

## **How primary school students view music and the arts**

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### *Abstract*

*The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* document (2000), the last of seven curriculum documents to be developed, is to reach full implementation stage in 2003. This paper, an investigative study, looks at the current views of students, in predominantly Year 6 classes – the final year of primary schooling, to ascertain their views on the arts and on music in particular. Such an inquiry seeks to evaluate present student perceptions of music in their schooling and to gather projections regarding how these students might feel about undertaking further music study at intermediate and secondary school.

### **The project**

*The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* document (Ministry of Education, 2000) includes four arts disciplines, those of Dance, Drama, Music and the Visual Arts. Schools are expected to offer all four at primary and intermediate levels, that is until the students reach year eight of their compulsory schooling, after which at least two of the disciplines must be offered. During the writing of the document (1998-2000) it became apparent that very little music, dance and drama education was happening in primary schools, although visual art was very apparent. Dance and drama appeared more often in the form of physical education exercises and role-plays respectively, and music was claimed by the primary teachers union (the NZEI) to be the subject generalist teachers feared the most.

Many schools claimed they were offering music when they engaged in mass singing, but research has shown (Foley et al., 1998) that in most cases the only instruction was “sing louder” with absolutely no music education input whatsoever. Findings in 1998 showed that many schools offered as little as ten minutes per week of music on average, mostly in the form of massed singing, despite the fact that music was listed within an essential learning area and therefore a compulsory curriculum subject (Ministry of Education, 1993). It is hoped that the full implementation of the arts curriculum document will redress the poor circumstances afforded music, dance and drama, in primary schools. This research was carried out at a time when the curriculum implementation programme had been in place for two years.

### **The research form**

This study is qualitative and might be regarded as relating to phenomenology in that it seeks to interpret the lived and perceived experience of the children in relation to music and the arts. Interpreting the children’s responses as part of a text will enable us to gain a better understanding of the whole. Phenomenology is the philosophical exploration of the modes in which human beings apprehend phenomena, the things of this world. In regarding human experience as context-bound, the researchers acknowledge that the responses inevitably relate to the context of the school and possibly to very recent classroom and personal experiences. The interview strategies were intended to facilitate some reflection, allowing for the interacting of thought, and sought to identify aspects of music which might have significance in the subjects’ lives.

Unlike the Cartesian tradition which regards symbols, pictures, perceived objects, or perceived sound as being only in the mind, phenomenology recognises the reality and truth of phenomena, the things that appear. Appearances are real and phenomenology allows us to recognise and restore the world that had been declared merely psychological, a world which is now regarded as ontological, part of the being of things. It allows us to uncover underlying assumptions through which human beings give meaning to their world.

It is hoped that this approach will help to shape findings about the present state of, and student perceptions about, music education in New Zealand primary schools. The researchers believe that students are in a unique position to enhance our understanding of what is going on in the teaching and learning of music and the arts (Bresler, 1993). Asking open-ended questions in the group interviews was intended to enable the students to share experiences and perceptions in order to “reveal personal meaning” (Bresler, 1996: 12) and gain multiple perspectives.

### **Methodology**

Schools selected for this project were all within the greater Auckland area. A cross-section of schools was chosen representing a range of socio-economic and cultural clientele. The target year level for interview was Year 6 (10-11 year olds), although in some cases slightly younger students were interviewed. The interviewers were students in their final year (year 4) of a B.Ed (Music Pathway) degree course.

The interviewers generally selected ten students from their chosen school and interviewed these in two batches of five. In a few cases the students were selected by the music teacher, but most were volunteers from a random selection of classes. The questions interviewers put to the students were open enough to elicit free responses from the children (see Appendix I). They were designed to gain the children’s opinions, both at school and in their lifeworld, of music and the related arts of dance, drama and drawing and painting (visual art).

### **Responses to questions**

The kinds of music these students listened to covered a wide range of popular styles, with hip hop/rap, R & B and Shakira being the most popular. Most claimed to enjoy a variety of music, one even liking their parent’s CDs “cause I’m used to them”. Other comments included:

- “I don’t listen to the radio”
- “I went to a Mozart concert thinking it was educational, but it was really boring. The first half was OK, but I nearly fell asleep in the second half”

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- “I like that song ‘Puff the Magic Dragon’, do you know what that song is about?”
  - “I went to Big Day Out, and it was really loud!”
  - “I went to a concert in my dream. It was Michael Jackson. It was good, he pulled me up on stage”

Perceived parent/caregiver preferences in music included St Germain, Santana, Christian rock, Queen, Frank Sinatra, Neil Diamond, ACDC, the Beatles, Elvis Presley and New Wave group the B 52’s (“it’s this crazy group”). Island music and Dutch Bands were also mentioned. Other comments ranged from “old music” opera and classical, with a query from one student of “what’s a classical?”

Most of the students had some relative who played an instrument, with a few of the students themselves playing an instrument, mainly piano or guitar. Dance was prominent, with jazz ballet (often called just “Jazz”) being significant. One Pacific Island girl danced at weddings, “sometimes by myself or sometimes in a group”. As far as choices for an instrument they would like to learn, drums won the day, with electric and bass guitar running close; saxophone and piano were also prominent.

At this point it might be interesting to note the household expenditure on recordings (vinyl, cassette, CDs) from the census of 1993/94 (the most recent) which showed that over 62 million dollars (62.69) were spent in a twelve-month period in New Zealand. It is likely to be much higher now, with increased access and new technologies also tempting the buyer. Household spending on musical instruments in the same period totalled over 45 million dollars (45.7). (Statistics New Zealand, 1995: 78-79). This does not take into account spending in the hospitality industry in which music and concerts are involved. For the same period around 160 million dollars was spent on books, 35% of which were published in New Zealand (ibid: 61).

Students participating in music groups outside of school produced a fairly even split between those who did not and those who did. For those who did, church choirs and

groups were popular, with many students also placing great value on their cultural group. Recorder was another popular out of school activity.

The question of what the world might be like without music produced a range of responses:

- “It would be pretty stupid, ’cause then you’d only have talking” - with a follow up response from a fellow member of the group – “But you wouldn’t even have talking!”
- “It would be boring, we wouldn’t have any instruments.”
- “We couldn’t dance.”
- “Nothing would be fun.”
- “TV with no music would be so boring. Coca Cola RTR (a music programme) would be boring.”
- “Empty. It’s in everything, like dancing.”
- “People wouldn’t hum when walking down the street.”
- “It would be boring and geeky.” – whole group agreed.
- “Everyone would just watch TV. Nobody would listen to the radio.”
- “It wouldn’t be creative.”
- “No music, just talk, no dancing.”
- “When you go to a party or dance, you do nothing!”
- “There would be no noises outside, because there’s always birds singing.”
- “The world would be boring and dull. Life would be boring.”
- “Your voice would be lost. Jobs would be lost. Money would be lost!”
- “Radios wouldn’t exist. Ads on TV would be boring.”
- “Movies? No sound in movies.”

One student thought a world without music “would be good”, while another thought, “it would be normal”.

One optimistic student affirmed that: “someone would just invent it!”

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The next block of questions began by asking if the students did any music at school and if so, how often and at what time of day? They were also asked what they enjoyed doing, and when they would like to have music.

Most of the students had music education as a subject at school, although one school in particular was unpredictable with its timetabling: “we don’t know when we do it, we just come in the morning and it will be on the timetable”. Another school was “hardly ever”, but this school had started singing on a Friday afternoon in term 4. Other schools had a range of times from once a month, once a fortnight, once a week, twice a week, to every day (this school had a highly effective music specialist and the students opted for extra music). The times music was taught varied, with the earliest being the 11.00am middle slot, the rest were after lunch, often after 2.00pm.

While most students opted for more music than they presently have, there was a range of responses. Negative comments were: “never”, “in the morning – over and done with”; “while you sleep” and “after school, if anyone wants to go they can go”. Students who were happy with the allotted time suggested replacing other subjects with music – the pressures of the numeracy/literacy drive showing - “music instead of maths – that’s for sure” (several students suggested this), “music instead of language”. Other comments included: “all day”, “in the morning”, “everyday, all day”; and the suggestion, “Friday or Monday, to wake people up”.

Most lessons use singing as the dominant musical activity either to recordings or with the teacher playing the guitar. Many students noted the inclusion of Maori and Pacific island songs, recorder or other instrumental playing. Some schools included listening – “we learn about Mozart and different famous composers”; “Once we did Bob Marley”; “listen to some dumb songs”; “I hate it when Miss M..... takes it ’cause it’s really boring. She makes us listen to different instruments and that’s real boring”. A favourite teaching aspect was ‘keeping the beat’, many students mentioned this and almost as many expressed a dislike for it. One group in particular claimed that that was all they did in any music period.

The types of music learning the students preferred ranked singing highest (but not always); others wanted to learn some new songs, create music, learn about modern songs, learn the drums (very popular), learn violin (x1), learn the harmonica (x1), make a video clip, being able to write songs and getting people to play it; playing the keyboard; and of course, “anything except Miss M...!”

A question related to singing showed that most students engaged in some form of singing at school, mostly in assemblies, but also in class time. Some students also perceived singing as being different to a music class. Others mentioned its use in school choirs, productions and cultural groups. Other times when students sang included “in my head” and “in the shower”.

Singing also had a function, such as:

- “I sing at home when I have time out, I go into my room and sing”

- “It takes bad things off my mind”

Some of the negative aspects of school singing included:

- “Some people go flat. The teacher makes us start again if we talk or go flat.”
- “too many old songs”
- “Sometimes you don’t like singing ‘cause you can’t get all the high notes or low notes”
- “Some people are shy and they don’t want other people to hear their voice”
- “I do like singing, but not here”

To demonstrate the negative side of massed singing I have included an observation undertaken by a primary trainee of an intermediate specialist music teacher in a decile 8 school. The commentary needs no explanation, the square bracket inclusions in italics are added for clarification.

I observed fifty minutes of block singing today. The whole block [four classes] join with another block in the school hall for singing. They walk in and sit down and wait for the music teacher to take control. However, all the teacher did was put a tape on. He didn't greet them and in fact did not say one word to them [*the students*]. When the tape started, the teacher yelled out 'SING!' and that was it. Nothing more was said.

The music teacher then stood in front of the children with his hands in his pockets looking utterly bored. He just watched the children without saying or doing anything. The classroom teachers [*of the children*] were walking around handing out 'smiley cards' and encouraging the children to sing as they sang along too.

Eventually the teacher walked over to the tape player and turned the music off. He then shouted at the children telling them that they weren't making enough effort and that they were talking too much. I was watching the children during this process, along with the other block teachers, and we didn't see any of them talking.

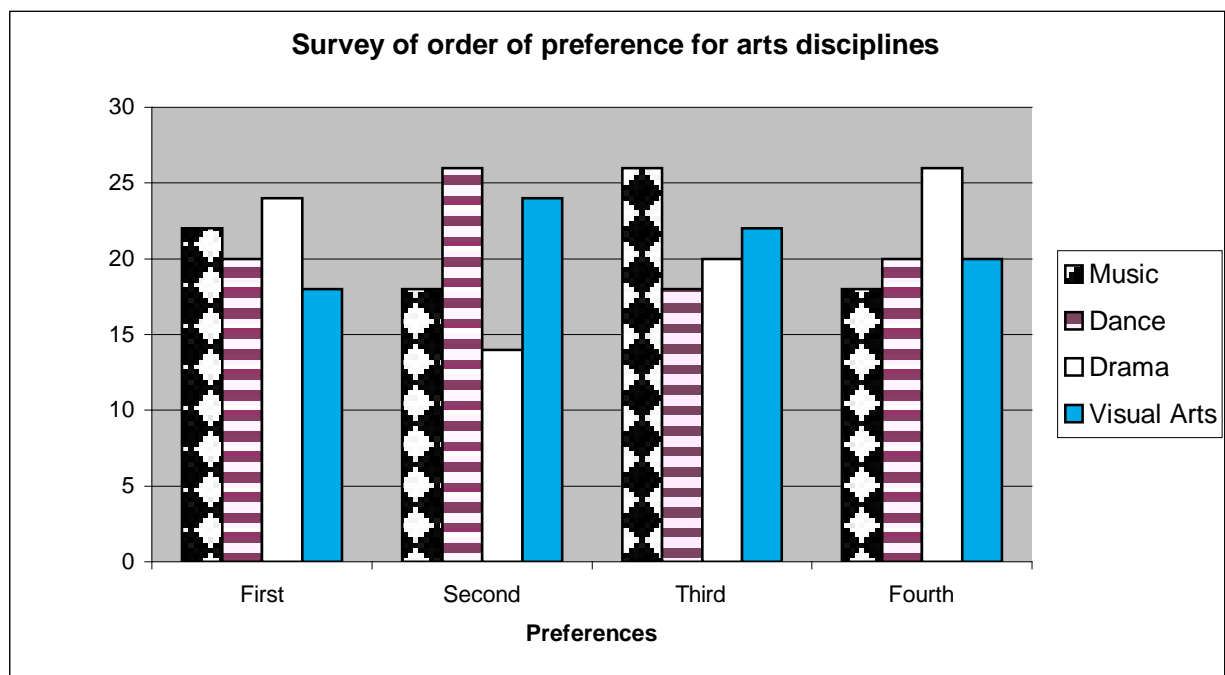
When the music was put back on again, the children sang and even did some actions, but the teacher discouraged them [*from physical engagement*] and stood there with a frown on his face and his hands on his hips. He was very intimidating and he looked bored.

I believe with music that children need to have an amount of freedom, but in this lesson this was definitely non-existent. The teacher didn't even sing along to motivate the children or anything. I have never seen children of any age look so bored and unmotivated for music, and I have never seen a teacher be so discouraging. (Recorded October 2002, used with permission.)



This example shows that a keen and energetic generalist teacher can often get more out of children, as previous commentary has shown, than a specialist who dislikes a particular activity. Sadly, this negative experience of massed singing will no doubt reflect on these students' perceptions of music education in the future.

The students in the survey were next asked to list their order of preference for the various arts disciplines of Dance, Drama, Music and the Visual Arts. Their responses were as follows:

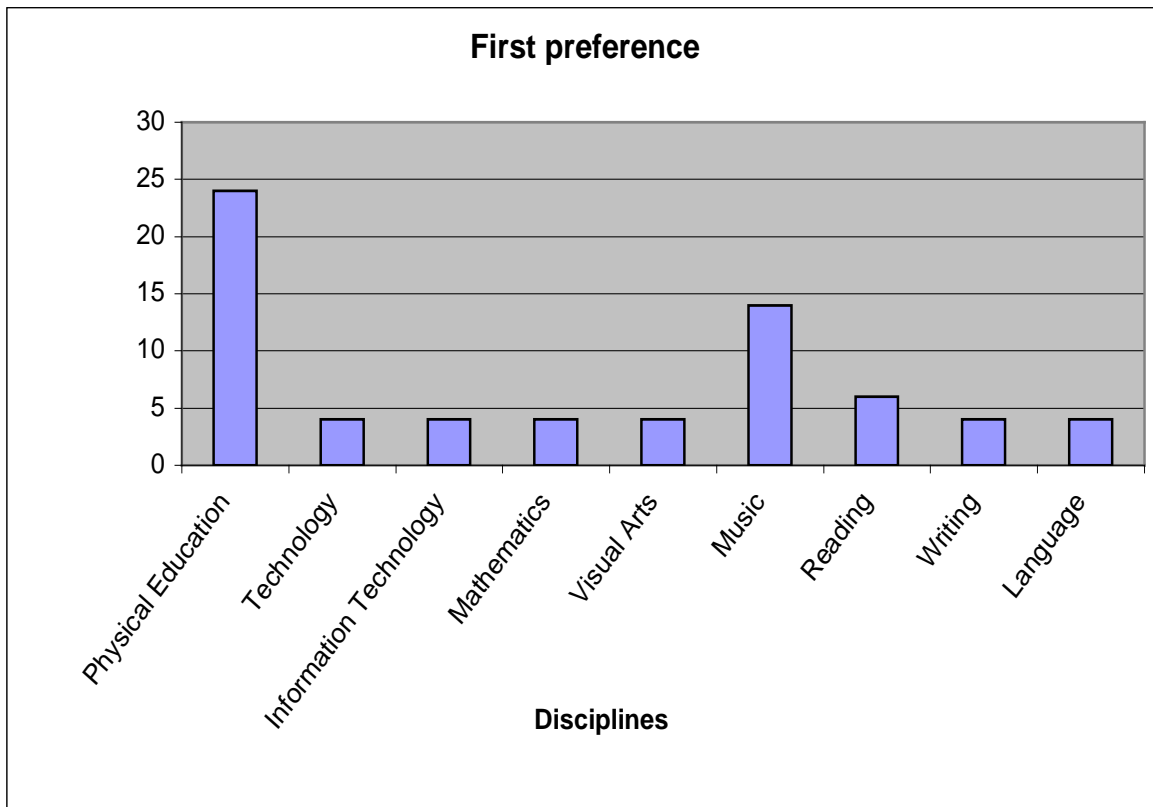


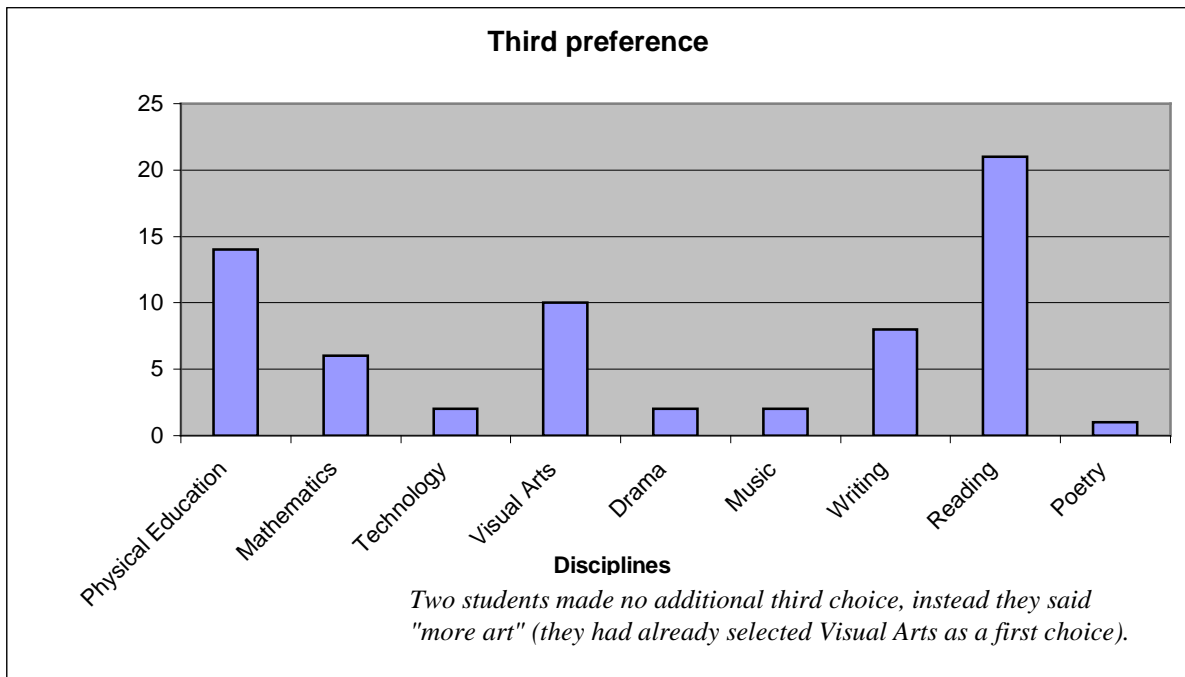
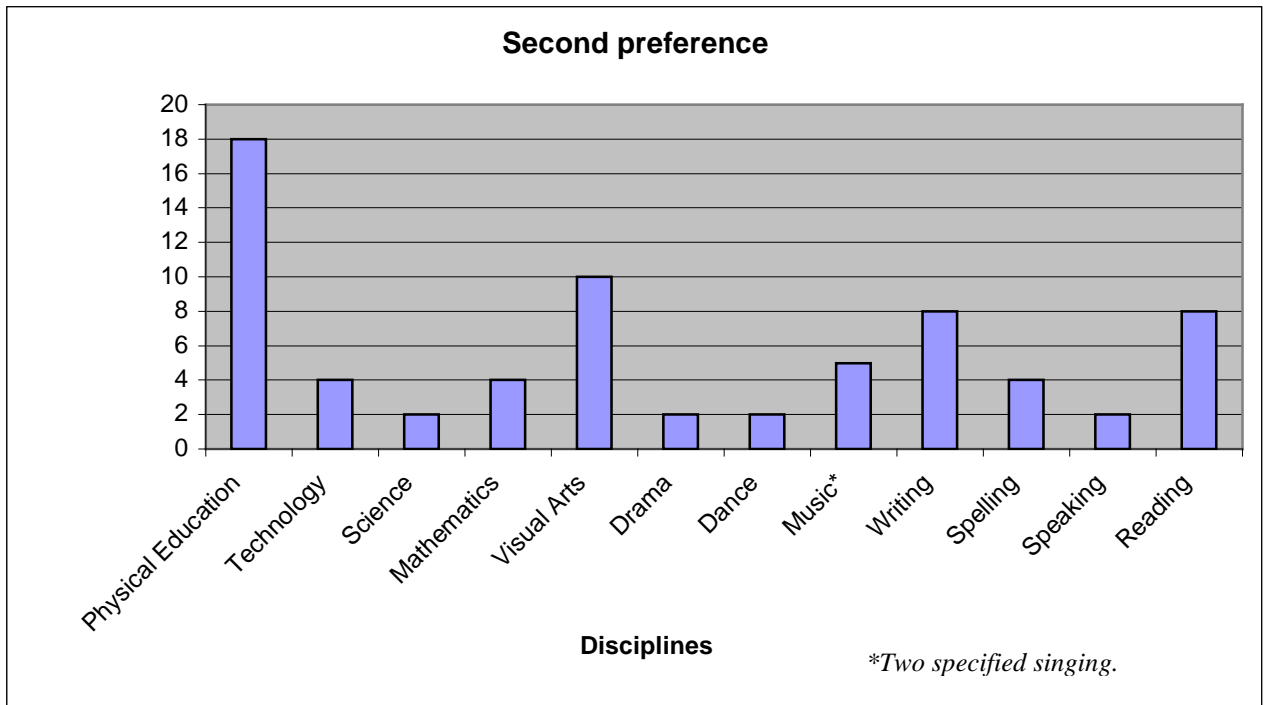
The close similarities between choices in the arts appear to demonstrate no particular preferences by these students. However, some of the comments made by students about their choices may add new dimensions to curriculum perceptions. Many students placed music first because they liked singing. One student chose art because it “is interesting and you can waste time”. “Art is fun and it expresses your feelings, like splashing paint on a piece of paper”. “I put Drama first because I just like fooling around”. “I like dancing because you get to make up dances”. “I put music last because it can be really boring and it’s never really exciting”. “I put drama last because we always do it with another school”. “Folk dancing is really boring – it’s always the same dances”. “I put dance first

because when I was a little girl my uncle would always want me to dance, and every time I danced I'd get a jellybean, so I got used to dancing". "I'd like to be in Shortland Street one day so I like drama". "When I was young my next door neighbours put me on the trampoline, they'd dress me up and put me on the trampoline and I was on the trampoline dancing, I liked that".

Asked whether they might take music as a subject at intermediate or secondary school, many said yes to both, although there were around 30% negative. Most who responded in the affirmative said they would only take music if they could learn an instrument.

Finally, students were asked what their three favourite subjects were in the current year. Many students broke their language/literacy responses down into specific activities and these have been reproduced according to the 68 responses.





The strong showing by physical education (PE) is in marked contrast to the subjects which either fail to appear at all or make a limited showing. It should be mentioned that PE is a cover-all term as at least half of the students said “sports” and one “athletics” and

these were recorded under the broader heading of PE. The arts have a presence, although visual art makes the strongest showing here, in marked contrast to the survey of arts preferences shown earlier.

### **Discussion and interpretation**

Throughout the interviews it became clear that the life-world significantly informs the 'school-world' of the student. Consistently, responses speak of childhood experiences which influence attitudes towards certain arts disciplines, and towards specific activities within them. The phenomenological understanding of appearance insists that "parts are only understood against the background of appropriate wholes, that manifolds of appearance harbour identities" – which can be expressed in a manifold of ways, and that "absences make no sense except as played off against the presences that can be achieved through them" (Sokolowski, 2000:4). The students' responses to the question of a world without music make this concept abundantly clear.

The kinds of music students listen to influences the kinds of music they enjoy singing. That this is not always practicable or even potentially effective is not at issue. Identities are being established and these identities are influenced by music as much as by any other phenomena. To take this further than the intent of this study would require a philosophical analysis which would lay out the various moments that go to make up a given whole. In the arts, "the philosophical analysis of vision, for example, will show how vision is founded upon the eye, on the ability of the head to be turned, on the ability of the whole body to go from one place to another, from one viewpoint to another, how both seeing and that which is seen are moments within a whole, and how seeing is conditioned by other sensory modalities, such as touch, hearing, and kinesthesia" (Sokolowski, 2000: 26).

The students were very aware of things that bored them, and this occurred when the activity seemed pointless. Singing "old songs" without explanation, purpose, or imbedded skill development lacks both vision and meaning. Merely putting on a recording and demanding the students "sing!" is also without pedagogical foundation and musical

purpose. Relentlessly getting students to 'keep the beat' also raises questions of how the beat is being kept and precisely where the beat is? The music the students said they listened to is heavily 'beat' oriented and repeatedly student responses indicated they enjoyed dancing to this music. One presumes the dancing follows the beat. This means, in some classrooms, that the beat might be being taught in a simplistic fashion which neither defines nor intellectualises.

Teachers, I suggest, have a responsibility to ascertain the situated prior knowledge, experiences, tastes and aspirations of their students in order that they might give a value of consensus to what they teach. Educational psychologist David Wood argues that knowledge and expertise are "often a product of *shared* constructions by teachers and children", and further, that "children usually attempt to make productive use of the lessons that they are taught. But sometimes, perhaps often, what they try to generalize *from* is poorly founded" (Wood, 1988: 212).

Responses to preferred subjects demonstrate how students of this age enjoy interacting with the world in a physical manner. Most of the subject areas named involved some form of physical activity, whether playing sport, painting, writing, singing, reading, dancing or working at the computer. Even when questioned whether they might take music at secondary and/or intermediate school, these students stressed wanting to play instruments, to engage physically with music. The natural attitude might be to take this as children's energetic response to the world. A phenomenological attitude requires us to reflect in a focussed and philosophical way on the students' pleasures and perceptions. This might be a study worthy of following up. The physical is not some polar opposite of the mental, one primitive, the other sophisticated. Both require concentration, control and dedication to achieve. I would suggest the so-called 'knowledge society' rates too highly mental attitudes and dispositions over its perceived 'lowly' neighbour, the physical.

Phenomenologies are well-suited to capture the 'lived experience' of music, as well as teaching and learning (Bresler, 1996: 15). Teaching requires a phenomenological sensitivity to students' realities and their life worlds, facilitating teacher's ability to see

the pedagogic significance of situations and interactions with children (Van Manen, 1990 in Bresler 1996: 12). The arts are almost back as a fully-fledged compulsory school subject. Let us hope that those responsible for the final stages of implementation give consideration to the background of the students, listen to what they say, and heed what they need. Once implemented, *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* document will present new opportunities and will challenge tradition, if tradition will let it in.

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## Appendix 1

The question guidelines offered to the student researchers were as follows:

**Warm up/ice breakers:**

- What sort of music do you like listening to? What do your parents/caregivers listen to?
- Do you or anyone in your family (whanau) play a musical instrument or sing? If you could learn an instrument, which one would you choose?
- Are you in a culture group, a performance group or choir outside of school (eg, church)?
- Could you imagine a world without music? What would it be like? Would anything be lost or missing?

**Key Questions:**

1. Do you do music at school?

IF YES -

- What sort of things do you do? Which do you enjoy the most? Which do you least enjoy?
- How often do you have music?
- What time of day do you normally have it?
- When would you like to have it?
- What would you like to do in music?

IF NO -

- Would you like to have it?
  - What would you like to know about, or do, in music?
2. Do you sing at school? Where or when? Do you enjoy singing? – why/why not?
3. There are several things we put together and call the Arts. These are: Dance, Drama, Music, and drawing and painting (Visual Art). Put these in the order of those you like most to do to those you like the least – an order of preference.
- Why did you put ..... first?
  - Why did you put ..... Last?
4. Do you hope that you will do music at intermediate school (years 7 and 8)?  
Do you think you might take music when you go to secondary school?
5. What are your three favourite subjects (out of all the subjects you learn) this year in order of preference / first, second, third?

*“Lunch” and “Patrols” were  
also included in the responses,  
perhaps in fun.*