Parents' Perception of Private School Provisions

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Abstract

Educational policy makers are able to cite sound reasons for certain types of instruction being the responsibility of the generalist primary class teacher. Parents of able young Australian musicians are, however, critical of the impact of such policies upon their children's school-based experiences. They maintain that teachers' lack of skills and expertise in specialist areas, results in the use of inappropriate and less than successful approaches to teaching and learning.

An examination of extensive qualitative data reveal firmly held parental contentions, that the needs and interests of musically involved children would best be served by school-based music programs differentiated from the mandatory courses undertaken by all students. Additionally, parents maintain that placement of their children in advantaged school settings is likely to ensure the provision of teaching and learning programs more readily suited to their children's needs.

The evidence presented in this paper has been obtained from a recently completed, Australia-wide study, concerning itself with an examination of environmental facilitation of talent development in music. Australian parents (N=194) describe a crisis of confidence in the public education system in respect of this specialised area of education. The implications for teacher education programs shall be addressed.

Introduction

Contemporary writers confirm the importance of musical activity for the aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, and physical development of the individual (Elliott, 1995; Gardner, 1982, 1983; Parker, 1990; Reimer, 1970). These views are firmly embedded in the design of music syllabi and support documents being used in primary and secondary schools throughout Australia, and particularly in the state of NSW (NSW Board Of Studies, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c; 1998, 1999a, 1999b; NSW Department of Education 1984). Statements of syllabus rationale emphasise, for example, the role of musical engagement in the wholistic development of young Australians. School-based musical engagement is considered to provide the necessary opportunities for intellectual development and an appropriate outlet for young people's aesthetic expression (NSW Board of Studies, 1994b, 1994c).

Classroom-based music education programs are also considered essential for the enhancement of a child's normative musical growth and development (NSW Board Of Studies, 1998; Hargreaves, 1996; Elliott, 1995; Reimer, 1970). They provide vital opportunities for field specific engagement with learning, training, and practice for all children (Gagné, 1993, 1995). They also have the potential to offer extension opportunities for able and experienced young musicians.

The effectiveness of school-based music education programs is, however, frequently questioned in research studies in music education (Lierse, 1998; Mills, 1996, 1997). The following discussion briefly outlines some of the challenges and dilemmas facing school-
based music educators with the view to considering the impact these have upon the effectiveness of classroom-based music programs for experienced young Australian musicians attending primary and secondary schools.

School-based Music Education in Australia

All Australian school students undertake mandatory, school-based courses of music education as part of regular curriculum offerings. In primary schools the design and implementation of such courses is largely the domain of the generalist class teacher. Mills (1997) effectively outlines the staffing situation in Australian primary schools in her description of a similar scenario existing in schools in England. She found that three staffing models exist for classroom-based music teaching: specialists who have music qualifications and have undergone subject specific professional development; generalist class teachers without music qualifications or experience; and situations in which specialist teachers work with generalist teachers to develop their experience and confidence to teach music in school classrooms. Numerous reports and studies confirm the similarity between the Australian and English primary school situations (Bartle, 1968; Commonwealth of Australia, 1995; Covell, 1970; Department for Education and Science, 1978, 1992; Jeanneret, 1996; NSW Ministry of Education, 1974; Russell, 1988; Russell-Bowie, 1993).

While some recommendations as to preferred staffing arrangements for programs of music teaching and learning in primary school classrooms exist (Russell-Bowie, 1993, 1999a, 1999b), the effectiveness of one staffing formula over another is deemed to be reliant upon factors other than the musical qualifications and experience of the teacher. Mills (1996, 1997) maintains, for example, that effective classroom-based musical experiences are more likely to occur in schools where resources and personnel are managed appropriately by school administrators and senior teachers. Her findings demonstrate that in situations in which one or more components are ineffectively employed, neither staff nor students are likely to achieve their potential.

Mills (1997) specifically cites examples of primary school teachers failing to adjust programs of teaching and learning in accordance with the needs of their students despite having undertaken specialised musical training. She found that school-based music programs which contained unchallenging content, and were taught in procedural rather than motivating ways, ensured poor standards of attainment for all students. Mills (1996, 1997) maintains that in such cases school administrators and senior teachers, working outside the area, are rarely aware of such concerns. It would appear that the occasional, successful public display by the school choir or band tended to mask recurrent classroom-based problems.

Secondary school students in Australia also undertake mandatory, classroom-based courses of music in the junior secondary school years (years 7 & 8). Courses in elective music may be chosen in years 9 and 10 and the senior years, 11 and 12. The design and implementation of secondary school-based music education programs derived from state-based syllabi, is the responsibility of classroom-based secondary school music teachers. An integrated approach to music teaching and learning requires that all secondary school students develop the skills and knowledge necessary for engagement with musical performance, composition, and analytical tasks (NSW Board of Studies 1994a, 1994b, 1994c). Unlike primary school teachers, secondary school music teachers in Australia are required to submit to four years of specialist tertiary studies in either music and education, or in music education, as a pre-requisite to school-based employment.

Lierse (1998, 1999) provides concerning evidence on the health and effectiveness of secondary school-based music programs in Australia. She maintains that many programs are being taught by ill-prepared and ineffectual teachers. Her findings highlight several
contributing factors, significant among which is the impact of the reduction of funding allocations to appropriately staff and resource music education programs in state government secondary schools. School music teachers and principals surveyed in her study contend that reductionist approaches to funding allocation have significantly compromised the quality of music teaching and learning programs.

Additionally, Lierse (1998, 1999) maintains that reductions in staffing and resources to tertiary institutions have had a negative impact upon the quality of music education graduates obtaining employment in the government school sector. Studies by Gordon (1999) and Kelly (1999) confirm that American and Australian school-based music educators are failing to effectively meet the demands of an increasingly complex role. Teachers at the secondary and tertiary levels report that they are unable to fulfil their obligations to provide quality music teaching and learning experiences in environments where the availability of time and specialist resources have been significantly diminished.

**Procedure**

The evidence presented in this paper has been obtained from a recently completed, Australia-wide study, the focus of which concerns the development of a profile of environmental catalysts which have facilitated opportunities for learning, training, and practice, in the musical domain, for a sample of high achieving young Australian musicians (Gagné, 1993a, 1995a). Research literature from the fields of gifted education and music education support the broader investigation.

One hundred and ninety four Australian families, representing six Australian states and one territory, participated in this study. Two mailed survey questionnaires were used to collect extensive qualitative and quantitative data pertaining to the experienced young Australian musician's parent and then pertaining to the experienced young Australian musician's home environment and musical involvements. Survey Questionnaire One provided details about the subject child's parents; their musical involvements, and their views on music and music education.

The majority of parents of experienced young Australian musicians responding to that survey questionnaire were female (81.4%), aged between 40 and 49 years. Cumulatively 77.8% of subject parents were aged between 30 and 49 years. Tertiary educational qualifications were reported as the highest level of educational attainment by 66.7% of a total pool of 381 parents from the participating families.

**The Place of Music in the School Curriculum.**

Parents provided views regarding their consideration of the place of music in the school curriculum. Claims that music in schools was valuable yet undervalued were consistent throughout the qualitative data. School-based musical engagement was described, for example, as being important and highly valued by parents and yet frequently undervalued in the broader community and in particular in some school sectors. The following parental comment highlights one of the central issues arising from the literature relating to the quality of school-based programs of music teaching and learning.

"Music is very important but often only the basics are taught in the school curriculum because schools (ie primary, gov't) lack teachers with musical expertise or experience. More opportunity should be given to all schools to go beyond the basics - music in the school curriculum is undervalued at present".

(Parent [Pt]. 051)
Mills (1996, 1997) maintains that the quality of school-based programs of music teaching and learning is reliant upon the effective use and management of personnel and resources available to design and implement such programs. She describes a staffing profile in which many primary school children in England receive musical instruction from generalist class teachers. Few of these teachers have specific musical qualifications or expertise. A similar situation exists in Australian schools where syllabus directives encourage the generalist class teacher to employ musical activity as an integral component of daily classroom-based teaching and learning programs.

There is research evidence to indicate that with appropriate support, professional development, and resource availability, classroom music programs in primary schools can be successfully implemented by the generalist class teacher (Jeanneret, 1996; Russell, 1988). While this may be effective for the exposure of musical novices to the fundamental skills and knowledge of the domain, the notion that musically able and experienced primary-aged children should be taught by teachers musically less experienced or well informed than them, would not sit comfortably in any other field of endeavour.

While educational policy makers are able to cite sound reasons for musical instruction being the responsibility of the generalist primary class teacher, parents of experienced young Australian musicians provide a rather critical view of the impact of such policies in their children's classrooms. Their comments indicate that primary teachers, with limited musical experience, adopt inappropriate and less than successful approaches to the programming and implementation of classroom-based musical experiences.

"Very teachy, unjoyous, has-to-be-correct, like bad medicine that's good for you".

(Pt. 009)

"...an important place in broadening children's horizons. I don't know that learning the recorder once a week does this however. I like to see exposure to different types of music, ages of music & cultures". (Pt. 082)

The issues raised in parents' comments align with Mills' (1997) contention that many English school-based music programs contained unchallenging content and were taught in procedural rather than motivating ways. She found that even teachers with some musical qualifications and/or experience frequently underestimated the abilities of primary-aged musicians. Low teacher expectations of accomplishment frequently resulted, for example, in poor standards of performance (Van Tassel-Baska, 1992).

Demographic evidence collected as part of the broader Australian investigation clearly demonstrate that most of the sample of experienced young musicians enter primary school having been exposed to a wealth of home-based musical encounters. More than 40% of the sample had, for example, undertaken some form of formal musical tuition before their sixth birthday. Cumulatively, 90.7% had undertaken formal musical tuition before the end of their primary school years. The notion that such children can be effectively taught by well-meaning musical novices needs to be seriously considered by educational policy makers. Clearly the needs and interests of students, whose families have provided extensive opportunities for music learning and training, are not being effectively served by primary school-based music programs planned and implemented by the generalist class teacher.

Investigations by Russell-Bowie (1999b) suggest that the most appropriate model of staffing primary school music programs is to regularly couple generalist class teachers and specialist expertise. Clearly in the case of children entering primary school with prior musical learning and training, this situation would offer a satisfactory alternative to what currently occurs in
many Australian primary schools. The following example demonstrates how the appropriate management of school staff and resources can result in workable and relevant programs for primary school children demonstrating a range of musical interests, experience levels, and aptitudes (Mills, 1997).

"Our children go to the local primary school where music is a big part of the school curriculum. Three teachers of music. Music is part of each class every week. Music is also part of every school function (ie. assemblies etc). The children feel they can play a part in the school life - choir, orchestra, recorder groups". (Pt. 017)

Successful implementation of the type of music program initiatives described here would require a considerable injection of funds for staff, professional development, and resource allocation. Comments by parents describing the low status of music in Australian schools are reinforced in recently completed research which explores the impact of reductionist approaches to funding for educational programs in government secondary schools. Lierse (1998, 1999) confirms, for example, that the low status and priority of school-based musical initiatives means that they are often the first to be eliminated from program offerings when funding is reduced or limited. She demonstrates that philosophical rhetoric contained within music curriculum documents being used in schools in Victoria, is indeed at odds with reductionist economic policies being adopted by the government in that state (Lierse, 1998). She maintains that while the breadth and diversity of music curriculum documents is being appropriately expanded to meet the needs of children exhibiting varying degrees of interest and expertise, the reality is that funding constraints have effectively limited the number of teachers available to implement programs derived from the documents and have drastically reduced the allocation of time available in schools to do so.

Comments by parents of musically experienced young Australians demonstrate that they are well aware of the challenges and dilemmas facing school-based music educators, particularly those located in state government secondary schools. Despite firmly held contenotions that school-based programs are important in the provision of equity of access to opportunities for musical engagement, some of the sample of Australian parents recognise that placement of children in advantaged secondary school settings is more likely to ensure the provision of appropriately challenging musical experiences. The differential between music program offerings in the public and private school sectors was frequently referred to in the descriptive data.

"It plays a large role in my daughter's school, as it does at most private schools in Sydney. From my experience the place music has is dependent on the type of school (public vs private) therefore on the financial status of parents". (Pt. 024)

"I have 2 children in separate schools. In my son's school (private) I think music is treated with the seriousness it deserves. It is given significance by the whole school community and the standard is excellent. I think the situation in my daughter's school (public) is more common where the teaching is pathetic and the standard rubbishy" (Pt. 004)

"Some private schools publicize their musical activities and it is a big drawcard. State schools often have just as great success but often don't have the range of expensive instruments or private music classes to give that extra edge". (Pt. 012)

Kelly (1999) identified limited availability of funding to appropriately resource demanding and rigorous school-based musical programs as one of the stressors contributing to the "burn-out" of music teachers employed in government secondary schools in Queensland. Teachers admitted that they could not effectively cater for the needs and interests of students, demonstrating a range of musical ability and experience levels, in an environment
where the availability of time and specialist resources had been significantly diminished by a reduction of funding available to schools for such purposes.

The failure of school-based music programs to cater for the needs of able and experienced young secondary school musicians appeared as a recurrent theme in the descriptive data provided by Australian parents.

"It should be achieving a certain basic standard of music "literacy" - understanding chords, cadence, scales, periods of music. However, it tends to deteriorate into an out-of-control situation (discipline-wise) and tends to aim at the lowest common denominator and tends to be boring for children who are talented and/or having music lessons". (Pt. 028)

Kelly's (1999) investigation also confirms that discipline and management difficulties experienced by classroom music teachers in state secondary schools, have a significant impact upon the quality of instructional delivery and content of school-based music programs. She refers particularly to stresses felt by music teachers in state government secondary schools where a tradition of engagement with "more serious" musical forms and styles does not exist. Lessons based upon simplified content and the use of popular music styles are employed as means of "entertaining" rather than educating difficult to manage class groups of secondary school music students.

Although many Australian parents indicated that they were "strong supporters" (Pt. 072) of school-based music programs which provided "equity of access for all children" (Pt. 072) a trend evident in their espoused views was the expression of a policy of separatism for musically able and experienced secondary school students. Comments indicate a belief that the needs and interests of some of the sample of experienced young Australian musicians would perhaps best be served by school-based music programs differentiated from the mandatory courses offered to all students. The following comments highlight the perceived failure of classroom-based musical offerings to cater effectively for the needs and interests of musically experienced secondary school students.

"Music cannot be taught well in groups because of the high level of skill required...children with musical ability need more encouragement in performing etc, because the present school culture is anti-musical". (Pt. 013)

"Important if people want it. Forcing music on people who don't want to take music may have some value but probably would do more harm". (Pt. 171)

"...[experienced] students do receive a lot of jeering from peers". (Pt. 096)

"Without an appreciation of music developed from a young age, music can appear "boring" to students. I don't envy teachers of the Mandatory music course in junior sec.[ondary] school! To those with interest it can assume a major role. The challenge is to interest the presently uninterested". (Pt. 206)

One finding emerging from the broader Australian investigation is the apparent deliberate shift of the enrolment of experienced young Australian musicians from state government primary schools to private or special purpose schools for the secondary school years. The espoused views of Australian parents concerning the place and value of music in the lives of their children are perhaps being enacted in the placement of their musically experienced and able children in school environments which parents perceive are better able to cater for their child's musical ability and interest level.
Undoubtedly rigorous and high quality school-based musical program offerings are expensive to establish and maintain. Administrators of independent schools, and special purpose music schools in Australia, generally acknowledge the need to employ specialist expertise to service the unique requirements of the classroom and ensemble music programs they offer for their students. The evidence indicates that a crisis of confidence (Noonan & Baird, 1999) in the public education system is well founded in respect of compulsory classroom-based music education. Parents seeking extending opportunities for musical learning, training, and practice, for their already musically experienced and able children, recognise well the impact that differential funding allocations have on the quality of school-based music education offerings.

Implications for Teacher Education

This investigation highlights several issues relevant to the current content and structure of Australian teacher education courses in music education. In the case of primary school educators, the decreased emphasis on arts education in pre-service courses, and in particular foundation courses in music discipline and music pedagogy (Russell-Bowie, 1999a), mean that only tertiary, teacher education students with prior learning and experience in the field may have a musical skill and knowledge base developed to a level necessary to design and implement classroom-based music programs which will appropriately challenge primary-aged students, who themselves may have undertaken extensive formal music learning and training. Additionally, few primary music education courses, it appears, consider the design and implementation of learning experiences differentiated to cater for the needs and interests of experienced and able young musicians. Few teacher education courses in Australia, for example, mandate the study of the specific educational needs and interests of exceptionally able children. Low teacher expectations of students’ musical accomplishments frequently result, for example, in the acceptance of poor standards of performances resulting from musical potential unrealised.

With respect to music education in secondary schools, the findings reinforce the difficulties being experienced by classroom-based music teachers in the implementation of broad-based, mandatory courses of study. The under-valuing of the arts in society has contributed significantly to the reduced status of school-based music education. It appears that the challenge of effectively disciplining and managing large groups of disinterested adolescents in music classrooms, is only being met by activities which serve to entertain rather than educate secondary school students.

The reduction of staff and resources devoted to tertiary music education has resulted in the genericization of course content (Lierse, 1998, 1999). Little time is available, for example, to consider discipline and management issues specific to secondary music classrooms. Generic courses in discipline and management delivered to students undertaking any teacher education degree appear to provide new graduates with a skill and knowledge base which falls well short of that necessary to effectively engage music students in challenging school environments. Similarly, the specific needs of experienced and able school-based musicians are not being considered as part of teacher education courses. The inability to effectively differentiate music learning programs and experiences from those mandated for all students, for example, results in the use of unchallenging content and inappropriate teaching and learning strategies for experienced young musicians.

Additionally, the evidence highlights the differential quality of music education offerings in state and private schools which is described fundamentally in terms of the gap between "rich and poor". Music education graduates need to be equipped with skills and strategies that will
enable them to design and implement classroom-based programs of teaching and learning which will effectively cater for a diversity of student needs and interests, irrespective of funding and resource bases available to do so.

REFERENCES


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