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Characteristics of Elementary Music Programs in Urban Schools: What Money Can Buy

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to assess the status of music education in the elementary schools of a large urban center in Texas and to investigate possible inequalities in access to music education resources based on the race and socio-economic characteristics of the student population. Elementary music teachers (n = 54) from one of the largest and most diverse urban school districts in Texas were sent a questionnaire to gather information about their music programs. Schools were classified as of high, medium, and low socio-economic status on the basis of the proportion of minority students and economically disadvantaged students in the school.

Results indicated clear differences in parental support, facilities, instructional resources, budget allocations, and student-teacher ratio between schools of contrasting SES. These differences invariably favored schools of higher SES. No differences in teacher preparation and teacher commitment to teaching were found between high and low SES school. The need to study inequalities within school districts are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The Gallup polls about American Attitudes Toward Music showed an increase in the public's support for music education during the last 10 years (DiMaggio & Pettit (1999; Gallup, 2003): In 1994, 86% of the respondents considered that schools should offer music as part of the regular curriculum and 71% believed that states should mandate music education in their public schools; by 2003, these figures had increased to 93% and 79% respectively. Similarly positive is the latest report on the status of music education in the public schools published by the National Center for Education Statistics. In 1999-2000, 94% of the elementary schools in the Nation offered music instruction and, of these schools, 72% had full time music specialists and 67% had fully equipped music rooms. These national statistics reflect a healthy and improving picture of music education in the elementary public schools. However, research conducted at the state or local level often present a contrasting view of public music education, one that shows deficiencies and a decline in the quantity and quality of music programs across the United States.

Statistics gathered in California, for example, illustrate some of the problems affecting music education across the country. In the early 90s, the music programs in Orange County were declared in crisis due to funding cuts resulting from Proposition 13 (Kim, 1990). By 2003, businesses and the community in Santa Barbara had started raising funds to preserve music education programs in the schools. The severe cuts in state funding have had a devastating impact on the hiring and retention of music teachers, the enrollment of students in music programs, and the availability of instructional equipment and resources in the state. Between 1999 and 2004, there was a 27% reduction in the number of full-time music teachers and a 47% drop in enrollment in music courses (Music for All, 2004). Only 12% of the school districts in the state had an arts supervisor in 2005 (Arts for All, 2005). In Kern County, a markedly scarcity of music instructional materials and adequate resources were reported (Lambourne, 2003).

These problems are not exclusive of California but also affect other states. A study conducted in North Carolina about a decade ago showed that insufficient instructional time was allotted to general music at the elementary level (Chenault, 1993). Similarly, in Ohio, actual instruction time in K-8 general music was found to be below standards with the majority of the students in any given school not receiving any type of music instruction (Rasor, 1989). The need to allocate more time to music at the elementary level was indeed one of the recommendations of a nation-wide study sponsored by the National Endowment of the Arts (Leonhard, 1991). This recommendation seems particularly important given the low proportion of students who participate in music programs in secondary school (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). The NAEP 1997 Arts Report Card (US Department of Education, 1998) shows that only 3% of eight graders participated in orchestra, 18% in band, and 22% in choir. That approximately 75% of eight graders do not participate in any type of school music program (Poor, 1999) implies that most of the population, music education probably ends upon graduation from elementary school.

In addition to problems related to funding, resources, and time allocations, schools also face problems related to inequalities in the availability and quality of music programs (National Endowment for the Arts, 1987). There are markedly differences in the participation in music activities according to race (Love, & Klipple, 1995) and alarming statistics about race inequalities in the schools (Fowler, 1996). Schools with 10% of higher concentrations of black and Hispanic minorities offer fewer arts classes (Fowler, 1996) and there are very low percentage of minority in-service and pre-service music teachers in certain regions of the country (Ausmann, 1991). More worrisome is the fact that more than half of the teachers participating in a study in Ohio felt unprepared and unwilling to teach in urban settings where the proportion of minorities and low SES students is higher (Ausmann, 1991). Indeed, in urban settings, the availability of music programs is lower than in suburban schools, for example (Smith, 1997). Not surprisingly, the best predictor of the availability of string programs at the elementary school level is the socioeconomic profile of the students (Smith, 1997).

The purpose of this study was to assess the status of music education in the elementary schools of a large urban center in Texas and to investigate possible inequalities in access to music education resources based on the race and socio-economic characteristics of the student population. Texas is the second most populated state in the country, with a minority of 11.3 million comprising 50.2 percent of the total population of the state. Music is mandatory at the elementary level. However, it is unknown which percentage of schools actually have music specialists and there are no studies about the characteristics of the music programs in the elementary public schools of Texas.

METHOD

Sample

All elementary music teachers ($n = 75$) from one of the largest and most diverse urban school districts in Texas were sent a questionnaire to gather information about their music programs. The district serves almost 80,000 students, has an average minority population of 71% and a proportion of 53% of students who are economically disadvantaged (i.e., receive free lunches). The response rate was 70% ($n=54$).

On the basis of demographic information available through the Texas Education Agency (Texas Education Agency, 2006), the schools were classified into three minority-representation (MR) groups: high MR with more than 95% minorities, medium MR with 71% to 95% minorities, and low MR with less than 70% minorities. The number of respondents per MR group was 17, 17, and 19 respectively. The schools were also classified into three economic status (ES) groups according to the number of economically disadvantaged (ED) students in the schools: high ES with 2% - 53.5% ED students, medium ES with 55% - 89% ED students, and low ES with 90% - 98% ED students. The number of respondents per ES group was 15, 18, and 18 respectively.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire gathered information about the teacher, the music program, and the perceptions of the teacher about certain characteristics of the school:

Teacher information: full/part time position, education and teaching certification, years of experience as a teacher and music teacher, instrument, participation in musical and professional activities.

Program information: number of assistants, schedule, instructional and planning time allocations, number of students in the program, in special education, and taking private lessons, curriculum, performances, participation in competitions and regional and all-state ensemble, facilities and resources, fees and budget.

Teacher's perceptions: about parental, administrative and peer support, of changes in the characteristics of the music program during the last three years, and about whether there is equality of music resources among the schools of the district.

RESULTS

Interval and ratio data gathered (e.g., the number of students taking private lessons, the amount of funds raised per student) were analyzed through two ANOVAs, one based on the economic classification of the schools and the other based on their racial classifications. Nominal and ordinal data (e.g., rating of parental support, type of teaching certification) were analyzed using Chi squared tests. Two series of contingency tables were drawn for these data, one taking into consideration the economic-status of the schools and another one based on their minority representations.

Teacher characteristics

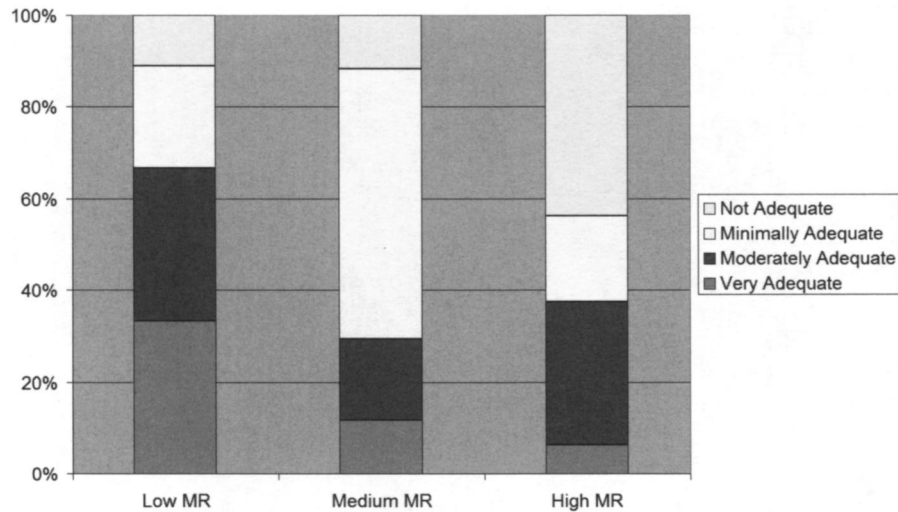
There were no significant differences in teacher preparation, teaching experience, teacher certification, intention to continue teaching, involvement in musical activities outside school, and involvement in school and professional activities in school according to the minority representation and economic status of the schools. The only difference between the teachers of high and low economic status schools or between those of high and low minority schools was related to the supervision of student teachers ($p = .02$). Three quarters of the teachers of high economical status and low minority representation had student teachers in the past while less than 30% of the other teachers did so. Although nonsignificant ($p = .10 - .20$), there are certain trends worth mentioning: A third of the teachers from low minority schools presented at professional conferences but only 6% from high minority schools did so. A third of the former teachers did not attend the Texas Music Education Association annual meeting while two thirds of the latter failed to do so.

Program characteristics

There were no differences in the allocation of instructional time, class size, and number of performances opportunities between schools of contrasting profiles. The following significant differences were found: Schools with a low proportion of minority students reported having, as an average, twice as many students with disabilities than did the other schools. In the former schools, students went on music-related field trips more often than did students in other schools. The student-music teacher ratio was lower at the low-minority schools than at the remaining schools. Differences in facilities (music room), instructional resources (music, text books), instrument quality, and technologies (software and hardware) favored schools of high economic status or low minority representation. As an average, schools with high minority representation or low economic status reported having inadequate or minimally adequate resources in each of these areas three times as often as did schools with low minority representation or high economic status (e.g., Figure 1).

Figure 1

Adequacy of the technological resources in schools with low, medium, and high minority representation (MR)



Program support

The following significant differences were found: More than 70% of high economic status and low minority representation school teachers reported parents as being very supportive; less than 25% of the other teachers did so. The lack of parental support at the latter schools was particularly noted in fundraising and volunteering activities and in concert attendance (Figures 1 and 2). For example, whereas 61% of parents of high economic status were very involved in volunteering activities, none of the parents of low economic status schools were reported as being very involved in these activities. None of the teachers of low minority schools reported a lack of support from their colleagues; 20% of high minority schools teachers did so. Additionally, schools with high minority representation or low economic status were less likely to receive funds from outside sources.

No significant differences in perceived support from schools administration or district were found between the school groups. However, half of the teachers from economically disadvantaged schools reported being very supported by the district administration but only between 11% and 22% of the other teachers did so ($p = .08$).

Figure 2

Parental involvement in volunteering activities in schools with low, medium, and high minority representation (MR)

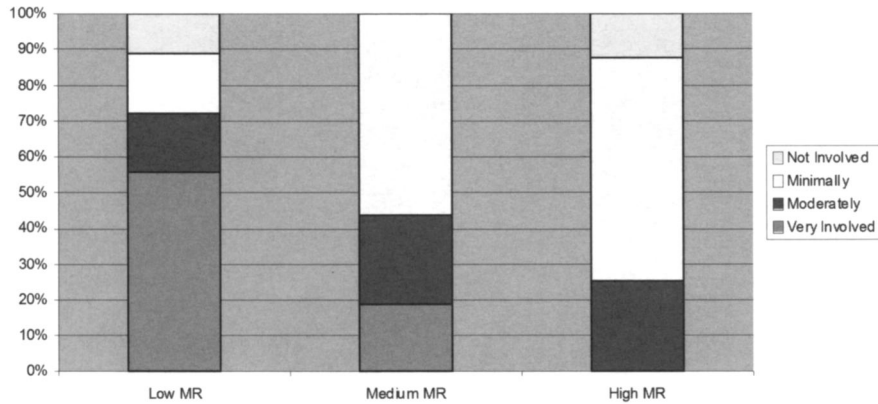
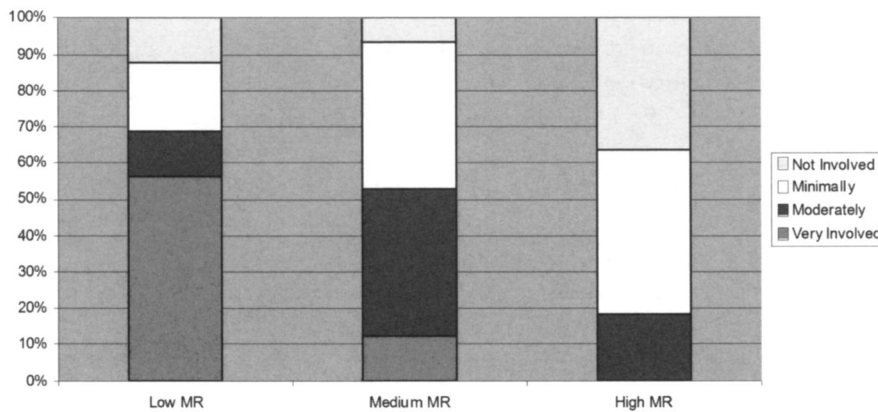


Figure 3

Parental support in fundraising activities in schools with low, medium, and high minority representation (MR)



Changes overtime

There were no differences among schools in perceived changes in class size, number of music staff, music budget, and administrative duties over the last three years.

Perception of equality

No differences in teacher perception of equality were found between high and low MR/ES schools: 80% of all teachers reported that the resources for their programs were

not equitable to those of other schools. When providing comments about the sources of inequalities, approximately half of the teachers' referred to budgetary issues such as the limited funds allocated by the district to certain music programs. About 3% of the comments related to administrative issues such as differences in administrators' value and support for the arts. Approximately 20% of the comments referred to parental involvement in the music program. Often, teachers expressed frustration at not having a strong and supportive parent-teacher committee that would commit funds to the music program. Another 20% of the comments alluded to the socio-economic characteristics of the schools. Teachers believed that the geographical location of the school determined the type of community resources available to them and the ability of parents to participate in music activities. The other comments focused on the differences in facilities, instruments, and resources among the schools of the district and the fact that some schools have more music teachers than some others.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the differences in elementary school programs and teacher characteristics among urban schools of diverse socio-economic status (SES). The two socio-economic indicators used in the present study were minority representation and proportion of economically disadvantaged students in the schools.

The results show that, in general, schools with fewer minorities or with lower proportions of economically disadvantaged students had more adequate facilities and instructional resources, more supportive and active parents, and better access to external sources of funding than school with a higher proportion of minority students or disadvantaged students. These findings are in agreement with the results of National studies on arts education and participation conducted in the United States a decade or more ago (National Center For Education Statistics, 1999; National Endowment for the Arts, 1987, 1993). The music teachers perceived these differences: 80% of the respondents, regardless of school SES, stated that the resources for their school programs were not equitable to those of other schools in the district. Supporting the results of the statistical analyses, teachers often referred to financial and parental support issues when explaining possible sources of inequality.

Other differences between schools of contrasting SES were related to enrollment. Schools with fewer minorities or economically disadvantaged students had lower student-music teacher ration but twice as many students with disabilities than the other schools. These trends may be the result of the superior resources of the high SES schools and the lower academic performance usually associated with low SES schools. According to the teachers' comments, district monetary allocations to schools with low academic performance are often used for the hiring of language and math specialists instead of music teachers. Because failure to meet academic standards in core subjects such as math and language result penalties and ultimately closure of the school (US

Department of Education, 2005), school administrators may prefer to invest the allocations in these areas rather than the arts. High academic performing schools, on the other hand, do not seem to have such a need for support in the core subjects and may use the allocations into teaching positions in the arts and special education.

Very few differences related to teacher qualification and experience were found between schools of contrasting SES. As an average, teachers had been teaching from 14 to 21 years and intended to continue teaching between 8 and 12 years. They all had music teaching certification and a Bachelor's degree in music and almost half had completed Masters and doctoral degrees. The preparation and commitment to music teaching of the respondents was very homogeneous across schools. However, though nonsignificantly, teachers from contrasting SES schools differed in their participation in professional conferences. More teachers from high SES presented at professional meetings and attended the state music teachers' conference. Additionally, a larger proportion of the former had student teachers assigned to them, a possible indication of the quality of their music programs. The placement of student teachers in good music programs is a common practice in many American universities. This is why having student teachers speaks favorably about the quality of the teaching. No student or teacher performance data were gathered in this study, however, so conclusions regarding the quality of the programs and the quality of the teaching are speculative in nature.

Many other characteristics of the music programs were similar among the schools probably due to the fact that they were all in the same school district. All students in K-5 grade received music instruction every third day for 45 minutes from a specialist and had performance opportunities during the year. All teachers had one hour of designated time for planning and preparation. Differences in students' opportunities to go on music-related field trips were found between schools of contrasting SES. High SES schools provided more of these opportunities than did the other schools.

Teachers perceived support from school and district administrators did not differ between schools of contrasting SES. More than half of all the teachers reported that the school administration was very supportive and very few ($n=3$) rated the school administration as not supportive. Most teachers perceived moderate support from the school district. A nonsignificant but interesting finding indicated that more teachers from low SES reported the district as being very supported than did the other teachers. It seems that the district has made an effort in providing support to those programs that have the greatest needs. An important difference related to the sources of program support was found between schools of contrasting racial make up. Teachers from low minority schools felt more supported by their colleagues than did teachers from the other schools. A possible reason for this finding may be related to the national and state academic standards mentioned earlier. Teachers in low SES schools often have to solve problems related to the low academic performance of their students. As described by a teacher in the comment section of the questionnaire, classroom teachers sometimes

resent having to send students to art instruction simply because it is time that could be spent in math and language.

In summary, there are clear differences in music program characteristics between elementary schools of contrasting SES. It is discouraging to find these differences given the political and financial efforts vested in equalizing access to educational opportunities. For example, in Texas, the *Robin Hood Law* mandates that wealthier school districts with larger tax revenues contribute to the budget of less affluent districts. The results of this study suggest that the redistribution of moneys among school districts do not solve the sources of inequality within districts. The differences in program characteristics among schools in the same city and belonging to the same school district are, although not surprising, alarming.

However, there are many characteristics of the music programs in these elementary schools that reflect a strong commitment to music education. That all schools in this large city have music specialists with certified credentials and teaching experience and all children in K-grade 5 receive music instruction more than once a week, for example, are only a few of the positive findings of the study. Whether the quality of music instruction is commensurate to the qualifications of the teachers is unknown. Future studies may investigate not only the characteristics of the music programs as related to socio-economic indicators, but also how the student outcomes and performance indicators of teaching effectiveness differ among schools of contrasting socioeconomic makeup.

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Note

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