

A ten year follow-up investigation of preservice generalist primary teachers' background and confidence in teaching music

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a study involving 138 NSW preservice generalist teachers and compares them with similar findings from a similar group of students from a previous study. Students' perceptions of their background in formal music education and their confidence in teaching music lessons are analysed. The paper also examines the data to identify if there is a correlation between the students' background and their confidence in music teaching. Results indicated that preservice teachers entering the creative arts unit had little formal music education and lacked confidence in teaching music lessons, however about half of them felt positive about teaching music lessons. These results are compared with current and past research as well as with the findings from the previous study and indicate that students in the previous study had a stronger formal musical background than those in the recent study. Further research suggestions are considered along with suggestions for addressing these challenges in Teacher Education courses.

Key words: preservice teacher, music education

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Introduction

Entry level preservice teachers bring with them a wide variety of background and experiences in the different subjects they are to learn and teach (Jensen & Rowley, 2004). What preservice teachers learn is influenced by the assumptions, conceptions, beliefs, dispositions and capabilities that they bring to their experiences (Jensen & Rowley, 2004). By clarifying preservice teachers' preconceived notions and experiences in relation to teaching, educators can tailor their teaching approaches to suit the wider contexts of their students.

It is particularly important to understand the background and knowledge levels of preservice teachers in relation to music because of the varied and largely limited exposure to this subject area throughout their schooling life. For

example, in a survey of Australian teachers, Duck (1990) confirmed that most teachers have little experience in the arts from their own education and are not confident in teaching them. Lack of exposure to music and the other arts through early, primary and secondary schooling, and lack of involvement in the arts outside of school pose a significant challenge for arts educators who must help preservice teachers become competent to teach these subjects, often within a limited time frame.

Background

Since the 1980s, the responsibility for music teaching in primary schools is situated with either a specialist or the generalist music teacher, as decided by the state and/or the school (Stevens, 1997). In New South Wales (NSW)

there has always been a policy of not using specialist teachers, including music teachers, in the primary school (Ardzejewska, 2006). As a result, many NSW state primary schools have less than adequate music programs, as teachers perceive that they do not have the confidence, training, competence, resources, time or priority to implement an effective music program (Department of Education, Science and Training [DEST], 2005; Russell-Bowie, 2002; Senate Environment, Recreation, Communications and the Arts References Committee [SERCARC], 1995).

In a study focussing on practising teachers, Russell-Bowie (1993) found that, because of the lack of supportive family background and adequate training in music, Australian generalist primary teachers were anxious about, and lacked confidence in teaching music and, therefore, often ended up omitting this subject from their program. These results have been reflected repeatedly in numerous Australian reports into music and arts education over the past 40 years. Confirming findings in these previous reports (ASME/ACE, 1973; Bartle, 1968; Covell, 1970; Hobcroft, 1980; NSW Conservatorium of Music, 1981; NSW Ministry of Education, 1974; Russell-Bowie, 1993; Schools Commission/ Australia Council, 1977) the report of the Senate Environment, Recreation, Communications and the Arts References Committee (1995) reiterated 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)

So why are primary school teachers not confident to teach music in their classroom? When focusing on preservice teachers, both anecdotal experience and research indicate that generalist primary preservice teacher enter their teacher education courses with very little background and low confidence levels (Ballantyne, 2006; Conway, 2002; Jacobs, 2008; Jeanneret, 1997;

Kim, 2001; Mills, 1989; Temmerman, 1997). In their primary school experiences, they have had little music education, as their teachers were generally ill equipped by their own preservice education to provide developmental and quality music experiences (SERCARC, 1995). In their teacher education course, students also at times do not receive the training they require to give them confidence and competence in teaching music (DEST, 2005, p. 60; Green et al., 1998).

Research indicates that if students have had a strong background in a subject area, they will be more confident in teaching the subject. Coopersmith (1967) and Harter (1982) found that preservice teachers' early experiences in music may have a significant effect on the musical self-confidence of students. The preservice primary teachers in Ryan's study (1999) reported that "having positive experiences in music prior to university made them more confident to teach music" (p.136). In their study of primary preservice teachers, Russell-Bowie, Roche and Marsh (1995) indicated that if preservice teachers felt confident about themselves as students of the subject, they would feel more confident about teaching that subject. Welch's study (1995) into art education and preservice teachers indicated that the personal experience of primary school teachers during their teacher education course are instrumental in developing their confidence in teaching art education.

In a study using preservice teachers learning mathematics, Bruce (2001) found that students' prior experience in mathematics had a significant influence on their confidence levels in teaching mathematics. Lazar's study (2007) investigated preservice teachers' attitudes towards children and teaching of reading. He found that successful professional experience placements in schools had a strong positive influence on students' confidence and interest in teaching children to read. Therefore background in music, in-course positive experiences in the subject and perceived success in teaching music in professional

experience would seem to be strong influences on preservice teachers' confidence in teaching music in the classroom.

In relation to family background, the Australia Council's study on *Australians and the Arts* (Saatchi and Saatchi, 2001) found that those who placed a high value on the arts were most likely those who had encouragement from their parents as they were growing up. Similarly, those who had arts lessons outside of schools were more likely to place a high value on the arts than those who did not have these experiences (p. 127). From the research presented in the Australia Council's submission to the *Enquiry into the Education of Boys* they found that "parental involvement is the strongest single factor to encouraging positive attitudes to the arts" (Nihas, 2001, p. 11).

A long history of research indicates that Australian music educators have documented the lack of formal music education experiences their generalist preservice teachers exhibit prior to entering their teacher education course. In 1968, Bartle indicated that 75% of student teachers knew nothing about formal music (Bartle, 1968). Eleven years later, Silsbury (1979) claimed that 85% of her students knew nothing about formal music and twelve years later, Ryan (1991) reported similar results. Also in Australia, Fromyhr (1995) stated that many student teachers were reluctant to teach music because they lacked the confidence to do so. Her study also supports Lange and Burroughs-Lange (1992) who found that Australian preservice teachers' existing knowledge influenced how they benefited from their course (p. 1).

In relation to in-course experiences, Welch (1995) claimed that negative experiences in teacher education courses may negatively affect the confidence of preservice teachers to teach art, and Hudson's study (2005) indicated that university-based courses can positively influence preservice teachers' confidence in teaching art.

However, when students enter teacher education courses having little background in the

arts subjects, it is hard to expect the universities or colleges to change this situation in a few years, working only in class time (SERCARC, 1995).

Over the past twenty years, Universities have decreased this class time for arts education due in part to funding cuts (DEST, 2005, p. 60), despite the repeated recommendations from a variety of reports into Arts education, for preservice teachers to be more adequately trained in the arts.

The recent *National Review of School Music Education* (Department of Education, Science and Training [DEST], 2005) also focuses on this aspect and recommends that universities improve the standard of preservice music education for all generalist classroom teachers by providing more time for training of students in dedicated music education units which allow students to demonstrate both their personal and professional musical understanding and skills (p. xvi).

Currently Australian primary music educators in universities are working with students who indicate a lack of background in formal music education experiences and who have little time in their teacher education course to equip them adequately to teach music. The study reported here examines the background and confidence of some of these NSW preservice teacher education students in relation to music education and music teaching. The first group were part of a four year undergraduate teacher education course and the second group were enrolled in an end-on one year Master of Teaching course, both at the same institution.

This paper examines how confident these primary preservice teacher education students are in the area of music education and if this confidence correlates with their formal background in music prior to entering their teacher education course. It also investigates if there are differences in background and confidence between the students who have completed an undergraduate degree prior to their teacher education course and those who have entered teacher education course as

undergraduate students. Results between two similar cohorts of students ten years apart are compared.

Research Questions

This study was a follow-up to a larger study covering all four arts subjects conducted ten years previously and compares responses from students in a recently administered similar survey. Specifically this study examines the following questions, the first two of which were included in the initial study:

- How do generalist primary preservice teacher education students perceive their own background and confidence in relation to music teaching and music education?
- Is there a correlation between students' perceived formal music background and their confidence in teaching music?
- Are there differences between the responses from the undergraduate students in the original study and those of postgraduate students in the current study to the music-related questions?

Method

The 2008 study was based on a survey instrument used in a similar previously validated survey 1998 at the same teacher education institution, to ascertain the attitudes of preservice teachers to music education (Russell-Bowie, 2002). This is a follow-up to the original study and sought to compare differences in students' responses over the years.

Participants

The participants were 138 university students enrolled in a tertiary generalist primary teacher education course in Sydney, Australia. The students had completed a non-education undergraduate degree and were in their second semester of a one year Master of Teaching

(Primary) degree. Table 1 indicates that there were more females (92%) than males (8%) as is usually the situation in primary teacher education courses.

In Australia, the Arts is one of the key learning areas in the primary schools and comprises a core, though constantly diminishing, component in teacher education courses in Universities. Within this context, the sample students were training to be generalist primary school teachers, not specialists in any of the particular creative arts areas. Some of the students had already completed at least one semester of the Master of Teaching (Primary) course and had been expected to teach one or more creative arts lessons in their Professional Experience session in a primary school in the previous semester, with little pedagogical or musical input from university staff.

Survey Instrument

The instrument for this current study covered all four strands of the Creative Arts (music, dance, drama and visual arts) and was administered to the students in a mass lecture at the start of their creative arts unit. 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. Responses were given on a five point Likert scale. This paper reports on those items related specifically to students and their perceptions in relation to music. Questions relating to this study were:

- I am able to play a musical instrument well;
- I clearly understand music theory;

Table 1:
Gender details of sampled students N = 134

Item	Category	Number	Sample %
Sex	Females	123	92%
	Males	11	8%
	TOTAL	134	100%

- iii) A family member plays an instrument well;
- iv) My family is often involved socially in musical activities;
- v) I have had music lessons outside of school;
- vi) I have a good background in music;
- vii) I have taught some successful music lessons;
- viii) I feel positive about teaching music; and
- ix) I am confident in teaching music lessons.

Data Analysis

Statistical procedures were selected in light of the questions to be tested. Frequencies were computed for the responses to the questions and a 2-tailed Pearson Correlation test was undertaken to ascertain correlations between students' perceived background and confidence in teaching music. The frequencies of positive responses from the initial group surveyed and those of the second group surveyed were compared.

Results

How do generalist primary preservice teachers perceive their own background and confidence in relation to music teaching and music education?

In considering this question, cross-tabulations of frequencies of students' responses to each of the selected questions were analysed and the following results were indicated. In relation to the sampled students' perceptions of their formal music background prior to university, 13% said they could play a musical instrument well, 13% could understand music theory, and 17% had taken music lessons out of school. Students responded that 38% of them had a family member who played an instrument well and 25% indicated specifically that they themselves had a good background in music (Table 3).

In relation to their perception of their confidence in music teaching, 14% indicated that they had taught some successful music lessons, 48% felt positive about teaching music and 21%

felt that they were confident teaching music lessons.

Is there a correlation between students' perceived formal music background and their confidence in teaching music?

Correlations between the selected questions were computed and results indicated that several were significant at the level of 0.01 level (see Table 2). There was a strong positive correlation between students feeling confident about teaching music lessons if they felt they had a good background in music ($r=0.66$), and if they felt they could play a musical instrument well ($r=0.64$). There was also a moderate positive correlation between students who perceived that they had a good background in music and their feeling positive about teaching music lessons ($r=0.57$) as well as if their family was often involved socially in musical activities ($r=0.45$). There was a negative correlation between students not being particularly interested in music and their feelings of confidence about teaching music lessons ($r=-0.33$).

Are there differences between the responses from the undergraduate students in the original study and those of postgraduate students in the current study to the music-related questions?

When comparing the results relating to musical background with the same questions administered to an undergraduate group of preservice primary school teachers in 1998 (see Table 3), the strongest differences were in response to the questions relating to playing an instrument well (25% in 1998 compared with 13% in 2008), understanding musical theory (26% in 1998 and 13% in 2008) and having a good background in music (34% in 1998 and 25% in 2008).

When the responses from this study were compared with those previous responses in relation to confidence in music teaching, 69% in 1998 had taught successful music lessons compared with 14% in 2008, 53% of students

Table 2:

Correlations between responses to the questions of background and confidence in teaching music.

Questions	Mean	Std Dev.	N		My family is often involved socially in musical activities	I feel confident about teaching music lessons
My family is often involved socially in musical activities	2.13	1.34	132	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1 132	.446** .000 131
I feel confident about teaching music lessons	2.50	1.26	135	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.446** 000 131	1 135
					I have had a good background in music	I feel confident about teaching music lessons
I have had a good background in music	2.43	1.37	131	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1	.656** .000 130
I feel confident about teaching music lessons	2.50	1.26	135	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.656** .000 130	1 135
					I have had a good background in music	I feel positive about teaching music lessons
I have had a good background in music	2.43	1.37	131	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1	.586** .000 131
I feel positive about teaching music lessons	3.24	1.33	135	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.586** .000 131	1 135
					I am not particularly interested in music	I feel confident about teaching music lessons
I am not particularly interested in music	2.22	1.4	134	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1	-.334** .000 133
I feel confident about teaching music lessons	2.5	1.26	135	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	-.334** .000 133	1 135
					I can play a musical instrument well	I feel confident about teaching music lessons
I can play a musical instrument well	1.93	1.26	138	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1 138	.644** .000 135
I feel confident about teaching music lessons	2.5	1.26	135	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.644** .000 135	1 135

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

in 1998 felt positive about teaching music compared with 48% in 2008 and 50% felt confident teaching music lessons, compared with 21% in 2008.

In relation to music background, when comparing the results of the recent survey with those findings from the initial survey, there was a clear difference between responses, with the results from the 1998 students being generally higher than those in the 2008 group of students. In relation to students' perceptions there was a clear difference between the responses of both groups in relation to those who could play an instrument well (1998: 25%; 2008: 13%), those who clearly understand music theory (1998: 26%; 2008: 13%), those who felt they had a good background in music (1998: 34%; 2008: 25%) and those whose their families were often involved socially in musical activities (1998: 26%; 2008: 19%). Responses between the two groups in relation to having music lessons out of school (1998: 20%; 2008: 17%) and having a family member who played a musical instrument well (1998: 35%; 2008: 38%) were fairly similar (see

Table 3) although this latter pair of responses was the only set for which the second group scored higher than the first group, and this was only by 3%.

As regards the students' confidence in music teaching, there was a clear difference between the responses of both groups in relation to having taught some successful music lessons (1998: 69%; 2008: 14%) and their being confident in teaching music lessons (1998: 50%; 2008: 21%). The responses of the two groups to the question relating to their feeling positive about teaching music were similar, although the first group was still higher than the second group (1998: 53%; 2008: 48%).

Discussion

The results of the questions relating to how the generalist preservice teachers in the second study perceived their musical ability indicated clearly that most students had minimal or no training on a musical instrument and in musical theory and had little family involvement in musical activities.

Table 3: Differences between the responses from the students in the original study and those of students in the current study to the music-related questions

	1998: Per cent strongly agree/agree N=346	2008: Per cent strongly agree/agree N=138
Music Background:		
I can play a musical instrument well	25	13
I clearly understand music theory	26	13
A family member plays a musical instrument well	35	38
I have had music lessons outside of school	20	17
I have a good background in music	34	25
My family is often involved socially in musical activities	26	19
Confidence in Music Teaching		
I have taught some successful music lessons	69	14
I feel positive about teaching music	53	48
I am confident teaching music lessons	50	21

Research has indicated that students whose parents are involved in the arts are more likely to have positive attitudes toward the arts (Nihas, 2001; Saatchi and Saatchi, 2001) and those who have had arts lessons out of school are more likely to place a higher value on the arts than those who did not have these opportunities (Saatchi and Saatchi, 2001, p. 127). The results of this study indicated that only 13% of students perceived they could play an instrument well, 13% could understand music theory, 17% had taken music lessons out of school, 19% had families who were often involved socially in musical activities, and 38% of them had a family member who played an instrument well. These findings confirm the previously discussed research in which music educators have documented the paucity of formal musical background in their generalist primary students over the years: Bartle (1968), Silsbury (1979), Ryan (1991), Fromyhr (1995); Jeanneret (1997), Russell-Bowie (2002) and more recently, Ballantyne (2006).

However, despite their perceived lack of formal musical skills, 25% of the surveyed preservice teachers in the second group indicated that they had a good background in music. This area could be followed up by further research to establish the reasons they perceived they had a good background in music whether they included their informal involvement with music, which is often a significant factor in the lives of students, as part of the basis of their response. Based on these results, the challenge to music educators is to make their music education courses challenging and meaningful to this 25% of students as well as to the 75% who do not perceive they have a strong background in music.

The results from the second group of students seem to be much lower than those from the first group of students but both groups fall close to the percentages indicated by different authors over the years, that is, from between 15% and 25% of students having a good background in formal music, for example, Bartle (1968),

Silsbury (1979), Ryan (1991), Russell-Bowie (2002). The lower results from the second survey could indicate that children and young people generally are increasingly not interested in learning, or do not have the opportunity to learn a musical instrument or music theory either in school or outside the school environment. The results could also indicate that families in general are not involved in musical activities as much as they might have been in previous years. Further research could be undertaken in this longitudinal study to survey a similar group of students both in the short term, as well as in a decade's time to investigate if the results are trending downwards or if this particular group of students was atypical of the general trend.

In relation to confidence in music teaching, almost five times the number of students in the first group felt they had taught successful music lessons (69%) compared with those in the second group (14%). Both groups of students were surveyed at the start of their first (and only) creative arts unit and most had been expected to teach music and other creative arts lessons in their course, prior to enrolling in this unit. The second group's perceived lack of specific musical skills (87% indicated they had minimum or no formal musical skills) could have been a disincentive to their teaching music lessons. On their four week in-schools Practicum they may have selected instead to teach visual arts, dance or drama lessons instead of music lessons, or they may have taught music lessons but not considered them to have been successful.

The students' responses as to whether or not they were confident teaching music lessons seems to reflect their experience in teaching successful music lessons as Lazar (2007) also indicates. Of the first group, 69% had taught successful music lessons and 50% of them felt confident about teaching music lessons, compared with 14% of the second group responding that they had taught successful music lessons and 21% of them feeling confident

teaching music lessons. This latter result could be researched further as to why a third more students felt they were confident teaching music lessons than those who had actually taught successful music lessons.

Further research also needs to be conducted to identify students' perceptions of a successful music lesson. Research indicates that teachers will only teach music or other subjects if they feel confident as practitioners of that subject and have a strong background of skills and training in the specific area (Bruce, 2001; Coopersmith, 1967; Harter, 1982; Russell-Bowie, Roche & Marsh, 1995; Ryan, 1999; and Welch, 1995).

However, despite their seeming lack of confidence in teaching music lessons (2008: 21%), their lack of experience in teaching successful music lessons, and their perceived lack of an adequate background in formal music, 48% of the second group responded that they felt positive about teaching music. These results seem to contradict the previously cited research that indicated students feel positive about teaching a subject if they have had a good background in that subject area and the correlations found within this survey. The reasons they responded as they did could be followed up with further research to why they responded in this manner, despite their not having a strong background in music education.

When correlations were computed, the results indicated that there was a high correlation between students feeling confident about teaching music lessons and their having a good background in music ($r = .66$) as well as their being able to play an instrument well ($r = .64$). There was a moderate correlation between their being confident about teaching music lessons and their family being involved socially in musical activities ($r = .45$) and there was a lower negative correlation between their being confident about teaching music lessons and not being interested in music ($r = -.33$). Having a good music background also correlated moderately

with students who felt positive about teaching music lessons ($r = .59$). These results do confirm to previously cited findings from a variety of different authors who indicate that when students have a strong background in music education they are more likely to be confident in, and positive about teaching music lessons (Ballantyne, 2006; Jacobs, 2008; Jeanneret, 1997; Mills, 1989; Temmerman, 1997).

Conclusion

This paper has raised several questions for further research, which are discussed above. As well, the results of the present investigation with preservice generalist teachers have important implications for teacher education. Student teachers enter their training institution with attitudes to music that they have developed over their lifetime. Most of them arrive having had little formal music education in school and often have negative attitudes and low self-esteem in relation to their ability to teach these subjects. This will surely affect their confidence in teaching music in the classroom. It is crucial that teacher educators realise this nexus and attempt to break down the negative attitudes and low self-esteem by providing students with positive and successful learning experiences in music, both for the students personally and professionally. Successful experiences may help break down the barriers and develop confidence and expertise in teaching the music education in the classroom.

These interventions could include practical, syllabus-based tutorials, online quizzes to ensure all students learn the basic concepts of music education, lectures to cover theory and practice in music education and reflective journal entries where students reflect on and analyse what they have learned in each lecture and tutorial to consolidate their learning. Students could also be given the opportunity to participate in a significant amount of time learning music to develop their skills personally, in their own time,

based on their own interests and background and be given credit for this. They could be asked to write, implement and evaluate a music program for a particular year group to give evidence of their understanding of music education pedagogy.

Such intervention, even for adults, can be very productive in changing anxiety levels and self-concept in relation to the arts. Positive learning experiences in music have been found to be a significant factor in breaking down barriers, changing students' attitudes, lessening their anxiety, giving them confidence and new teaching ideas, and developing their self-esteem in relation to teaching each of the subjects in their classroom (Russell-Bowie, 1997). Further research could be undertaken regarding the basics that should be taught in a preservice music education cause within the current minimal timeframe.

As recommended by the Australian National Review of School Music Education, preservice teachers need to learn musical understandings, skills and knowledge for themselves as well as learning how to teach music effectively to children (DEST, 2005). To empower and encourage preservice teachers to develop their personal confidence and competence in music is a current and daunting challenge facing music educators and must be backed up by universities providing more time and priority for music education in teacher education courses. With the implementation of the National Curriculum in the Arts in the near future, it is hoped that music education will increase in its priority and funding in both universities and schools to ensure that primary teachers are given more opportunities to be effectively trained prior to becoming full time teachers.

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