1993

Policy and practice in music education in New South Wales state primary schools

Deirdre Russell-Bowie

University of Wollongong

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Policy and Practice in Music Education in New South Wales State Primary Schools

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

from

University of Wollongong

by

Deirdre Russell-Bowie
B.Ed. (TCAE); Ass. Dip. Mus. (TCAE);
Grad. Dip. Arts. (SCAE); Dalcroze Level 2;
M.Ed. Hons. (Wollongong)

Faculty of Education
September 1993
Abstract

This project focuses primarily on the development and implementation of the New South Wales (K-6) Music Syllabus (1984), and the effectiveness of the curriculum development model which was intended to overcome repeatedly identified deficiencies and policy implications arising from these findings.

An examination of the events leading to the development of the syllabus revealed a series of reports on the arts in education which all identified key deficiencies in primary music education and recommended:

- that specialist teachers be used in primary schools;
- that improved resources and facilities be provided for all schools;
- that all children have the opportunity to learn an instrument;
- that teacher training institutions and professional development programs provide teachers with better music education skills and with appropriate knowledge and attitudes; and
- that a new music syllabus be developed, based on children's developmental stages.

Using a model which initially aimed to involve as many interest groups as possible but was finalised by a small group of music experts, the music syllabus was developed over seven years. This research project sought to evaluate the development of the syllabus and its implementation seven years after its launch in relation to how effectively it addressed these identified deficiencies, to identify key factors influencing primary music education and to develop some policy suggestions in response to the problems arising from these results.
Summary

This project focuses primarily on the development and implementation of the New South Wales (K-6) Music Syllabus (1984) and the effectiveness of the curriculum development model which was intended to overcome repeatedly identified problems associated with primary music education. The thesis is built around four key research questions.

Question 1: What were the perceived deficiencies in primary music education that the new syllabus was expected to address?

In the mid 1970s concerns emerged that the existing music syllabus, written more than a decade before, was no longer relevant to currently practised educational philosophies. A series of national and state reports was commissioned by respective governments and interested organisations to examine music education in primary schools and make recommendations on how it could be improved.

These reports all identified five key problem areas:

• the need for music specialist or resource teachers in schools;
• the need for improved music resources and specialist facilities;
• the need for instrumental tuition in primary schools;
• the need for better preservice and inservice teacher education; and
• the need for a developmental, child-based music curriculum.

Question 2: In what ways did the syllabus and the process of its development seek to address these perceived deficiencies?

In response to these concerns the Director-General of Education decided that a new music syllabus for primary schools should be developed. Each of these perceived deficiencies in primary music education was examined and recommendations were made over the years of the syllabus development in relation to them. In keeping with current interest in promoting greater awareness and involvement among teachers in general about curriculum changes, a new model of curriculum development was used. This model, termed the 'involvement model', used generalist primary teachers and representatives of various interest groups to develop the syllabus through a series of conferences. In practice, however, this approach did not prove to be effective. After a substantial amount of time and resources had been expended to produce few tangible outcomes, a small team of experts was used to complete
the document which was launched in 1985. However, this final document did not appear to specifically address the previously perceived deficiencies.

Question 3: After the syllabus had been in operation for several years, how effectively had these deficiencies been overcome, if at all?

Throughout the following three years a variety of central, regional and school-based strategies was used to implement the syllabus throughout the state. Initially teachers and school executive involved with the implementation perceived it to be successful. However as priorities for music education began to decrease so did resources, and by 1991 it again appeared that primary music education was not being effectively taught in state schools.

This project examined the current situation of music education in relation to the specified aims of the music syllabus as a way of gaining circumstantial evidence on the effectiveness of both the process and outcomes of the curriculum development model and the resultant syllabus. Relevant documents on the development and implementation of the syllabus were examined, principals were interviewed on aspects of current policy and practice in music education and a survey was conducted among 846 teachers in government primary schools from four regions of NSW. The selection of schools and profile of survey respondents indicated that they were broadly representative of the state as a whole.

The survey also sought to evaluate the influence of school location (rural/urban), and of language and socioeconomic background of pupils on the teaching of music in NSW primary schools, as well as to determine whether certain teacher characteristics or the grade level taught had any influence on music education in the school.

The results indicated that, in general, teachers and members of the school executive perceived that music education was not given the priority and regular practice in schools that most other subjects enjoyed. Classroom music was patchy in most schools; music resources as well as instrumental and choral groups were in significantly greater numbers in schools from higher socioeconomic areas and in those with lower proportions of non-English speaking background students. The school community's views of music education and its priority and practice in the schools was significantly influenced by the socioeconomic and language/cultural background of pupils.
and by the grade level taught. Children in younger grades, from schools in higher socioeconomic areas and/or with lower proportions of non-English speaking background pupils were significantly advantaged in the practice of music education.

As well as the influence of these factors, the pupils were considered by teachers to have experienced significantly more classroom music lessons if they had a female teacher, or a teacher aged 40 years and over or if they attended an urban rather than rural school. Their perceived achievement of set skill levels was significantly influenced by a combination of socioeconomic background and school location factors, with pupils from urban schools in high socioeconomic areas achieving significantly higher results than those in urban schools in lower socioeconomic areas, and higher results than those in rural schools regardless of their socioeconomic ranking. Also, as the grade level increased so the students' perceived achievement increased. However, there was no significant improvement in perceived skills between pupils in Years 3 to 6.

Question 4: What are the implications of this study for future curriculum policy and practice in primary music education?

Teachers also identified key issues relating to music education in general. These were very similar to the five broad problem areas arising from the reports on arts in education conducted twenty years earlier. The results of this study provide a sound basis of empirical evidence to support specific policy suggestions on how these problems in primary music education might be addressed. These include the provision of ongoing support through specialist or music advisory teachers to assist the generalist primary teachers; identification of a minimum set of equipment and resources in each school; the provision of continuing professional development opportunities in the area of music education; the opportunity for all pupils to receive instrumental tuition; the recognition and active response to the circumstantial differences in each school; and a balance of emphasis between the need for productive outcomes and the consultative process in the area of curriculum development. It is only if suggestions such as these are implemented that the children of the future may receive a more effective music education program than those in state primary schools today.
I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degree.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in the thesis.

.................................................................
Signature
This study has involved the assistance of a large number of people and I greatly appreciate their support, cooperation and contribution over the years.

I am enormously grateful for the support and practical assistance of my chief supervisor Professor Russell Linke, Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong, for his objective clarity and rigorous, astute comments in reading the draft material and for his continued interest and insightful contribution to the study from its conceptualisation to its completion. I have also really appreciated the wealth of experience and knowledge which he brought to bear on the development of the thesis and his professional encouragement and interest throughout the project.

Deanna Hoermann, my external supervisor, displayed a keen interest in this study from our first meeting. Being very involved in the syllabus development over a decade ago she was able to offer clear insights and an accurate overview of the policy development process, as well as being an encouragement in her belief of the value of this study for future policy makers. I am grateful also to her for reading the draft thesis and raising thought-provoking issues about the content.

I shall always be grateful to Christine Brown for her tireless assistance, enthusiasm, advice and objectivity throughout the study, especially in the area of statistical analysis. Without her support this thesis would only be partially complete. In addition to this, her methodical and rigorous reading of the draft thesis produced valuable insights into areas which need further development.

Other members of the Faculty of Education at Wollongong University who were of great assistance were Dr John Patterson in his reading of, and comments on, the draft thesis, and Dr Ken Russell, who assisted me through some complicated statistical analysis, making it sound so easy! I am also grateful to Professor Carla Fasano for the clarity of her teaching on policy analysis in the early stages of my study, and to Jacqui Collins, secretary to Professor Linke, for her friendly, capable assistance in practical matters.
Employees of the Department of School Education have been very supportive of my work, and I am grateful to the teachers, school executive and regional office personnel from the North Coast and South Coast regions and from Metropolitan North and Metropolitan South West regions who have assisted me by granting permission to undertake a survey in their region or school, through completion of surveys and through their interest and cooperation during interviews.

To those who were involved in the development of the syllabus and shared their memories, opinions, insights and documents with me I am very grateful. I am especially appreciative of Graham Russell's interest and practical support in this area as well as of the assistance given to me by Dr Alf Colvin, Dr Doreen Bridges, Mal Hewitt, Dr Fenton Sharpe, Don Haddon, Phil Hobson, Dr Norm McCulla, Helen Pain, Graham Penn, Laura Solomon, Alan Suthers and Stan Warren. Because of their help I trust I am able to say that the story of the music syllabus development has been told with the integrity and accuracy it deserves.

I am grateful, too, to David White for the illustrations which bring to life the thesis content with a succinct freshness and have been used to share the content of this study with others at several conferences.

The University of Western Sydney, Macarthur has also been very supportive throughout the development and completion of this thesis in providing several internal grants to cover travel, teaching replacement and printing costs. The Faculty of Education has provided practical support though access to its computer software and hardware, etc, as well as enabling me to work on my thesis full time for six months during Staff Development Leave in Spring 1991. I am grateful, too, to my colleagues who have supported me in my alternating frustration and enthusiasm during my doctoral studies, and to Herb Marsh and Lawrence Roche for their expert assistance in the area of survey development and statistical analysis.

Finally I wish to express my gratitude to my husband, Vaughan, whose caring support and interest encouraged me to stay on the task until it was finished.
I can only express my most sincere and heartfelt thanks to all of the above people for their personal and professional support over the years I have been involved in this study.

Deirdre Russell-Bowie
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