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**Challenges for
Primary Music Educators**
Preservice teachers' perceptions of the
challenges to teaching music
in primary schools in five countries

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Abstract

Music educators around the world have a mission to bring the world of sound into the classroom so every child has the opportunity to play music, to listen to music and to create their own music. Current preservice teacher education students are tomorrow's teachers. What they believe about the priority and problems of music education in elementary schools is important as it will impact on their attitudes and practice when they are teaching in schools. This study investigates the perceptions of almost a thousand students from Australia, South Africa, Namibia, Illinois (USA) and Ireland in relation to the priority and problems associated with teaching music in elementary schools. The results indicated that 78% of all the students felt that elementary schools should give a high priority to music education however only 43% of the sampled students felt that elementary schools actually gave a high priority to music education. Of the problems identified, the teachers' lack of musical experience (78%) and the lack of priority of music in schools (77%) were seen by the highest number of students as being significant problems to teaching music. Other problems which were seen to be significant were the lack of resources (66%), lack of time to teach music (63%), lack of knowledge (58%) and lack of adequate preparation time (49%). This study highlights the need for a higher priority for, and more experience in, music education in both teacher training institutions and in elementary schools.

Background

Music educators around the world have a mission to bring the world of sound into the classroom so every child has the opportunity to play music, to listen to music and to create their own music. The benefits of a strong foundation in music education are well-known, both anecdotally as well as being confirmed by research. Academically, young people who say that they have had 'consistent high levels of involvement in instrumental music show significantly higher levels of mathematics proficiency by Year 12' (Fiske, 1999, p.2). More generally, students with high levels of arts participation outperform students with little arts in their background, by virtually every measure, and arts participation makes a more significant difference to students from low-income backgrounds than for high-income students. In non-academic areas, engagement in the arts nurtures the development of competencies and attributes within the students' cognitive, social and personal domains, and as such should be a basic part of children's learning experiences both inside and outside of school (Fiske, 1999).

The musical benefits of being involved in authentic engagement in music education are well known to the music educator and those who have sung in a choir, played an instrument, listened carefully to music or created their own composition. The awakening and nurturing of the aesthetic spirit as part of the development of an aesthetic education is a challenge for every teacher, whether specialist or generalist, but brings great rewards, both tangible and non-tangible (Reimer, 1989; McKellar, 1990). The listening skills developed in music lessons are relevant and of great benefit to children throughout the whole curriculum, not just in music lessons. The creativity and problem solving skills children develop as they make their own musical compositions are vital to creating a well-rounded child able to perform confidently in the 21st century.

In an ideal world, children would be engaged in music daily throughout their childhood and beyond, inspired and led by motivating and well-resourced music educators. However we live in a world which falls far short of this ideal. In many countries, music and the other arts subjects are given a low priority compared with the ‘basic skills’ of English and Mathematics.

In most western countries, music specialist teachers were trained, resourced and funded to implement developmental and sequential music programs in many elementary schools. Over the last few years much research has highlighted the situation of non-specialist elementary teacher education students in these countries as having little confidence in their own musical ability and their ability to teach children music (Lepherd, no date; Kim, 2001; Mills, 1989; Sanders and Browne, 1998; Jenneret, 1997). Generally, they were not expected to have the skills and expertise to implement music programs, as this was seen to be the domain of the music specialist teacher, and so they were not trained accordingly.

As a result of economic rationalism, funding for music and other arts programs, specialist music / visual arts / drama / dance teachers, instruments, resources and teacher

training has decreased significantly. In many countries generalist elementary school teachers are now expected not only to teach English, Science, Mathematics, Social Studies, Physical Education and many other across curriculum perspectives, but also to have the expertise and confidence to teach music, visual arts, dance and drama. This is despite the fact that many of them have not been adequately trained in any or some of these arts subjects. As a result, many elementary schools across a variety of countries have less than adequate music and other arts education programs. Some of the problems identified include that teachers perceive that they do not have the confidence, competence, resources, skills, time or priority to implement an effective arts program (Van Niekirk, 1997; Mills, 1989; Russell-Bowie, 1997; Senate Environment, Recreation, Communication and the Arts Reference Committee [SERCARC], 1995).

In Australia, for the past thirty years there have been at least nine enquiries into the adequacy of the provision of music education in Australian schools and each report has produced similar results – there is a paucity of quality music and arts education in schools. (Bartle, 1968; Covell, 1970; ASME/ACE, 1973; NSW Ministry of Education, 1974; Schools Commission/Australia Council. 1977; Hobcroft, 1980; NSW Conservatorium of Music, 1981). Little has changed since any of these reports and in 1995, the Australian Senate Inquiry into Arts Education (SERCARC, 1995) found that ‘Generalist primary classroom teachers, because of their own poor arts experience at school, and because of inadequate teacher training, lack confidence to teach the arts. As a result... there is a strong impulse to marginalise the arts in their teaching’ (p.49). In relation to the cultural background of Australians and their attitudes to the arts, the Saatchi and Saatchi funded report, *Australians and the Arts*, notes that people from a non-English speaking origin in the survey sample differ from the overall population of Australia in having a more positive view of the arts. Those with non-Anglo-Australian origins are more likely to take a

positive view of the arts, compared with those with Anglo-Australian origins (Costantoura, 2001).

In USA, Bresler (1991) reports that ‘training in the arts is inadequate. Teachers find arts education a difficult assignment’ (p.136). She notes that although American schools have an arts program, the emphasis is on instrumental and vocal performance within music. Although strong advocates for the arts helped ‘draw rhetorical attention to the arts,.. practices in the schools appear largely unchanged’ (p. 3). Bresler also quotes from the 1988 National Endowment for the Arts, “Basic arts education does not exist in the United States today.”(p. 3).

In Namibia, where many of the people have been brought up in an arts-rich culture, the arts were ideally meant to be taught by specialist teachers but practicalities often resulted in the arts being taught by a classroom teacher with minimum experience in one of the arts subjects. ‘In terms of the true aims of music education, little appears to be achieved in these classes – in fact the result is often inculcation of a dislike of music’ (Lepherd, 1995, p. 29). Prior to political independence from South Africa, there were extremes of inequalities, with black schools having no qualified music teachers or even instruments, white schools having planned curricular, trained teachers and excellent facilities and resources and so-called coloured schools being placed between the two ends of the continuum (Manns, 1994). With the continued implementation of the new Primary Arts core subject within the elementary school, since 1996, it is hoped that this situation will be changing for the better.

In South Africa, another country with a culture steeped in the arts, ‘most South African children of all races were supposed to have tuition in Class Music ... but it often featured on timetables but not in practice’. There is a ‘whole range of wonderfully exciting things happening musically in South Africa, but often outside the curriculum’, so the aim of the

new Arts in Culture syllabus is to ensure that engagement in authentic music activities happens inside the school situation as well (van Niekirk, 1997, pp. 268 – 269).

Although in Ireland, the children and teachers also come from a rich heritage of music making, within the classroom situation, many teachers seem to devote little time to playing instruments and making music, and instead rely mainly on singing within their music lessons (Murphy, 1998). Across these five countries, specialist teachers in the arts in most public elementary schools are currently a rarity and with the crowded curriculum in most schools, the arts are generally low in priority and the first set of subjects to be left off the timetable (Kornhaber and Krechevsky, 2002; Russell-Bowie, 1993, 2000).

Why is this so, and what are the problems that generalist teachers face when trying to implement the music syllabuses across these countries? Russell-Bowie (1993), in surveying almost 1,000 generalist elementary school teachers in Australia, identified six main challenges: lack of knowledge about the syllabus requirements, lack of time to prepare music lessons, not enough time in the teaching day, lack of priority for music, lack of personal musical experience and lack of adequate resources. These are similar to the problems identified by van Niekirk (1997) in South Africa, Mills (1989) in England and SERCARC (1995) in Australia. Lack of time and lack for priority for music education were also identified by Roulston (1997) and Lean (1997), and McPherson (1997) identifies the lack of teacher confidence and skills as well as the inadequacy of training institutions to train teachers effectively in music education as key problems in the implementation of effective music programs in elementary schools. This study examines the perceptions of preservice teacher education students from five countries, in relation to these problems.

Aim

The aim of the larger Creative Arts: Students' Attitudes – National and Overseas Associate (CASANOVA) study was to survey a sample of student teachers from various

countries to investigate their attitudes towards the Creative Arts. However the smaller study on which this paper is based used only the questions from the survey which related to the priority and problems relating to music education.

Specifically this study examines the following questions:

1. *What percentage of preservice teacher education students think that elementary schools should, or actually do give music a high priority in elementary schools?*
2. *What perceptions do these students have about the problems of teaching music in the elementary schools?*
3. *Is there a statistically significant difference in perceptions between students from the five different countries in relation to these questions?*

Method

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was developed specifically for this study, but was based on a similar previously validated survey used in 1991 to ascertain the attitudes of teachers to music and music education in New South Wales public schools (Russell-Bowie, 1993). Similar questions were asked in both surveys, however the instrument for this current study was focussed on student teachers, covered all four strands of the Creative Arts (music, dance, drama and visual arts) and was administered in five different countries. Apart from the demographic questions, each of the other questions had one stem with four endings, and each of the endings related either to music, visual arts, dance or drama, eg.

I think that elementary schools should give a high priority to:

- Music*
- Visual Arts*
- Dance*
- Drama*

Responses were given by circling a number, eg. to indicate one answer in the demographic questions, or one number on a Likart scale from 1 – 5, with 1 = Strongly

Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree. This study reports on those items related specifically to music.

Participants

As Table 1 indicates, the participants were 936 university students enrolled in tertiary generalist teacher education programs in Sydney and Newcastle, Australia (n = 385 = 41%), Windhoek, Namibia (n = 187 = 20%), Durban and Pretoria, South Africa (n = 254 = 27%), Illinois, USA (n = 59 = 6%) and Dublin, Ireland (n = 51 = 5%). These institutions were selected on the basis of lecturers being willing to administer the instrument to their students and return the surveys to the author in Australia. Other institutions in different countries were also approached but the above were the only ones to respond with completed surveys.

Table 1:
Number and percentage of students from five countries who completed the survey

Country	n	%
Australia	385	41
Namibia	187	20
South Africa	254	27
Illinois (USA)	59	6
Ireland (Eire)	51	5
ALL 5 COUNTRIES	936	

The demographic details of the sampled students are included in Table 2. Of these students, 82% were females and 18% were males, 82% were aged 18 - 25 years, 18% were aged 26 years or older. Responses indicated that of the sampled students, 30% were in their first year, 25% were in their second year, 28% were in third year, 15% were in their fourth year and 1% responded with 'other'. It was also noted that some of the sampled institutions only had three years of teacher education while others had a four year course.

Table 2:
Demographic details of sampled students

Item	Category	n	%
Sex	Females	750	82
	Males	162	18
Age	18 – 21	508	55
	22 – 25	252	27
	26 and over	165	18
Year level	Year 1	277	30
	Year2	230	25
	Year 3	265	29
	Year 4	140	15
	Other	12	1
Uni Entrance Score	0 – 50	65	9
	51 – 60	105	14
	61 – 100	184	26
	Not applicable	378	51
Home language	English	573	62
	Other	350	38

In response to the survey, students were asked to indicate what score they received as their University/College entrance score, or whether or not this was applicable to them. Twenty-three percent indicated that they received a score from between 0 – 60% and 26% had a score above this, with 51% of the responding students not required to have a University/College entrance score so indicated ‘not applicable’ on their survey form. In relation to the language spoken at home, of the responding students, 60% spoke English at home and the rest spoke a variety of other languages including Arabic, various African languages, Vietnamese, Spanish and Greek.

In most of the sampled countries, the Creative Arts is one of the key learning areas in the elementary schools and comprises a crucial component in the teacher education program. Most of the countries (NSW in Australia, Namibia, South Africa and Ireland) have recently introduced a new Creative Arts syllabus instead of separate curriculum documents for each of the individual arts areas. Within this context, the sample students were training to be generalist elementary school teachers, not specialists in any of the particular creative arts areas.

Data Collection procedure

Students were asked to complete the survey during lectures at each University or College and the same instructions were printed on the front of the instruments and were read out to every group of students. Ethics clearance had been obtained from the University of Western Sydney Ethics Committee and students gave their informed consent by completing the survey. The students' lecturers were instructed to read the front page of explanations and to inform their students of the reason for the survey (to assist Creative Arts lecturers in tailoring courses and subjects to suit the needs and interests of the students). The students were then given a practice example to ensure they understood how to complete each question. Students took between 15 and 30 minutes to complete the survey and surveys were collected as students completed them.

Data Analysis

The raw data from the surveys were then entered into an SPSS file and analysed using frequencies and cross tabulations to gain an overview of the data. Statistical procedures were selected in light of the questions to be tested and ANOVAs were used to test for

differences between countries. Listwise deletion of missing data was undertaken for each of the statistical analyses.

RESULTS

In relation to the focus questions of this study, the following results were found:

1. *What percentage of preservice teacher education students think that elementary schools should, or actually do give music a high priority in elementary schools?*

Table 3: Percentage of students from five countries agreeing or strongly agreeing that *music should be a high priority* and that *music is actually given a high priority* in elementary schools.

Country	Elementary schools <i>should</i> give priority to music	Elementary schools <i>actually</i> give priority to music
Australia	63%	24%
Namibia	82%	62%
South Africa	93%	54%
Illinois (USA)	88%	59%
Ireland	88%	43%
ALL 5 COUNTRIES	78%	43%

Table 3 shows the percentage of students from the sampled countries who indicated that they felt music should be, and actually is, given a high priority in elementary schools. Overall, 78% of all the sampled students agreed or strongly agreed that elementary schools should give music a high priority, however only 43% indicated that they actually give music this high priority.

Table 4:

Significantly different Means and Standard Deviations of each country in relation to Question 29 (*should* give music a high priority) and Question 30 (*actually* give music a high priority).

	Q 29: Elementary Schools should		Q30: Elementary Schools actually	
	give music a high priority		give music a high priority	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Australia	3.67*	1.1	2.57**	1.2
Namibia	4.22*	1.3	3.53**	1.6
South Africa	4.72*	.63	3.43**	1.5
Illinois (USA)	4.50*	.7	3.45**	1.2
Ireland	4.46*	.89	3.10	1.4

* *Significant differences were indicated between Australia and Namibia, Australia and South Africa, Australia and Illinois (USA), Australia and Ireland.*

** *Significant differences were indicated between Australia and Namibia, Australia and South Africa, Australia and Illinois (USA).*

The means and standard deviations of the responses from each country are shown in Table 4. When these means were compared, Australian students gave significantly lower responses than students from each of the other countries in relation to the high priority to music that elementary schools should give ($F = 40.05$; $df = 4,794$; $p = .000$) and, except for Ireland, in relation to the high priority that elementary schools actually give ($F = 22.85$; $df = 4,889$; $p = .000$). There were no other significant differences between countries in the responses to these two questions.

2. *What perceptions do these students have about the problems of teaching music in the elementary schools?*

Students were asked to answer, on a five point scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree, if they thought problems in teaching music lessons in the elementary schools related to lack of knowledge about the syllabus requirements, lack of time to prepare, not enough time in the teaching day, lack of priority for music, lack of personal musical experiences and lack of adequate resources. The following results relate to those students who responded *agree* or *strongly agree* to each of the questions.

Table 5:

Percentages of students from five countries agreeing or strongly agreeing that knowledge, preparation time, teaching time, priority, experience and resources were problems in relation to music teaching.

Country	Knowledge of the Syllabus requirements	Lack of time to prepare	Not enough time in the day	Lack of priority for music	Lack of personal musical experiences	Lack of adequate resources
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Australia	55	50%	64%	78%	82%	60%
Namibia	65	51%	57%	74%	78%	78%
S. Africa	64	49%	62%	76%	70%	66%
Illinois (USA)	44	52	71	85	81	59
Ireland	46	34	71	77	79	76
IN 5 COUNTRIES	58	49	63	77	78	66

The percentages of students from each of the five countries who agreed or strongly agreed that the listed problems were relevant in relation to music education were computed and these are listed in Table 5. Most responses from the students were in relation to the lack of personal musical experience of the teachers (78%), and the lack of priority for

music (77%). About two thirds of students indicated that lack of adequate resources (66%) and not enough time in the teaching day (63%) were problems related to teaching music lessons, 58% indicated that lack of knowledge about syllabus requirements was a problem, and almost half of the students (49%) responded that lack of time to prepare was a problem in teaching music lessons.

3. *Is there a statistically significant difference in perceptions between students from the five different countries in relation to these questions?*

The means and standard deviations of the responses from each of the five countries, to each of the questions, were computed and are listed in Table 6. When they were compared, there were statistically significant differences between the different country responses to the problems related to knowledge ($F = 6.02$; $df = 4,794$; $p < .001$) and resources ($F = 4.29$; $df = 4,794$; $p < .05$). In relation to the problem, *lack of knowledge about the music syllabus*, the mean of the South African responses ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.3$) was significantly greater than those from Australia ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.1$), Illinois, USA ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.1$) and Ireland ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.4$). There were significant differences in the means of responses between Australia and Namibia ($F = 4.29$; $df = 4,794$; $p < .05$) in relation to the *lack of adequate resources*, with the mean of the Australian responses ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.1$) being significantly lower than that of the Namibian responses ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.4$). No other significant differences were indicated between the means of responses from each country in relation to each of the other questions.

Table 6:
Means and Standard Deviations of responses from students from five countries in relation to the six problems.

Country	M / SD Knowledge of the Syllabus requirements	M / SD Lack of time to prepare	M / SD Not enough time in the day	M / SD Lack of priority for music	M / SD Lack of personal musical experiences	M / SD Lack of adequate resources
Australia	3.48/1.1*	3.35/1.2	3.67/1.23	4.10/.95	4.23/.9**	3.68/1.1
Namibia	3.79/1.5	3.21/1.6	41/1.5	4.02/1.3	4.10/1.3**	4.14/1.4
S. Africa	3.85/1.3*	3.37/1.4	3.37/1.4	4.20/1.2	4.05/1.3	3.82/1.3
Illinois (USA)	3.2/3.2/1.1*	3.32/1.2	3.32/1.2	4.13/1.0	4.14/1.1	3.64/1.0
Ireland	3.24/1.4*	2.93/1.3	2.93/1.3	4.26/.9	4.13/1.1	3.96/1.3
ALL 5 COUNTRIES	3.6/1.3	3.30/1.3	3.30/1.3	4.12/1.1	4.15/1.1	3.82/1.2

* Significant differences were indicated between South Africa and Australia, South Africa and Illinois (USA) and South Africa and Ireland.

** Significant differences were indicated between Australia and Namibia

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that Australia had the lowest percentage of students who felt that elementary schools both should, and actually do, give a high priority to music education. Other sections of the larger CASANOVA study indicated that, compared with the students from other countries, these sampled Australian students had the lowest background in music education (17% of Australian students, compared with 21% each of South African and Namibian students, 34% of Illinois (USA) students and 41% of Irish students indicated they had a good background in music education) and had the lowest confidence levels (39% of Australian students compared with 42% Namibian students, 52% South African students, 37% Illinois (USA) students and 63% of Irish students who

indicated that they felt confident and enjoyed music education), (Russell-Bowie, 2002). There could be many reasons for this, but a significant reason could be the lack of personal musical involvement across the Anglo-Australian culture compared with those from other cultures and the lack of adequate music education in schools for many years (eg. Comte, 1988; Russell-Bowie, 1993; SERCARC, 1995; Costantura, 2002).

Traditionally, students from South Africa, Namibia and Ireland come from an arts-rich heritage and participate in a variety of integrated music and other arts experiences from a very early age as part of their culture and lifestyle. Although more formalised, America has a strong history of participation in music, through bands, instrumental groups and choirs, both inside and outside of the school. As Constantura notes, Australian culture tends to present music as a spectator sport, with comparatively few children and young people having, or taking up, the opportunity to make music, either individually or with others. This arts-poor background could be a factor influencing the results which indicate that significantly fewer Australian students than those from any other country sampled, think that elementary schools should, and actually do, give music a high priority.

The problems identified as being relevant to music education seem to be universal across the five countries, with the lack of priority for music in schools, and the lack of teachers' personal musical experiences being of greatest concern. When teachers have not been personally or professionally involved in musical experiences they have little chance of becoming effective music teachers. Teacher education institutions could achieve much in both these areas, by giving music adequate time and priority, thereby equipping their students with the skills, knowledge and attitudes to teach music confidently in elementary schools. With the balance of practical experiences and research-based activities (both action research and research into the importance of music to children's development) preservice teacher education students could graduate with adequate confidence and

effective knowledge to make a difference in the lives of the children in their future classes, impact the priority and practice in their schools in relation to music education and teach their children about this world of sound and music.

The problem of lack of knowledge about the music syllabus appeared to be significantly greater for South African students than for Australian, Illinois (USA) or Irish students. At the time the questionnaire was administered in South Africa, a new *Arts in Culture* curriculum was in the early stages of implementation. Previously, there was a Eurocentric music curriculum, which many teachers did not feel they had the skills or knowledge to implement and in the segregated black schools, the music curriculum was virtually non-existent (van Niekirk, 1997). These could be factors contributing to this result.

Namibian schools have shared a similar background to South African schools as Namibia gained its independence only in 1990. Namibian students' responses in relation to the problem of knowledge of the music syllabus, were significantly lower than those responses from their Illinois (USA) counterparts. Namibia was also implementing its new National Curriculum in the Arts around the time the survey was being administered (Manns, 1997) so many teachers and student teachers would still be unsure about the content and skills required to implement the syllabus.

In relation to resources, some South African and Namibian schools have extreme limitations on the amount of resources for teaching any subjects in the curriculum. Some schools are without electricity, running water, books, toilets, chairs, desks or windows, (van Niekirk, 1997) yet the mean of the sampled South African students, in relation to this problem, was not significantly different from those of the other countries. However the mean of the Namibian students' responses was significantly greater than that of the Australian responses indicating that the Namibian students felt that this was an important problem which impeded the teaching of music lessons. Australian and Illinois (USA)

students' responses had the lowest means for this question, indicating that, although it was an important problem it was less of a problem than in the other three countries.

Overall, the lack of priority of music in elementary schools and the teachers' lack of personal musical experiences were the two problems considered by most students, regardless of country, to be serious impediments to the teaching of music lessons in the elementary school. The first problem needs to be addressed in a multi-level context, with state and country policies and syllabuses needing to reflect a higher priority for music than it is currently given. As well, each elementary school needs to give music adequate time, resources and trained teachers to implement the syllabus, thereby indicating clearly that the school values and prioritises music education, both for itself and for the benefits it brings to the children.

The second problem needs to be addressed by teacher education institutions, with increased time for music education being given within the teacher education courses. As well, Departments of Education need to provide resources for continuing education and inservice training for teachers in music education. This will entail a significant cost which many governments and institutions are reluctant to give to the arts as they see them as non productive in economic rationalism terms. However the inherent outcomes of an arts-rich program across all areas of the curriculum are significant and need to be weighed up carefully by policy makers before the concept of giving the arts a higher priority and more resources, is abandoned without relevant thought or research. When teachers become more confident and competent with learning and making music themselves, they are more likely to teach music and to teach it effectively. If these two problems are addressed effectively in each country, there will be more likelihood of music education being taught in every classroom and to every child.

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