Finding the right balance?

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For many years music education lecturers and researchers have debated what is the best model to use when training generalist primary teachers for the teaching of music in their classroom. There is universal agreement on the valuable role arts education (and specifically music) plays in the total education of the child. However, this statement appears to have little impact on decision makers when it comes to training primary generalists teachers to have a quality impact on arts/music education.

Given that pre-service teachers must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to teach music in their future classrooms, how then do universities provide the necessary training in undergraduate programs when the time for arts/music training continues to be eroded? With the time made available how does one ensure efficient use of this time? What do students need to equip them to be able to teach music in their classroom? What is the balance needed between theoretical and practical knowledge and skills? This paper reports on data obtained via an email questionnaire to student teachers who had completed their one semester of music education in their first year of training, and had now completed a four-week practicum in schools in their second year of training.

Introduction

The how, when, where and why of providing pre-service teachers with quality music education has become an endless debate over many years. Many researchers including Gifford (1993), Russell-Bowie (2004), Jeanneret (1994, 1996, 1997, 2006), and Temmerman (2006), are a small example of those who have investigated in this area. In some Australian states primary school students have access to music specialist teacher. For example, in Queensland 85% of state primary schools have access to a music specialist teacher (Tyler, 2006). Whilst in other states some music specialist teachers do exist, they are not the norm in state and public primary schools. Therefore, across the spread of Australian Universities music education training varies greatly and although there are systematic issues this training is often linked to what students will be required to do in their future classrooms. This endless debate has been a renewed focus in recent times with the National Review of School Music Education (Pascoe et al, 2005).

This paper follows further research into this area by the author. Other studies have investigated how pre-service teachers learn music (Hartwig, 2004). The data gathered provided valuable information that was used to improve the delivery and content of the music education course for future students. Hartwig stated that:

The challenge is to provide in the course a balance between university students’ own music skills development and providing them with the ability to engage primary students in their future classes with musical experiences and activities. By presenting the course content in a variety of ways and methodologies it is hoped that these students will engage with the music and be prepared for the future to be able to apply different ways of knowing so they will be able to engage students in their own classes and present information so that all students will have the opportunity to benefit from music education (p. 211).

According to Regelski (2005), approaching music and music education as praxis offers alternatives that can ‘make a difference’, especially because, by definition, praxis involves tangible ‘doing’ that ‘makes a difference’ of some kind for the individuals or groups served.

As in Queensland there are music specialist teachers in primary schools, the emphasis in the course is the use of music to enhance learning across the curriculum.

Comments from students at the end of the course included:

Showed how to teach music, got to experience activities first hand. Learnt lots of valuable teaching techniques and how to go about teaching music – it has become so automatic for me.

I taught a song on prac and played my recorder for the whole Grade 2 class. I can’t believe this.

I was terrified of music but this has been the best subject. I had lots of fun and learnt lots. I will certainly use music in my class. (p. 211).

In further research, Hartwig and DeVries (2006) focussed on the assessment tasks given to pre-service generalists teachers across two universities in two states. This study revealed that a variety of assessment tasks were apparent, including tasks that engaged students in practical music-making experiences, which is vital to inspire confidence in teaching music. At both universities there is an attempt to provide pre-service teachers
with the tools to teach music in their general primary class. This has been developed through a variety of experiences and assessment tasks that are practical, that allow the lecturer to act as facilitator and provide constant feedback which students view as being relevant to their teaching.

However, the journey continues…. What do pre-service students need to equip them to be able to teach music in their classroom? What is the balance needed between theoretical and practical knowledge and skills? How can this be achieved in the time frame that is made available for music education training? This paper reports on data obtained via an email questionnaire to student teachers.

**Background**

**Participants**
The participants in this study are in their second year of their Bachelor of Education (Primary) program. They had just completed their first semester of study in second year and a four week practicum in a primary school. During their first year of study they had completed a one semester (13 weeks of contact) course in Music Education. This course consists of a 2-hour lecture, with the first hour investigating issues and current trends in music education as well as the music syllabus documents, and the second hour is devoted to music theory. This second hour is optional for those who need to develop their music theory skills. Students are also required to do a 2-hour practical workshop where they are engaged in music making. This practical music making is supported by many researchers including Small (1998), Elliott (1995), and Regelski (2005), when they comment that music education should take the form of ‘doing’, of ‘praxis’ and not academic study ‘about’ music. Students are able to attend a workshop that best suits their music skills with three levels being offered (advanced, some music reading skills, and new to music). Assessment in the course includes practical tasks and written tasks.

**Methodology**
An email questionnaire was sent to the 205 students enrolled in the second year practicum. The use of email allowed ready contact with the participants as they were not on campus but out in schools, and not due to return to university until the next semester. The email was sent in the final days of their practicum so as to capture their current situation. This web-based approach (Dillman, 1998) is now seen as a viable means of gathering survey data (Mertler, 2003). The questionnaire asked students to respond to six questions:

1. Rate your music skills before doing 1015VTA Music Education. Poor/Good/Excellent
2. Did participating in the music course help to improve your music skills?
3. Do you now feel equipped to use music in your classroom in the future?
4. Did your mentor teacher use music in any way during your recent practicum? If yes, how?
5. Did you use music in your classroom during your recent practicum? If yes, how?
6. In the future will you use music in your classroom?

94 email responses were returned. This was a 46% response rate. This represents almost half of the student participants in the population of the relevant music course. There is no attempt in this paper to generalise across all pre service music education courses, only to represent the practices that were recorded and analysed in the stated study (Freebody, 2003).

The data analysis included both quantitative and qualitative methods. As well as the information identified by the quantitative data, the analysis of the qualitative data included looking for merging themes that corresponded and differed between the students (Burns, 2000).

**Discussion**

**Question 1: Rate your music skills before doing 1015VTA Music Education.**

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The majority of these students will have come through the Queensland music programs in place since the late 70’s and 80’s, so it was encouraging that some students attributed their skills to their primary training.

I remembered from primary school how to play a recorder. (Response No 46)
I had not played the recorder since primary school and I was amazed how well I could still do it. (Response No 86)

However, one could question with nearly 50% of the students stating their music skills were poor, how effective the primary programs are in developing life-long music skills.

**Question 2: Did participating in the music subject help to improve your music skills.**
This response indicates that all students had at least gained something from their semester of music.

Question 3: Do you now feel equipped to use music in your classroom in the future?

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Again this response was encouraging that the program had given the students (at this stage) some confidence and skills to apply this understanding of music education in their classrooms. Some of the student responses included:

- "I believe using music across the curriculum is an excellent way to ‘disguise’ learning. That is, music can be used to make fun activities (eg jingles to help remember facts, music to express moods for ICT/Vis Arts activities/drama stuff). (Response No 40)
- The music program was thorough and enjoyable. The assessment that we did on the teaching of a theme using the syllabus was simple and easily explained. The break up of the classroom instrumental, dance, a simple song, to rhythm to recorder was inspiring. Yes I still have my pass assessments even though this subject was taught in first year, still fresh in my mind to what we learnt. (Response No 26)
- Yes, because the subject gave me more courage to use music, and made me see that even the most basic music lesson can be effective. (Response No 5)
- Yes it taught me how I, even though I thought I was tone deaf could actually use and teach music in the classroom. (Response No 73)
- By taking part in the course, I have developed some fundamental skills and knowledge with respect to music education, and although I am by no means musically talented, I am confident that I can use what I have learned in order to integrate music into my future teaching. (Response No 81)
- Before doing the music course I had no idea about music (rather than listening to it) and I certainly did not know how to implement it in a classroom. Now I have a knowledge base (practical as well as theory) to work with. (Response No 30)
- I did not think I would say this but I am confident that music will be a part of my teaching in the future. (Response No 65)

Question 4: Did you mentor teacher use music in any way during your recent practicum?

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<td>69</td>
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These statistics I believe show a true indication of the number of practising classroom teachers who use music in any way during their day. When a music specialist is on staff, classroom teachers sometimes believe they can leave the teaching of music to the specialist. However, they are missing valuable opportunities by not using music as a tool in their classroom to engage learners and learning.

Question 5: Did you use music during your recent practicum?

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This response showed that 65% of the students used music in their classroom during their practicum.

I taught a number of music lessons while I was at prac. I became the classroom music teacher. (Response No 70).

Yes, singing, pentatonic scales, rhythm, actions, loads of fun. (Response No 24)

During my recent practicum I utilised music as a listening activity. I took groups of students and played a variety of carefully chosen musical pieces to represent the animals. The children really surprised me in that they were able to quickly interpret the music and were spot on with the representations. If there was some disagreement the students were able to validate their reasons eg ‘It is the python because he’s hunting his prey. The music sounds like he’s trying to get his prey’. (Response No 30)
Other students reported they were willing to include music in their lessons but were not allowed to do so.
I wanted to but my classroom was a no ‘arts’ classroom. (Response No 20)
No – my teacher wouldn’t let me. (Response No 16)
I was going to teach a song for my unit, but the teacher said I had to leave that to the music teacher. (Response 90)

Question 6: In the future will you use music during your recent practicum?

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This response was totally unexpected and I hoped that the students were not giving me the response that they thought I wanted to hear. However, some of the students did support their positive response with an explanation.
Yes, because I have learnt how to integrate music into all of the KLA’s. (Response No 16)
Yes, I would feel comfortable using music with other areas of the KLA’s because music isn’t just about playing an instrument it is about feeling, learning about different types of music from different countries…would fit into many different theme areas. (Response No 36)
Yes, in any way I can. From music knowledge = zero in week 1 to music knowledge = confidence, teaching basics and enjoying in 13 weeks…thanks. (Response No 24)
I will definitely use music within the classroom. Especially since I am doing the Spec Ed degree and I know that music is a fabulous tool in this area. Especially from my experience to keep control and peace within their classrooms. (Response No 46)
In SOSE as an introduction to say the First Fleet play some music from the ocean (nature music) to get them into the feeling as of they were on a ship back then so that they could fully immerse themselves within the experience. It is possible to use it in English and Drama as well in English looking at the lyrics seeing how they rhyme etc how do the words make you feel etc. It could be used in drama so that they can mime to the music or use music to enhance their performance or act out the sounds whether they are high low or spinning sounds etc. (Response No 6)
Yes, I have the confidence to teach music to primary children. (Response No 38)

Conclusion

The results of this study reveal that upon completion of their one semester of music education many students (in fact 100% of returned responses) believed they had improved their music skills and felt equipped to teach and use music in their primary classroom. Some students stated that they now had confidence to teach music. However, not all of these students then used music during their 4 week practicum teaching block in a classroom. In the majority of classrooms mentor teachers do not use music at all in the classrooms, and this may have had an influence on the pre-service teachers. In fact, as mentioned above, some students were not allowed to use music in their lessons. What does this say about what is happening out in the field? Although in Queensland, music specialist teachers are relied upon to meet the needs of the music strand of The Arts Syllabus (2002), it appears that music was not a high priority for the classroom teachers mentioned in this survey.

100% of the pre-service teachers indicated that they have the belief in their ability and the desire to use music in their primary classrooms in the future. The concern is will these teachers have this same confidence in two years times when they have graduated? The students feel confident now as their skill development is current, however these students will have no further music study. Will this confidence and their skill development fade, or will they draw on the philosophical issues discussed in lectures and remember the value of music education for all children? A further questionnaire will follow these students in their 3rd and 4th year of preservice training.

However, the question remains: What balance of theoretical and practical elements are needed in a preservice teacher music education course to ensure music will become part of their classroom learning? Temmerman (2006) expands this question further when she suggests that the aim of preservice teacher music education courses must be to provide teachers with valuable, relevant and real contexts for teaching music education, which will ultimately facilitate young people’s engagement with, and understanding of, music, and, in turn, ensure the longer-term well-being and sustainability of music experience in the broader community.

Notes:
KLA – Key Learning Areas – in Queensland there are eight – English, Maths, Science, Technology, The Arts, Studies of Society and the Environment, Languages Other Than English, Health and Physical Education.
About the Author

Dr Kay Hartwig has taught music from preschool to tertiary level. She now lectures in the Education faculty at the Mt Gravatt and Logan Campuses of Griffith University to primary and secondary music specialists, as well as primary pre-service generalists teachers. She is also convenor of the Master of Teaching and Graduate Diploma of Education programs for International Students at Griffith. Dr Hartwig is the current secretary of AARME.

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References


