

Musical Learning and Classroom Performance: A Focus Group Research of Elite Primary Schools in Pakistan

Dr. U.A.G Isani
Dr. Zaira Wahab

ABSTRACT

Of all the arts, the one that appears to affect the lives of children most directly is music. Scientific evidence proves that students involved in music education score significantly higher in Maths, Science and Languages. They have enhanced spatial and naturalistic intelligences and engage less in disruptive behavior. The present enquiry employs focus group research to explore the impact of music learning on student performance. For this enquiry twenty five, primary school teachers have actively participated in focus group discussion. The results indicate a high correlation between music learning and classroom performance.

Preamble

School curriculum comprises different subject areas, which respectively enhance and impact different aspects of development. Subjects such as mathematics, science, social studies, and languages have age old stability in schools. They enjoy this position of strength in the school curriculum as they play

a vital role in inculcating basic literacy skills; and in developing critical thinking and problem solving attributes.

The core curriculum builds basic literacy skills. There are other subjects also which are common but not universal over time or place such as foreign languages, literature, and the arts. These help in building finer skills. In recent times foreign languages have assumed an important place in society, as a result of globalization. However art education has suffered badly. All its components: literature, painting, sculpture, and music have been neglected, resulting in producing students, incapable of appreciating beauty and lacking in aesthetic sense. The present enquiry focuses on the impact of music on performance in order to showcase the multifarious advantages of music; and to advocate greater importance of music in the school curriculum.

Related literature review shows that music education has been highly recommended by psychologists, educationists and researchers all over the world. Howard Gardener, an eminent psychologist, asserts that there are eight different intelligences. He further cites music as the first of the multiple intelligences to become functional in a person. “The single most important thing in education is for each person to find at least one thing that he/she connects to, gets excited by, feels motivated to spend more time with” (Gardener, 1992). No doubt music is that very thing for many children.

“Project Zero”, an empirical study by Howard Graduate School of Education found demonstrable links between experiences with music and drama and increase in certain cognitive skills. The findings of “Project Zero” research (the- three-year-longitudinal- study) suggest that music and spatial reasoning are related psychologically (Ellen Winner and Lois Hetland, 1997-2000).

Method, Participants, and Setting

Considering the importance and impact of music education in the early years, the present study makes an attempt to understand the problem in a primary school setting in Pakistan. Focus group research has been employed to collect data for the present study. Though mainly used in marketing research, focus group research has increasingly gained importance in educational research. Focus group tends to be a more qualitative rather than a quantitative form of research and is used especially when a researcher is interested in gaining a deeper understanding of an issue.

The focus group discussion in the present enquiry was conducted in five phases. The researchers, in the first phase, identified and developed questions which were reviewed by the experts. In the second phase, an appropriate text on how to conduct the research was located; this was Morgan's (1998b) Planning Focus Groups. In the third phase, twenty five primary school teachers were selected from three elite private schools of Karachi. The researchers gained access to eleven teachers from the first school, nine teachers from the second school and five teachers from the third school. From this population five, experienced primary school teachers were located, who could be used as interviewers. These teachers were then introduced to the basic questions of the enquiry and the way data was to be collected through focus group interviews. Two interviewers were selected from school one, two from the second school, and one from the third school. A mock focus group interview was also conducted over a sample similar to the one, to be selected for the actual study. This gave the researchers a model for the research they would be conducting.

In the fourth phase, the trained interviewers conducted focus group interviews on the targeted sample. Two interviewers audio taped the interviews, while one relied on notes taken during the interviews. In the fifth phase, all five interviewers contributed to a final writing assignment. The detailed recorded and written responses were then codified on the tabulation sheet. In depth analysis was made with reference to different subjects and classes that the teachers were teaching. Their responses were then detailed in both graphic and narrative form.

The study used "purposive" or "theoretical" sampling design. Three private, elite primary schools (Elite) were located in Karachi, and twenty five primary school teachers from these schools were selected as a sample. These schools were selected because music is a part and parcel of their curriculum and teachers' in these schools are in a better position to describe the impact of music on students' performance. Generally in Pakistani culture music education is not encouraged, therefore almost none of the public sector institutions teach music. Even in the private institutions there is not much recognition of the value of music education. Therefore the only experience available in Pakistani educational system would be in elite institutions which do teach music. It was due to this constraint that sample was drawn from this population. Total sample comprises of twenty five teachers, teaching various subjects at the primary level. Their areas of expertise included language arts, science, social studies, and mathematics. The

interviewers generated responses to pre-determined questions from the sample through focus group interviews. Questions are discussed at length in the results. Generally, the interviewers reported that the focus group worked well, though occasionally, a member or two tried to dominate the group. One interviewer reported that the teachers she interviewed were quite intimidated in the beginning, but they soon picked up the mood and showed eagerness to share their opinions. Another, interviewer commented that the inexperienced teachers confined their answers to very basic and general comments.

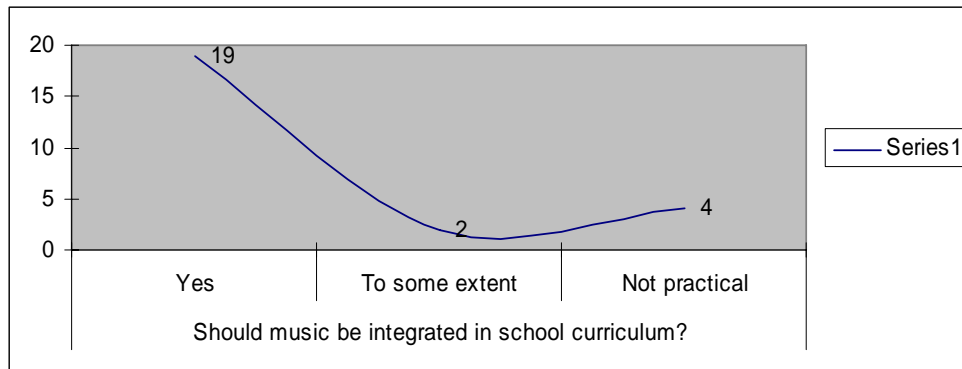
Results

All twenty five teachers responded eagerly to the questions and their responses reveal that they perceive music as instrumental in enhancing performance. Furthermore, they believe that music can easily be integrated with almost every subject and does not necessarily require state of the art equipment and environment. Their responses are shown in the forthcoming discussion in detail.

Question One: Should music, along with the other arts, be included in the primary school curriculum?

Response: A sizable number of teachers believed that music should be a regular component of primary school curriculum. They went to the extent of saying that a curriculum without music is a lifeless curriculum. One teacher categorically stated that a rhythm less school is an impoverished place. As they were related to private elite schools, they said that music is a part of official as well as operational curriculum in their schools.

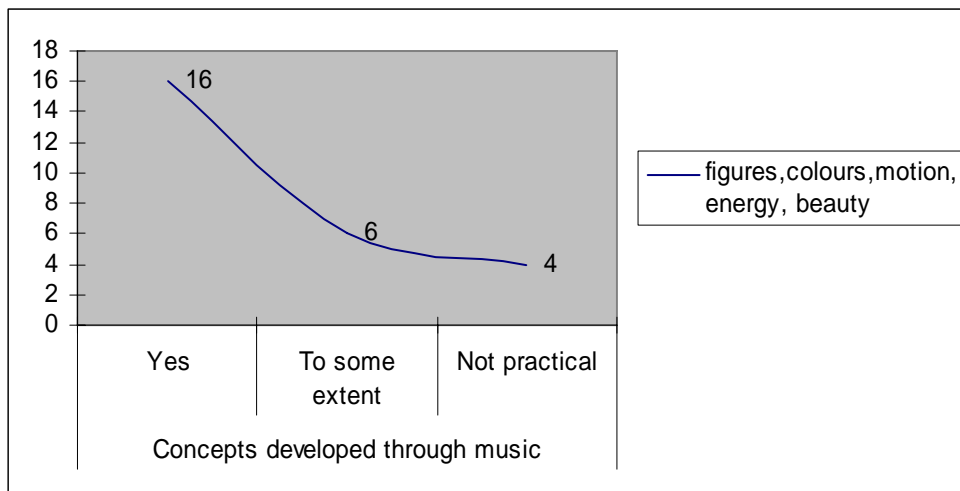
Table 1



Question Two: Which particular concepts, attitudes and skills can be developed through musical activities?

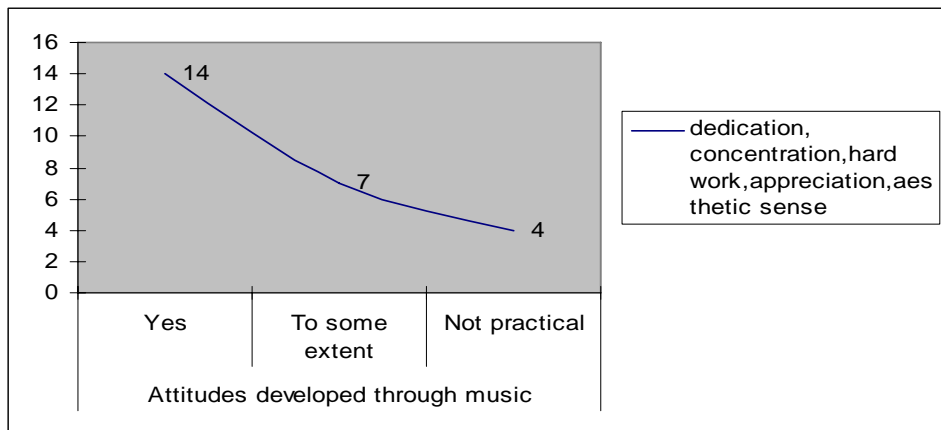
Response: The responses to this question were varied and surprising. Teachers, of almost all subjects believed that a wide variety of concepts can be taught through music. They reported that they taught the concepts of time, months, figures, motion, qualities of things, languages and customs etc. through music.

Table 2



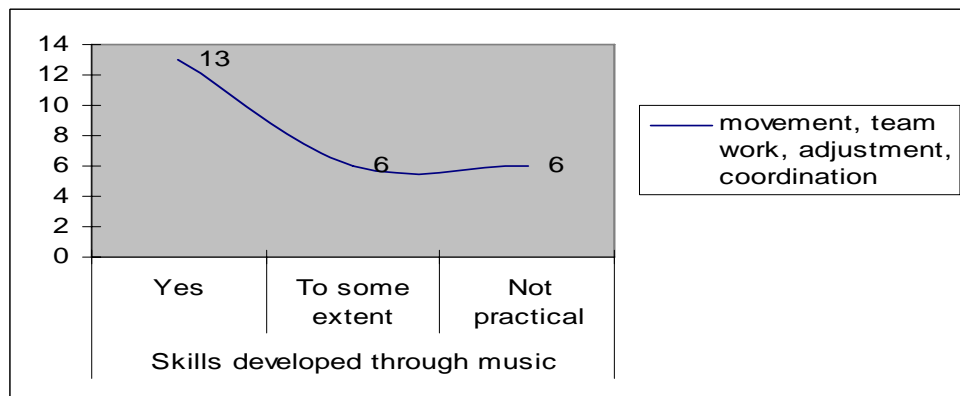
Besides concepts what was more interesting for the researchers were the responses regarding attitudes and skills. Teachers revealed that musical activities developed concentration (a musician needs to be meticulous and flawless in order to be able to compose and present music); skill (studying music requires skills and techniques); self confidence (performing in front of others); perseverance and courage (you learn through the cost of mistakes and musical activities require a lot of patience: practice (it takes hard work to master tunes); and goal setting (goals for performing and delighting others and goals for achieving and succeeding). Teachers believed that students good at music consistently showed and exhibited these values and attitudes.

Table 3



In addition to concepts and attitudes, teachers identified some skills also. Teachers believed that music develops the attributes of team work and patience. Children very often perform musical activities together and this develops coordination, adjustment and cooperative skills. Constant practice, another skill mentioned by the teachers is both the bane and essence of quality musicianship. Playing music repeatedly develops the skill of learning through experience and the virtue of patience. Moreover, a sizable number of teachers believed that musical activities provided valuable preparation for the working world. Many skills called for in the workplace are the same skills emphasized in musical activities. Some of these skills include the capacity for working together, communication skills, creative thinking, and imagination.

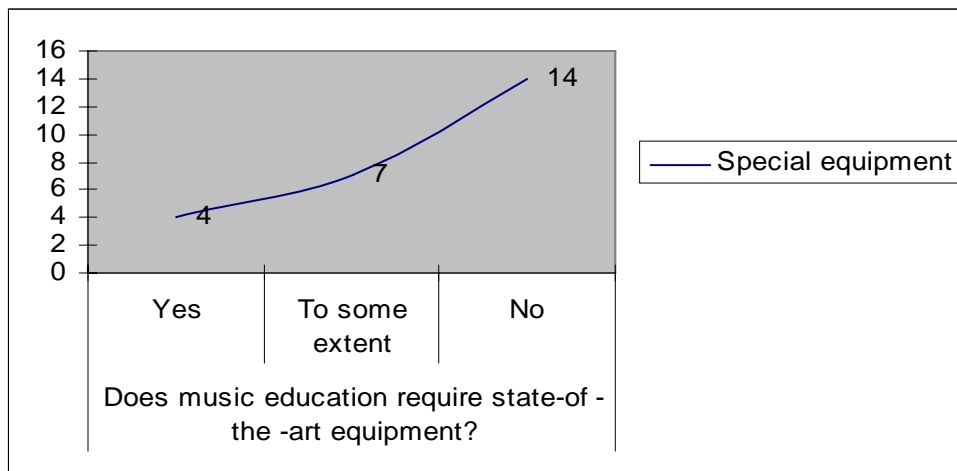
Table 4



Question Three: Can we integrate music with different curriculum areas and does the teaching of music need state-of-the-art -equipment?

Answer: Almost all teachers believed that music can easily be integrated with all subject matter areas as almost every area lends itself to musical activities. They further opined that musical activities did not always require state-of –the art equipment, nor was the teacher to be a trained musician.

Table 5

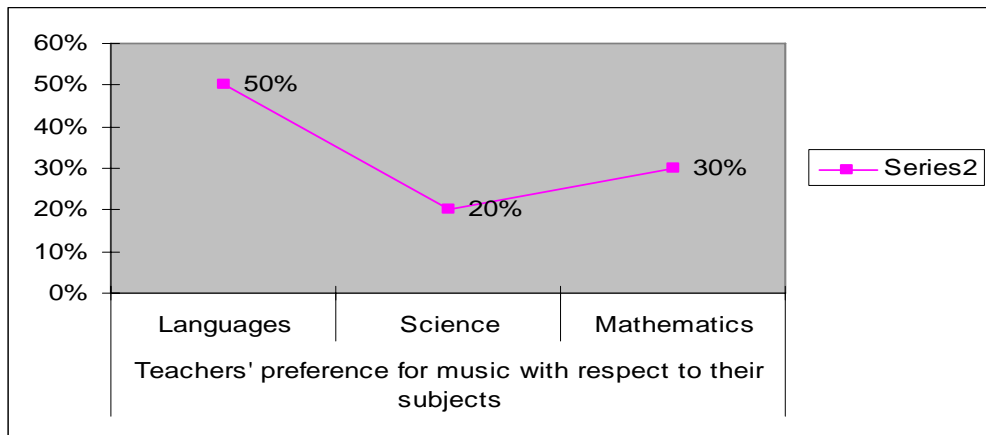


One teacher reported that in her grade I class, students’ love music; therefore she has set up a music center in the class with an inexpensive keyboard, an old piano, a flute other simple musical instruments and a song book. The list of rhymes that her students enjoy singing is endless. A Maths teacher reported that she uses counting songs as it helps her students to learn mathematical concepts. Playing simple tunes in three-four, four-four, six-eight, and other time signatures provides wonderful opportunities for her students to explore fractions. Furthermore she encourages her students to create their own songs related to mathematical concepts.

A Language teacher responded that she uses rhymes and songs to teach vowels and consonant sounds; to enhance vocabulary; to teach spelling; and to introduce figures of speech. This does not need special equipment. Usually simple and easily available instruments are used in the class.

Even history and social studies teachers said that their subjects can be integrated with music as students learn traditional folk songs from various eras of history and from different countries and cultures. They reported that in junior grades they teach students about the special days celebrated in our culture and in diverse cultures. They said that their students love singing popular patriotic songs. This teaches them about their country's marvelous past and beautiful heritage.

Table 6



Science teachers responded that they teach scientific concepts musically. One teacher reported that she taught students high and low sounds through music.

One interviewer reported that many teachers in her group responded that they use records, tapes, and CDs for instructional music activities and for enjoyment and music appreciation.

Question Four: How do primary school students respond to musical activities?

Answer: Teachers responded that musical activities, as well as all art activities, provide students multiple ways to enjoy, achieve and perform. Music is something they can understand, participate in, and enjoy. It leads them into worlds of fantasy, imagination and adventure. Almost all teachers reported that their students love playing music and wait for the activities that involve music.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through this focus group research, numerous advantages of music education have emerged. The ones identified by the focus group participants are:

music transforms abstractions in crystallized concepts; music teaches self - discipline and self-expression; musical effort develops coordination; grace and timing; it enhances and develops appreciation and aesthetic sense; it fosters social interaction and provides self-gratification while giving pleasure to others.

The researchers believe that music has many benefits and needs to be taught in our schools; as it is important physically, mentally, socially and emotionally. They have made an attempt to explore the phenomena at the micro level. The study is limited to a selected segment of society and the results cannot be generalized over a diverse population. The researchers would recommend that similar studies be conducted in inclusive settings with students from disadvantaged groups; students with disabilities and giftedness, and students at higher educational levels. Greater efforts are recommended to be made by parents, teachers, school administrators, and accrediting agencies to promote the multilayered benefits of music education.

Despite the acknowledgement of the positive effects of music, many private and public schools continue to perceive it as a luxury. As a result of this we are not able to expose our children to the universal language of music. Music education is not only for the wealthier schools. It should be for all schools. We must promote, explain, and act to get music taught to all our students.

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