that's tone colour. I mean, hello, tone colour. What the heck could that possibly mean? Really?

Kate Ambrose: I was wondering.

Graham Sattler: Yeah, I'm glad you were actually. So this is magnificent. We're able to accept that that's meaningful as an aural phenomenon. So the tone colour as one of the five concepts refers to the, the quality of the sound, right? The quality of the sound, not as in good or bad, but the characteristics of the sound and a fantastic thing is we don't have to be told and it doesn't have to be enormously different for us, for our ears, for our brains to sense that there's something different about it and it's that difference in the quality that we refer to as tone colour. So here's a great example. I think it's a great example. So, I'm going to play a note on my trusty xylophone *music...* play it a few times over, right. Same pitch, the rhythm, very straightforward, same dynamics, you know, same level of loudness and then if I make one difference to this, so how would you describe the difference between.....and.....

Kate Ambrose: I'd say there's, there's an, there's an added element to the second one.

Graham Sattler: Fantastic.



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Kate Ambrose: And that's what I'm hearing and I'm trying to also equate that with tone colour and what I'm seeing also,

Graham Sattler: Beautiful.

Kate Ambrose: because it gives me a different image.

Graham Sattler: Fantastic.

Kate Ambrose: If I'm taking that visual thing too far, but

Graham Sattler: But that's the way you sensed it. Yeah. That's fantastic. So all I changed there was, the, the mallet, right. The thing that I was beating or hitting the xylophone with. So the only thing that changed there was the quality of the sound. Would you agree with that? That it was the

Kate Ambrose: Yes.

Graham Sattler: The quality of the sound and it's actually a very subtle difference, you know, but you could hear that there was a difference. Yep?

Kate Ambrose: Absolutely.

Graham Sattler: Yeah. And scrambling with ways to describe, to describe that actually fairly subtle, but, you know, for human beings, very clear difference. The only way that we've come to, to kind of work out a way to describe it is colour and it's, it is kind of neat, but again, without much experience in music, a beginning teacher or somebody even who's been teaching for a while, but not had much experience with interrogating this stuff, if you said, right: tone-colour, it's just the label. Now that I've explained it it's, it seems reasonable, but it is, it's not immediately apparent. So, and in fact, if we were just to take that a little bit further. We have this sound : *music* we have this sound: *music*, and then we have this sound: *music*. Was that yet another different sound, do you think?

Kate Ambrose: Yes.

Graham Sattler: And the difference there was that it was the material. So the, the actual material, the instrument that was of course a boomwhacker, the most wonderful instrument, classroom instrument, lovely bit of cylindrical, plastic, tube cut to a certain, certain length that, plays a certain pitch. So yeah. So that's tone colour. And, I suppose if you think like looking at a colour chart and when you, you can



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see shades of different colours in a sense, maybe that's, that's a similar kind of similar thing that we have with tone colour. So yeah, I mean that, and that's, as we said before, that's very much a visual term, but it gets applied to music.

Another one is structure. Structure, we tend to think of as at least a tangible thing. Right. So, you know, the structure of whatever, but in music, again, we're talking purely and simply about, an invisible art form. So a structure in a musical sense as a, as a musical concept really just relates to whether it's, for instance, a song that is just what we'd call through composed, which just means it sort of goes from the beginning of the end. There's no repeat or whatever. If something is a verse chorus, for instance, that's a different structure. Maybe if we were to sing or play A-Round where it's the one tune that sort of starts, and then it's staggered with people, you know, entering that's a different structure. So structure is a fairly straightforward one, but again needs to be, I think it's perfectly reasonable that it, that it's explained.

So, if we think about music, we think about, of a piece duration, right? So duration is the beat or the pulse, I'm clicking a pulse there, it's the rhythm and of course, whoops, I did it again. The rhythm is the pattern of the notes. So, you know, kookaburra sits in the old gumtree. It's an old favourite of course, you know. We've got the rhythm, that's part of duration. We've got the pulse, which is like the background heartbeat, if you like, duration also refers to the length of the notes, the length of the sounds, the length of silences sometimes often in music, in fact, always in music, we have silence. So, so we've got duration, we've got the pitch, which is the highs and the lows, we've got the dynamics, which is the louds and the softs and the gradations between them. We've got the tone colour, which describes the, the quality of the sound. It might be a trombone it might be a guitar, might be a ukulele, might be a xylophone and we've got the structure of the piece of music. As we said before, that's, that's a fair go. That's a pretty good go at describing all of the elements that make up a musical piece, a musical experience.

I'm going to throw a question to you, Kate question without warning, without notice. What do you think it is that makes a piece of music interesting or appealing, probably memorable versus a piece of music that is totally forgettable? Do you have any sense of what, of what the difference can be or what some of the considerations might be that make a, make a piece of music appealing and maybe stick with you, maybe even become an ear worm at worst. Do you have any sense of that?

Kate Ambrose: I think, and I'm going to give you pretty more of an emotional response answer, rather an intellectual answer if that's okay.

Graham Sattler: So yeah. Emotion, it's all about emotion.



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Kate Ambrose: Yeah, okay, great. I think it's, if something is catchy, it's something that will have a certain rhythm to it that goes up and down and I'm probably using really bad concepts here. For me personally, when I talk about the emotional thing, it's about bass for me and that's probably going a little bit too far in terms of answering your question, but I'm not trying to answer it honestly and a variation.

Graham Sattler: Okay. Yeah, there you go.

Kate Ambrose: For me so if something just sounds the same and there's not, I guess the highs and the lows, even the softs and the hards, but probably the highs and lows more, I think that makes it more memorable for me.

Graham Sattler: And that's exactly what we're talking about. Isn't it? And this, the concepts of music that are in the syllabus are about identifying those things. I think the reason that we do music and teach music and involve students in music is because it's a safe and stimulating medium for expressing emotion. And it's a safe and really accessible medium for sharing, emotion, but also information, cultural information sharing. It's a, a sort of a social glue, which is why it's great to hear you say, use the "e" word emotion. That's what it operates on. It operates on an emotional basis, on an emotional level. and the variations in the elements is what makes it appealing, what makes it stick. And again, the concepts are a really, I think, a really good attempt, more than attempt, a really good way to identify, identify those things and allow us to discuss it.

As I mentioned before, the one that gets thrown in or introduced, I should say, in stage four is texture. And that's another corker in terms of, other sort of sensors and it relating to other sensors. Cause I mean, I think texture outside of music is pretty purely a tactile consideration, the touch thing, right?

Kate Ambrose: Absolutely.

Graham Sattler: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Kate Ambrose: I think the two, the two concepts that have thrown me that you're talking about now are tone colour and texture, because to me one's very visual, one's very tactile where everything else I can understand in a more aural sense.

Graham Sattler: Yeah. Yeah. Great, great, great. Which again is why we're doing this. Cause it's really upfront in saying that there's nothing immediately apparent about these things. So the interesting one about texture is that that's, it talks about the way that voices, sounds, instruments are combined in music. And so, and because they have great pieces of music by which I don't mean any particular genre,



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great pieces of music that really grab you and that, to which you have an emotional response. Those they really, what they do, I think I know actually is that they mess with your emotions in a, in a way that you can't really protect yourself from. And there are a whole bunch of types of sounds, combinations of sounds, et cetera, that have almost a kind of primeval kind of connection to us, to human beings and, and actually not just human beings, frankly. So, the, the really great pieces of music combine and provoke, I guess, using what we would refer to as textures in a musical sense that that can also incorporate some of the other elements because when you're balancing through dynamics, if you like, you know, some instruments or sounds being louder than others, some being subtler than others, that's when we start to get quite a sophisticated emotional provocation. I suppose and, in that way, I suppose, I mean, for me, I can see the connection to that sort of tactile use of the word a more conventional use of the word texture, because it can vary subtly, it can be quite rough, it can be quite smooth. It can feel or sound well, people will use terms like silky or soft, or smooth or lush when talking about sounds and musical sounds. So I think it, it makes a lot of sense, given that you give yourself over to those, those kinds of, those sorts of references. It's just an interesting one.

Kate Ambrose: Yeah. I'm feeling a bit hard done by now, Graham, in terms of you asking me that question before explaining to me the texture concept or something I thought I was trying to describe.

Graham Sattler: It wasn't very fair was it?

Kate Ambrose: No, but I think that's what I was trying to describe and that's really interesting and it is really interesting then that's only introduced syllabus wise in stage four, rather from stages one to three and is it because it's a more, sophisticated concept?

Graham Sattler: I think so. And I think it's a pity, because I don't think it's a difficult, I don't think it's sort of inherently difficult to grasp or explain. And as we know young children will take on board as much as they're capable of taking on board, right? So, I don't think it's in any way offensive or difficult as such a concept. It's also one that can be demonstrated again, pretty, pretty simply by, you know, playing different sorts of recordings or whatever. So, there are two things here because we are very much talking, because this is a CPL podcast of course. We're talking about allowing and encouraging teachers who are not music specialists, encouraging them to understand this language so that they can use it. It's in the syllabus. It has to be, it's mandated to be used. It makes sense, given that you understand it. So we're talking about that, but the other consideration obviously is how the kids will understand how to demonstrate it and how do we engage the kids in, actual discussion and dialogue about these things. Of course the other, the reason that I didn't feel too bad about asking you a question without notice is because when we're talking about describing sound, there is no wrong answer. And I mean that really, really, really genuinely it's the other great thing about being people talk about sounds whether they're, you know, three or two or 86, everybody does have a response to a



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sound. And so in discussing these things, we talk about the labels, but again, you say to a child of any age, you know, what does that make you think? Or what does that sound like? They will have a response. They will have a response and there's nothing wrong with that. So again, talking about textures as being maybe a more sophisticated concept. I think it is the one that covers off and I think it's certainly something that can be talked about and that explicable, if you like for sure, for sure. And it's really, really important as I say, when we're talking about something that affects us emotionally, that kind of mastery, if you like of balancing the other elements and balancing instruments, balancing sound, balancing tone colours, to get that emotional response is an essential part of the function of music.

Kate Ambrose: Do the, are these concepts, are they of a universal or are they New South Wales curriculum specific?

Graham Sattler: They are pretty universal. Duration actually I think is a more, more the sort of components of duration. So, you know, beat, pulse, tempo, meter rhythm, those things are totally, totally universal, totally universal. So, the word duration, not necessarily so clear, but, but the, you know, the bits that fall underneath it certainly pitch is absolutely 148% universal. Dynamic's actually is also universal, tone colour is universal, and structure is too. So, the good news is that they're, they're pretty safe. Understand what they mean, and they ask, and of course not of course texture also and when I say universal, I'm talking also about musicians, right across the right across the world. I think musicians get used to very quickly to particularly the, the terms that are borrowed from, from the other senses, for sure.

Kate Ambrose: Well, I think that's important for the students to know too that these concepts that they're learning, it's not just so somebody can tick off that they have taught it, but there they are universal concepts so I think that that gives more meaning to them.

Graham Sattler: Yeah, I think so too. And you know, some, in fact, all of the courses that we do, the music courses that we do through CPL, we've frequently, whether it's choir conducting, whether it's starting a band, whether it's, you know, music reading. We always make the point that, the content that the, the techniques, et cetera, are absolutely... are universal and are used all over the world and the reason that we do that is because we're not only dealing with children in a particular year group or a stage or even primary school or whatever. The wonderful thing about music, your providing children with, an understanding and then therefore skills, that they can take, you know, throughout their lives and use them to whatever degree they want to. So, yeah, it's a really important point to know that, that we are talking about, concepts, and considerations that are absolutely universal. Yeah and really, really useful.

Kate Ambrose: So Graham, this is pretty, pretty big one, but I've heard, I've heard the argument, I



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guess all the suggestion at times, that music is something that we hear and do that should have an essential creative freedom about it. So is it really necessary? I guess that's what people are going to ask. Is it really necessary or even helpful to tie it down to something so rational and prosaic as a set language?

Graham Sattler: The wonderful, wonderful, wonderful thing about music is you can just do it yeah and you can just hear it and you can just enjoy it. In one sense, you need no language and again, you can travel all over the world and it doesn't matter where you are there will be some cultural differences. There'll be some differences in these concepts. There'll be some differences in duration, the way it's treated - different rhythms. There'll be different approaches to pitch highs and lows. High sounds low sounds all of that. There'll be different approaches that in all of those concepts, tone, colours, the types of instruments used yet the way pieces are structured and then even if you get all sophisticated, if you're 11 years or older joke, joke, joke, textures, right? Those things will vary. They'll vary. You will be affected emotionally. You won't need words to appreciate, but you will need words when you come back from Cairo or Venezuela or Hobart or wherever, and you want to talk about it. These, these are the labels, these are the concepts that give us a facility to discuss why the ways that things are different. I think that's a very, very important thing.

So, we don't need the language to experience. We don't need the language to music as such the verb to music, which is one of the faves. But being able to discuss and share and identify is really, really important and that's why we need the labels. It's not something to get head up or kind of nervy about, or think it's, you know, academic and we need answers, but we need ways in to discuss difference and to be able to appreciate. Yeah.

Kate Ambrose: That makes a lot of sense. It doesn't take away from the creativity of it.

Graham Sattler: Not at all, no it just, just gives us a way into, yeah. discussing and sharing that's exactly right and remember the ways that things are different. The way that you want to describe differences around the concepts is can often be quite personal and is always meaningful, but yeah, these give us a way in to discuss.

Kate Ambrose: So those five or six, if you're 11 years old, 11 years older, concepts, those concepts are covering all aspects of describing the musical experience, I'm guessing from what you've said today, I then I can see how it covers all of it.

Graham Sattler: They are fantastic and, there's a little bit of sort of shared ground. The definition between them is sometimes a little grey, which is totally great. I mean, talking about tone colour and, and sometimes well tone-colour, and texture, this crosses over, et cetera. But yeah, they do, they do



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cover them, and it is a fantastic thing. You can understand I think why sometimes teachers who are new to teaching the syllabus, teaching the content, they might feel there's a bit of an impediment and you can also understand why when teachers are confident with the language, with what it means. It opens up the, again, the ability to discuss it, it opens it up completely. So it's, it's a really important sort of gateway if you like, the collection of the concepts really, really important gateway without them, lack confidence with them, it's you know, it's the way in to discuss with students with other teachers, with musicians and it's the language that we use globally.

Kate Ambrose: And all you really need is a boomwhacker, a ukulele, and a xylophone, I guess.

Graham Sattler: It pretty well does it, it pretty well does it. That's exactly right. Exactly.

Kate Ambrose: Graham, that's fantastic. Thank you. Is there anything that we've missed today?

Graham Sattler: Okay. What a great question. I don't think so. I think what I'd love to, to just to reinforce is that while we've discussed that they are useful, these labels are useful, they do create a, essentially a comprehensive vocab, if you like to discuss music. They're great. They're pretty comprehensive. But also remember that there's nothing innately kind of explanatory about them. So what I'd love teachers to remember is that understanding what they mean is a task and people mustn't be embarrassed or concerned about not having, not being born with the language. So as is the case with everything CPL, we are here to explain and to facilitate and to help with some of the corners and some of the slightly mysterious, elements of, of what we're discussing with teachers and the training that we're doing. So be brave, always with music, and certainly don't be frightened or concerned about asking questions it's a hectic phrase, but the only stupid questions are the ones that you don't ask. So, that's all I would say to finish on there.

Kate Ambrose: Thanks Graham. I'm I really am already feeling more confident about being able to talk about those concepts in this quick chat with you today. So thank you very much, and thank you for sharing your knowledge, expertise, and wisdom with us once again.

Graham Sattler: Always a pleasure Kate, as you know.

Kate Ambrose: Thank you. So you've been listening to the Centre for Professional Learning podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation. I'm Kate Ambrose. I've been talking with Graeme Sattler it's been a pleasure and I'll see you soon. Thanks Graham.



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CONCLUSION:

The CPL podcast is produced by the Centre for Professional Learning and the New South Wales Teachers Federation, all opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the individual speakers only and do not represent the views of their employer or associated organisations. The host was Kate Ambrose. Technical direction by Jason Nicholas.

Dr Graham Sattler has extensive music teaching experience in primary, secondary and adult education settings. He has been involved in course design and delivery around concepts and strategies for both pre-service and existing teachers and is committed to the principles of access and equity and student-focused learning experiences. Graham presents regularly at international music education conferences, drawing on his research into socio-cultural development through group music activity in marginalised communities.