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Problem Solving: Solutions Associated with Music in NSW Primary Schools

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Abstract

The greatest inadequacy of primary teaching lies in music instruction and, as such, students are not given the quality education that they deserve. Whether this is due to a lack of teacher confidence, a failure to see the importance of music, curriculum restrictions or the overwhelming nature of standardised testing, quality music programs are not consistently apparent in primary public schools. This paper examines the issues that are blamed for a lack of quality music education and offers solutions that aim to turn around this prognosis for future students.

Keywords

music; education, confidence, NAPLAN, quality; programming, curriculum



Problem Solving: Solutions Associated with Music in NSW Primary Schools

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The greatest inadequacy of primary teaching lies in music instruction and, as such, students are not given the quality education that they deserve. Whether this is due to a lack of teacher confidence, a failure to see the importance of music, curriculum restrictions or the overwhelming nature of standardised testing, quality music programs are not consistently apparent in primary public schools. This paper examines the issues that are blamed for a lack of quality music education and offers solutions that aim to turn around this prognosis for future students.

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The facts: Introduction

Most students in Australian primary schools have little to no access to a music education within school hours. This is in spite of the fact that research has shown the importance of the range of creative skills and attitudes fostered by the arts.

All Australian public school students, in theory, have access to music via generalist teachers, but these teachers do not have the confidence or perceived resources that can support an effective implementation of quality music programs (Letts, 2007). Furthermore, it has been identified that a teacher's main source of support in schools were colleagues, drawing knowledge and experiences from those who are more practiced in the field (Bowell, 2010). However, the problem lies where teachers are collaborating on a topic that most of them very little about and, thereby, a growth in professional development does not occur.

Another key problem is that Australia has no established standards of music education, with the federal government referring educators to the Finnish and American guidelines (ACSSO, 2005). However, the American standards set out by the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) have nine 'standards' that read more like a list of outcomes than a reference point for a quality education (NAfME, 2012). Alternatively, the Finnish standards set forward by the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) outline the values and enjoyment that students should achieve from participation in quality music programs (FNBE, 2004). The contrast between these standards, with one focusing more on content and the other concerned more with emotional impacts, highlights the importance of considering the context of the education when establishing standards. It is for this reason that



Australian primary school students should not have their music education decided by the standards of another country whose student needs are vastly different to their own.

A survey by the Australian Music Association (2001) examined public views of music education in primary schools and reported two key findings. Firstly, 87% of people surveyed agreed that “all schools should offer instrumental instruction as part of the curriculum” and, secondly, that 74% agree, “music education should be *mandated* by the states to ensure that every child has an opportunity to study music in schools” (Australian Music Association, 2001, cited in Letts, 2007, p.34, italics added). Sadly, the general public believe that by merely mandating for it to happen, music will be taught effectively. This is not the case, as the quality, scope and depth of the education provided to students varies greatly between schools, states and educational bodies. Interestingly, only 53% of individuals tested agreed that “participating in school music often corresponds with better grades and higher test scores” (Australian Music Association, 2001, p.43), with a quarter stating that they did not know. This suggests that the general public have no real idea of how a music education can influence students’ academic and social life skills, a fact that needs to be changed in order for any real headway to be made in the implementation of quality music programs in schools.

There are four main barriers that are seen to inhibit the implementation of quality music programs in schools, with the most highly cited being that teachers lack confidence in teaching the subject. This has been attributed to their own negative experiences in schools as well as poor-quality pre-service programs to prepare them to teach such a specific subject area (Bowell, 2010). The second issue stems from the view that teaching music is not relevant to classroom instruction and has no importance or significance to later learning. The third, and most widely blamed issue is the lack of room in the curriculum to integrate such a subject amongst everything else children have to learn. With focus now moving toward supporting literacy and numeracy education of students, teachers are finding it increasingly difficult to fit in other ‘more important’ subjects such as science or physical education, let alone music, which is often deemed irrelevant. Out of this idea arises the final issue of an increased focus on standardised testing, in particular, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), which leaves little to no room for music between the intensive sessions of literacy and numeracy required to lift scores and increase school funding.

The body of this article will discuss these problems further and demonstrate how solutions can be found if an integrated, quality music education program is introduced into classroom practice.

Problem 1: Lack of Confidence in Teaching Music

Teachers are more effective in teaching concepts that they confidently understand, not only because the content is understood but because students recognise passion and respond accordingly (Santamaria *et al.*, 2010). Teachers are role models within the classroom, demonstrating the behaviour and values that are essential to education (Barretti, 2008; Shein & Chiou, 2011). This, in turn, leads students to admire these practices and mirror the behaviour, thereby increasing overall engagement and enthusiasm within a lesson. If teachers were to display this confidence and positivity



toward music as a subject, students would mirror this and everyone's enjoyment of the content would increase (Shein & Chiou, 2011).

However, this confidence is not displayed in the teaching of music. The lack of confidence currently displayed is described as one of the main contributing elements to the lack of music education in schools (Richards, 1999). This is not helped by the fact that there has been a reduction in support sources, with limitation of resources and specialist teachers available to consult for primary programming (Bowell, 2010). It is this lack of support services that can often turn those teachers who have some level of enthusiasm after graduation into teachers who cannot find a place in the curriculum for it.

The Senate Inquiry into Arts Education (1995) found that the lack of music education is directly proportionate to poor preparation of teachers, and that investment in professional development courses as well as implementation of specialist teachers to support generalist teachers in schools could see a change occurring in this issue (cited in Jeanneret, 2006). It also stated that careful monitoring of curriculum changes, in addition to consistent national action, could help to shift learning toward the creative arts and make sure that teachers are equipped with skills and resources necessary for this to occur (Jeanneret, 2006). After all, the NSW *Education Act 1990* requires that each student *must* be provided an education in each Key Learning Area (KLA) *every* year (NSW BoS, 2006). With Australia moving toward the implementation of a national curriculum within the next few years, this issue will only become more out of control. The trend of decreased teacher confidence is also recognised in other countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), where the generalist teacher is primarily responsible for creative arts education (Jeanneret, 2006). However, these countries have utilised government resources and provided specialist teachers to consult on programming, provide professional development workshops and to promote information sharing amongst teachers (Jeanneret, 2006). Most importantly, other countries have developed specific pre-service teacher programs to target an increase in confidence and skills associated with teaching primary music. Although Australian universities have these programs, the quality, scope and aims of these can be lost within the other requirements of the degrees. The Higher Education in the Arts and Schools (HEARTS) project, currently in place in the UK, has been designed to develop confidence, ideas and strategies within teachers and provide experience in a range of creative activities that can be used in the classroom to establish a nurturing yet challenging classroom environment for young music students (Davies, 2010). With this model in mind, if resources and funding were pooled to allow teachers to combine and converse on music education issues, the state of this learning may not be in such jeopardy. Similar projects and systems could be set up in professional development courses, which would allow teachers to build their confidence and learn from each others' practice to positively influence their students' learning experiences.

Problem 2: Relevance and Importance of Music Education

The argument is grounded in the belief that music is not an important part of the curriculum and detracts time away from more-important subjects, such as numeracy, literacy and science. It has also been identified that the greatest inadequacies of



teaching lie in primary music education, and that many of the problems in high school could be solved through enriching the primary program (Letts, 2007). This is because the creative arts provide students with a range of skills and attitudes that are not developed in any other subject (Butzlaff, 2000; Gadberry, 2010; Kalish, 2009; Miller & Hopper, 2010). These skills, such as flexibility in thinking, innovation and unique problem-solving techniques, can be integrated into other subjects and increase achievement and engagement (Gadberry, 2010; Miller & Hopper, 2010).

One example of this skill integration is between Music and English. Both subjects are represented in formal, written notation and are read left to right, allowing music to transcend the boundaries of ‘creative arts’ and be influential to literacy achievement (Butzlaff, 2000). Research has shown that the stronger the involvement and engagement in music, the greater the achievement will be in English (Butzlaff, 2000). It is this set of creative and analytical skills, not developed elsewhere in the curriculum, that can be the difference between a child understanding a concept or having to be retaught the same concept two or three times (Kalish, 2009). In developing these skills in children, their ability to self-monitor becomes more developed and the ability to understand their own learning capabilities increases (Kalish, 2009).

The skills fostered in the creative arts extend beyond the classroom and blend into life skills. Such skills include increased citizenship and volunteering opportunities, more-fully developed memory capacity, increase in self-confidence and school spirit (Gadberry, 2010). These skills can combine to increase achievement in other areas, as the collaboration and integration of content and understanding is paramount within all facets of education. For example, the creativity and flexibility in problem solving helps students to think through issues concerned with numeracy and science, while connecting new ideas and communicating them through understood symbols helps students with literacy activities.

Although all these skills are an amazing contribution to achievement in other subject areas it must be stressed that music or any other creative art subject should not be taught to solely increase marks. It should be taught and appreciated for its own artistic merit and for the unique set of skills it provides.

Problem 3: Restrictions of the Curriculum and Timetabling

One of the general complaints teachers make is that there is not enough time in the day, or space in the curriculum, to fit in all that is required (Bowell, 2011). Between compulsory numeracy and literacy blocks, the other four KLAs and extraneous activities such as peer support, assemblies and library time, teachers claim there is no time to have in-depth education in the creative arts. The NSW Board of Studies (BoS) acknowledges the overcrowded nature of the school day, allocating 20% of time to these extraneous activities. The rest of the time should be split between English and Mathematics (45%) and the other KLAs of Science, HSIE, Creative Arts and PDHPE (approx. 8%) (NSW BoS, 2010). This leaves all Creative Arts options with approximately 1.5–2.5 hours of teaching per week. In public school classrooms, even this small amount of time is rarely afforded or allocated.

The foundation statements also emphasise that there must be a *balance* between the key subjects, with teachers focusing on meeting student needs through



differentiated, outcome-based learning (NSW BoS, 2010). Teachers are also urged to consider the most appropriate and effective learning styles of their students, which often involve some form of creative integration and movement (Gardner, 1983). If this indeed is correct, why are teachers ignoring a sixth of the curriculum, and the way that many primary students learn?

It has already been shown in the UK that integration of creative arts across curriculum areas can help to minimise the time spent solely on the arts (Bowell, 2011; Davies, 2010). Through the connections between prior knowledge and integrating creativity into other subject areas, their curriculum has been condensed and made more meaningful to students, as the learning is more condensed (Bowell, 2011). Gallions Primary School, located in Beckton, London, is one such environment that incorporates the arts into their everyday curriculum. The school organises the curriculum in such a way that more than 80% of the content can be taught through music, visual arts, drama and dance (Gallions Primary School, 2013). This, in turn, engages interests, encourages creativity and develops the different learning styles of all students involved and allows the curriculum to be more accessible, even to those students who do not possess English as their first language. As a result, the school and its educators are often called upon for advice and information about how to integrate an education in the creative arts seamlessly into the already full and demanding curriculum (Gallions Primary School, 2013).

It must also be stated that to do away with creative education would be detrimental to overall student achievement, as any creativity in a child's life is enriching rather than limiting (Miller & Hopper, 2010). I have no doubt that teachers do not dispute this, but it is finding the time to integrate that is the problem. Learning related to literacy and numeracy cannot develop to the fullest potential if the skills that are needed to apply them to real life are not present (Miller & Hopper, 2010). Without the discovery and nurturing of these skills, how can we then expect students to undertake testing and perform to the best of their abilities?

Problem 4: NAPLAN and Standardised Testing

It is a common observation that much of the teaching in the first term of the school year is focused on NAPLAN testing. This yearly, standardised test, examining students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9, focuses on specific skills literacy and numeracy and is usually the central focus of the classroom until NAPLAN's conclusion. As a result, all other subjects are compressed and pushed aside while English and Mathematics consume the majority of classroom activity. However, research has shown the parallels between music participation and increased standardised test scores (Anon., 2001; Johnson & Memmott, 2006; Olson, 2008). With an increased focus on standardised testing becoming more apparent, the more intangible form of development associated with the creative arts is being neglected (Anon., 2001).

A study carried out in the United States concluded that student involvement in any form of music education is more beneficial than no involvement at all. However, the higher the quality of the program, the higher the academic achievement of a student will be (Johnson & Memmott, 2006). This idea was addressed by Catterall, Chapleau and Iwanaga (1999), who discovered that, despite socio-economic differences, students' participation in music education programs increased test scores



dramatically. Additionally, Olson (2008) recorded that music is the only subject in which students of any ethnicity have equal opportunities of success. This opposes the results of NAPLAN or similar standardised tests, which do not demonstrate the same unbiased results amongst various cultures.

The developed skills associated with a creative arts education were cited as the factor increasing test scores, along with a heightened sense of academic responsibility and performance, increased levels of engagement and abilities to connect new ideas (Butzlaff, 2000). For this reason, it can be said that the correlation between achievement and music instruction is high and results in significantly higher test scores, although there has been doubt amongst some researchers. While none dispute the evidence presented by such empirical studies as Johnson and Memmott (2006) and Catterall, Chapleau and Iwanaga (1999), the other variables involved have been questioned. Johnson and Memmott (2006) did note that elements such as family music involvement, predispositions toward the arts and learning styles could be contributing factors that are unable to be controlled in such studies and could have influenced the research outcomes. However, with the abundance of research making the same clear point, can the importance of music to other curriculum areas really be disputed?

The solution: Conclusion

It is clear that music education is fundamentally important to student development, both socially and academically, with the benefits of such transcending the boundaries of the Creative Arts KLA (NSW BoS, 2006). However, to only acknowledge this fact does not address the main concern of how this could be achieved. The four problems presented in this paper can be viewed as barriers to the implementation of effective and quality programs that support music education within primary schools, and it is through the identification of these problems that solutions can begin to be formed.

To ensure that teachers are providing students with a quality music education, their confidence in their own abilities and understandings must first be increased. Although all generalist teachers are given some level of pre-service training in this area, the evidence points to it not being carried through into the classroom environment. Therefore, the introduction of pre-service and professional development programs that focus on teacher confidence, as well as specialist teachers who can aid in the development of comprehensive and engaging programs could see this problem becoming minimised.

Teachers must be informed of statistics and research that support the importance and relevance of quality music education in primary schools. This is to ensure that those teachers who currently believe that music can be minimised to make way for more important subjects can see both the detrimental effects that this can have on students as well as the beneficial aspects of music education within their classrooms.

The curriculum and its restrictions also pose another challenge for teachers who struggle to see how music can relate to their students, but the skills and attitudes fostered in music and the mere fact that creative arts takes up one-sixth of the syllabus requirements emphasises the fact that students need to be taught music. Teachers could be engaged in professional planning sessions with their fellow stage teachers to



discuss and map out what students are required to know and how it can be achieved throughout the year. This could also include a specialist teacher who can advise on engaging and innovative ways that students can connect with the content whilst weaving it into other subject areas and topics to create more cohesive and comprehensive units of work. An education on the skills and values that music fosters in students could also be beneficial to teachers as they can begin to recognise what students are being deprived of when quality music programs are not present within the classroom.

These skills then support student achievement in NAPLAN and similar standardised tests, with scores increasing exponentially with any form of music education. It must also be noted that the higher the quality of these programs, the higher the academic influence will be and, as such, teachers must consider *how* to develop these programs (Johnson & Memmott, 2006). With much of teachers' time in the first term of the year spent teaching to NAPLAN, why is it that there is an unwillingness to teach a subject that could improve these scores without even trying?

Without music education in primary schools, teachers are limiting students and not providing challenges that encourage an attainment of goals and potentials. It is the range of creative skills, attitudes and values that are developed through music that make it such an integral subject to the primary curriculum. If these values are developed early enough, teachers set up positive habits of learning that students can carry through to their high school education.

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