

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF THE EXTENDED SYLLABUS IN MUSIC. A SURVEY STUDY WITH 8-GRADERS IN FINNISH COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL

JYRKI HONKONEN

Doctoral Researcher, Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Finland
jjhonkonen@gmail.com

SUVI SAARIKALLIO

Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

ABSTRACT

Recent studies propose that music classes benefit school environment in many ways: help with concentration, relaxation, and create social affinity. In 2016, curriculum reform added one weekly hour for music in the upper school in Finland. Contents were directed towards students' agency and participatory action. This study investigated how students encounter these changes. Data were collected through a survey among 113 students in one school that implemented the extended music syllabus at 8th grade. Students' participatory activity, attitude, potential benefits and perceived necessity of music in 8th grade were surveyed. Results show that students generally perceive music necessary, consider themselves active, responsible and motivated learners, and think that music education has positive impacts on both personal musical development and general school atmosphere. Girls reported greater participation and motivation than boys. Overall, findings indicate high approval of the curricular aims of active participation and student responsibility.

Keywords: Music education, secondary school, curriculum of music education, impact of music education, necessity of music education, musical development, lifelong learning.

BACKGROUND

In January 2010, the Finnish Journal of Music Education published a manifesto, "*Music belongs to everyone*", in which representatives of Finnish music education and 29 organizations declared that "*All-around musical education and possibility of spiritual growth must be assured for every child. Music must be among the compulsory subjects of basic education for an*

adequate number of hours per week throughout the elementary school" (The Finnish Journal in Music Education 2010, 114-115.) Four years later, an additional music lesson per week was allocated to secondary school by the national curriculum reform. This study was conducted in one of the schools that implemented the curriculum extension for the first time in the school's history. Our aim was to survey the participating students' perceptions of music education in the context of this extended syllabus.

ADMINISTRATIVE CONTEXT OF THE EXTENDED SYLLABUS

In the Finnish education system, early childhood education and primary education offer music education to everyone to a certain extent. According to the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (FNCCBE 2004), music is a compulsory subject in grades 1-7; after that, it continues as an elective or optional subject in grades 8-9 in secondary school. Class teachers are mainly responsible for teaching music in lower grades, but in the secondary school, music teaching depends on the resources of the education provider and the proficiency of the disposable teachers (see Laitinen, Hilmola & Juntunen 2011, 29). In 2012, the Finnish National Agency for Education initiated a curriculum reform, resulting in FNCCBE 2014, which came into effect in 2016. In FNCCBE 2014 (see Finnish National Agency for Education 2014), one additional hour per week was added to music education. Depending on the education provider, this lesson could be positioned to either grade seven, eight or nine.

CONTENTS, GOALS, AND MEANINGS OF SCHOOL MUSIC EDUCATION

The structure of curricula development in primary education concerning art and physical education at the context of this presentation is worth closer observing. Since 1970, when the first Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education came into effect, music has been a compulsory subject until 7th grade. After that, the priority of music as an optional subject is classified mainly based on students' interest and musical ability (Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2004; Kosonen 2009; Lehtonen and Juvonen 2009; Lindström 2011,

16–18; Honkonen 2018). The history of optional subjects in basic education starts from the reform of comprehensive school in 1970. According to Luukkanen & Luoma-aho (1974), the idea for creating optional subjects is a result of lacking interest in subjects of gradually dying agrarian society. Due to the exiguity of interest, the financial resources to establish new positions for the teachers were limited. Therefore, the municipal teacher officeholders had to take charge of the optional subjects.

For school music education, FNCCBE 2014 also meant a new emphasis on how to approach the subject of music. The following themes already existed in FNCCBE 2004: digitization, multiliteracy, improvisation, composition, social community and observing. Nevertheless, FNCCBE 2014 demands further development and deepening of themes involving students' own initiative, creativity, and participation. FNCCBE 2014 instructs the teachers to guide and advise pupils, particularly through individual instructions and considering personal abilities. According to the instructions, several different musical activities can be in progress at the same time. The task of the teacher is to follow and, if necessary, offer guidance and help. Pupils are instructed to set aims for their work, be self-reliant and report the results for evaluation (The Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014, 422-425; see also Partti 2016; Partti & Ahola 2016).

Curriculum development has been conducted in dialogue with Finnish music education research, which emphasizes the potential of school music to serve young people's overall positive development, wellbeing, and social participation. It has been argued that music creates emotional states, helps with concentration and relaxation, and creates social affinity (Hairo-Lax & Muukkonen 2013). Juvonen (2009) sees music in schools as a multifaceted subject offering meaningful and exciting contents for everyone. Further, Hairo-Lax and Muukkonen (2013) view music for secondary school-aged pupils as an enriching experience on many levels. Karlsen (2011) emphasizes music as a forum that allows students to assert their agency. Overall, it has been discussed by many music educators that music forms an essential, multifaceted, and development-supportive means of expression for the youth in schools (Hairo-Lax and Muukkonen 2013; Juvonen, Lehtonen, Ruismäki 2016; Numminen 2005, 57-60; Honkonen 2018).

This discussion is further in line with the broader research accounts on the impacts of music on human development and wellbeing (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Macdonald, Kreutz, Mitchell 2012; Welch, Biasutti, Ritchie, McPherson, & Himonides, 2020). A large body of research has demonstrated positive impacts of music on cognitive development (Dumont, Syurina, Feron, & van Hooren, 2017; Sala & Gobet, 2020; Swaminathan & Schellenberg, 2019). Music has also been addressed as a forum for supporting the development of self-identity, sense of agency, emotional competence, and pro-social relations in the lives of young people (Laiho, 2004; Lamont, 2020, McFerran, Derrington & Saarikallio, 2019; Miranda, 2013; Saarikallio, 2019a; 2019b).

According to Juntunen (2011, 49-50), music teachers are eager to offer compulsory music education for everyone through the entire primary school, in addition to the possibility of choosing it as an optional subject. However, for various reasons, it can be challenging the students to accept an additional compulsory weekly lesson as FNCCBE 2014 instructs (Juntunen 2011, 79). Although music is now a compulsory subject in 8th grade in municipal educational administration of Lem-päälä, students can still choose music as an optional subject for 8-9 grades. This, however, raises a question concerning overdosing the amount of music education in secondary school. It may affect the necessity of optional subject music and cause a reduction in music education at 9th grade.

AIMS OF THE CURRENT STUDY

While research is supporting the idea that school music can be beneficial for young people, and the recent curriculum reform is both allowing extended amount of music education and directing the contents of the lessons towards addressing students' agency and participatory action in the classroom, we know little of whether and how students welcome these changes. Do they perceive music to be a necessary subject in secondary school? Do they feel that they are active and motivated agents during classes and that music education provides something useful for their personal development?

The specific interest of this paper was to investigate students' experiences of school music education in a situation when music was included as a compulsory subject to their curriculum for the first time at 8th grade. We focused on student's perceptions of 1) their own behavioral and cognitive *activity* during music lessons, 2) their *approach* and attitude towards music lessons, and c) the perceived *impact* of music lessons in their lives and personal musical development. We further inquired the students' opinion about the necessity of music education being offered at 8th grade and explored how this was linked to the abovementioned experiences. As an additional question, we explored possible gender differences in these experiences.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

This research was conducted as a survey study among the students of Sääksjärvi comprehensive school in Lempäälä during spring 2019. Permission to conduct research was obtained from Lempäälä municipality cultural administration. The enquiry was conducted with 8th grade pupils (age around 14 years) to whom music became a compulsory subject for the first time in the school's history in autumn 2018. The data set consists of answers from 113 out of 120 students, of which 57 were female, and 56 were male. The group of students represents a typical sample of this age group in a small-to-medium Finnish town. Participation in the enquiry was voluntary. The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were carefully protected during the process; only the first author of this paper had access to the identifying information.

MEASURES

The format of the survey was a self-administrated questionnaire, which enables the use of both categorical and numerical data with the help of a simple survey questionnaire (Phillips, Aaron & Phillips 2013, 12-15). The questions were structured into three themes, which will be called *sections* later in this paper: activity, approach and impact. The questions

were formulated based on the general themes emphasized in FNCCBE 2014 and the first-author's hands-on experience of implementing these curricular goals into practical work during music lessons. Each section contained items, which were answered on a five-point rating scale (0= no answer, 1= fully disagree, 2= disagree, 3= quite of the same opinion, 4= of the same opinion, 5= fully of the same opinion). *Activity*-section was surveying students' participation in cognitive and behavioural activities in the classroom, such as participation in singing and playing, asking advice, practising, concentrating to lessons, venturing their musical ideas, and attempting to advance personal musical skill development. The activity-variable was calculated as a mean score of ratings for seven original questions (see Appendix).

In the second section of the questionnaire, *approach*, the students evaluated their personal attitude towards music lessons. Four original questions (see Appendix) focused on the students' acknowledgement and respectful attitude towards the working environment (instruments, the safety of the soundscape), motivation to invest personal input during lessons, and attitude of being supportive and collaborative towards classmates. The focus was on students' attitude and motivation concerning working habits and environmental awareness.

The *impact*-section inquired students' experiences on the effects and consequences of music education. Five original questions (see Appendix) were mapping the possible relaxing and concentrating effects of music and the music lessons' impacts on the students' personal musical development, on increased interest towards music in general, and on finding personal ways to approach and work with music.

Finally, one meta-level item: *Music education is necessary at 8th grade*, was used as a variable defined as a *necessity*. This question was targeting students' opinions on the relevance of the new, extended, syllabus of music being a compulsory subject for them.

ANALYSES

Data were analyzed using statistical methods. Descriptive statistics were calculated to provide an overall picture of participants' ratings. Pearson correlation was used to assess the relatedness of *necessity* to

activity, *approach*, and *impact*. Gender differences were tested with independent-samples t-tests. All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS (version 26).

RESULTS

ACTIVITY

Overall, students reported high levels of agreement with items involving their own cognitive and operational activity in music class. The mean score of *activity* was 3.67 (S.D. = .731). The mean scores of the individual items of *activity* are presented in Table 1). *Activity* correlated significantly with the meta-level item *necessity* ($r = .66$; $p < .001$), indicating that personal involvement in classroom activity is a relevant aspect for the general experience of music being an essential part of the curriculum. The gender difference was observed, with girls providing significantly higher ratings for activity than boys do ($t(113) = -3.16$; $p = .002$). The spread of answers by males and females is illustrated in Figure 1.

APPROACH

The attitude and motivation to behave in a supportive and respectful manner in the music classroom seemed to be very positive in general. The mean score was 4.02 (SD= .646). Table 2 presents the variation of means and SDs according to the original questions. Students reported particularly high agreement concerning responsible behaviour towards the working equipment and instruments. The correlation between the meta-level item *necessity* and *approach* was significant ($r = .64$; $p < .001$). The substantial effect size indicated that the perceived need for music education in 8th grade is closely related to personal attitude towards classroom behaviour. Differences between male and female participants were similar in shape to activity-section. Female participants gave higher ratings to *approach* than male participants did ($t(113) = -3.27$; $p = < .001$). Figure 2 presents the difference in approach between genders.

IMPACT

The third section of the questionnaire, impact, focused on the effects of music education on students' experiences. Mean score was 3.78 (SD= .920). Table 3 presents the conversion of means and SDs in connection to the original questions. The students were agreeing particularly strongly with the idea of music lessons having a relaxing impact on the overall school attendance. The correlation between meta-level item necessity and impact of music education was significant ($r = .63$; $p < .001$). The effect was again strong and showed that the perceived necessity of music in the curriculum is linked to the perceived positive impacts of music. Female participants provided higher ratings than males participants also for impact, but this difference was not statistically significant ($t(113) = -1.52$; $p < .130$). The shape of the bar chart in figure 3 is in line with the previous results in figures 1 and 2.

CONCLUSION

FNCCBE 2014 directs students to take more responsibility, whereas the teacher is instructed to guide them "into becoming lifelong learners, by taking the individual learning approaches of each pupil into consideration". The FNCCBE 2014 also allows adding one extra hour of music as a compulsory subject for the secondary school. While we, as music educators, might consider these developments as being self-evidently positive, such a hypothesis might be dubious. Changes that increase the weekly amount of work can also cause resistance among the students. Students might also not feel able to, or willing to, engage in lessons as active, self-directed actors.

However, our results show that students generally seem to agree with the items that position them as active participators, who approach the lessons with a positive attitude and perceive music education to have positive impacts on them. The results thus suggest that the possibility to take more responsibility and engage in individual learning processes is accepted positively. The results further indicate that students consider music education to increase their general interest in working with music. Small, yet interesting, observation is that the highest-rated item among all the impact-related items was the one indicating that music lessons make

the whole school attendance a more relaxed experience. Our findings also show that all the three studied aspects of students' experience - activity, approach, and impact - are equally relevant contributors (with correlations of strong effect size) to the overall perception of music as a necessary subject in 8th grade.

The gender difference was evident, with girls providing higher ratings than males for active participation and approach. The difference was statistically significant, yet perhaps not alarming, in terms of the mean score difference. Majority of male answers are situated in the middle part of the response scale, around values 3 - 4, while female answers centre around values 4 - 5, with both genders still generally agreeing positively with the items rather than disagreeing with them. No statistically significant difference was found between genders in the impact of music, demonstrating that even if female students demonstrate more active participation in music lessons, males and females perceive the lessons equally beneficial.

Our findings are somewhat in line with prior work on students' experiences of extended music education. For instance, Juntunen (2020) recently conducted a study on an added music intervention in elementary school context and reported that students generally had positive experiences and felt that the intervention improved their general school satisfaction and motivation. However, Juntunen also concluded that music activities seem to particularly benefit students (often girls) who already have a positive attitude towards music, to begin with. This interrelatedness, or perhaps a virtuous cycle, is present also in our findings, with the perceived necessity of music at 8th grade being correlated with activity, approach and impact.

The sample includes 113 participants, which may be considered a large enough sample for us to generalize these positive results to the larger population of students who are involved with the changes of the novel educational approach and extended syllabus instructed in FNCCBE 2014. However, as the survey was conducted in one school only, it is not possible to fully control for or rule out the impact, role and proficiency of the music teacher of this school. Nevertheless, based on our findings we argue that if we presume that skilled, professional, teachers work through the instructions and guidelines of the curriculum and in-service training is executed in real-time, we can expect the results to be parallel to this research.

DISCUSSION

Art and music education are highly respected through the entire educational system in Finland. The educational network of music institutes offers numerous possibilities to practice musical skills in different forms from beginner to professional level. The educational network, however, covers a limited amount of the population, especially among younger people and requires, in most cases recognized musicality and skills. Still, recent research has indicated that music has a significant role in human development, and therefore it is essential to create everyone possibility to get acquaintance and create a relationship with music at personal, subjective level.

The results in this research indicate that continuity is a reasonable choice in the subject of music through entire primary education. Comprehensive and upper secondary schools are practically the channels through which everyone can receive music education. In Finland music education outside school is centred on various music institutes, which offer target-oriented schooling for students. The results of this research, however, emphasize the importance of music education in a primary and secondary school in general. In this enquiry, the possibility to become personally acquainted with the elements of music and familiar with instruments trusting in personal abilities received an extensive assent. According to the results, music seems to be distinctly appreciated subject in the school. Therefore, it is not surprising that the positive impact of music education is evident in primary school (Eerola & Eerola 2014).

One primary challenge of school music education is to respond to the musical needs of the students who do not have a particular hold on music. This paper argues that getting acquaintance with elements of music is a primary task in order to get young people to experience the positive impact of music-making. It, however, may not be depended only on musical capability; music educators have the responsibility to get all students familiar with music-making. It demands further expanding in a variety of educational means and versatile approach to the context of music education in general. A former focus in school music education has been, in addition to cognitive contents, on presentations and shows in school events. According to the results of this research, however,

musical experience seems to contain more multidimensional substance, which can be exploited to a broader understanding of the essence of music education.

In summary, the vast majority of the students deem music necessary in the school. According to the results of this report, students' musical activity and pursuit correlate to the sentiment towards music lessons: students regard music as a necessary, valuable subject and they experience that music has a positive impact on their everyday work in general.

This research was implemented with a limited number of respondents; therefore, more research is needed to verify the results comprehensively. Nevertheless, the results indicate that primary school education is welcomed by students as a positive activity that can contribute to their lifelong learning in music and beyond. We hope our findings advance further dialogue between research and development of the contents of the curriculum and support granting resources both in music as a subject in school and in teacher education.

TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Mean scores of items relating to *activity*

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
I have a positive attitude to the contents of music education	4,11	113	,849
I venture to test my musical ideas	3,39	113	1,198
I am capable to concentrate on music lessons	3,77	113	,916
I try to develop in working with music	3,70	113	,875
I participate in music-making by singing or playing an instrument	3,67	113	1,064
I practise actively	3,27	113	1,054
I ask for advice and instructions unprompted	3,74	113	1,025

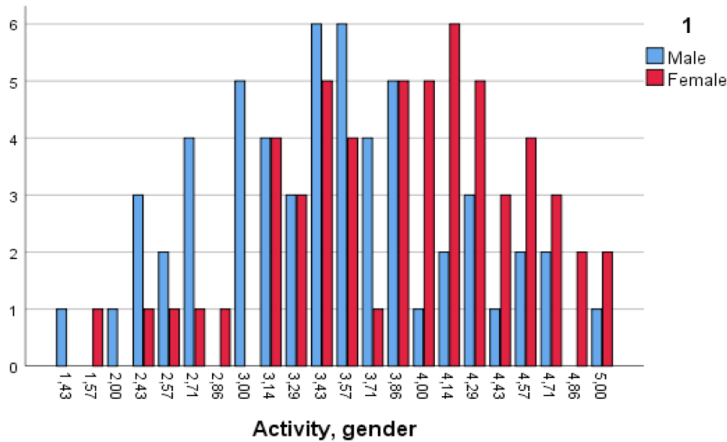


Figure 1. The spread of mean scores for *activity* in males and females.

Table 2: Mean scores of items relating to *approach*.

	I have a positive attitude to my classmates' music-making	I take the safety of the auditory environment over music-making into account	I look after the instruments and other working equipment	I aim to work independently and in a target-oriented manner
Mean	3,83	3,97	4,53	3,75
N	113	113	113	113
Std. Deviation	1,209	1,130	,642	,902

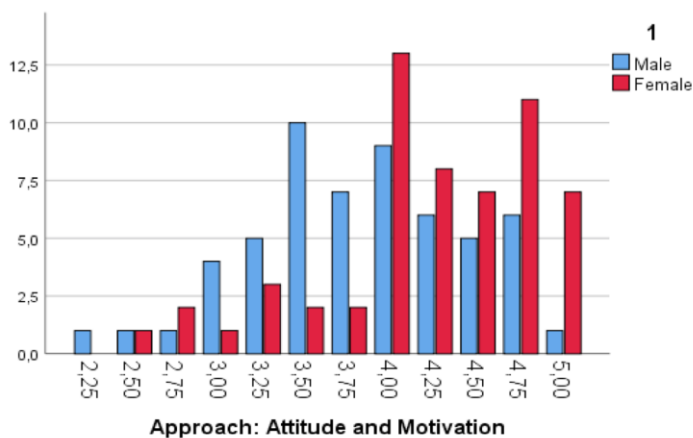


Figure 2. The spread of mean scores for *approach* in males and females.

Table 3: Mean scores of items relating to *impact*.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I have found own means to approach music and to work with music	113	3,70	1,149
Music education has increased my interest in music-making and working with music in general	113	3,56	1,195
Musical activity helps to concentrate	113	3,88	1,148
Music lessons relax school attendance	113	4,35	,884
I can work independently over the music lessons	113	3,39	1,198

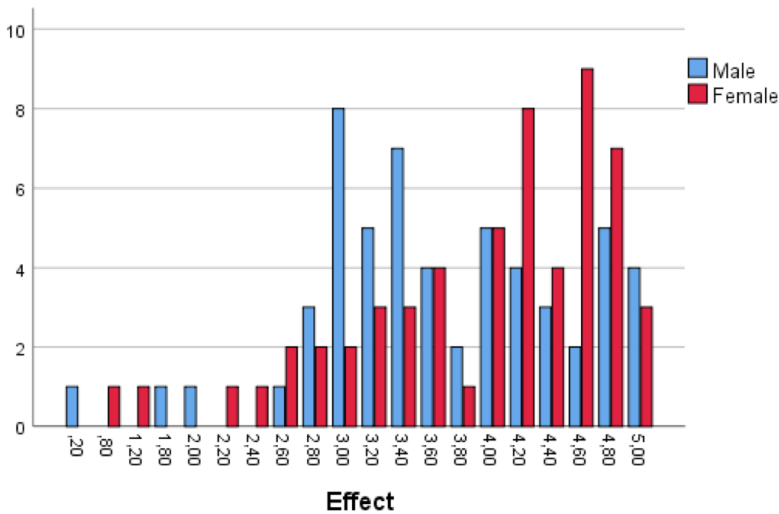


Figure 3. The spread of mean scores for *impact* in males and females.

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¹ All translations from original Finnish language are by the authors.

