

# International Journal of Education & the Arts

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<http://www.ijea.org/>

ISSN 1529-8094

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Volume 9 Number 12

November 3, 2008

## Primary Music Education in the Absence of Specialists

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Citation: Wiggins, R. A. & Wiggins, J. (2008). Primary music education in the absence of specialists. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 9(12).

Retrieved [date] from <http://www.ijea.org/v9n12/>.

### Abstract

Many schools worldwide rely exclusively on generalist teachers for music instruction at the primary level yet we know little about these teachers, their preparation for the task, and what they actually do in the classroom when teaching music. The extant literature in this area has focused primarily on boosting generalist teachers' confidence to teach music. Little attention has been given to their musical knowledge base and thus their competence for teaching music. This paper reports the results of an investigation of music teaching in one national school system that has almost no specialist teachers at the primary level. Drawing from questionnaire data augmented by classroom observations and interviews, the authors describe the nature and quality of music teaching in this system highlighting the issues that arose for these teachers.

## **Introduction**

In many parts of the world, generalist teachers are the only teachers of music in primary schools. Almost 20 years ago, Mills (1991) supported generalist teachers teaching music suggesting that, just as music should be for all children, it also should be for all teachers. Yet, at about the same time, interviews of 50 generalist teachers in five English primary revealed that the teachers rated their teaching competence lowest in music. Almost half wanted to be relieved of all responsibility for teaching music (Barnes & Shinn-Taylor, 1988).

In the United States, this issue may be gaining importance. Byo (1999) reported that in 1995, generalists taught 30% of school music in the United States, which contrasts with a general perception that music is taught by specialists in American schools. More recently, Indiana declared all certified elementary classroom teachers qualified to teach music. This may be a reflection of the negative effect that economic issues are having on overall school funding and arts education in particular. Abril & Gault, (2006) reference two studies that point to changes and reductions in instruction in music and the other arts. A Music for All Foundation (2004) study showed that despite increasing student enrollment between 1999 and 2004, the number of music teachers in California declined 26.7%. The second study, carried out by the Council for Basic Education (2004), reported that 25% of 956 school principals in Illinois, Maryland, New Mexico and New York had seen a decline in instruction in the arts and 33% expected further cuts. This is consistent with a study done by the Center on Education Policy (2007) in which data from a survey of 491 nationally representative and randomly selected school districts, along with case studies of 13 of those districts, showed a 16% decline in instructional time in art and music which computes to an average decrease of 57 minutes per week. Yet, in Abril & Gault's own study (2006), 92.5% of a random sampling of principals nationwide reported that music was a required subject at the primary level and 94.9% said they employed a music specialist.

Despite the inconsistencies in the data reported above, these studies imply a trend toward the hiring of fewer music specialists in the United States, suggesting that if general music remains in the curriculum in localities where music positions are cut, it likely will be taught by generalist teachers rather than music specialists. If that is the case, it would be good to know whether these teachers are up to the task. This work is important because the place of music instruction in primary schools often reflects its marginalized status in the broader frame of educational policy and the teaching done by generalists may contribute to music remaining "on the fringe."

The knowledge base and pedagogical preparation needed for generalist teachers to teach music has been examined from a variety of perspectives. Most of the literature focuses on the preparation generalists receive (DeGraffenreid & Kretchmer, 2002; Gauthier & McCrary,

1999; Herbst, de Wet, & Rijsdijk, 2005; Temmerman, 1997) describing it as minimal, typically consisting of some form of music fundamentals course and, to a lesser extent, methods instruction. Within this context, some attention has been given to generalist teachers' understanding of their own musicality (Kane, 2008; Kretchmer, 2008; Ruthmann, Wiggins, & Wiggins, 2004). Much attention has been paid to generalist teachers' confidence to teach music (Jeanneret, 1997; Russell, 1996) and factors that contribute to that confidence (Hennessy, 2000). However, Bartel, Cameron, Wiggins, and Wiggins (2004) drew on Bandura's (1977, 1986, 1997) work on self-efficacy to make the point that confidence alone is meaningless if it is not accompanied by competence.

One source of competence is a generalist teacher's personal background as a musician and with music. Kane (2008) included questions about musical background in her study of New South Wales generalist pre-service teachers. She found that, although many had studied music and played instruments at one time, they confessed they were no longer musically active and had forgotten much of what they had learned. To make the connection between generalist teachers' confidence to teach music and the musical cultural norms of the community, Russell-Bowie (2002) gathered data internationally on prospective teachers' personal backgrounds in music. Among other things, she found that students in Ireland were twice as likely to play an instrument or have a family member who did than were students in Australia, Namibia, and South Africa. In contrast, students in Namibia and South Africa reported that they were more involved in music as a leisure-time activity.

However, as can be seen from a study by Herbst et al. (2005), a strong musical culture in the community does not necessarily result in generalist teachers having the competence to teach music. If there is a cultural mismatch between school music and community music, or between the musical preparation of the teacher and the music of the community, efforts to take advantage of a generalist teacher's musical background may come to naught. Reporting on survey responses from 233 teachers in the Cape peninsula of South Africa, they found that although just over 50% had studied piano and some others also played guitar or recorder, these teachers had relatively small amounts of musical instruction in their primary, secondary, and tertiary school education. They had even less preparation in the indigenous music of Sub-Saharan Africa and were unable to either play or successfully teach their students to play African instruments—something emphasized in their national curriculum.

Even when the majority of prospective teachers have a background that includes some music instruction, it does not necessarily produce the competence that gives a generalist teacher the confidence to teach music; it does not substitute for professional preparation. Russell (1996) takes exception to referring to pre-service primary teachers as nonmusicians when we do not refer to them as nonscientists or nonmathematicians. However, the distinction may be justified. When prospective teachers study the art of teaching language, science, or

mathematics, they receive comprehensive methods instruction at the post-secondary level that builds on approximately twelve years of progressive study in each discipline. We would not allow someone who had stopped studying mathematics at the fifth grade level to teach mathematics. We would be appalled at the idea that someone could teach language arts if he or she had not read a book or written a word since the age of eleven. Yet we expect that generalist teachers can teach music when their last formal musical instruction, if any, may have occurred at that age or earlier.

We found very little literature reporting what actually goes on in the classroom when generalists teach music. In her study of three elementary schools in the United States, Bresler (1993) compared specialists and generalists and found obvious differences in their confidence, experience, willingness to participate, allocation of time, and resources. In their daily practice, kindergarten teachers sang with students while some other teachers used music to create atmosphere in their classrooms. Beyond that, music rarely appeared in the general curriculum except as part of holiday celebrations or as entertainment (p. 11).

The lack of information about the music education of generalist teachers, their musical backgrounds, or how that impacts classroom practice is problematic for the U.S. and for countries that currently rely on generalists to teach music. We have not sufficiently considered the voices of these teachers or their sense of agency in framing the discussion about quality primary music education in the absence of specialists. Who are these teachers? What do *they* believe they can accomplish instructionally? What is their self-efficacy—their *competence* as well as their *confidence* to teach music? When they do teach music, what is happening in their classrooms? What does it look like when a non-musician teaches music?

Seeking answers to these questions, we engaged in an extensive study of primary music teaching in a national system that relies almost exclusively on generalist teachers to teach music at the primary level. We were compelled to undertake this study because, while what is available in the existing literature provides valuable information, it is almost entirely based on survey responses with only Bresler's (1993) study actually using classroom observations and interviews with practicing teachers. The literature has not sufficiently made connections between personal experience with music and classroom practice. We decided to combine a questionnaire approach with naturalistic observations (Angrosino & Mays de Pérez, 2000) and semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996). The questionnaire data set context—but the more important data came from the observations and interviews. These accounts were valuable since they allowed us to go beyond documenting preparation levels or identifying curricular components and gave us insight into the impact of the teaching on the students. More importantly, employing ethnographic methods allowed us to present the voices of the teachers and uncover what they believed they were accomplishing when they taught music.

## **Method**

In the national system we studied, there were approximately 2,000 primary schools. Our goal was to get information about who was teaching primary general music and what the instruction looked like throughout the system. To that end, we developed a questionnaire that would provide us with demographic information and arranged to travel throughout the country for six weeks in February and March 2001 visiting schools and consulting with school-support personnel. For the purpose of this article, we decided not to identify the country for a number of reasons. First, this is not intended as a program evaluation of this system's approach to music education. We saw examples of both excellent and less than successful teaching as we might in any setting—but that is not really the point. We simply wanted to document the nature of the instruction when teachers who have not been educated as musicians are asked to teach music. This country was chosen only because classroom teachers almost always are responsible for teaching music at the primary level in this system. We make no claims about the appropriateness of this instructional organization for this or any other educational system. That said, we are convinced that what we observed in this setting would likely be the case in any system that chooses this organization for instruction. While we have our personal views about the wisdom of this practice, we recognize that it is a decision for local and national policymakers. Hopefully, our work provides information that might come to bear on that decision but in a general sense only. Thus, our second reason for not identifying the country is to avoid focusing the article on the practices and policies of one system and thereby causing the reader to assume that this situation is unique. By maintaining anonymity, our intention is to place the emphasis on the universal issue of who should teach music rather than implying that our findings are contextually bound. We leave it to the reader to determine whether we have succeeded.

Finally, we want to make clear that we were outside observers with no vested interest in this country beyond our general concern for the state of music education worldwide. We do not want to appear to speak for any individual or group. Although we were outsiders, we had visited this country previously and been involved with the primary schools owing to a partnership between our university and two teacher education institutions in the country. We informed the Ministry of Education that we were undertaking this study; we did not ask for their endorsement or even their permission but were pleased to have their cooperation as well as that of all the participants.

## **Questionnaire**

We developed a questionnaire that asked for basic information about teachers and their musical backgrounds. All the questions could be answered with either yes/no, a checked box, or a 1-5 rating of some sort. Two post-secondary music education faculty members and three pre-service teachers reviewed the questionnaire. After some changes for idiomatic

expressions, all agreed that the questionnaire was clear and to the point. Using a random number generator, we identified 200 primary schools (10%) to which we would send questionnaires. Although there are more specialist music teachers in secondary schools in this system, we limited our study to primary schools because we were interested in what is typically termed classroom general music in Grades 1-5 (ages 6-11). Before sending the questionnaires, we examined the list of schools to confirm that they represented a cross-section of socioeconomic level, community size (urban, suburban, rural), school size, and cultural diversity of the population. We sent multiple copies of the questionnaire to each school. Some of the schools are quite small. Seventeen percent of the returns came from schools that had five or fewer teachers and another 27% came from schools that had between six and nine teachers. We received 300 completed questionnaires and were established that the responses adequately represented the selected schools. However, we also recognized that responses to the survey were voluntary and could have come primarily from teachers with personal agendas. Therefore, as further confirmation that our responses were trustworthy, we checked for response bias by comparing the last 25% of responses received to the first 25% and to the entire group. We found no substantial differences and thereby concluded that the results would have remained constant had additional teachers responded.

The first part of the questionnaire asked for basic demographic information about the school, such as the number of pupils, number of teachers, economic ranking of the school (which determined the level of government funding), and population size of the community in which the school was located. We also asked teachers to indicate the number of years they had been teaching, the grade level they currently taught, and the preparation they had received for teaching music. The second part of the questionnaire asked about the number of music lessons students received each week, how many, if any were taught by a specialist, and the nature of the activities in those lessons. Next, we asked teachers about their own experience as musicians, private instruction or course work in music they had taken, and assistance they received from regional music advisers. Finally, we asked how confident they felt in their ability to teach music and what contributed to that confidence.

### **School Visits**

The main purpose of the school visits was to observe classrooms while music was being taught. The choice of schools visited was somewhat serendipitous, guided by recommendations and arrangements made by university contacts, music advisers, and people from one school recommending the next. In all, we observed 21 teachers teaching 25 classes and attended numerous assemblies and morning teas at 17 schools representing a wide range of size, location (urban, suburban, rural, remote), socioeconomic level, and cultural diversity. We verified impressions we were forming during the observations with follow-up interviews with almost all the teachers we observed. We also interviewed eight principals, eight music teacher education faculty, three regional music advisers, several pre-service education

students who had an interest in teaching music, and the national arts coordinator. Some school music takes place outside the school day in this country so we visited two community music schools. Finally, we participated in two in-service workshops sponsored by colleges of education—one taught by university arts faculty and one taught by local music specialists. We believe we heard the voices of multiple stakeholders.

We kept consistent field notes and journals of our visits and conversations, collecting artifacts where relevant. Over the course of the observations and conversations, issues and themes began to emerge. With each subsequent visit, we confirmed these emerging themes and raised additional related questions. After completing our initial analysis, we sent a draft of our report to two university music educators, one who was a participant in the study and one who served as an adviser and peer-debriefer (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), to solicit their feedback on our interpretations. Both verified our themes and confirmed that they represented the situation accurately.

### **Surface Issues and Just Beneath**

Earlier studies on the competence of generalist teachers to teach music have drawn their conclusions primarily from surveys. This approach leads to generalizations that may be based on demographics alone. It is important to get beyond self-reports and look deeper into the everyday practices in the classroom. Surface analysis of our questionnaire data portrays teachers who have reasonable personal and professional backgrounds in music, having studied instruments and received post-secondary instruction comparable to what teachers receive in other systems worldwide. These teachers reported spending a reasonable amount of instructional time on music, engaging their students primarily in performing and listening, with somewhat less time devoted to creating. Some teachers supplemented the materials provided by the government with their own or colleagues' materials. It not only appeared that these teachers were well prepared, but 50% thought they taught as much music as the other teachers in their schools with 26% stating that they taught more than most and only 13% indicating that they taught less than the average.

If we drew conclusions from the questionnaire alone, we would be tempted to paint a picture of quality music education in this setting. Yet there is a *non sequitur here*. These teachers should have been proud of and enthusiastic about their music teaching. They were not. Only 20% felt very confident teaching music and less than half reported that they were at least fairly confident. As we mentioned above, there is an emphasis on the importance of confidence in the literature and our own writings have stressed the combination of confidence and competence. These teachers appeared to have had the competence, yet their confidence was very low.

When we visited schools, time after time teachers greeted us warmly in the teachers' lounge until we said we were interested in how they taught music. They would then ask whether we could please observe any other part of their teaching day instead. Despite their reluctance, the teachers graciously permitted us to observe their classrooms as they taught music. In many cases, the observations and interviews conducted in schools and other school-related venues provided important perspectives that the questionnaire could not have shown. Therefore, we share our analysis of the questionnaire data integrated with our analysis of the observations and interviews in an effort to clarify this apparent contradiction.

### **Respondents and Participants**

We received questionnaire responses from an equal distribution of urban, suburban, and rural schools with 31% from cities with populations greater than 100,000, 21% from cities with between 30,000 and 100,000 residents, 20% from communities under 30,000, and 29% from extremely rural communities. In general, the distribution of respondents reflected that of the population as a whole. Student enrollment was also fairly evenly distributed but slightly bimodal with most teachers coming from schools with either 100-200 (26%) or 300-400 (24%) students. Schools with fewer than 100 students accounted for 17% of the responses and 10% of the responses came from schools with 500 students or more. The teachers in those largest schools reported having more music specialists than the remaining 90%; otherwise, school size did not appear to be related to whether or not the school had specialists. We also reviewed the economic levels of the communities in which the schools were located as reported by the respondents. We did not find any pattern relating the presence of a music specialist to the economic status of the school.

On the questionnaire, we asked the teachers their positions in their schools, the ages of the students they taught, their musical backgrounds, and their professional preparation for teaching music. Respondents were overwhelmingly generalist teachers (87%). Only 24 (8%) identified themselves as music specialists with only 6 (2%) indicating that they were employed in that role even on a part-time basis. Teaching principals were typically from small schools that could not justify a full-time administrator. In two cases, principals completed the questionnaire although there was no indication that they had any teaching responsibilities. The teaching assignments of the classroom teachers were fairly evenly distributed across years 1-6 with very few responses from teachers in years 7-8 (4%).

In the questionnaire responses, many more teachers (68%) reported playing instruments than singing regularly in a group setting (21%). This seemed counterintuitive so we sought to verify this with one of the tertiary teacher educators. He suggested that respondents may have interpreted this question as asking if they had studied an instrument at any point in their lives, regardless of whether they currently played whereas the singing question may have been interpreted to mean "at present." During our observations, we found teachers who played

recorder and guitar well enough to teach simple tunes and accompany simple songs. Yet, although 50% of the questionnaire respondents reported that they had studied keyboard, in our observations, we found very few who were willing to play in school. Based on what we observed in the classrooms, we were surprised at the number of teachers (56%) who reported on the questionnaire that they read music well or adequately.

Although only six teachers identified themselves as music specialists, 97 (32%) reported that their school had the services of a specialist for chorus, 86 (28%) a specialist for guitar and recorder, and 43 (14%) a specialist for classroom music. The responses to other questions and the teachers' written comments clarified that, although these individuals were referred to as specialists, most did not have degrees in music or music education. They were other classroom teachers who felt more confident and agreed to teach music to a colleague's class or lead grade-level singing at weekly assemblies.

Even with this sharing of teacher expertise, less than one-third of the students received music instruction from someone with a music education background. On the whole, the teachers reported that their students received an average of 1.6 music lessons per week with 55% reporting teaching music only once a week. Ninety-one percent taught music to their own students. Consequently, based on the teachers' responses to our question regarding confidence level, at least 52% of the students were taught by a teacher who did not feel confident to teach music. Given five levels of confidence, 20% reported that they were very confident, 28% put themselves in the next level, 32% in the middle, and a final 20% who were less or not at all confident.

#### *Serendipitous Nature of Availability of Music Instruction*

An important issue that emerged from the school visits and interviews was the serendipitous nature of the availability of music instruction, impacted by geographical location and availability of qualified teachers. The geography and population density are quite varied, with some schools located in densely populated urban areas and some children living in areas so remote that their only option was home schooling. Availability of music teachers was subject to the nature and size of the pool of teachers who lived in or near the community. In more remote, more sparsely populated areas, it was more difficult to find qualified music teachers or even qualified itinerant teachers to service the schools. It was also more difficult to find connections to supportive resources beyond the schools, such as performing groups or support from universities. This issue of inequality of availability of qualified teachers and support services becomes more important when we add to the mix the fact that the people living in the most remote, underserved regions were indigenous minorities.

A more important question, though, is who were these music teachers that communities described as qualified? First, the few teachers we met who called themselves music specialists

were people who, in addition to being qualified generalists, had studied music outside the school system. They were musicians who were also qualified teachers. They usually played one or more instrument quite well and were also musical leaders in the community, working outside of school as studio teachers, church musicians, and the like. However, in most cases, while they had had opportunities to learn to teach and opportunities to learn music, they had not learned how to teach music.

More often, we encountered what we came to call “hidden specialists”—generalist teachers or principals who happened to have a leaning toward music, a willingness to teach music, or some kind of prior musical experience that made them the likely people to teach music in their schools. These individuals volunteered to teach some music in addition to their other responsibilities. Sometimes it was as simple as a team of two teachers who swapped classes for some subject areas that one or the other felt more confident to teach. Sometimes it was a teacher who volunteered to teach music to all classes on a particular grade level or to the upper school or lower school. Two of the teaching principals we met had accepted responsibility for teaching music to the whole school, one because he played guitar and had some skill at reading music and the other because no one else in the school was brave enough to attempt it.

Again and again throughout our travels, even in the office of the national arts coordinator, we encountered people referring to individuals willing to teach music as “music enthusiasts.” A music enthusiast was an individual in a school who was willing to teach music classes. Yet, we found that, in many cases, their enthusiasm did not make them qualified specialists, either musically or pedagogically. This lack of musical knowledge and musical pedagogical knowledge (Schulman, 1986) posed serious problems for these teachers and their students, which shall become clearer as this story continues to unfold.

A former regional music adviser said he had resigned from the position because he had become frustrated with the serendipitous nature of the teaching of music in the schools. In his view, music programs depended on the presence of “one enthusiast who is willing to ‘bug’ everyone—principal and colleagues—to make sure people are actually teaching music, being made aware of inservice opportunities, and so on.” In many cases, in his experience, this was a new teacher—sometimes a first year teacher—because no one else in a school would teach music. The principal would intentionally seek a new teacher who had music skills, which put the new teacher in a terribly awkward position, perhaps an impossible one, in his view. Where people do succeed in establishing a strong program, if that teacher leaves or the principal changes, all can be lost, he said (Interview, Feb. 2001).

Sometimes “enthusiasm” for music was rooted in the cultural background of the teacher. Singing is a very important part of the indigenous culture, figuring prominently in religious ceremonies and social events. In schools we visited, we noted that teachers of indigenous heritage seemed to sing more frequently with their students and seemed to feel more comfortable doing so. In several schools, we met teacher aides of indigenous heritage and saw that these individuals were often given the responsibility of leading singing in the classroom, a responsibility they eagerly embraced because of its importance to them. Schools that served a higher percentage of indigenous children seemed to feel a greater need to incorporate singing into the school day as one way of bringing the children’s culture into the school.

### **Teacher Preparation and Professional Development**

In response to a question about their teacher preparation, 82% of questionnaire respondents reported that it included music coursework. We also asked about the number of courses they had in either music or music education. At first glance, it appeared that the norm was one course in music and one in music education, but we cannot say that for certain in part because approximately 30% of the responses were blank. Sixty percent either gave no response (27%) or reported having one course or less in music (33%); that figure was 70% for courses in music education. We cannot assume the blank responses meant those teachers did not have any preparation but, in the comments section of the questionnaire, a number reported they did not recall if they had had any. This is consistent with what Kane (2008) found in her study. At the very least, we can deduce that a learning experience that is not remembered is not having much impact on the teachers’ current work in the classroom.

When asked about continuing professional development, 61% said they had access to a regional music advisor employed by the government, but of that group, 42% reported that they never utilized the advisor’s services and an additional 19% did so only rarely. Only 11% reported working with an advisor as often as once a year, which is still relatively infrequent. Regarding initial teacher preparation, interviews with music teacher educators identified two critical issues they felt negatively impacted their ability to teach their students to teach music. First, proportionately few hours were given to arts education, paralleling scheduling patterns in primary and secondary schools. Program requirements varied greatly, with one program offering only four half-days of instruction in music and music methods and another offering 40 hours over two years. Second, students who entered the teacher education programs had received their arts education in the school system described here, which means they entered arts methods classes without much background knowledge or prior experience.

When these two issues are combined, they present a difficult situation for tertiary arts educators who find themselves faced with insufficient contact time to foster in their students the development of both artistic understanding and the pedagogical knowledge necessary to teach it. They must decide whether to spend their limited time developing the musical skills

and understandings of their students (through teaching them to play some guitar, recorder, keyboard, note reading) or teaching them how to teach music (pedagogical issues, lesson design, assessment, and so forth). Most whom we interviewed attempted to do both. Most tertiary programs that offer arts courses for generalists face this problem, but the issue here is that these teachers will be primarily responsible for teaching music to the next generations. In countries where there are specialists, it is important for generalists to know about the arts, how they operate, and the role they play in society and culture so that they will be able to talk with students about how the arts impact and overlap other aspects of their curricular experiences. But where there are specialists, generalists are not responsible for providing the key arts experiences necessary for the development of artistic understandings and skills. When the responsibility falls to generalists, they need sufficient opportunity to learn what they need to know to be able to teach the discipline effectively.

### **Resources & Materials**

Questionnaire responses indicated that, by far, the most common curricular materials used for teaching music were prepackaged activity kits supplied by the government or available commercially. These kits included recorded music and instructions for activities. Only 17 of the 300 respondents did not use any of the five most popular kits available. Approximately 25% of the teachers used materials provided by the regional music advisor. Less than one-third reported using the national standards documents. To be sure we had a complete picture of the materials used, we asked teachers about curricular materials in two different sections of the questionnaire. Despite an overwhelming reliance on prepared kits, 64% reported that they relied on materials they developed themselves and 34% used materials developed by a colleague. Seventy percent of the teachers used recordings from their own CD collections and CDs owned by the school. Clearly, teachers augmented students' classroom music experiences with additional listening materials and teacher-created activities.

Visiting the schools, we saw that the national education office provided well-written, comprehensive curriculum guides that offered information about music teaching, advice to teachers, beautiful photographs of children making all sorts of music, music for lessons, and many lesson plans. However, verifying the questionnaire responses, we rarely saw teachers using these materials; much more prevalent were two commercially developed music programs. Almost all the teachers we observed were teaching lessons from these kits, which aim to "help primary school teachers, particularly those with limited music skills, to teach music in a planned and sequential way."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sources of quotes from the materials are not identified to maintain the anonymity of the school system.

The recordings that accompanied the national curriculum guides were also excellent, providing a model of children singing with good tone quality, pitch, diction, and balance. On the other hand, the recordings in the more prevalently used kits were quite poor—predominantly contrived songs composed specifically to teach a musical concept (mostly finding the beat). We could not help but compare this practice of using contrived materials to what we know about these generalist teachers' sophisticated understanding of the importance of using quality literature in the teaching of language arts—and wondered about the discrepancy.

Despite the fact that the questionnaire responses indicated that 64% of the teachers used material they developed themselves and 70% stated they used CDs from their own collection, few of the teachers we interviewed felt they had the expertise to select materials beyond what was provided. Understanding criteria for selection and use of materials takes knowledge of music and of music pedagogy (May, 1993). In her study of generalist teachers teaching music, Bresler (1993) noted, "Lack of expertise interacted with teacher ability to draw on curricular organizers such as music textbooks or the use of a curricular guide provided by the [school] district" (p. 5). This is recognized and acknowledged by those who wrote the national curriculum materials. One of the national guides indicates, "The sample six-week plan for class music...is specifically intended for teachers who are not very confident about teaching music...Musically confident and experienced teachers will probably be able to devise their own less-detailed plans."

### **Core Issues: The Nature and Quality of the Music Instruction**

One item on the questionnaire asked teachers the approximate percentage of time they spent on different musical activities. Performance activities predominated with 41% of the time devoted to singing, 10% to dance, and 14% to movement. Listening was next, at 22%. Classroom instruments were used 20% of the time, but it was not clear whether this supported performing or creating; since teachers reported engaging students in composing or improvising only 5% of the time, it was likely performing. Teachers might choose to spend more time singing and listening because, with less musical expertise, they feel they can carry these out in some capacity.

Not surprisingly, the school visits and interviews provided much more information about the quality of what was actually happening in these classrooms. The most critical issues that emerged in this setting concerned the nature of teacher knowledge, rooted in a) the teachers' visions of musicianship and music pedagogy, b) their lack of understanding of the importance of an aural framework for music teaching, and c) their lack of subject knowledge with its connected issue, teacher confidence. We consider these to be the most important findings of this study.

### **Visions of Musicianship and Music Pedagogy**

One theme that emerged repeatedly was misguided visions of many of the teachers about what it is to be a musician, to teach music, and to learn music. Most teachers' understanding of what needed to take place for music learning to occur was colored by their own experiences as children in schools. They therefore saw music education primarily as an activity for school assemblies, where children sang songs together or a group of students presented a program for the school. In these cases, singing songs was the sum total of the music education experience (with children often singing along with CDs or over awkward teacher accompaniments, such as a guitar accompaniment supplied by one teacher who never changed chords as she played). For other teachers, their understanding of music pedagogy came from their own prior experiences in private or small group music learning in a music studio setting. These teachers saw music knowledge as learning to read notes and tended to drill students on their ability to do so, often in contexts devoid of real music (e.g. exercises, naming kinds of notes).

#### *Visions Rooted in Studio Instruction*

Because teachers who had had some prior music study tended to teach music in whatever ways they were taught as children, in some cases, the generalist teachers we observed were actually more effective music teachers than the self-proclaimed specialists. This was rooted in the fact that teachers who accepted responsibility for teaching music had not always been taught how to teach music—or in the case of local musicians acting as specialists, how to teach at all. Those educated as performers seemed to draw on their understanding of teaching in a studio setting and attempted to bring that into the classroom.

Along with using methods rooted in their own studio experiences, many studio-trained teachers adopted the demeanor of the mentors of their experience, placing undue emphasis on personal discipline. Time and again, we saw teachers whose classrooms had a marvelously democratic feel during the teaching and learning of other disciplines who, as soon as they began to teach music, adopted the stern air of a “prima donna” music teacher. We saw them completely change their demeanor with the children, drilling them in discrete activities, chastising those who made mistakes. One principal who acted as his school's music specialist characterized himself as a folk musician and spoke about how important it was to learn to play instruments by ear. However, when we watched him teach, he sternly drilled students on note reading. He told us he was acting on advice from a local composer and trumpet teacher.

#### *Visions Rooted in Generalist Pedagogical Knowledge*

When we encountered teachers who were excellent practitioners, we found that these teachers were often better able than their studio-trained counterparts to envision what good school music experiences might be simply because they had an excellent understanding of good school learning experiences.

A generalist teacher taught his nine-year-old students to play recorder in what he called a “fun” way, which was in actuality a carefully structured, socially interactive setting that allowed for lots of peer and teacher scaffolding. (“Have a look at your neighbor and see if there is anything you need to tell them. See if there is anything they need to fix.”) They did this several days a week in anticipation of what he called “serious Thursday,” when the itinerant music specialist (a local musician who was not an educated teacher) would come in to drill them on their ability to read notes and play. It was clear that the learning probably took place on days other than Thursday (Field & Interview Notes, March 2001).

One of the best music lessons we observed in all our travels was taught by a generalist teacher who knew how to play a few guitar chords to accompany songs by ear.

The day we visited, the children were busy at work in various areas of the classroom—much the same way we generally saw students engaged whenever we observed classes other than music. Children worked independently, in small groups, with partners, or on their own, to figure out how to play particular musical works. Some children had small guitars and were trying to use chords they knew to figure out how to accompany a song by ear. Their job was to try all different combinations of chords and use their ears to decide which ones sounded best, and when they had made their choices, to play the song for others and seek their opinion. Once successful choices had been made, the children were to practice singing and playing on their own until they were ready to bring the song to the whole group. Other children were working with recorders and music sheets. They already knew how to play some of the notes on their page. They knew how to check the fingering chart to find out how to play notes that were new to them. Once these children had figured out how to play the song, they were to bring their ideas to the larger group. The work session ended when most of the children were ready to share with the class. As they did, students made evaluative judgments and suggestions to their peers. It was all done rather informally and with the clear feeling that everyone was working together to solve these real musical problems. The teacher was one of the experts in the room, but by her own explanation to us, not the definitive expert. Instead she introduced us to individual children who were valued by their peers as being “really good at music.” The children comfortably took advice from all the experts in the room, and eventually played their pieces very well and very proudly (Field & Interview Notes, March 2001).

When we met with this teacher afterwards, she was truly amazed that we thought she was a good music teacher. She did not see herself as a competent musician and therefore assumed that she was not a good music teacher.

#### *Visions of Music Learning as Performing*

It was clear that teachers throughout the country saw performing as the goal of music instruction and, in many cases, performing through reading notation. In our travels, we observed only one listening lesson—one where a teacher who enjoyed opera was sharing her favorite moments in opera with a class of eight-year-olds who seemed rather receptive to the idea. Her lesson was filled with information about the stories of the operas and the predominant activity was the children describing how they thought the music sounded in connection to what the teacher had told them about the story. The lesson was permeated with the teacher's personal reactions to the musical excerpts she played. Bresler (1993) describes teachers who incorporate listening as trying to share with their students what she calls their "personal knowledge," that is, the things that sustain and nourish them emotionally in their private lives. She cautions that when teachers who engage in such practice have little knowledge of how to teach the music in a way that engenders aesthetic sensitivity, students do not find the experience valuable or learn to regard music as a potential source of knowledge, emotional, or intellectual investment (p. 7). Having observed this lesson, we concur.

#### *Vision of What Students Need to Know*

One of the biggest issues evident in the data was that many of the teachers did not know what constituted beginning music skills, reflecting their lack of understanding of what musicians actually do. They seemed to have grave misconceptions about what one needs to know in music. In many cases, it seemed as though motor skills, listening skills (not musical listening skills), or following directions was the main goal of the lesson. It also seemed evident that this was what the students took away from their experiences. One of the main reasons for this was the lack of musical context for the teaching, but beyond that, these seemed to be the goals that many of the teachers emphasized as they taught.

Most of the teachers seemed unable to work with students on a level that required them to engage in musical thinking. The teachers were unable to pose questions that required students to think in sound in order to answer. They were unable to stimulate or scaffold student musical thinking. We also noted, as we observed, that they missed many teachable moments that could have arisen from student actions, comments, and questions because they did not have the knowledge base to understand what the students were doing or saying musically.

#### **Lack of an Aural Framework**

The issues of teachers drilling students on note reading with no musical context and teaching music as motor skill are symptomatic of a much larger issue that may be the most important issue relating to the quality of the music instruction we observed. Most teachers we observed

did not seem to understand the importance of providing an aural framework for music learning. The same generalist teachers who are known for their expertise in contextual language arts instruction did not seem to make the same connections about the importance of contextuality in music instruction. It may not be that they did not understand the importance; it may be that they, themselves, did not understand the musical contextuality of the lessons they were trying to teach from the materials provided.

A teacher distributed rhythm instruments to a group of young students whom she had divided into two groups. One group was to play four quarter notes and then stop while the other played eight eighth notes and stopped. As they played, she chanted 1 2 3 4 or 1& 2& 3& 4&. She led one of the groups with her chanting while another generalist teacher led the other group. There was no song or piece present. She did not establish a tempo or beat before they played. The children were simply decoding the symbols, which they were not really doing, since she was telling them what to play with her voice. She adjusted the tempo of her chanting to fit with what the children were playing so that they had no sense of the movement of the rhythm pattern through musical time. She did not ask them to repeat the pattern so that it would have the feel of an ostinato or background part to a song. Each group simply decoded the symbols by banging their instruments at the appropriate times and then passed their instruments on to the next group (Field Notes, February 2001).

Eventually, these children were asked to perform the patterns along with a recording of music that had been composed for the purpose. They proceeded to execute the patterns, but not in time with the tape or with the teacher or with each other. They did not play as an ensemble in any sense of the word. They simply read the symbols from the chalkboard and played them during the recording, but not in time with the recording. We witnessed scenes like this again and again as we traveled throughout the country—not the identical situation, but scenario after scenario in which teachers were trying to teach music without providing the children an aural framework.

One teacher educator suggested that the biggest problem may be that teachers do not know how to set concepts into context because they do not understand the contexts or how the concepts really operate in the contexts—and they do not have the knowledge to generate their own contexts. A music adviser said he thinks that some teachers teach students to read note values out of context because it makes them feel at least a bit confident. They believe this is something that has to do with music that they can do—adding that they often do it incorrectly (something we observed as well). The national curriculum guides caution teachers that “learning music skills in isolation can be sterile and practice-oriented. While teaching skills, teachers also need to promote children’s understanding and enjoyment of many kinds of

music.” It seems that either teachers do not understand the meaning behind this statement, do not read the curricular materials, or do not have the knowledge base to understand how to teach skills in context.

### **Subject Knowledge and Teacher Confidence**

One of the most important issues that emerged was the teachers’ lack of knowledge of the subject matter of music. Most generalist teachers we met articulated quite openly that they did not feel qualified to teach music. Some principals and university instructors attributed this hesitancy to lack of confidence, but classroom observations revealed that their hesitancy and resultant lack of confidence were truly well founded.

Whenever possible, when visiting a school, we would meet with the entire faculty in the staff room during their morning tea. In every instance, when we explained that we wanted to talk with them about their teaching of music, everyone laughed. In one school, where the principal was the music specialist, the principal told us that all of his teachers teach music to their students at least two times a week. As soon as he left the staff room, the teachers told us this was not really true, that they did the best they could, which they said was not much, and “thank goodness” for the principal who was able to teach music (Notes from Group Interview Session, March 2001).

The university music education instructors were very concerned about the confidence issue. All mentioned it in our conversations and all talked about ways they tried to address it in their methods classes. One suggested that most people believe that musical “talent” is inherent and not something that can be taught, and therefore do not really believe that music education is necessary or realistic for all students. She believes that this issue is at the root of generalist teachers’ lack of confidence in their own ability to learn or teach music.

In the national curricular guides, there is a chart with a column labeled “teacher’s music competence” and other columns indicating which parts of the guide they should read and use according to their level of competence. The lowest level of competence on this chart is labeled “limited” defined as “able to read simple rhythmic patterns and sing confidently while playing a few chords on the guitar.” Higher levels are also described as ability to read and perform music. There is nothing to indicate that being an informed listener might make one competent to teach—nothing to indicate to teachers that their life experience with music and ability to think about it might be a starting point for their teaching. The vision of competence portrayed on this chart helped us understand why so many teachers we met classified themselves as “limited” and probably contributes to the prevalence of “one year of instruction six times” described below.

*What Counts as Musical Expertise?*

Several people spoke about how much more the indigenous children knew about singing—that they were much better singers, much faster at learning music by ear, and better at singing harmony parts because singing is an integral part of their cultural lives and experiences. The indigenous musical culture is an aural culture. Many indigenous people play guitar and can accompany songs but do not know the names of the chords they are playing—or even that chords have names in Western culture. One university instructor talked about teachers undervaluing what indigenous children were able to do by ear, thinking they are not good at music because they cannot read notation. She said that, in her experience, many indigenous teachers undervalued their own skills as well. Indigenous teacher education students in her classes did not believe their musical knowledge to be relevant or important to what they were about to do as teachers. We encountered a similar attitude in some of the teachers we observed and interviewed. In some cases, after we had observed truly excellent teaching, in follow-up conversations, teachers would insist that they did not know anything about music because they were not “trained” musicians. For example, in the classroom where the students were problem solving on guitar and recorder, the teacher did not think her own skills of playing guitar by ear and singing beautifully in tune were valuable—and we could not convince her that they were, no matter how hard we tried.

*One Year of Instruction Six Times*

We were quite surprised at the number of times we observed extraordinarily basic music lessons taught to older students. Most often, we saw generalists teaching lessons on steady beat, loud and soft, or fast and slow, regardless of grade level. In many cases, the steady beat lessons were the same ones from school to school, and from grade level to grade level, emanating from the same set of materials. We talked about this with a regional music advisor who said, “Students don’t have six years of music; they have the first year of music six times.” She explained that a sixth grade teacher who may know the least about music of any teacher in the school may find herself in a position of having to take responsibility for teaching the most sophisticated aspects of the curriculum, which she feels unqualified to teach. As a result, she said, it was not uncommon for teachers of older students to teach lessons from books designed for much younger students, simply because they do not have the knowledge base to know how to teach more sophisticated musical concepts. Further, the music consultant felt that the materials available for teaching older students were not as sophisticated as they should be, because it was assumed that teachers would not know enough about music to teach more sophisticated ideas. This constant re-teaching of the same material meant that students were not engaging in any kind of sequential music learning and that there was little consistency from school to school, in spite of the existence of a sequenced national music curriculum.

This is not to say that the generalist teachers we observed were not good teachers. Their knowledge of teaching was excellent and clearly evident in their work with students. For example, we observed a generalist teaching music to six-year-old students. As she organized the beginning of the lesson, she asked the children, "Have you made a good decision about where are sitting? Just check." As she taught a lesson on steady beat, she asked many questions. In her responses, she never told a child that he or she had given an incorrect answer. It was clear that she was thinking very carefully about what it was that the student was responding to or hearing or thinking. At one point, she was trying to help the children see that she was tapping the beat of a song she was humming. To different children, she said: "Yes, there is harmony in what we are doing, but which part am I tapping?" "Yes, I am humming, but what are my hands doing?" At one point, she distributed chopsticks with which they were to keep the beat. When some children had not followed her directions about placing them on the floor, she said, "Have a look around and see if what the others have done will help you know what to do." While this teacher was clearly knowledgeable in ways of teaching and classroom management, the context of all this was a 20-minute lesson where the only activity was sitting and tapping the beat. Students did not engage in music in any way other than through listening to the teacher's singing and humming and following her motions. It was, however, a positive, enjoyable experience for the students.

#### *Ability to Scaffold or Assess Student Learning*

The teachers in this system are highly educated in social constructivist teaching approaches and are, in fact, known for this the world over. Part of this way of teaching is constant assessing of student perspective and understanding, and making moment-to-moment teaching decisions based on that assessment. However, when teachers have insufficient understanding and knowledge of subject matter, they are far less able to scaffold or assess student learning. On a number of occasions, we were aware that a child's comment reflected understanding or misconception of a particular aspect of the music in question and also aware, from the teacher's response or lack thereof, that she was unaware of the child's perspective. One university music education instructor described her experiences with teachers who engaged students in small group composing but were unable to engage them in reflecting on their work (also noted by Hewitt, 2002). The teachers were capable of reading the directions in the teacher's manual and engaging the students in the activity, but there was no follow-through. They were unable to take the experience to a higher level because they were not knowledgeable enough to listen to student work and assess what it represented about their understanding of music.

This issue of inability to scaffold and assess in the context of the discipline made the kind of teaching that occurred during music instruction quite different from the teaching in which these teachers generally engaged. This, no doubt, contributed to their lack of confidence and comfort with teaching music. They found themselves adopting a persona that was very

different from their general way of being with students. They needed to work very differently from the ways they are accustomed to working with students and therefore resorted to much more didactic, teacher-centered methods of instruction.

### *Teacher-directed vs. Student-centered Instruction*

We were most curious about this situation that we observed again and again, where teachers who were otherwise experts in student-centered teaching “from the sidelines” taught music with such a radically different way of being. One rather articulate teacher of older primary students said she thought it was because teachers were afraid of classroom management issues that might arise if everyone was making music independently. She thought teachers feared that their classrooms would appear too noisy and out of control. She added that this would be particularly important to new teachers and therefore believed that teachers got into habits of teaching music in a controlled fashion from the very beginnings of their careers. Further, she believed that teachers who felt insecure in their teaching would seek shelter in teacher-directed instruction:

It is difficult to design student-centered instruction when you don't really know what you are teaching or doing, and you can't assess what your students know, because you don't know it well enough yourself to be able to recognize it. You need to be able to assess individual levels of understanding and skill in order to be able to design appropriate instruction. Without full understanding of what you are teaching, you can't do that” (Interview, March 2001).

One principal said she thought the prevalence of teacher-directed instruction in music was fear of noise, but more, lack of confidence in subject knowledge. A music teacher educator said that her students had no models in their student teaching or fieldwork. When she would ask them what they had seen teachers do when teaching music, they would reply that they had seen “nothing” or very traditional activities like singing songs. They reported that they never saw the kinds of activities she had taught them in methods classes. Her impression was that they did not really believe that real teachers did any of the things she taught them in class. The national arts coordinator concurred, noting that music was one of the only subjects where whole group instruction seemed to be so prevalent. She thought it was a management issue and also reflected a lack of teacher confidence, noting that when teachers engage in large-group instruction, all eyes are on them and this in itself can be threatening if they do not know curriculum well or are not confident in their ability to teach it. Last, she suggested that many teachers may only have seen or participated in music instruction in situations where a teacher was leading a very large group in singing. Such situations are usually more formal, structured, and controlled, partially because of the size of the group. When they get into a more intimate setting of a classroom, she suggested, it is their only model, so they emulate it.

In some of our visits where we saw large groups of students rehearsing singing for an upcoming event, we could not help but note teachers' autocratic feedback on student performance. We also saw this from teachers who were leading singing in school assemblies. The mindset seemed to be that the teacher's role was to criticize student performance and tell them what they needed to do to improve. Student input was never sought. One university music educator said she thought that people believe that music is either right or wrong. She suggested that people may see visual art and interpreting poetry as open-ended, but not music. A second university teacher educator felt that teachers' autocratic behavior was rooted in their insecurity at being asked to put on a performance and at having to work with such a large group of students. He did not think teachers would dare to ask students what they thought of their own work, even though they would certainly do that in their own classrooms, because they feared losing control. He thought they believed they could not use the same kinds of student-centered approaches with large groups because the situation might get out of hand. He also suggested that they might feel it is better for them to act in a way that shows they are "in control" and confident in their leadership than it might be for them to appear timid or unable to lead the group.

### **Findings and Implications**

The most important issues emerging from these data concern the quality of the music instruction the generalist teachers were able to provide, which reflects the nature and extent of their knowledge of music and the pedagogical content knowledge (Schulman, 1986) necessary to teach music. Teachers' understandings of what it is to be a musician, to teach music, and to learn music are derived from their personal experience learning music, which in these cases was through either private study in a studio setting or mass singing in a large group assembly setting. The teachers had had no personal experience studying the substance of music—its elements and the ways they interact to produce musical works of a vast array of styles and genres rooted in particular cultural or historical ways of thinking. They had not learned to cherish music for its intrinsic aesthetic/cognitive value (Bresler, 1993, p. 115).

As a result, they were unable to implement with disciplinary integrity the lesson ideas they found in curricular materials or learned in methods courses or workshops. They did not understand the importance of providing an aural framework for music learning. At best, they taught isolated musical tidbits devoid of context. Their lack of knowledge of how to teach music with integrity rightly caused them to lack confidence in their abilities to teach it. In some cases, the generalists we observed taught more fruitful music lessons than the specialists we observed, simply because of the sophistication of their pedagogical knowledge and their willingness to trust the students to figure things out for themselves, so they were not relying on the teacher's content knowledge. This makes for effective teaching to a point, but breaks down when the need arises for teacher scaffolding and assessment. Fears of teaching music

combined with teachers' own prior experiences in school music generated predominantly teacher-directed teaching in schools that take pride in their student-centered learning environment. This teacher-directed environment was often laced with autocratic feedback to students' efforts and an emphasis on personal discipline instead of music making and meaning making.

A former music adviser wondered why music is treated so differently from other disciplines. It would not be acceptable for teachers to say that they were unable to teach math or language arts or that it would be all right for students to have math in only certain grade levels. If we accept that premise, he felt, then music *is* different and should be treated differently—and should be taught by specialists. He has heard the argument that hiring specialists will cause students to see music in a different light and wonder why their classroom teacher cannot teach it—and then wonder, if their own teacher cannot do it, why should they need to? But this falls down, he says. If teachers truly do not have the background and understanding to teach music, then they should not teach it. Otherwise it will perpetuate the cycle. If children in the next generation do not have opportunities to learn music, they will not be able to teach it either (Interview Notes, March 2001).

This perspective brought to mind a statement made by a practicum student in Hennessy's (2000) study:

I realize that it doesn't matter what my ability is because as long as I set it up right and get my aims across then it's up to them [the pupils]. They don't want you interfering—just give support and advice to get the structure. It's so different to maths where you've got to know how to do it, it's what they want to do, their interpretation (pp. 188-189).

Should we find acceptable that future teachers believe they need to know “how to do it” in mathematics, but not in music?

While this study focused on one national system, the goal was not to evaluate that system with an eye toward praising its strengths or suggesting improvements. It is important to acknowledge that the teaching assignments in any national system reflect what the policy makers in that country have determined is possible and appropriate for that culture. We do not pretend to know better. Still, there are lessons to be learned regarding teaching music in primary schools.

The politics of school reform and the economics of school funding may lead to fewer music specialists and more instruction by generalists at the primary level. Our concern is that national policies may be overly influenced by reports about generalist teachers that describe the teachers as confident and competent at teaching music. Much of the extant literature gives the impression that generalist teachers can teach music successfully. Even the questionnaire data that were part of this study would lead to that conclusion. It was only when we looked more closely, through site visits and interviews, that we formed a very different perspective.

Ultimately, policies regarding who teaches music in any system are integrally linked to decisions about the role that music will play in the school lives of the students. Generalist teachers tend to treat music as a marginalized afterthought that serves to entertain, create group cohesion, or teach nonmusical skills such as motor skills or following directions. Most generalist teachers we saw were not able to teach in ways that would connect to and foster students' musical understanding. They could not support or nurture their students' ability to think in sound, solve musical problems, develop sophisticated listening skills, create original music, or begin to understand music as a reflection of the human experience. Every nation determines its own curricular framework and, worldwide, such documents speak to quality music experiences for students. Yet it is clear to us that music taught almost exclusively by generalists falls short of attaining the goals articulated in national curriculum documents. If our profession is to make progress in these economic times, we need to resist the urge to accept substandard instruction just because it seems like a politically expedient alternative. Instead, we need to present policy makers with descriptions of what actually occurs in primary classrooms when generalist teachers teach music so they will have accurate criteria for making decisions about the future of music education in the schools.

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