What we want: the music preferences of upper primary school students and the ways they engage with music

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Abstract

This article examines the current music preferences of grade 6 children (12-13-year-olds) in an Australian primary school and the way these children engage with music.

Data were collected in three phases, comprising a written questionnaire administered to all 86 students, focus group interviews with 12 of these children, and observation of students' engagement at school, both in class and out of class, over a five week period. This article focuses on the latter two phases. Results revealed students prefer contemporary popular music to other styles of music; new media technology such as digital music players play a significant role in their engagement with music; music plays multiple roles in the students' lives; they are aware of the diverse ways music is present in the world, both in and out of school; the students valued choice, particularly in terms of repertoire, in music activities at school; school can stifle potential engagement with music; and students involved in extracurricular music groups at school valued the experience.

Keywords: music preferences, engagement

Introduction

"The grade 6s are my least favourite year level to teach. They're so hard to engage so you end up spending most of the lesson trying to keep them under control – and even that doesn't always happen." Primary school music teacher, Happy Valley Primary School.
"Music sucks. Not music that I listen to, but music at school, the music lesson we go to each week. We never get to do our music, the music we like." Grade 6 student, Happy Valley Primary School.

These two quotes emerged in interviews with the primary school music teacher and a group of year 6 students at Happy Valley Primary School (pseudonym) during the first week of a research project focusing on the current music preferences of upper primary school students and the ways they engage with music. The project stemmed from the classroom music teacher's invitation to conduct this research because of the frustration she had been feeling for a number of years with upper primary school student disengagement in her general classroom music lessons. The music teacher taught the year 6 students, and all other classes in the school, music for one hour each week (split over two half hour lessons).

The focus of the research was negotiated with the teacher. That is, she wanted to find out what music these children enjoy and the way these children engage with this music. The teacher believed she needed to better understand what music her students' preferred and the way they engaged with this music in order to rethink the way she taught music to upper primary school students. It should be noted that the research reported in this article does not focus on the

teacher's pedagogy and the changes she made in her pedagogy as a result of learning of the students' music preferences and preferred ways of engaging with music.

The dilemma of upper primary school music

Literature indicates that children become increasingly negative towards school music as they move through the primary school years (Ruismaki & Tereska, 2008; Bowles, 1998), with music being nominated as one of the least favourite school subjects (Stavrou, 2006). The reasons for this negative attitude to school music are many and varied, including the absence of a learner-centred and process-oriented music curriculum (Stavrou, 2006), the absence of connection between the cultural contexts of school, home and community when it comes to music learning and engagement (Temmerman, 2005), and music teaching pedagogy being aligned with the Western classical music tradition, as opposed to the more informal practices of popular music learning (Green, 2002).

It is not a case of upper primary school children not *liking* music. Studies of children's engagement with music outside of school suggests a real valuing of music in their everyday lives (i.e., Lamont et al., 2003; O'Neill et al, 2002; North et al., 2000). Therefore to engage upper primary school children in school music there needs to be an understanding of what music upper primary children prefer, and the ways they choose to engage with music.

Music preference

The music preference literature demonstrates that many factors impact on music preference, and warn against generalisations being made. For example, in their overview of musical taste in adolescence, Zillman & Gan (1997) found many reasons for music preference, with factors impacting on preference including peers, family, class and media, although some authors suggest

that social influences affect all forms of music preference (Radocy & Boyle, 2003). DeNora (2000), in her extensive research examining the role of music in everyday life, also illustrates the complexity of music preference, suggesting that music preference changes according to the individual's ever changing social circumstances.

In adolescence there is a trend towards popular music as a preferred style of music (Gembris & Schellberg, 2003; Hargreaves & Marshall, 2003; Lamont et al., 2003; North et al., 2000; LeBlanc et al., 1999; Hakanen & Wells, 1993), with students' musical identities being strongly connected to their valuing of popular music outside of school (Hargreaves & Marshall, 2003). Children's engagement with popular music takes on many forms, although this is predominantly through the act of listening to music (Hargreaves & Marshall, 2003; Lamont et al., 2003; Robertson & Christenson, 2001; North et al., 2000). Roulston (2006) points to the recent proliferation of new technologies that young people use to not only listen to, but also listen and view music, such as cell phones, MP3 players and portable DVD players. The impact that such listening and viewing devices have on music preference is relatively new and uncharted territory.

Method

The aim of this study was to examine the current music preferences and the ways upper primary school students engage with music. To do this, three research questions were posed:

1. What types of music do children (12-13-year-olds) in the final year of primary school prefer?
2. What role does music play in these children's lives?
3. What impact do school music experiences have on these children's engagement with music?

Design

There were three phases to the research design. The author undertook all stages of research data collection. Phase 1 was the administering

of a written questionnaire to all students (n = 86). Based on Roulston's (2006) interview guide prompts, the questionnaire not only asked students to identify their preferred music, but also asked them to identify the ways they engage with music (see appendix 1). Phase 2 consisted of focus group interviews. There were three focus group sessions: one immediately following the collation of the written questionnaire, the second two weeks later, and the final one two weeks after that. Each session lasted for half an hour. Phase 3 of the research design consisted of the researcher's ongoing observations of music activities in the school, both formal and informal. Formal observations included observing four half hour classroom music lessons taught by the music specialist, observing four extracurricular music rehearsals (choir and band), and twelve observations of students engaged in student-directed music making at lunch breaks. In addition to observing these activities the researcher was involved in talking to students about these activities. This third phase of the research design provided an additional data gathering technique to gain additional in-depth data about the students' music preferences and engagement with music. Choosing multiple sources of data and data collection procedures, as is the case with this research design, is typical of ethnographic studies, allowing for different perspectives of participants to be apparent, resulting in a more complete understanding of the complexity of the behaviour of the participants (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). The initial questionnaire provided raw data that was used as stimulus for the focus group discussions. That is, through the focus group discussions, the researcher sought to explain the data trends that emerged from the questionnaire. A debrief interview with the music teacher occurred at the conclusion of the project to share findings. The findings were also shared with interested students at the conclusion of the project. This article will focus on phases 2 and 3 of the study,

although reference to phase 1 (the questionnaire) will occur.

Participants

The questionnaire respondents were the 86 children in grade 6 (12-13-year-olds), the final year of primary school, at Happy Valley Primary School, an urban public school in Australia. 12 of the 86 students were part of two focus groups of six students each. Half of each group had students who were participants in the school instrumental and choral programs. In addition, half the students in each group were male, and half female. The aim of the focus groups was to have a group of students to comment further on the results of the questionnaire. In total 34 of the 86 students were observed and/or interviewed informally about the music activities they were engaged in both informally and formally during the five weeks the researcher spent at Happy Valley Primary School. These activities included band and choir rehearsal, a student initiated and run dance club, informal listening to music in the playground, and a student run SingStar karaoke competition.

Ethics

All student participants in the project were informed that their participation, whether it was filling in the questionnaire, being part of the focus groups, or being observed in their music-making, was entirely voluntary. Students were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. All participants were ensured of anonymity throughout the research process. This was particularly important for students when speaking frankly about the music lessons they undertook at school.

Students were informed of the purpose of the research, which was initiated by the specialist music teacher to find out more about the role of music in their lives, which in turn would impact on the way the teacher would plan music lessons in the future. Both the teacher and students were

also informed that the results of the research would be shared at the conclusion of the project.

The rights of both the specialist music teacher and students were considered when the research was designed. That is, there needed to be clear benefits for the participants in terms of the research. The benefits for the teacher was a better understanding of the students, so that she could then use this research data to plan for more engaging music lessons in the future. The latter was also seen as a beneficial outcome for students. That is, more engaging music lessons that took into account students' interest and students' musical needs. Similarly, possible harm to participants was also assessed as being minimal due to student anonymity.

Data analysis

Constant comparative analysis of data occurred as it was collected (Anfara, Brown & Mangione, 2002; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), resulting in emergent themes through the collation of the questionnaire, ongoing focus group interview data, observations of music activities in the school, and informal discussions with students engaged in music activities. The inclusion of these multiple forms of data collection allowed for triangulation of data. Data analysis occurred initially through open coding, resulting in the categorisation of data; subsequently selective coding occurred, allowing for the further refinement of data (Strauss & Corbin 1990). As themes emerged and were clarified additional data in the form of focus group interviews and informal discussion with students engaged in music activities continuously occurred. Initially, data from the questionnaire provided starting themes for analysis. These themes were continuously refined as student voices and observations by the researcher provided additional information and alternative perspectives on the emergent themes.

Results

Students prefer contemporary popular music to other styles of music

The written questionnaire, focus groups and observations of student engagement in own choice music activities at school pointed to a clear preference amongst boys and girls for contemporary popular music. The questionnaire asked students to indicate the music they liked to listen to at home. This was an open response item (like all the other items), yet students wrote down styles of music, often more than one.

The focus group interviews revealed that students would like to be able to freely listen to contemporary popular music at school. However, there were limited opportunities for this to occur. Students in both groups were particularly scathing of the school policy to ban iPods and MP3 players: "That is such a dumb rule because that's how I listen to music." One of the girls in the focus groups indicated that each afternoon after school her mother would meet her at the school gate, give her her MP3 player, then she would walk home listening to music while her mother would drive home!

The six students in the focus groups who were in the school band or choir indicated that popular styles of contemporary music were preferred, and that they wanted more of this music at school. These students clearly differentiated between the music played or sung in these groups and the contemporary popular music they listened to at home. For example, a member of the choir said

I like being in choir and I love to sing. But choir singing is different to the way I really like to sing, the music is just so different, even when it's cool music like ABBA. We don't get to sing it like ABBA, or even like the actors did in [the movie] Mama Mia. But that's okay, being in choir is still fun and you get to sing with other really good singers.

In each of the student initiated music activities at school during lunch breaks the choice of music was contemporary popular. Although iPods and

MP3 players were banned, mobile phones were not. The students thought this was amusing, as music could also be stored and played on mobile phones. On seven separate occasions groups of both boys and girls were seen listening to and sharing contemporary popular songs on mobile phones.

Another example of student initiated engagement with popular music was a group of four girls who regularly spent the lunch break at the back of the student canteen so they could listen to the radio that played in the tuckshop: "They turn it up real loud, which is great. There are some really cool Mums who work there and they listen to the same station we do, not stations that play music from the eighties." A student initiated and student run dance club also featured contemporary popular music. The music was chosen by a group of year 6 girls, although a teacher who supervised the club could veto songs deemed to be inappropriate. Finally, as a reward a group of girls were allowed to bring in the game SingStar one Friday afternoon and organise a karaoke like competition using this computer game.

Technology is indelibly linked to engagement with music

New technologies played a vital role in students' engagement with music. The questionnaire revealed that students use a range of new technologies to access music, including computers, Internet websites, MP3 players, iPods and mobile phones.

Older ways of listening to music, namely the radio, television and CD player, did not rank as highly as newer technologies. The focus groups revealed how the higher ranking newer technologies have replaced older modes of listening to music. For example, YouTube was frequently used to view a video clip of a newly released song: "You get to watch it straight away, and you can send a link to your mates so they can see it too. If you want to see the clip on TV you've

got to wait until Saturday or Sunday morning when they show them on TV." Therefore YouTube is serving as a more contemporary, user friendly mode of viewing popular music video clips.

Music has multiple roles in the lives of students

Although focusing on listening to music, the written questionnaire pointed to the multiple roles that music plays in the students' lives. When asked on the written questionnaire to indicate what they liked to do while listening to music, 70% of students indicated at least two different activities, the activities being varied, including relaxing, singing, dancing, talking on the telephone, playing computer games, doing homework, doing household chores, and as an accompaniment to exercise.

Focus group interviews further revealed the important and multiple roles that music played in the participants' lives. A clear distinction was made between teacher led music at school, student initiated music activities at school, and music outside school, with students in the focus group most excited to talk about the latter. The two focus groups were unanimous in their use of music to "relax", "chill" or "de-stress." This discussion also revealed how aware the students were of stress and having to manage it. As one girl said, "There's just *so* much pressure on us, from parents, teachers, friends, other kids at school. You're supposed to do so much and do it well. I need time to just relax and unwind, by myself. Music is the *best* for doing this." Others agreed, indicating that using music for this purpose tended to be a solitary activity, most often listening to music using iPods or MP3 players with earbuds, "where you can just block the world out." The nominated place for this was unanimously the students' bedrooms.

The students in the two focus groups were able to articulate two specific types of roles that music plays in their lives: music as foreground activity ("where it's all about the music") and music in the

background ("where it's there and you know it and you like it there, but you're doing other things as well"). The former included singing along to songs and dancing to music, whereas the latter included talking on the phone, playing computer games, and doing homework. Members of the groups pointed to music making certain activities that were viewed as unpleasant – namely homework, cleaning your room, and chores – at least bearable, "because you can focus on the music and just get it done." In response to music being used to exercise, one boy indicated that music helped him when training for middle distance running: "It pumps me up, gets me motivated." He stressed the importance of the "right music" for this, and indicated he spent a lot of time creating playlists and "getting the order right" so the music had maximum effect when he trained.

The focus groups identified other ways that they used music in their everyday lives, namely using music to socialise with family. None of the focus group members were surprised that listening to music in the car rated so highly: "It's where you get to share the music you like. My little brother loves listening to music that I like. He so copies my taste, and in the car we sing along to new stuff that we both like." In another response, a member said, "I love listening to the radio with Mum because I get to tell her what the cool music is and what she should be listening to. I like that, and I think Mum does too." Likewise, the kitchen as a place to listen to music was also determined to be a place where music could be shared with family members, either while cooking or eating.

One girl in the second focus group said that on the written questionnaire she indicated that she liked to listen to music at church (one of two respondents): "We have some really talented musicians at church and they play and sing the best Christian music. I love it, I love the message in those songs." Without any prompting, she immediately went on to discuss other ways she used music, in different contexts in her life, including Top 40 music that she used to "chill" to after school (listening on her MP3 player), listening "over and over" to "two or three" slower love songs

from the Top 40 that she was trying to "pick out the melody on the piano" (she has been learning piano for five years), and playing CDs that her mother plays "with instruments only" when doing her homework, because "songs distract me with the lyrics and I can't concentrate properly."

Likewise, when talking to members of the school choir, students talked about the experience of rehearsing and singing in the choir as being only one part that music plays in their lives. A number of these girls also led the dance club, which they saw as a completely different way of engaging with music:

Well it's not singing, it's dancing, and we kind of get to be the teachers, which is fun, teaching some of the younger kids our dances. We like that, we like planning the dance together, we've all got really great ideas and we work really well together.

These girls were not unsurprisingly good friends out of school: "We have sleepovers which always have music. We make up mix CDs and play those all night! We dance, we sing, we play games to the music, we talk about guys!"

Students are aware of the diverse ways music is present in the world, both in and out of school

When asked about music they were aware of at school, both focus groups identified numerous examples of music being part of school life. Examples of listening to music as an audience included the regular performances of school music ensembles (bands, choirs) performing on assembly, and visiting musicians.

Students identified examples of performing music at school, including singing and playing instruments in the weekly classroom music lessons as well as singing in other lessons, including learning and performing German songs in German class, and learning mathematics timetables by rapping them. Students also identified the use of background music in class: "Our teacher will often put on quiet music in the background when we're reading after lunch, or if we're doing written work."

Students cited much less obvious examples of music at school. One of the girls helped in the school office one lunch hour each week, where she answered the telephone: "Well there's always music on the phone when you're on hold. I like that." Another student indicated that music was on "school television" in the opening theme that introduced the educational television program "Behind the News" that students watched each week in class.

Observations of music activities that students were engaged in at school, and then discussing these activities with the students, also revealed student awareness of the diverse ways that music is present in the world, and how it is used. For example, when discussing with a group of three girls their experience singing in the school choir, they not only identified what they gained from the experience (being with friends, learning new songs, singing songs they enjoy singing), but what other people gained from their performing in the choir: "Mum just loves it, particularly when we sing in competition. She gets so excited about it if she thinks we're going to get a place. I remember two years ago we came first and she was just so happy!" Another of the girls talked of the choir visiting a retirement village and performing for the elderly residents:

That was so great. They loved us coming. I mean when we sang they were just enjoying it so much, and then after we got to talk to them and they told us how much they enjoyed us signing, particularly some of the songs that they knew when they were young.

In observing a group of boys listening to music on a mobile phone, it was apparent that they were not just listening to the music in a cursory way. Rather, as music selections played, or immediately following the music, they would comment on the music. This commentary was not just a value judgement about the music (i.e., "I like that song"), but often comment on how the music was used or could be used. For example, when playing a new hip hop track, one of the boys commented that it could have been used in "that 50 Cent movie"

because it was "hardcore and raw" like some of the other music featured in the movie. Later on, when playing a fast, guitar driven song, one boy commented that it would be an ideal song to listen to before playing "a game of footy [football] because it really gets you going."

Just as students were able to articulate a variety of ways music was present in school, they also identified a variety of ways that music was present outside of school. The focus groups concurred that music was a part of everybody's home life, with the two groups identifying a variety of sources of music in the home that were heard daily, including radio, television, computers and parents and/or siblings playing musical instruments. Four of the twelve focus group members talked about a parent who would play the guitar at home, often with the children encouraged to not only listen, but to join in when singing occurred. There was an overall awareness of music being part of all family members' lives.

Three of the focus group respondents spoke of seeing live music with their family. One frequently went to the Irish club with her parents and saw "lots of different Irish bands. Not like U2, but with Irish instruments. It's really different but I like it. And Mum and Dad get up and dance which is embarrassing, but they and their friends really like it." The other two respondents had been to popular music concerts, one to see the Police because his mother was a fan of the lead singer Sting ("Mum was screaming like a kid with all these other Mums when he came on stage"), and the other girl to see Pink: "Mum likes Pink and likes me listening to her and watching her videos because she's a good role model, a tough woman who takes no shit from men."

At the conclusion of the final focus group discussion with the second group, the group was asked if they could imagine a life without music. All agreed that they would not want to be without music, which led to an interesting comment: "I mean even if we wanted to, we couldn't get away from music. It's everywhere, on the radio, the Net, in movies, at the shops, everywhere." Others

agreed, then continued citing further examples of music not already discussed, including sportspeople singing their respective national anthems prior to competing, buskers performing in the city mall, and the theme tunes to popular television programs.

Students value having choice in music activities at school

Students clearly valued choice in the music activities they engaged in at school, whether this was in class (classroom music lessons), in extracurricular music ensembles (band, choir) or in informal music activities that occurred outside the classroom.

I observed the half hour classroom music lessons four times throughout the five weeks I was at Happy Valley Primary School. Each time the format of the lessons was the same: students sat on the carpet in a circle, took out their music writing book and began the lesson with ten minutes of music theory and aural tests (i.e., written rhythmic dictation and/or melodic dictation). This was followed by 10 – 15 minutes of singing, either with the aid of a song book with CD accompaniment, or the lyrics of a song written on a whiteboard and subsequently performed either unaccompanied with the teacher, or with the teacher playing guitar. In some cases songs were accompanied by actions or a dance. In the final five minutes of the lessons a music game was played. Throughout these lessons the teacher would often spend time reprimanding students for being "off task." By the end of the lessons there would be between two and five students who had been warned about their behaviour three times and were thus excluded from the concluding game.

One of the boys who was excluded from a game was a member of the focus groups. When students were asked to talk about the classroom music lessons he was the first to speak: "Music sucks big time. I'd rather do German than music, and German is sucky enough." When asked why he did not like the music lessons he said, "They're boring, we do the same thing each week, and I never get to play

the games at the end which is the only good thing about music." When asked if he liked music outside of school he responded, "I'm always listening to music and my brother's teaching me guitar. We're going to start a band when I know a few more songs." When asked what would make the weekly music lessons more engaging, he replied, "If we did stuff with music we like. Rock. Hip hop. Playing real music, not the songs that she [the teacher] picks." Up until this point other members of the focus group had not spoken. However, when this student begun talking about song choice others nodded in agreement, confirming that they too would like to have a say in song choice. One of the boys said, "If we were singing proper music I wouldn't sit there and just mouth the words, I'd get involved. It'd be more fun."

Discussion about having choice, or "a say" in music was frequently mentioned throughout the focus group interviews. Students commented that the music they listened to at home was their choice, not something that was imposed on them by adults. Even the students involved in learning a musical instrument at school emphasised the need for choice when it came to practising their instruments at home: "I know we've got to practise and some weeks I don't practise enough. I get that, but I like to choose when I practise. There's no way I could do it in the morning before school, but the afternoon is okay, before I do my homework. That works."

Members of the school bands and choirs valued choice in the repertoire they played. A trombonist, in talking about this, said that "Mr T was a really good conductor." When asked why he replied, "He always gives us a choice about what we play. We vote on it. He'll bring in a CD with three or four pieces on it. We listen to them, he tells us about them, then we vote for the two pieces we want to learn. It's really good." The valuing of choice went beyond the selection of repertoire to the actual performances the students gave. A group of senior choir members indicated that at the beginning of the year the choir would discuss with their

conductor where they would like to perform, what competitions they might enter, and when they would like to perform.

Student valuing of music activities that they initiated and organised also centred around choice. For example, the girls who organised the SingStar karaoke competition not only chose the songs that formed the repertoire for the competition, but they designed an advertising campaign for the competition, which included talking about the competition on assembly and designing and drawing posters advertising the competition. "We did everything ourselves," said one of the girls. "It was so much fun. I would love to get paid to do this. Like being a music promoter or the person who organises Australian Idol." Similarly, the girls who organised the dance club focused on their valuing of choice with this group: "Even though Mrs Williams is in the room when we rehearse and she can say no to a song, it's still what we choose. The songs that is. And we choose the dances, we make up the dances. She just tells us how talented we are!"

School can stifle potential engagement with music

Although there was a lot of enthusiasm about music amongst the grade 6 students at Happy Valley Primary School, there were clearly instances of the school environment stifling potential engagement with music. This was apparent with the classroom music lessons, where focus group interviews revealed a passion for music, yet ten of the twelve students in the focus groups only had negative comments about classroom music lessons. When asked how the lessons could be improved, the inclusion of popular music and less "writing" were the most cited comments.

A number of the students mentioned the upcoming end of year school concert where "every class gets up on stage and performs a song, dressed up, and with some dancing." Students indicated this had occurred each year since

kindergarten and it was "so boring. You spend the whole of the last term rehearsing in music time." When asked what they would prefer to do, students had a variety of suggestions, including selecting and choreographing their own choice of song, or to cater for different song preferences, "we could do a few songs, but just the verse and chorus of each." Other students were interested in creating their own music and performing it, "using computers." One student had a number of music composition software programs that he used at home. "But they're not on school computers," he commented. This led to discussion about the actual space where music lessons occurred, and how the physical space stifled potentially engaging music activities: "There's only one computer in the music room, which isn't enough. We've got eight in our classroom. If we had eight in the music room groups could make their own music up. With drum loops you can make up anything. A song, rap." When asked if they ever composed their own music in music lessons, the students indicated they did not. However, all but one student said this was something they would like to do, if they had access to musical instruments and computers with music composition software. The other issue raised by the group was the actual music room: "There's no chairs. It's just carpet and nothing else. There's no smaller rooms where groups can work, like we've got in our classroom upstairs." This was seen as a real liability, "because if we did any music in groups you wouldn't be able to hear what you were doing because of all the other groups in the room."

One of the most interesting (and potentially dangerous) activities I witnessed during lunch breaks was a group of boys performing choreographed stunts that a friend filmed on his mobile phone. This included, for example, the boys, one by one, jumping down five stairs, landing on their hands and feet and doing five pushups. In another instance they would slide down a metal handrail then walk up the stairs upside down, using their hands to move from step to step. The boy filming these stunts showed

me this video footage on his phone, along with previously recorded stunts. When asked what he intended doing with the footage, he said that he wanted to edit the footage, add music, and post the video on YouTube. When asked about the music he said "that's going to be the hardest part, because I don't want to add just the one song. I want to mash up different songs, make sure the music fits what's on the video, so that the rhythm matches the way they move." He indicated that he had some ideas for songs that he might use, but was unclear as to how he might "slow down songs" to match the movement on screen. When asked if learning how to do this would be something he would like to do at school, he replied, "Absolutely. But it's not going to happen. We don't do that in music, and it's not something my class teacher would think was worth doing." This was an example of a way that schooling could potentially facilitate an engaging student experience with music and technology, yet this student already believed it was something that his teachers would not want to facilitate. When asked what other musical activities he would like to do, he said, "I just want to be able to bring my iPod to school and listen to music." He was one of many students who mentioned the school's ban on iPods and MP3 players as being a ridiculous school rule. When asked why this rule was in place, the school principal told me that the main reason was theft and damage to players, but then indicated that they caused "antisocial behaviour … the children put on their earphones and block out the world." I asked the focus groups about this. A number of the students indicated that sometimes at school, during lunch breaks, and before and after school, this would be a positive thing to do: "Just listening to music puts me in a better mood, it can lift me up if something bad has happened." However, both groups did not see having digital musical players at school as promoting antisocial behaviour: "If I could bring my MP3 player to school I'd be playing music to my friends, letting them hear what I'm listening to." Others agreed, viewing the players as a way to share music at school.

Students involved in extracurricular music groups at school value the experience

For the most part students were negative about their experiences with classroom music, although they did reveal the potential for engaging, enjoyable music activities that might occur in these classes. In complete contrast, however, were those children involved in extracurricular school music ensembles, namely choirs and bands. Students willingly attended rehearsal and looked forward to performing, pointing to having an enthusiastic conductor, having input into repertoire and performances, and the social aspects of the ensembles as being the most important reasons for being in an ensemble. Participants also valued performing in different venues.

When asked about the difference between classroom music lessons and being in band or choir, students indicated that band and choir were more challenging. "Particularly band," said a flautist. "You have to have been learning your instrument for two or three years to be good enough to play in band." The other main reason that emerged was that band and choir was about performing music, whereas classroom music was seen as focusing too heavily on writing and music theory.

Discussion

Three research questions were posed for the current research project that examined the current music preferences and the ways the grade 6 students at Happy Valley Primary School engage with music. These questions can be answered with reference to the themes that emerged from the data analysis.

What types of music do children in the final year of primary school prefer?

Students demonstrated a clear preference for contemporary popular music, which concurs with previous research of the music preferences of adolescent children (Gembris & Schellberg, 2003;

Hargreaves & Marshall, 2003; Lamont et al., 2003; North et al., 2000; LeBlanc et al., 1996; Hakanen & Wells, 1993). Students were also able to identify specific genres of contemporary popular music that they preferred. Although preferring popular music at home, the study revealed that students would also like to be able to access popular music at school, although there were barriers to doing this such as the school's banning of iPods and MP3 players. However, the study did reveal other ways that students accessed and used contemporary popular music in the school environment. The students' access to and use of popular music was clearly dominated by digital technologies (digital music players, internet websites, computers).

What role does music play in these children's lives?

Music did not play a singular role in the lives of the students. Rather, music performed multiple roles in their lives, with distinction being made between teacher led school music experiences, student initiated music activities at school, and music outside of school. Music was foregrounded in some cases (singing and dancing to music, listening to music to relax), and in other cases was the background to other activities (doing homework, chores). Although listening to music was frequently cited as a musical activity, it was not the only musical activity highlighted by the students.

Although engagement with music was largely viewed as being a social activity, such as performing in music ensembles or sharing music with family members and friends, students also stressed their valuing of listening to music alone, in particular to relax (or "chill"/"de-stress"). This use of music as a means of mood regulation was previously reported by North et al. (2000) with females aged 13-14-years old. In the current study both males and females in the focus groups (and 57 of the 86 respondents in the written questionnaire) pointed to using music to enhance relaxation, or to "chill". Similarly, DeNora (2000) found that adults used music in similar ways to

modulate mood. Students were also acutely aware of the various ways that music is present and used both at school and outside of school. In doing this they were able to articulate a variety of ways that music positively impacted on their lives and the lives of others, thus articulating the "life benefits" that music provides, just as the adolescents in a study by Campbell, Connell & Beegle (2007) did.

In identifying the multiple roles that music plays in their lives, the students also identified how music in its various guises contributed to their own identities, or more specifically to their own multiple identities, or multiple selves (Harter, Bresnick & Bouchey, 1999). The data also points to friendship groups being formed not only through similar preference for particular musical styles (as revealed by North & Hargreaves, 1999), but the types of musical activities they chose to engage in (i.e., dance club; listening to music; being a member of the choir). The clear valuing of music outside of the structured, formal classroom music lessons suggests that classroom music in this school might consider drawing on the models of music learning outlined in the *Musical Futures* (2010) project, that is the way children aged 11-18 engage in music making through informal music learning practices, drawing on popular music practice. Finally, the study revealed that technology was indelibly linked with the way students engaged with music, as Roulston (2006) has suggested.

What impact do school music experiences have on these children's engagement with music?

Student response to the impact of school music experiences was varied in terms of teacher led classroom music lessons and teacher led extracurricular music experiences such as band and choir (the former negative, the latter positive), yet student response was overwhelmingly positive to student initiated music experiences at school. One of the central issues about positive, engaging school music

experiences was student choice in these activities, particularly in terms of repertoire selection (songs to sing, songs to dance to, music to be learnt and performed in band). The study also revealed that the school environment stifled potential student initiated engagement with music, both in the classroom (i.e., the nature of the classroom music lessons) and out of the classroom (i.e., access to computers, software and teacher expertise to add music to student video footage). That is, musical activity in the school was teacher led. Despite this, out of the classroom students did manage to find ways to engage in musical activities that they constructed. Finally, students involved in extracurricular music groups valued their involvement in these ensembles, with the enthusiasm of the conductor, choice in repertoire selection, and the social aspects of these ensembles having an impact on their positive experiences.

Implications for practice

There are notable limitations about the current study. Firstly, the study focused solely on grade 6 students in just one school. Therefore generalisations based on the results of this study cannot be made. Secondly, the focus of this article has predominantly on 12 student voices as heard through the focus group interviews.

The students' preference for popular music, and previous studies that have also found this to be the case, suggests that popular music cannot be ignored by teachers and should play a part in children's music experiences at school. Green (2006) indicates that popular music has been part of the music curriculum, but educators have often ignored the informal learning practices of popular musicians that are at the centre of popular music making, which has resulted in negative student response to the inclusion of popular music in school music. The current study clearly indicated that students did want popular music as part of their music learning experiences in class, although students in teacher led extra curricular ensembles

did realise that this was not always going to be appropriate for these ensembles. The examples of student initiated music activities that utilised popular music also demonstrated the value that the students placed on popular music. Therefore opportunities for student initiated activities that involve popular music are recommended, albeit ones that do reflect the informal learning practices of popular musicians, as was observed in the informal student initiated music activities such as the dance club and the SingStar karaoke competition.

Student use of technology to access music cannot be ignored, in particular the variety of ways they access music. Using these technologies at school can potentially allow for a greater sharing and understanding of music between students and teachers, as well as providing new ways for students to learn (Villani, 2001). With student willingness to use this technology schools need to have hardware and software to accommodate student interest in not only listening to music using digital technologies, but creating music.

Music is clearly something that students do not view as being isolated from other traditional school subject areas, as witnessed in students' reference to "listening" to music on television and YouTube, where there is a significant visual component to the musical experience. The kind of cross media music experiences that Webb (2007) has described for the music classroom, using video sharing websites such as YouTube, provide new and exciting ways for student engagement in visual musical works that consider music from aural, visual, spatial and kinaesthetic orientations.

Student identification of the many roles that music plays in their lives not only points to music being used in tandem with other activities, but using music in ways that go beyond the traditional school music curriculum. This cannot be ignored, as witnessed by the emphasis placed on using music to relax. Acknowledgement at school of these "other" uses of music, which have previously been identified by Sloboda & O'Neill (2001), and fostering an environment where these uses can

occur (as opposed to being stifled, as witnessed in the banning of digital music players) is suggested, thus allowing "the control of one's aesthetic environment" (DeNora, 2000, p. 163).

In demonstrating the diverse ways that music is present in their world, the students in this study were able to articulate how music is present in many different ways, again often being indelibly linked with other activities and other curriculum areas. This suggests that the classroom music teacher might explore this musical "baggage" that students bring to classroom music lessons and use this as a point to plan engaging musical experiences for students.

The emphasis on choice, in particular choice of repertoire that students pointed to in classroom music experiences, extracurricular musical experiences and student initiated music activities, cannot be ignored. This is not to say that music becomes a "free for all" experience, but there clearly needs to be student input into school musical experiences, as others have previously found (Hargreaves & Marshall, 2003).

Finally, schools need to be receptive to students' natural enthusiasm for engaging with music, and provide ways to encourage this, rather than stifle this, both in teacher led (facilitated) musical experiences, and in the school playground. As Temmerman (2005) has suggested, there needs to be a greater connection between the cultural contexts of home, school and community when it comes to music education, and a move away from a more traditional formal school music education that focuses on "an understanding of the vocabulary, history and technical elements" of music to one that acknowledges that many students' "level of engagement and involvement with music will be less formal and mainly serve the purpose of enjoying the creative activity of others as a consumer" (p. 121).

As indicated earlier in this article, the music teacher was presented with the findings of this research project. Although the impact of these findings on the teacher's pedagogy is not within the scope of this project, the teacher did indicate that as a result of being exposed to the findings she now had a stronger sense of student musical preference and an awareness of the limitations in her pedagogy with her upper primary school music classes. In particular she identified providing students with a greater choice in terms of music repertoire and music activities being a priority, along with utilising new technologies in the classroom to engage students in music composition.

There is no doubt that the students at Happy Valley Primary School *like* music, that music plays a significant role in their lives, and that they want to be engaged in relevant, student-centred music experiences at school. What this study has revealed is the very diverse ways that students do this and the ways they want to do this, both at school and in the home.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire administered to students

1. What music do you like to listen to at home?

2. What music do you like to listen to at school?

3. What do you use to listen to music?

4. What music do you own?

5. If you had $500 to spend on musical items, what would you purchase?

6. What do you do when listening to music?

7. In what places do you like listening to music?

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