

Music teacher attitudes and practices in relation to composition and its connection towards curriculum

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Abstract

Many music teachers value teaching music composition in class and cite its value for engagement and other pro social and psychological outcomes. The current curriculum on music composition in Australia is focused mainly on musical outcomes. This research looks into the interaction between music teacher attitudes towards composition, what they teach and how it relates to the Australian curriculum. This paper surveyed music teachers (n = 74) in Victoria, Australia and showed that while they believe that teaching composition was very engaging and worthwhile, actual time spent in class on composition was low. This paper gives an overview of the teaching of composition and make recommendations regarding further research into this subject, specifically, how composition can be used in class for engagement and pro social and psychological benefits. Furthermore, a suggestion for how to include potential changes to curriculum to focus on these extra musical outcomes.

Keywords: Australia, composition, music curriculum, teacher attitudes, music education, musical outcomes, extra musical outcomes.

1. Introduction

Researchers and specialists have discovered and refined themes and areas of focus in a composition class and define it as; developing music theory and notation, developing music awareness, developing young composers, understanding and knowledge of contemporary music and it's techniques, developing rich creative experiences (Kaschub, Smith, 2009). These areas can be considered as musical outcomes and there are strong rationales for teaching composition for these aspects (Hogenes, van Oers, Diekstra & Sklad, 2016, Kaschub & Smith, 2009, Pitts, 2000). The benefits of composition classes can be thought of three main ways, firstly, improving the soft skills such as personal and social capabilities (Bilhartz, Bruhn, & Olson, 1999, Custodero 2005). The fundamental social skills needed for successful music students are cooperation, collaboration, communication (verbal and nonverbal), focus, delayed gratification and acceptance of consequences (Gooding, 2009). It is important therefore that students are taught these social skills explicitly and can have them modelled, in the same way a teacher would approach musical concepts. Secondly, how it improves musical outcomes like theory, notation and aural abilities (Garofalo & Whaley, 1979) and how teaching from a musicianship frame that includes composition as opposed to a more traditional performative musical frame can impact musical abilities such as aural skills, rhythm and timing skills and other musical outcomes (Whitener, 1983). Finally, the influence of music studies on other areas of academic development and 'core' curriculum subjects (Gouzouasis, Guhn & Kishor, 2007; Johnson, Memmott, 2006). Student engaging in music classes has been shown to positively affect other areas of academic development. (Hetland & Winner, 2001). A meta study of the effect that music-based programs have on academic subjects have shown that there are reliable causal links in two areas, positive effects of listening to music and spatial temporal reasoning - the ability to think of three-dimensional objects in space and how to mentally manipulate them and positive effects on spatial reasoning - the ability to understand, remember spatial relationships with objects in space (Hetland & Winner, 2001).

In the field of music education, composition has an important role because of its ability to have positive influences on student learning outcomes (Hallam, 2010). While it seems that music teachers all agree on these principles (Strand, 2006; Teachout, 1997), many music composition classes focus mainly on technical musical outcomes. Music teachers agree that music composition is important in terms of engagement, fun and pro social psychological benefits (Burland & Davidson, 2001), however instruction, curriculum and assessment does not always match this belief. This paper looks at attitudes of music teachers towards composition in the classroom and seeks to address this potential gap in between their attitude about it being beneficial for social/psychological outcomes and actual teaching practises and any potential short fall also in the curriculum available.

2. Literature review

Music composition class has been shown to have positive benefits on students 'soft skills', known as pro social/psychological behaviors like engagement, collaboration, respectful interactions, self-esteem and self-efficacy (Culp, 2016, McClung, 2000, Trusty & Oliva, 1994). Some research goes so far as to suggest that music classes and composition should be assessed on such extra-musical outcomes and that the value in doing so is often overlooked (LeCroy, 1992, McClung, 2000). Composition focused music lessons have also been shown to have greater impact on musical outcomes such as music theory, aural abilities, notation and musical understanding (Whitener, 1983). Researchers looked into the effects of composition instruction as opposed to performance instruction on musical outcomes. They compared teaching a unit on composition as with a traditional performative musical approach and focused on different musical indicators such as aural skills, performance proficiency and other musical concepts. It was found that using the compositional approach proved to be effective in improving students' musical concepts and skills over that of the control group (Garofalo & Whaley, 1979).

Studies have shown that music composition is a valuable part of music education in schools (Berkley 2001, Burnard & Younker 2004, Hickey, 2001, Hogenes, van Oers, Diekstra & Sklad, 2016, Kaschub & Smith, 2009, Pitts, 2000, Ruthmann 2007). Evidence exists that describes and shows how important music composition is for developing creativity and problem solving (Burnard & Younker, 2004). One study mapped the cognitive processes of composition and was able to show that composing music drives problem solving and creativity in learners (Collins, 2005).

2.1 Music composition for engagement

The use of composition to teach music theory and notation and other related musical outcomes suggested by Kaschub and Smith (2009), while beneficial musically, has also been cited as important for student engagement (Hogenes, van Oers, Diekstra, Sklad, 2016). Research has emerged that shows effective music programmers are interactive, fun and enjoyable for maximum student engagement and achievement (Fullerton, 2002, Streaun, 2011). Music composition instruction and quality music education programs should provide opportunities for new skill development and performance, space for interpersonal bonding and shared goals, positive social engagement and recognition of excellence (Hallam, 2010).

Making music classes engaging and fun for students should be a priority and using composition is one way to achieve this (Ruthman, 2007). One study showed that producing their own music was found to be more engaging for students than merely reproductive types of music making (Hogenes, van Oers, Diekstra, Sklad, 2016).

2.2 Music teacher attitudes towards composition

In a survey conducted in 2001, music teachers responded positively to the implementation of composition in the national curriculum in the UK (Berkley, 2001). When asked about it, many teachers saw the benefits in creativity, confidence and problem solving that learning composition requires. They expressed that learning composition was an important part in the development and creation of musically knowledgeable and articulate students (Strand, 2006).

There exist many real-world problems to teaching composition in the classroom and teachers report that they are not using composition as an educational tool as much as could be possible (Strand, 2006). Teachers express that they find difficulties in utilizing music composition because of perceived and real classroom restraints (Bell, 2003). Educators cite different reasons for not including composition into music education programs such as too many other learning activities, a lack of access to technology, composing being inappropriate for type of music class, not enough time and confidence in teaching composition (Strand 2006). One study found that generalist teachers believed that music instruction added value to other subjects as well as value to social and psychological capabilities (Hash, 2010). In another similar survey on generalist teacher attitudes towards composition, it was found that they valued the non-musical outcomes such as personal, social, communicative skills over and above the discrete musical skills (Hargreaves, Purves, Welch & Marshall, 2007).

2.3 Music composition to assess social and personal values

Music composition has the capacity to be a strong promoter of social interactions and inclusion of cultural and personal development (Burland & Davidson, 2001). It can be said to be of utmost importance in students' experiences of school life and how they perform socially, closely links with their musical education development. (Hargreaves, Purves, Welch, & Marshall, 2007). Due to the nature of music being essentially a social activity, students get important time and space to practice their social and personal skills and receive feedback about these skills. Therefore, feedback on a student's non-musical skills in the area of social capabilities is vital (Gooding, 2009). There are some suggestions for the types of non-musical outcomes to focus on such as integrity, self-esteem, tolerance and civic responsibility (LeCory, 1992). These outcomes could be deliberately taught and used during assessment in a variety of ways. Some research even suggests that music educators can exploit the inherent values found in music composition and design a curriculum around these values, including formal instruction and assessment of such values (McClung, 2000).

2.4 Composition in the Victorian curriculum

Current Victorian curriculum clearly seeks to follow the definition of music class laid out by Kaschub and Smith (2009) that states composition class should be developing music theory and notation, developing music awareness, developing young composers, understanding and knowledge of contemporary music and its techniques and developing rich creative experiences. Some part of this definition could be missing in the Australian curriculum on composition, that is the aspect that addresses creating rich creative experiences and developing non-musical outcomes and the role that teacher has in providing and assessing them. What is sometimes overlooked in favour of the more technical aspects of the music composition class are these non-musical outcomes. That is to say that teachers concern themselves with the musical outcomes and discrete skills and content rather than the engagement or other pro social and psychological behaviours (Teachout, 1997). Very few studies have looked directly at the role of composition in music classes and how it affects students' soft skills and motivation. In many existing studies the teacher's role is not examined properly and thought about in an analytical way and instead, the focus has been on the students learning (Hallam 2010).

2.5 Hypothesis

Based on the literature review we have drawn four hypotheses that will be investigated in this research paper:

1. Music teachers who value music composition focus on musical outcomes
2. Music theory and music composition classes are often interlinked
3. Music teachers justify the use of composition by its inherent value for engagement and pro social benefits
4. Music teachers whose focus is on curriculum, don't use composition in class

3. Methods

3.1 Procedure:

The collection of data for this research project followed the action research model of 'Plan, act, observe, reflect' (Dahlberg & McCaig, 2010). During the planning stage the instrument was developed to acquire data that could inform and test the four established hypotheses. The survey contained some open-ended questions requiring short answers, Likert scales and multiple choice. Questions were on a range of subjects including demographic information, teacher background and own education, their area of music teaching, their attitudes towards content, delivery and their students and whether or not they used composition and their subsequent reasons and attitudes towards that. They were also asked about how they taught their class in relation to time spent on different aspects of music such as listening, theory, rehearsal, composition etc. In the description of the survey, potential respondents were informed that they were giving consent by filling out the survey and that it was anonymous. Respondents were informed that participation was voluntary and told the questionnaire would take approximately 12 - 15 minutes. They were also informed that the data would be used to form the basis of a research paper that would be put forward for potential publication and that if they so desired, they could withdraw their participation at any time. From the data gathered results were then collated and questions were abbreviated and cleaned. Correlations were then examined across the results. The most statistically significant correlations were identified as being anything over 0.5.

3.2 Population:

At the 'acting' stage, an online survey was emailed to music teachers from several specific schools in the Melbourne metropolitan area and was also emailed to subscribers of a statewide music teacher online newsletter. This group of music teachers is a diverse population of teachers ranging in age, gender and experience from across the state of Victoria that subscribe to musicmail. They were also a mixture of teachers from private music education providers, public school teachers and private school teachers. There was a mix that taught classroom and individual lessons, thus ensuring a wide variety of teaching types. The selection of participants was based on convenience/opportunistic data gathering approach described by Bryman, Becker & Sempik (2008). The survey was left open for 4 weeks and 77 respondents filled out the questionnaire. From these 77, 80.5% reported teaching composition currently or in the past.

3.3 Instrument:

A google form was used to create the survey. From the initial survey results the data were exported and converted into SPSS to organise the correlations. Some examples of the questions found in the instrument can be found in Appendix A

Appendix A:

- How long have you been a music teacher?
- Do you teach any other subjects?
- What grade do you teach?
- Briefly describe your education
- What is the primary focus of students you teach?
- What is most important to you as a teacher?
- Do you teach composition?
- Rate these aspects of music class from least important to most important
- How much time do you dedicate to these different aspects of music in your class?
- If you include composition in class, what are the reasons?
- Do you include student led repertoire?

4. Results

From the data a picture started to emerge of the types of attitudes music teachers had towards teaching composition, who was using it and also what their reasons were for doing so. Results from the questionnaire showed that music teachers who teach composition do so for reasons such as student engagement, fun, music theory and their own enjoyment (Table 3).

The first step of analysing the findings was to look at teacher attitudes towards composition. In this way testing parts of the first hypothesis. This was done from looking at data from two items. From the item "How important do you rate the teaching of composition in class?" it is clear in Table 1 *Attitude to composition*, that most respondents were neutral to positive about composition in class. It is also relevant to note that a strong minority rate composition as not important (Table 1).

Table 1.
Composition importance

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	Very unimportant	10	13.5
	Unimportant	8	10.8
	Neutral	28	37.8
	Important	18	24.3
	Very important	10	13.5
	Total	74	100.0

The other item to assess teacher attitudes was a question on what the respondent's thought was important in class: "What do you think is the most important part of music classes, rank them from most important to least important?". In response, it was shown that 52% of respondents said that enjoyment was the most important part of music class. The second highest result was 39% of those surveyed rated creativity as the most important part of music class as shown in Figure 1.

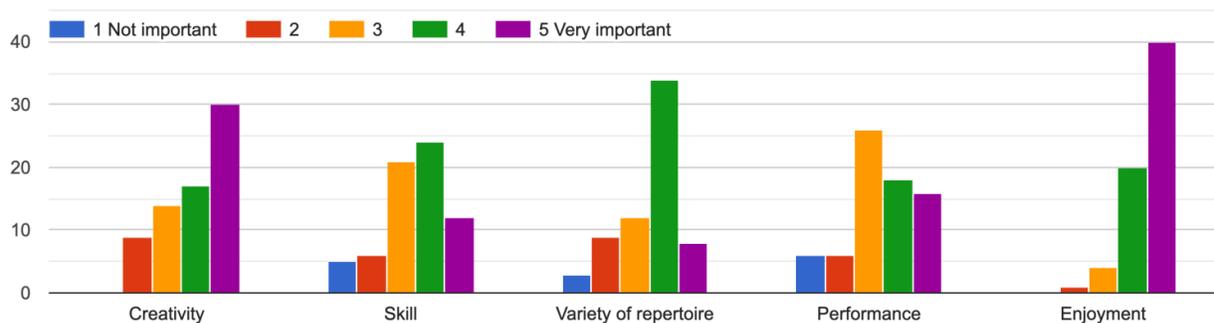


Figure 1.
Important part of music class

The second hypothesis was that “Music theory and music composition classes are often interlinked”. This was done by correlating answers to items on how much time is spent in class teaching music theory and how important composition was rated.

- a. How much time do you allocate to these different elements in your music class?
- b. How important do you rate the teaching of composition in your class?

As can be seen in Table 2 *Composition and music theory correlate*, a statistical significance was found between the two items (Table 2). Time spent on other musical aspects such as practising part of a piece, technical work, aural training, sight reading, listening was also correlated but there weren't any significant relationships with the other elements.

Table 2.

Music theory and composition correlate

	important composition	Time_Music_theory	Time_composition
important composition	1		
Time_Music_theory	.388**	1	
Time_composition	.558**	.633**	1

** = >.01

The third hypothesis that was examined was that “Music teachers justify the use of composition in class by its inherent value for engagement and pro-social benefits”. The respondents were asked if they have ever included composition in class either in the past or currently. Out of 77 respondents, 66 respondents said they had included composition in class (86%). This was a nominal question where they were given the option of selecting several different reasons for teaching composition from a list. Table 3 *Reasons for teaching composition*, shows that the three most common answers from 3rd most common to most common were “Fun for students” (70%), “Helps explain music theory” (76%), “Engages students” (77%).

Table 3.
Reasons for teaching composition

Reasons for teaching composition	
Engages the students	77%
Helps explain music theory	76%
Fun for the students	70%
Student shows interest - student led	59%
The curriculum requires it	41%
Using technology requires it	38%
Something I'm interested in - teacher led	27%

The final hypothesis, “Music teachers whose focus is on curriculum, don’t use composition in class” was addressed by looking at the correlation between two items relating to the focus of the respondent and also the reasons if composition is not included in class. There was no statistical significance between these two items, which is to say that teachers who focus on curriculum, aren’t limited by it in regard to composition.

- a. What is the primary focus of the students you teach? [curriculum]
- b. If you don’t include composition, please choose from the following reasons [curriculum]

One finding that was of interest was that music teachers are not using composition much in class in terms of time spent on it, in fact out of several different aspects of music class, composition is being used the least. When respondents were asked about how they divide their time in their music class using the item “How much time do you allocate to these different elements in your music class?” they were asked to be specific in terms of how many minutes (Table 4.). The mean number of minutes spent on composition was a little over 6 minutes. This result is of interest because initial observation of the data indicates that teachers rate composition and creativity as important parts of the music class but are not spending much time on teaching it and are prioritising other elements of the music lesson.

Table 4.
Time allocated to different elements of music

	Minimum (mins)	Maximum (mins)	Mean
How much time do you allocate to these different elements in your music class? [Music Theory]	0	50	11.35
How much time do you allocate to these different elements in your music class? [Practising a specific part of a piece]	0	30	12.64
How much time do you allocate to these different elements in your music class? [Performing a complete piece]	0	50	11.76
How much time do you allocate to these different elements in your music class? [Technical work (e.g., scales, timing, fingering, posture, etc.)]	0	30	11.82
How much time do you allocate to these different elements in your music class? [Listening]	0	50	11.42
How much time do you allocate to these different elements in your music class? [Aural training]	0	50	10.07
How much time do you allocate to these different elements in your music class? [Sight reading]	0	40	7.64
How much time do you allocate to these different elements in your music class? [Composition]	0	50	6.69

4. Discussion

When studying the results of music teacher attitudes towards composition it's possible to say that they are overall neutral to positive (Table 1). Just over a third of the respondents rated music composition as either 'important' or 'very important'. Almost a fourth of respondents replied that composition was either 'unimportant' or 'very unimportant' and over a third said they were neutral about composition. These findings are in line with similar studies (Berklee, 2001) where music teacher attitudes towards composition were collected and it was found that music teacher attitudes were similarly varied. Music teachers also rated creativity and engagement as important (Fig. 1).

The second hypothesis, music composition and music theory are connected, correlated responses of two items regarding what teachers are doing in their classroom in terms of time spent on composition and music theory and their attitude towards composition (Table 2). There was a statistically significant relationship between these two items which indicate that music theory and composition are interlinked in the classroom. In a study comparing the benefits of composition on such elements as music theory it was found that there was a strong positive link between them (Garofalo & Whaley, 1979).

Music teachers have many reasons for selecting what to include in their lessons and how to justify such prioritisation. The findings in this paper are similar to the results that were found by Strand (2006). That is to say that music teachers use composition to capitalise on engagement, enjoyment and motivation that comes with learning composition (Table 3). Engagement was seen as the most cited reason with a little over three quarters of respondents saying they use composition for engagement.

The final hypothesis, that music teachers who focus on curriculum don't use composition in class, was inconclusive when looking at the data from the instruments used in this study. This result could have several implications which would need further exploration. One possible reason could be that teachers are not limited by the curriculum which does include composition elements and when classes are focused on the curriculum, that composition is allowed for.

When looking at existing music composition and musicianship curriculum available in Australia, the Kodaly system, AMEB (Australia Music Examiners Board) and VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education), all have similar outcomes that focus on aspects of music composition such structure, theme, melodic and harmonic integrity and prioritising aural and written analysis of existing composition works. Music teachers are generally focused on these types of music composition curriculum (AMEB, Kodaly, VCE) or similar. This study has implications for teaching composition for engagement and pro social and psychological outcomes. Music teachers could discover the potential benefits of designing compositional curriculum that includes formal learning experiences that teach and assess behavioural skills (McClung, 2000). If using composition is beneficial for engagement and pro social and psychological outcomes, then music teachers may need to rethink the focus of their composition classes at the level of instruction and assessment. This study also could have implications for curriculum design as it seeks to address the teacher attitudes towards composition and how current focus is on musical outcomes alone.

Teachers could be taking advantage of the pro social benefits that composition offers. Having students engaged and enjoying their classes is always a goal of any teacher, composition can be used during music lessons as a way to engage students. The links between composition and engagement are evident. It also offers opportunities to teach music theory, typically a rather unimaginative element of music learning as a means to keeping students on task and active in their learning. Importantly, the results from this study imply that teachers who value composition for its multiple benefits could include opportunities for its use in class as an assessment of engagement.

5. Conclusion

The findings in this current study indicate that while composition is regarded as valuable by many teachers, the time actually spent on composition is quite low comparatively to other musical elements. This is important because it shows that in some situations, teacher attitudes and their practices are not aligning. Engagement, creativity and fun were all valued as important by music teachers but the current Victorian curriculum offers little in terms of how these outcomes could be expressed.

This current study was looking at different attitudes towards composition but no real definition of what composition learning looks like was made. In one study on music teacher attitudes (Strand, 2006), definitions offered by teachers about composition learning were quite varied. It becomes problematic to define what teachers are doing when they say they're teaching composition and this paper is limited in the sense that no real definition was offered. In this study, it was found there was no real connection between teachers who focus on the curriculum and time they spend on teaching composition. It's possible the instrument design was not accurate enough to properly capture this part of the teacher experience. The current research builds on existing research that music teachers regard composition as important (Teachout, 1997, McClung, 2000, Pitts, 2000) and did find that music teachers don't teach composition in class as much as other elements of music lessons. It was also able to look at the relationships between music composition and music theory and found that teachers who value composition, also spend time on theory and composition in class.

To properly capture music teacher attitudes future research could engage in a smaller data set with more open-ended semi structured interviews. Using the current data and information in regard to curriculum and teachers citing composition as important but not using it much in class, another instrument could be developed to fill those gaps and find out more beyond the limits of the current research. This could help form a more realistic picture of the state of music teacher attitudes and their practises in regard to composition, curriculum and its benefits. In this way, the results from the initial survey can be explored more deeply and music teachers' opinions would be given more opportunity for expressing detailed ideas and attitudes. Three main areas for further investigation are suggested, firstly, would be to explore the findings that showed that while teachers regard composition as valuable, it's not being taught as much as other elements of music class. Secondly, the results that music theory and composition are linked could be further explored as to the nature and amount that these things combine. Finally, a deeper look into the current curriculum and how it relates to composition, teacher attitudes and engagement and pro social outcomes could be of benefit. A selection of respondents could be chosen based on a variety of age, gender, how long they've been a teacher and education. Questions would be used as a guide and space would be given for respondents to deviate. This would enable the topic to be explored further with "how" and "why" questions (Dahlberg & McCaig, 2010).

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