

### **Snapshot 3: *Can I use arts on my practicum?: Pre-service teachers' insights into teaching the arts in the middle years* ®**

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#### **Abstract**

In Australia, generalist middle years teachers (years 4-9) are responsible for the delivery of arts education to their students. Research suggests however, that in-service and pre-service teachers express a lack of belief in their ability to teach the arts. This is attributed to lack of confidence by teachers (Hennessy, 2000; Jeanneret, 1997; Russell, 1995) and previous background experiences in the arts (Russell-Bowie & Dowson, 2005). Subsequently, arts education is not taught consistently or well.

Beliefs about one's capability to teach the arts are developed during the beginning phase of teaching and once developed, according to self-efficacy theory, are resistant to change (Bandura, 2006a). The beginning phase includes teacher training, practicum experiences and the beginning years of teaching. This paper will focus on examining the beliefs of beginning teachers during their practicum experience in teacher education.

During 2008, 201 beginning middle years teachers completed a short survey, describing their positive and negative experiences associated with the teaching of the arts during practicum. Results suggest that as pre-service teachers interacted with their schooling context, they did not have opportunities to experience the teaching of the arts. Beginning teachers also spoke of few opportunities to view the modelling of suitable arts education by supervising teachers. According to self-efficacy theory, these negative experiences will regulate the future thoughts, feelings and perceptions of competence of the beginning teacher towards the arts. Findings hold key implications for the long term teaching and sustainability of arts education by generalist teachers in schools. It identifies areas of need and development to be addressed through policy and practice in teacher education.

## **Introduction**

In Australia, generalist middle years teachers (years 4-9) are often responsible for the delivery of arts education (music, dance, drama, media and visual arts) to their students. The literature suggests however, that in-service and pre-service teachers express a lack of belief in their ability to teach the arts. This is attributed to lack of confidence by pre-service teachers (Hennessy, 2000; Jeanneret, 1997; Russell, 1995) and previous background experiences in the arts (Russell-Bowie & Dowson, 2005).

Practicum experience during teacher education is assumed to provide pre-service teachers with the opportunity to engage in arts teaching. During this time, pre-service teachers develop mastery experiences that they will later draw upon when they begin their teaching careers. From these experiences also develop a set of self-efficacy beliefs towards the teacher's own future capability in the arts.

In late 2008, 201 beginning teachers responded to a questionnaire exploring current perceptions and beliefs towards arts education. Beginning generalist teachers were located throughout Queensland, Australia. This paper reports on a small section of the questionnaire. It provides an overview of the influences of practicum experiences on teacher beliefs towards the teaching of the arts in generalist classrooms.

### ***1.0.1 Context of the middle years***

Middle schooling is a key focus to improve educational reform in Australia. The basic philosophy of the middle years is to provide a smooth transition from primary schooling to secondary schooling as students move from a student-centred approach to a subject-centred approach. The middle years is a general term that applies to students between the ages of 10-15, however this varies across Australia and around the world (Pendergast, 2007).

Chadbourne (2001, p.2), in a statement for the Australian Education Union, defined middle schooling as:

Formal education that is responsive and appropriate to the developmental needs of young adolescents.  
This education is characterised by a philosophy, curriculum and pedagogy based on constructivism.

This definition provides the intent of the middle years reform in Australia, to provide a greater focus on early adolescent education through philosophical imperatives to teaching and learning. Thus, it is a philosophical approach unique to the developmental and educational needs of middle years students.

There is growing acceptance of early adolescence as a stage between childhood and adolescence (Bahr, 2006; Carrington, 2006; Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2005; Hill, Mackay, Russell & Zbar, 2001). Previously, educational focus had been on the early years of learning to establish literacy and numeracy, and the senior phase of learning to focus on post-compulsory and vocational education (Pendergast, 2007). The emergence of middle years reform in Australia is driven by an abundance of research of alienation and disengagement of early adolescents, resulting from learning that lacks relevance, inappropriate pedagogies and poor assessment strategies (Pendergast, 2007). Research also suggests that some students in the middle years of schooling fail to improve academically, and in some cases decline, particularly in the area of literacy (Carrington, 2004; Hill and Russell, 1999). If such patterns continue, there is an increased probability that individuals will not reach their potential, not only as students, but as “active and contributing members of the knowledge economy and human capital of our society”(Pendergast, 2007, p.205).

Few studies in Australia however have investigated the impact of teacher self-efficacy on the overall effectiveness of the teacher with students, especially within individual subject areas. An understanding of teacher self-efficacy in different subject matters is increasingly important during the middle grades and beyond as academic content grows and becomes more complex (Woolfolk Hoy & Davis, 2006).

### **Teaching the Arts and Teacher Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy is developed through the interaction between an individual’s judgement of their teaching practice to perform a task and their perception of the actions required to perform that task successfully. The interaction is defined by Bandura (1986) as self-efficacy. These efficacy beliefs have been shown to powerfully predict choice of task, effort, persistence and, ultimately, level of success achieved (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). Teachers with a strong sense of efficacy have been found to be less critical of student mistakes (Ashton & Webb, 1986), be more willing to take risks, such as employing new strategies, because of a reduced fear of failure (Ross, Cousins, & Gadalla, 1996) and work harder with struggling students (Gibson & Dembo, 1984).

Bandura (1986) postulated four sources of efficacy expectations; mastery experiences, physiological and emotional states, vicarious experiences, and verbal persuasion. Mastery experiences have been identified as the most powerful source of efficacy information. When the performance is perceived a success, self-efficacy is raised. When the performance is

perceived a failure, self-efficacy beliefs are lowered. The level of emotional arousal (either excitement or anxiety), adds to the feeling of mastering a task or feeling incompetent.

Vicarious experiences are those in which the skill in question is modelled for someone. When the observer can identify the skill with the modeller, the observer's self-efficacy is enhanced. The final source, verbal persuasion, may enable a task on the task being performed. The potency of verbal persuasion depends on the credibility, trustworthiness, and expertise of the persuader (Bandura, 1977; 1986; 1997). Verbal persuasion may also come from students (Mulholland and Wallace, 2001) and the sense of collective efficacy within the entire faculty (Godard & Godard, 2001).

Self-efficacy beliefs are important for the teaching of arts education. Eisner (1997, 2002) in the United States, and Holt (1997) in the United Kingdom, argue that values and beliefs are fundamental to the role and purpose of music and the arts in education. Research into the perceptions of generalist teachers has largely focused on the lack of confidence by teachers (Jeanneret, 1997; Russell, 1996) and factors that contribute to confidence (Hennessy, 2000). However confidence alone, as Bartel, Cameron, Wiggins and Wiggins (2004) suggest, is meaningless according to self-efficacy research (Bandura, 1997; 1986; 1997) unless it is accompanied by competence. Beginning teachers must therefore have positive self-efficacy beliefs to teach arts education in their classroom.

Research in music and arts education suggests previous background experiences may contribute to the teaching practice of generalist teachers. Russell-Bowie and Dowson's (2005) study of 936 generalist primary teachers across five countries found (a) that most "...had very little formal background in any of the art forms," and (b) that "...in every creative arts area, background is very strongly, and positively, predictive of confidence and enjoyment in teaching" (p.7). Kane (2008) has also found that, in her study of New South Wales pre-service teachers, although many had studied music and played instruments at one time, they confessed they were no longer musically active and had forgotten much of what they had learned.

Some studies have shown that the way that teachers' perceive themselves in regard to their own artistic abilities connects directly to the level of effectiveness they demonstrate as arts teachers (Welch, 1995). Within a study conducted by Housego (cited in Welch, 1995), it was postulated that there are two significant factors attributed to a teacher's self perception. Previous research by Temmerman (1997) and Bartel and Cameron (2002) also show that a

perceived lack of competency to teach the specific knowledge and skills required in music was a significant internal factor affecting teachers' perceptions of their musical abilities. These include their teaching self-efficacy and their beliefs about one's preparedness to teach. Perceptions and beliefs therefore appear highly predictive of teaching practice.

### **Focus of Study**

This study focuses on the perceptions of beginning generalist teachers on their teacher education in the arts. It is part of a larger project exploring beginning teacher self-efficacy for arts education throughout Queensland Australia.

This part of the study is guided by two research questions:

1. What were the positive effects of practicum experience on current beginning teacher arts practice?
2. What were the negative effects of practicum experience on current beginning teacher arts practice?

### **Method**

In 2008, I collected questionnaires from beginning teachers (years 4-7) throughout the state of Queensland Australia, to create a snapshot of the impact of practicum experience on beliefs towards the arts. For the purpose of this study, beginning teachers are defined as still within the first three years since graduation from a teaching qualification.

Recruitment of teachers occurred through professional teacher organisations, at schools and at beginning teacher conferences. All 201 teachers who volunteered to take part returned usable surveys.

Experiences during teacher education practicum made up one section of the questionnaire. In an open ended question, beginning teachers were asked to write the positive and negative experiences they may have had during their teacher training.

Results were analysed using content analysis to show key themes that were common across beginning teacher's perceived experience on practicum experience. Content analysis is "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the context of their use (Krippendorff, 2004, p.18).

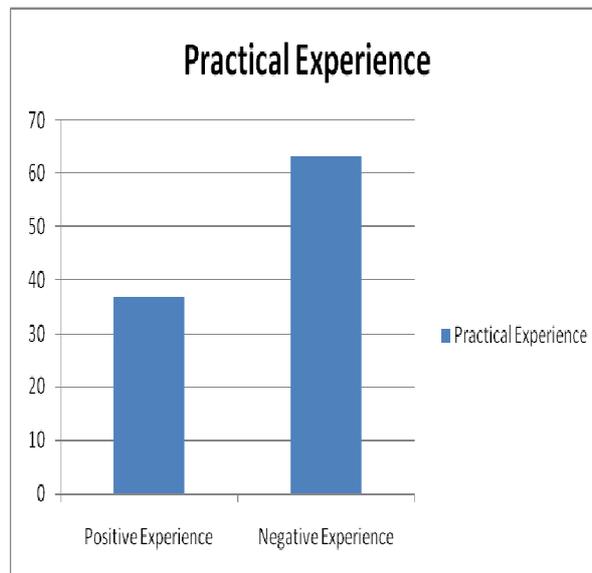
## Demographics

The sample consisted of 201 beginning generalist teachers in grades 4-9 throughout Queensland at government (46.8%) and independent schools (53.2%), located in city (31.8%), suburban (49.8%) and rural areas (18.4%). Respondents reflected a marked similarity to national statistics published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003; 2007) in terms of male/female ratio of teachers of 31.3%/68.7%.

## Results

Practicum experience during teacher education helped examine the socialisation of beginning teachers into the schooling culture. 63% described negative experiences towards the arts while on practicum experience. Accordingly, only 37% had been given an opportunity to teach the arts. Results are presented in graph 1.

**Graph 1 Teacher Education Practical Experience**



Beginning teachers wrote about their limited exposure to the teaching of the arts while observing; school curriculum appeared to focus on other key learning areas; and a general struggle with behaviour management:

*Many of my prac teachers did not do the arts. If they did do the arts, it was visual arts, and it was just drawing of something related to the current theme of the unit. No techniques were explicitly taught. At one school, they did have an "Artist in Residence" programme which was fantastic! (Beginning Teacher, 56).*

*On my first prac at a public state school I was involved in art groups that consisted of all of the things that I had avoided in my work in early childhood centres. Stencilled outlines of horses that children had to collage over, bubble blowing painting- where was the freedom of expression in that? When doing a maths lesson in subtraction for a year 2 class, I sang ten green bottles with the class. The children sang along happily but my supervising teacher told me to keep the noise down so as not to disturb the children next door (Beginning Teacher, 16).*

*I had no arts experience during practicum, because the focus was on maths and English. (Beginning Teacher, 11).*

*I only saw a focus towards maths and English, especially before the national exams (Beginning Teacher, 146).*

As one beginning teacher concluded, it caused her to lose motivation to teach the arts to students:

*Lost some motivation to teach arts as a prac teacher- was not interested in arts teaching a great deal (Beginning Teacher, 98).*

A small group of beginning teachers wrote of positive experiences with the arts while on practicum experience. These were largely reflected by the school culture that valued the use of arts. Beginning teachers described having the opportunity to form relationships with students through the arts, 'on a different level'.

*I had many opportunities to teach the arts on prac. One prac I did a dramatisation of the pied piper that was challenging. The children enjoyed it. On prac the school had a dance group come in and teach the children to dance (Beginning Teacher, 130).*

*I was at a private school that valued music. There were abundant resources for the students and their achievement level was above average across the board. The students also wanted to learn, they could see that resources were being provided for them and they wanted to know how to plan on an instrument or record on a music program (Beginning Teacher, 12).*

Practicum experience could therefore be viewed as an important time for teacher self-efficacy development, when beginning teachers take on values and beliefs associated with the school's collective efficacy.

## **Final Comments**

The above results provide an interesting starting point for analysis in the investigation of the perceptions of beginning teachers towards pre-service practicum experiences. It appears that the majority of beginning teachers did not have positive experience with the arts during practicum. They were influenced by negative teacher feedback, the absence of modelling in the arts and given little opportunity to master the teaching of arts activities. Without these positive experiences to build knowledge, confidence and skills while on practicum experience, beginning teachers may feel they have little capability when teaching music and the arts. Long term, these experiences may contribute to lower teacher self-efficacy for the arts, adding to the current problem of arts teaching within generalist classrooms. These results also confirm the findings from the 2005 National Review of School Music Education, suggesting few changes have been made to teacher education in the arts or within generalist classrooms.

These findings may provide insights into the growing imbalance occurring between music and the arts and other school subjects such as literacy and numeracy. Moreover, these beliefs appear to be ingrained in some school cultures. Beginning teachers may come to accept the school beliefs towards curriculum imbalance, impacting upon their own teaching practice towards the arts in their classroom. As one beginning teacher suggested:

*The school only focused on literacy and numeracy- that was it (Beginning Teacher, 178).*

It is hoped that such school beliefs do not become entrenched in the beliefs of beginning teachers towards music and the arts. If they do, beginning teacher may put less effort into planning and teaching the arts, or disregard them from their teaching altogether.

Of interest, 37% of beginning teachers talked about positive experience during their practicum, based on supportive school cultures that encouraged arts engagement. These experiences provided strong evidence of the role of arts education in the classroom for pre-service teachers, linking knowledge gained from university with the practical experience gained from teaching in the classroom. It would be interesting to see how these positive school cultures towards the arts were formed and sustained.

This paper reports results that raise interesting questions and starting points for further investigation in arts education. Particular interest will relate to reforming arts training in generalist teacher education programmes and practicum experiences. Positive experiences during practicum may help build and support beginning teacher self-efficacy for the arts.

Future research needs to investigate the effects of different school cultures on beginning teacher beliefs towards the arts. Do practicum experiences confirm/disconfirm teacher's beliefs? Can pre-service teachers be resistant to negative experiences in the arts while on practicum? If so, such knowledge would enable teacher training institutions to structure arts courses to more effectively enhance teachers' arts learning. Pre-service teachers would be able to learn valuable knowledge and skills that they could later use when teaching within their generalist classrooms, to resist the negative beliefs of some school cultures towards the arts. It is therefore important that such research is conducted to improve the current beliefs and teaching of arts education in the classroom.

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