Is Anything New Under the Sun?

Researching Research into Primary Music Education Dr Deirdre Russell-Bowie
Dip. Teach; B.Ed; Assoc. Dip Music; Grad. Dip. Arts; M.Ed(Hons);
Dalcroze II. Ph.D

Senior Lecturer in Music Education
University of Western Sydney, Macarthur
PO Box 555, Campbelltown, 2560
Work : Phone : (02) 9772 6200 / FAX : (02) 9772 1565
Email : D.russell-bowie@uws.edu.au

Paper presented at the AARE National Conference, Brisbane, November 1997

Abstract
This research project was undertaken to initially identify what research had been undertaken in primary music education and secondly, what teacher and school characteristics affect the priority and practice of music education in NSW state primary schools. Over 900 teachers and principals from 93 schools in four regions of the state were surveyed in relation to their teaching of music lessons, the extra-curricular musical activities in which both they and their pupils were involved, the adequacy and currency of the resources available in their school, staff, executive, pupils and parent views on music education and the development of their pupils’ musical skills. Six key school and teacher characteristics were identified as having a significant influence on the music education of NSW state school children.

Brief Biographical Note

Deirdre Russell-Bowie is a senior lecturer in Primary Creative Arts Education at the University of Western Sydney, Macarthur where she has taught since 1980. Prior to that she was a primary school teacher in Tasmania then lectured at the Tasmanian CAE. Over the past eighteen years, Deirdre has written and had published over twenty creative arts resource books, cassettes and videos to assist primary teachers with the teaching of creative arts education in their classrooms. As well as being the inaugural president of the Creative and Practical Arts Association in NSW, she coordinates all the Bachelor of Education courses within the Faculty of Education and has been awarded the UWS Macarthur Award for Excellence in both Teaching and Research, in 1994.

Is Anything New Under the Sun?

Researching Research in Primary Music Education

Dr Deirdre Russell-Bowie

Introduction
Over the last three decades at least six investigations into music education in primary schools have been undertaken, both nationally and at a state level. Prior to these, in 1963, a music syllabus had been developed and distributed to all primary schools in NSW. It had been prepared by musical experts and included the expectation that every primary school
teacher was musically literate and so could implement the highly prescriptive musical activities presented in the syllabus. It had also been created in a climate of highly centralised policy formation and administration before the development of the child-centred curriculum. However, for various reasons, it was perceived to be ineffective and that children were not receiving a good music education. Therefore, during the 1960s and 1970s there was a growing awareness about the state of music education, both nationally and in NSW. As a result, these investigations into music education were commissioned and the published reports each indicated that the situation for music education in the primary school was far from satisfactory.

National and State Reports on Arts in Education

In 1966, the Australian Council for Educational Research commissioned Graham Bartle to survey and describe the music education practices in Australian primary and secondary schools of all kinds. The results of this survey highlighted the continuing controversy over the use of specialist teachers versus classroom teachers to teach music in the primary school and reiterated the lack of confidence teachers felt in taking music lessons and their lack of an adequate background knowledge in music. The recommendations arising from his research included:

- That specialist teachers be used in each primary school;
- That adequate specialist facilities and resources should be available in each school;
- That children should be given the opportunity to learn an orchestral instrument; and
- That teacher training for primary teachers should included a school-related music education program.

Two years later, in 1970, the Australian Council for the Arts commissioned Roger Covell, a leading Australian musician and educator to research and present a report on Music in Australia: Needs and Prospects. In this report, Covell stated that it is necessary to stress the point that the situation of music in Australian education is bad and depressing. It lacks money, prestige, self-confidence, a clear sense of direction and sufficient high-level sponsorship. If this were a personal or isolated opinion only, it might be dismissed as exaggerated or alarmist. But it is confirmed by numerous interviews, by questionnaires... and by many other writers on the subject.

As a result of his findings, he recommended that:

- Specialist teachers be used in schools to work with classroom teachers.
- More adequate facilities be made available in schools for music education;
- Instrumental tuition be available to all interested pupils; and
- A higher priority for music education be given in the preservice training of teachers.

This growing awareness of the state of music education in primary schools was taken up by the Australian Society for Music Education and the Australian Council of Education, who
jointly commissioned reports in each state to examine ways of increasing the quality and consistency of music education in infant and primary schools. The NSW committee for this report strongly endorsed Covell’s findings and proposals, but also decided to investigate the arrangements for training teachers and the desirability of specialist music teachers for primary schools.

The committee underlined Covell’s findings that primary music education was of little use as a preparation for secondary music education; that ‘many primary school teachers lacked confidence and adaptability in dealing with music, and that Teachers’ Colleges were unable to remedy the musical deficiencies of their students in the time available for music’.

In its conclusion the committee noted that:

Many deficiencies in music education in NSW could be remedied if a vicious circle could be broken. Primary school teachers are often not able to teach music because they have not been equipped to do this at Teachers’ Colleges; College lecturers complain that they can do little with the musically illiterate and often indifferent students coming from secondary school; music specialists in high schools have an uphill battle to interest the majority of children in music because by the time the children reach high school it is too late to start the elementary training in music which should have been given in the formative years, between the ages of five and twelve. Thus much music teaching in the high school years is wasted effort, because foundations have not been laid in early childhood.

The recommendations made by the committee included:

¥ That specialists be allocated to primary schools;
¥ That there be adequate music resources in every primary school;
¥ That Teachers’ Colleges should give more priority to educating their students in music as well as in primary music education, with extra courses for those who need remedial assistance; and
¥ That a new curriculum be written.

Once again, as well as the need for adequate teacher training courses, specialists in primary schools, adequate music resources and a new curriculum were emphasised in the overall recommendations.

In response to the growing awareness of the value of the arts in schools, the NSW Minister for Education commissioned a report in 1974 to examine the position of the arts in NSW schools. The completed report, The Arts in Schools, examined the role of the arts in the education of schools children and recommended means of improving pupils’ experience of the arts, and of financing programs and activities associated with education in the arts. It concluded:

We consider that the arts are indispensable in the education of children and that participation in arts activities should occupy a significant proportion of school time. Furthermore, we believe that teaching must be competent and that all necessary accommodation, equipment and materials should be readily available.

In general, the status of the arts in New South Wales Government Schools is not yet commensurate with their educational significance.

The recommendations made in this report were similar to those of the previous reports:

Staffing:

¥ That, in the staffing of primary schools, closer consideration be given to the appointment of teachers having regard to their known abilities in the arts, so that, where possible, primary schools will include in their staff teachers competent in a range of arts courses...;
¥ That provision be made to enable principals to engage people with
special aptitudes in arts subjects as resource assistants;

Resources and Facilities
¥ That adequate resources and facilities be available in schools;

Instrumental Tuition
¥ That special training courses in teaching be introduced for
peripatetic teachers of musical instruments, with a view to their appointment to
regions;
¥ That instrumental tuition be available for primary pupils;

Teacher Training
¥ That education in the arts be given greater emphasis in the
pre-service training of teachers;
¥ That an enquiry be conducted to consider the most appropriate forms of
teacher training for all arts specialists...
• That a higher priority be given to the arts in teachers training.

These recommendations further backed up Covell’s statement about the lack of status the
arts and music have in education as well as the need for competent teaching, adequate
facilities and resources, instrumental tuition for primary pupils and a higher priority given to
the arts in teacher training courses.

Another investigation into education and the arts was a joint study started in 1974,
undertaken by the Schools Commission and the Australia Council, the latter being the
Federal Government’s major arts organisation and the former its major educational body at
that particular time. In mid-1976 a NSW State committee was established to undertake a
state-wide study as part of this report and the report was published in December 1977.

In the review, the following general points in regard to primary music education were made:
¥ The present situation of music in NSW schools was much less effective
than it should be;
¥ Classroom teachers were expected to teach music, but they were
inadequately prepared, lacked confidence;
¥ Music was not taken seriously by many teachers and its popularity was
static or declining;
¥ In Years 3 - 6 few teachers had the range of skills required for
effective music teaching;

These are very similar to the findings of previous reports; clearly children were not receiving
a good music education. In response to these results, several significant recommendations,
as related to music education, were developed. These included the following:
Specialist Teachers

- That specialists were needed to assist classroom teachers;

Resources and Facilities

- That adequate facilities and resources be made available to schools;

Instrumental Tuition

- That children be given the opportunity of instrumental tuition in primary schools; and

Teacher Training:

- That a higher priority being given to the arts in teacher training courses in order to change the unacceptable situation of arts education in primary schools.

- That students in teacher education programs be given experiences in the arts at both the adult and at the curriculum level...

- That a more detailed study of the nature and contribution of music programs relating to teacher preparation be undertaken as part of the proposed examination of principles and practices in music education for schools.

In 1980, a NSW Ministerial Taskforce was set up to inquire into Music Education in Primary Schools. Its findings were very similar to those in the previous reports and its recommendations clearly emphasised the importance of developing music literacy in primary children through the use of specialist music teachers with adequate resources and facilities. Their recommendations were also similar to those found in previous reports.

Senate Enquiry into Arts Education (1995)

In 1995, a Senate Enquiry into Arts Education was commissioned and, once again, found similar findings. Teachers were suffering from the effects of their own poor arts experiences in schools, they were facing cutbacks in teacher training and lack of support from school administration. Added to this was the declining centralised curriculum support, the declining use of specialists in schools and the devolution of decision-making to schools.

Three main recommendations came from this Senate Enquiry:

a) The arts should be given a high priority in the development of competency standards for newly graduated teachers;

b) The amount of specialist teachers should be increased in schools; and

c) There should be better inservice professional development for teachers in arts education.

Once again, these are very similar to the results arising from the other research into arts education and it is clear that, over the past thirty years, there has been a strong national and state emphasis on researching the present inadequate situation in relation to primary school music education. So why has there been no significant change, despite all this research? Apart from obvious reasons such as lack of priority for funds and resources, there seem to be other, more demographic specific reasons for the lack of quality music education in our primary schools.

NSW Primary Music Education Survey: (1991)
By 1990 it appeared that still, very little effective music education was happening in NSW primary schools. Therefore, this current research project was developed, in part to identify what was happening in NSW Primary schools in regard to music education. As part of this aim, it also attempted to evaluate the influence of language, cultural, rural/urban and socioeconomic backgrounds of pupils on the teaching of music education in NSW primary schools as well as determining if the age or sex of the teacher or the year taught had any influence on the music education of pupils. The results would then be used to develop implications for policy makers.

General Requirements and Limitations

Approximately four hundred teachers from each of four different Department of School Education Regions, across all year levels, were asked to complete the survey. Altogether, 1664 surveys were distributed, and 841 (51%) were returned.

In order to gain information about the size of each school, and their music education practices in general, another one-page survey was distributed to each principal. Schools were chosen from two metropolitan and two non-metropolitan regions to provide an even balance of rural and urban responses. Within these regions, the groups of schools selected were seen as being broadly representative of the social characteristics (measured in terms of regional socioeconomic status [SES] and percentage of non-English speaking background students in the school [NESB], size and location of the total government school population in the State as a whole.

The Survey Questionnaires

a. For Teachers

Each teacher in the selected schools was requested to complete a questionnaire indicating their current views and practices in regard to music education in the Primary School.

The eight page instrument included an introductory letter to each teacher and a range of questions, based on the aims and expected outcomes of the music syllabus, which covered two broad areas:

a) The general provisions for music education both in the teacher’s own class and in the school as a whole; and
b) The specific musical abilities that the teachers believed their pupils could demonstrate.

b. For School Principals

In order to gain specific information about each school and its music education policy and practices, a separate one-page survey was given to the principals in each of the selected schools. This survey asked:

a) How many pupils and teachers were at the school;
b) What priority music education had in the school;
c) Whether or not the school had written a music policy and how this was being implemented; and
d) If there had been any school-based music education inservice courses organised in the last two years.
Results
Section C : Teaching Music Lessons
This set of questions attempted to identify the general priority given to music in sampled primary schools as well as how much, and how much, and how often music was taught in the classroom. It also sought to determine what were the problems of, and solutions to, music education as perceived by the teachers. This section also included questions to ascertain what resources were seen to be most frequently used, and how teachers’ present programming and teaching practices related to the aims of music education as detailed in the NSW (K-6) Music Syllabus.

In general, the results indicated that urban teachers tended to give music a higher priority than rural teachers, older teachers did significantly more music than younger teachers, female teachers were substantially more involved in music education than their male counterparts, teachers in schools from higher SES areas and with lower NESB populations taught significantly more music and gave it a significantly higher priority than did teachers in schools from lower SES areas and those with higher NESB populations. Also as the age of the children increased, so the amount and quality of music education decreased significantly.

The two main problems, as perceived by the teachers, which prevented them teaching music more effectively, were lack of time in the school day and lack of personal musical experience. The two factors which respondents felt would help them most in teaching music were the availability of a music resource teacher and a series of inservice programs to assist them in planning and teaching music lessons. This first factor could be addressed by the development of semi-specialist music teachers in pre-service training. These results seem to indicate a clearly perceived need for the development of an adequate background for teachers in music education, if they are to teach music confidently and effectively.

Section D : Extra-Curricular Music Activities

After establishing the current practices of teachers in regard to classroom music lessons, the questionnaire sought to identify in what extra-curricular activities both teachers and pupils were involved, over and above the classroom music lessons.

a. School involvement with choirs and instrumental groups : Principals’ Questionnaires
   It was clearly shown in the responses to previous questions that there are substantial differences in music education opportunities and practices between schools with higher and lower NESB populations, between those from higher and lower SES areas, and between the rural and urban schools. From the results of interviews with principals, combined with their responses on the questionnaires returned, these differences were also clearly seen in terms of the extra-curricular music opportunities for pupils, such as choirs and instrumental groups. The pupils from schools with higher NESB populations and those in lower SES areas appeared to be clearly disadvantaged in this regard.

b. Teachers’ and pupils’ involvement in extra-curricular musical activities : Teachers’ Questionnaires
   The teachers’ responses to these questions indicated that less than one quarter of the respondents were currently involved in school music activities such as choirs, bands, festivals and other whole-school performances. This, in part, could be attributed to the fact that about one quarter of the schools in the sample did not have at least one choir and just over one third of the schools did not have any instrumental performance groups. The schools which had a wide variety and number of choirs and instrumental groups invariably came from the higher SES areas and had lower NESB populations, with the majority of schools from lower SES areas and higher NESB populations having none, or only one choir and fewer instrumental groups than did their counterparts in the more advantaged areas. As a result of this, both teachers and pupils from the less advantaged areas were less involved in extra-curricular musical activities
than were those from the schools in higher SES areas and those with lower NESB populations.

Section E : Resources

As the availability and use of instruments are in important feature in the implementation of the NSW K-6 Music Syllabus, the questionnaire sought to determine how teachers perceived the state, quantity, quality and accessibility of the school’s musical instruments and music education resources.

In general the results followed the trends identified in Section C, where music was given a higher priority in urban than in rural schools, by older more than younger teachers, by female more than male teachers, by teachers in schools in higher, more than lower, SES areas and those in schools with lower, more than higher NESB populations, and by teachers of younger children more than teachers of older children. The SES factor was seen to be the most significant variable overall with teachers in schools from higher SES areas being seen to have significantly more access to a wider range of resources which were in better condition compared with their counterparts in schools in lower SES areas. The higher priority given to music, as examined in Section C, was seen to be closely related to the range, condition and access of instruments and music education resources in that, if a school and/or principal gave music a fairly high priority, this generally ensured that teachers were resourced adequately to implement the syllabus. Similarly, if teachers perceived music to be a relatively high priority they also ensured that instruments were available and used more regularly in music lessons.

Section F : Views of Music Education

This section examined views of music education, the teachers’ enjoyment of taking music lessons, the pupils’ enjoyment of different aspects of music lessons, and the parents’ apparent interest in music education for their children.

The socioeconomic and NESB factors clearly differentiated between the attitudes towards music education in the schools from wealthy, predominantly English speaking areas and those in economically disadvantaged areas, with higher NESB populations. In all the questions in this section, teachers from schools in higher SES areas and with lower NESB populations indicated that their executive, other staff, themselves, their pupils and the parents all viewed music education significantly more positively than did their counterparts in the schools in lower SES areas and with higher NESB populations.

In general, the other factors examined followed the trends seen in previous sections, with teachers from urban rather than rural schools, female teachers rather than male, older teachers rather than younger teachers, and teachers of younger children rather than older children, indicating the following: the executive were more supportive, they enjoyed teaching music more, their pupils enjoyed music more, and their parents were more interested in formal music education for their children than were their respective counterparts. Overall, the most significant factor influencing the results in this section was that of the year taught, with teachers of younger children responding significantly more positively towards the practice and attitudes of music education than those who taught older children.

Section G : Development of Skills

The final category of questions sought to determine what proportion of each class of children was perceived to be able to do each of a variety of tasks. Respondents were asked to give
their best estimate of what their pupils would be able to do, based on their experience with them during the year of the survey.

Each question was based on one of the ‘Ideas and Objectives in Stages and Concepts’ as set out in the NSW (K-6) Music Syllabus. They were presented in a random order with specific concepts and stages being unidentified.

In the analysis of results, composite scores for each stage (ie. Stage One: Duration, Dynamics, Pitch, Tone Colour and Structure questions) were compiled. As the year level was a significant factor in the development of the pupils’ perceived skills, statistical tests indicated that there were significant differences between the perceived achievement of pupils in Kindergarten and those in Years 1 and 2. There were also significant differences in the perceived achievement of pupils in Years 1 and 2 and those in Years 3 - 6. However there were no significant differences between the perceived performance of students within the Middle and Upper Primary grade levels (eg. Years 3 - 6). This seems to be related to the results from previous sections which indicate that the amount of music lessons and activities, and the attitudes to and priority of music in the school, significantly diminish as the grade level increases.

The combination of socioeconomic status and site of school was also a significant factor in the perception of the development of pupils’ musical skills, with pupils from urban schools in high SES areas being perceived to achieve significantly higher results than those from urban schools and lower SES areas and from all rural schools, regardless of their SES ranking.

Conclusion

So what does this research mean in relation to children in today’s primary schools? The key significant factors influencing the policy and practice of music education in NSW primary schools relate to the school’s location (ie. rural or urban), the percent of non-English speaking children in the school and the socioeconomic area in which the school is situated. Other significant factors relate to the individual teacher characteristics of sex and age and the grade level taught.

Let us take two scenarios to exemplify inequality of music education practices in NSW primary schools, as indicated by these results. If Child A attends a school which has a high percentage of children from a non-English speaking background and is situated in a lower socioeconomic status area, that child will most likely be disadvantaged in the area of music education. Added to that, if the school is in rural NSW, the child’s teacher is male and under 40 years, and the child is in Years 3 - 6, the opportunity for that child to receive an effective music education is minimal.

However, if Child B attends a different school, in a higher income, urban area where most of the children come from English speaking backgrounds there is more likely to be an effective music education program in the school. In addition, if the child has an older female teacher and is in the lower primary grades in school, this will also maximise the opportunity the child has for an effective music education.

These scenarios indicate the three important external factors relating to music education in primary schools. These include, firstly, the context of the school, in particular the socioeconomic area in which the school is situated, the language and cultural background of the pupils and the rural or urban location of the school. The results clearly indicate that children from schools in lower socioeconomic areas, from schools with higher populations of non-English speaking backgrounds and from rural schools are significantly disadvantaged in the priority and practice of music education. Generally, neither their principals, their teachers nor their parents perceive music education to be of great importance, with the result that the quality and quantity of classroom and extra-curricular music education programs is diminished.
Secondly in relation to the teaching workforce, the teacher’s age and sex significantly influence how much music children are taught in the class situation, with children who have male teachers or teachers under forty years old receiving noticeably less than their counterparts who have female or older teachers.

Thirdly in relation to school curriculum issues, the grade level of the children is another key factor influencing the quality and quantity of music education in the primary school. Younger children, in Kindergarten and Years 1 to 2, receive much more music education and develop musical skills more systematically than do their older counterparts, as teachers of middle and upper primary classes appear neither to have the skills nor the commitment to give their pupils a satisfactory music education.

In considering these external factors it appears at first that little can be done to change the situation. There will always be schools in lower socioeconomic areas and in areas with proportions of recent migrant communities, in rural and urban settings. Teachers will always include both males and females, there will be younger and older teachers in most schools and most primary schools cater for KG - Year 6 classes.

However once these external influences have been identified principals, teachers and training authorities can work towards overcoming their effects. One clear way of doing this would be for all schools to employ music advisory teachers wherever the practical constraints of size permit, or to share one with other schools where size itself is a problem. These teachers would be able to provide the children who are disadvantaged by circumstantial constraints with a sound music program which they are clearly not receiving at present. At present, schools cannot claim to be providing equal and excellent educational opportunities to all students in this field. The gap between schools in poor and affluent areas and in rural and urban settings is demonstrably wide, and will widen even further unless some positive measures are taken to improve the position of schools in disadvantaged areas.

While the nature of these recommendations should come as no surprise this study had provided an extensive range of empirical evidence to demonstrate the disparities in music education provision and the circumstances that are associated with poorer levels of provision in schools in a way that cannot be ignored. The findings of this study are not simply expressions of expert opinion and they cannot be seen as statements of self interest by music experts within or outside the Department. Rather they reflect the priority and practice of music as classroom teachers and principals perceive it, and the musical skills that children develop as perceived by their classroom teachers. Thus if primary music education is to be taken seriously in this State these results need to be considered and acted upon.

On the basis of this research, and taking account of the recommendations of previous enquires, the most appropriate measures that could benefit all primary schools would be:

¥ the appointment of school-based advisory teachers with specialist expertise and training;

¥ the provision of at least a minimum set of equipment and resources required to implement the syllabus effectively;

¥ a continuing provision of inservice and professional development opportunities both to update the advisory teachers and to provide a more basic level of support to the general classroom teaching staff;

¥ support for the provision of instrumental tuition and extra-curriculum opportunities for all pupils;

¥ recognition of the circumstantial differences in which each school is
placed and how they influence music education in that school. Because of the
differences in levels of community support and interest in music education and the
capacity of communities to give this support, this issue needs to be explicitly recognised
and responded to adequately. Ignoring these difficulties does not address them and will
bring greater disparity between schools.

If these issues are addressed seriously in future music education policy there may be hope
that the children of the future will all receive a balanced, developmental music education in
the primary school less affected by circumstantial constraints than they seem to be at
present. Indeed without the implementation measures suggested above it is likely that the
policy of providing a sound music education for all children will continue to be, in many
cases, little more than a pretence.

Australia : Needs and Prospects. Unisearch (UNSW), Sydney.

ASME and ACE, (1973) Report of Joint Sub-Committee of ASME/ACE in NSW on ways of
increasing the quality and consistency of music education in infant and primary schools.
Sydney.

ASME and ACE (1973) Ibid. p 2
ASME and ACE (1973) Ibid, p 6-7
committee appointed to enquire into the arts in the education of school children in NSW.


Commonwealth of Australia (1995) Arts Education