Arts education: Are the problems the same across five countries?
Preservice teachers’ perceptions of the problems to teaching arts education in primary schools in five countries.

Keyword: ARTS

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**Abstract**

Arts educators around the world know well the importance of a strong arts education in the lives of children. And this importance is often reflected in the arts policies of education departments, schools and universities. However the actual practice of arts education in primary schools falls far short of the policy. Problems identified as impacting on the teaching of music, dance, drama and visual arts include the teacher’s lack of knowledge about the syllabus requirements, the teacher’s lack of time to prepare effective arts lessons, the perceived lack of time in the teaching day, lack of priority for arts education, the teacher’s lack of personal arts experiences and the lack of adequate arts resources within the schools. This study examines preservice teachers’ perceptions of these problems to teaching arts education, across five countries. The results indicate that about two-thirds of the sampled students agreed or agreed strongly that these six problems impacted on arts teaching in primary schools. Responses were fairly similar across all five countries, except in relation to Visual Arts education, where students from Australia (NSW) did not indicate as strongly that these problems were important compared with those from Namibia, South Africa and Ireland. The paper concludes with recommendations to address these problems.
Introduction

The arts... can serve as models of what educational aspiration and practice might be at its very best (Eisner, 2002, p. xii)

Arts educators know well the importance of a strong arts education in the lives of children. Every culture is surrounded and immersed in music, dance, drama and visual arts. Throughout history, as soon as people have satisfied their bodily needs for food, warmth and shelter, they ‘turn to expressing themselves through art’ (Senate Environment, Recreation, Communications and the Arts References Committee [SERCARC], 1995, p.6). Even today, for many people, the arts are an integrated way of life and of self-expression from the day they are born. But for others, the arts are more like a spectator sport, which they enjoy to watch from afar, only occasionally stepping up to participate in making, appreciating or performing within the arts. However, research indicates how important participation in the arts is for the developing child. Studies have indicated that students with high levels of arts participation outperform students with little arts background, by virtually every measure (Fiske, 1999).

Fiske (1999) also states that when children are engaged in the arts, they are being nurtured in their cognitive, social and personal development. He adds that involvement in the arts enable young people to ‘reach for and attain higher levels of achievement’ (Fiske, 1999, p. ix, xii). There is also much research indicating that there is a high correlation between children’s involvement in the arts and their academic success and also that young people who ‘report consistent high levels of involvement in instrumental music show significantly higher levels of mathematics proficiency by Year 12’ (Fiske, 1999, p.2)

However the arts should not be taught just so that children can achieve better results in mathematics or any other subjects, rather they should be taught as well for their own intrinsic worthy, as they are a vital and necessary component of the primary school curriculum (Kear and Callaway, 2000, p.4).
Although this is the policy in many countries, the practice is not so positive. The ‘basic’ academic skills, such as English, Maths, Science and Social Science, are seen as important and valued in schools, but the arts are considered to be the frills subjects. They are often the first to be left off the timetable if time is short and the first to receive budget cuts (Winner and Hetland, 2000, p. 17; Bresler and Thompson, 2002, p. 154). The actual teaching of the arts in each of the five countries investigated in this study differs significantly from the policy.

In Australia, for the past thirty years, there have been several enquiries into the adequacy of the provision of arts education in schools and each report has produced similar results – there is a paucity of quality arts education happening in state primary schools (NSW Ministry of Education, 1974; Schools Commission / Australia Council, 1977; Comte, 1988; SERCARC, 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 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, drawing in visual arts and producing sketches for drama. Although strong advocates for the arts helped ‘draw rhetorical attention to the arts ... practices in the schools appear largely unchanged’ (p. 3). Bresler adds that ‘according to the National Endowment for the Arts (1988), “Basic arts education does not exist in the United States today”’(p. 3) and ‘there is little need for research to establish the low priority and fragmentation of arts education in the schools’ (p. 3). Of the arts subjects that are taught, music and visual arts
were the most often implemented, with dance and drama (theatre) faring the worst. Also, when the arts were taught they were mainly taught as ‘acts of production’ rather than forms of knowledge (Fowler, 1988, p. 6).

In Namibia, where many people are brought up in an arts-rich culture which permeates their lives, the arts were ideally meant to be taught in schools by specialist teachers, but practicalities often resulted in the arts being taught by a classroom teacher with minimum formal experience and training in 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).

In South Africa, a similar country where the arts are an integral part of many peoples’ lives and ways of expressing themselves, and there are many exciting arts experiences happening outside of the school setting, ‘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’ (van Niekerk, 1997, p. 268).

Although in Ireland the children and teachers come from a rich heritage of music making, and in some cases dancing, within the classroom situation, many teachers seem to devote little time to playing instruments and creating music, and instead rely mainly on singing within their music lessons (Murphy, R. 1998). Across these five countries, specialist teachers in the arts in most public primary schools are currently a rarity and with the crowded curriculum the arts are generally 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 teach the arts subjects across these countries? Russell-Bowie (1993), in surveying almost 1,000 generalist primary school teachers in Australia, identified six main problems in relation to the teaching of music education: lack of knowledge, time, priority, personal
musical experience and 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 arts education as key problems in the implementation of effective music and other arts programs in elementary schools. Kear and Callaway (2000) identify the problems of teachers’ lack of personal skills and knowledge within the arts, lack of time and priority, lack of confidence, resources and facilities which discourage them from teaching the arts in their classrooms (pp. 4 – 5).

This study initially identifies six main problems (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) to teaching the arts, as raised in the literature, and examines the perceptions of preservice teacher education students from five countries, in relation to these problems.

Aim

This study is nested within the larger Creative Arts: Students’ Attitudes – National and Overseas Associate (CASANOVA) study, the aim of which was to survey a sample of preservice teachers from various countries to investigate their attitudes towards the Creative Arts. The current study on which this paper is based used only the questions from the survey which related to the problems relating to arts education.

Specifically this study examines the following questions:

1. What perceptions do preservice teacher education students sampled from five countries have about the problems of teaching the arts in the primary school?
2. *Is there a statistically significant difference in perceptions between students from the five different countries in relation to the problems in each of the art forms?*

**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 preservice 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.

**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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Namibia</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois (USA)</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland (Eire)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ALL 5 COUNTRIES</strong></td>
<td><strong>936</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>18 – 21</td>
<td>508</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22 – 25</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 primary 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 then means of the six problems in each of the art forms were computed then 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 perceptions do preservice teacher education students sampled from five countries have about the problems of teaching the arts in the primary school?
Students were asked to answer, on a five point scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree, if they thought problems in teaching each of the art forms 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 arts experiences and lack of adequate resources. The means of the responses for each of these questions in each of the art forms were averaged to give a mean which represented the students’ response to problems overall in each of the art forms and these are listed in Table 3.

### Table 3:

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Problems in Teaching Music %</th>
<th>Problems in Teaching Visual Arts %</th>
<th>Problems in Teaching Dance %</th>
<th>Problems in Teaching Drama %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia (NSW)</td>
<td>67.8</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>66.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Namibia</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>64.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Africa</td>
<td>69.7</td>
<td>66.4</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>71.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA (Illinois)</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>67.8</td>
<td>75.8</td>
<td>68.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>69.4</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>69.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN 5 COUNTRIES</td>
<td>68.5</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>67.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results indicate that in all five countries, the problems associate with teaching music were seen to be similar, with between 63% and 71% of students from the different countries agreeing or strongly agreeing that these six aspects were problems in relation to
teaching music. Similar results were found in relation to teaching drama with between 64.9% and 71.8% of students agreeing or strongly agreeing that these were problematic. There was more difference in range across the countries in relation to dance and visual arts education, with between 62.5% and 75.8% of students from the different countries agreeing or strongly agreeing that these six aspects were problems in relation to teaching dance and between 51% and 69.4% of students indicating that these problems were important in relation to visual arts education. To investigate these results further, the means of each of the averaged problems in relation to each art form and each problem were compared using ANOVA.

2. *Is there a statistically significant difference in perceptions between students from the five different countries in relation to the problems in each of the art forms?*

   The means and standard deviations of the responses from each of the five countries, to each of the averaged problems in each of the art forms, were computed and are listed in Table 4. The ANOVA results (Tukey HSD) indicated that there were statistically significant differences between the sampled Australian (NSW) students’ perception of problems and those students from Namibia, South Africa and Ireland, in relation to visual arts ($F = 8.36; \text{df} = 4,878; p=.000$), but there were no significant differences in relation to the other art forms.

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**Table 4:**

*Means and Standard Deviations of responses from students from five countries in relation to the averaged responses to the problems in each art form.*
Country | Problems in Teaching Music M/SD | Problems in Teaching Visual Arts M/SD | Problems in Teaching Dance M/SD | Problems in Teaching Drama M/SD
--- | --- | --- | --- | ---
Australia (NSW) | 3.8/.70 | 3.5/.79* | 3.8/.82 | 3.8/.83
Namibia | 3.9/.91 | 3.8/1.0* | 3.7/1.0 | 3.8/1.0
S. Africa | 3.9/.83 | 3.8/.85* | 3.9/.89 | 4.0/.87
Illinois (USA) | 3.6/.71 | 3.6/.74 | 3.9/.80 | 3.8/.80
Ireland | 3.8/.79 | 3.9/.82* | 4.1/.79 | 3.9/.90
ALL 5 COUNTRIES | 3.8/.79 | 3.6/.87 | 3.8/.89 | 3.8/.89

* Significant differences were indicated in relation to Visual Arts between Australia and Namibia; Australia and South Africa, and Australia and Ireland.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that about two-thirds of the preservice teacher education students sampled agreed or strongly agreed that the six problems relating to teacher’s lack of knowledge about the syllabus requirements, lack of time to prepare, not enough time in the teaching day, lack of priority for the arts, lack of personal arts experiences and lack of adequate resources were factors in arts subject being taught or not taught in primary schools. Overall, music education (68.5% of students agreeing) was seen to be affected the greatest by these problems, followed closely by drama (67.8%) and dance (67%) education. In relation to each of the countries, students from USA (Illinois) had the highest percentage (71.2%) agreeing that these problems were important in music education compared with Ireland which had the lowest percentage (63.2) of students agreeing with this. In relation to drama education, the lowest percentage of students agreeing that these were problems were from Namibia (64.9%) and highest were from South Africa (71.8%). In relation to dance education, the lowest percentage of students
indicating that these problems were factors were from Namibia (71.1%) and the highest percentage were from USA(Illinois) with 75.8% and Ireland (75%). The greatest variance in range of percentages was in relation to Visual Arts education with the lowest percentage being 51% of Australian (NSW) students and the highest being 69.4% of students from Ireland who indicated that these factors were important in teaching visual arts.

When the means were compared the only statistically significant differences were in relation to Visual Arts education, with Australian (NSW) students (M = 3.5) indicating that these problems were less important than indicated by the students from Namibia (M = 3.8), South Africa (M = 3.8) and Ireland, (M = 3.9).

The problems identified as being relevant to arts education seem to be universal across the five countries and overall students indicated that they perceived these to be important problems that need to be addressed. The problems of teachers’ lack of knowledge and personal arts experiences need to be addressed at a preservice level as well as through inservice teaching of practicing teachers. Teacher education institutions can play a key role in addressing these problems, by providing their preservice student teachers with quality programs across all the arts, both as discrete as well as integrated subjects. Content needs to cover personal development of skills and experiences in each of the art forms as well as the theory and practice of classroom activities appropriate to developing children within the primary school. This will enable their students to graduate with confidence, knowledge, personal skills and experiences within each of the art forms and so address two of the problems raised by the research. Teacher education institutions can also provide inservice courses, either as short courses or as part of a higher degree, for practicing teachers to complete, thereby increasing their confidence, knowledge, skills and experience within each of the art forms.
Schools and governments need to address the other four identified problems, those of lack of priority for the arts, lack of time to prepare, lack of time in the teaching day and lack of adequate resources for arts education. If the arts were seen in practice, as well as theory, to be equal in importance and value to the other curriculum areas then appropriate and adequate funding, time and priority would be given to arts education. For this to happen, arts educators need to provide clear and strong advocacy for the arts, in schools, in teacher education institutions and a government level. Advocacy documents such as *Champions for Change* (Fiske, 2001) need to be made readily available to principals, teachers and government departments, so that the importance and value of the arts to children, both for their own intrinsic worth as well as their assistance in the social, cognitive and emotional development of children, be recognised and understood. Maybe then these six problems will not be an issue in primary schools in the future.
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