## Managing Challenges of Teaching Music in Primary Schools in Ghana

**Abstract**

*Several research reports have revealed numerous and various challenges confronting primary school teachers in their attempt to implement the music content of the Creative Arts curriculum to provide learning experiences to pupils in Ghana. This study was aimed at identifying measures primary school teachers adopt to manage such challenges in the classroom. The phenomenological research design was employed to find answers to the research question through interviews and observations of nine teachers selected from three primary schools within the city of Kumasi in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. Findings indicate that knowledge and skills for teaching music, time constrains, lack of teaching and learning material, and lack of physical space constitute some challenges affecting the teaching of the subject. Recommendations include the provision of adequate materials for teaching and learning, converting some classrooms into special areas for teaching music, provision of in-service training and support for teachers to use information and communication technology in teaching music, and allocation of adequate for teaching. Data was collected from one out of the sixteen regions in Ghana.* *Further research should therefore include larger samples from various primary schools within the Ashanti Region of Ghana to maximise the understanding of the phenomenon being studied.*

**Keywords**: Managing, Challenges, Teaching Music, Primary School, Ghana

**Introduction**

As generalist teacher and music educators, our numerous encounters through informal conversations, with in-service primary school teachers during our visits to schools for supervision of supported teaching in schools of pre-service generalist teachers in Ghana reveal teachers’ expressions of mixed reactions and feelings about teaching music. This is as a result of some challenges affecting their effort in the effective implementation of the primary school music content of the Creative Arts curriculum to provide learning experiences to their learners. Research and experiences have also brought to light various challenges affecting the teaching of music in the primary school. Among these challenges are government educational policies such as educational reviews across different countries resulting in the marginalization of music as a subject of study. For instance, in Ghana, the 2019 and 2007 educational reviews/reforms resulted in making music a one strand of the Creative Arts curriculum while curriculum subjects such as Mathematics, Science, and English Language, which are considered as core subjects, continue to be stand-alone subjects (Curriculum Research and Development Division [CRDD] of Ghana, 2007; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NaCCA] of Ghana, 2019). Hence, the time allocation for music as part of the Creative Arts study continues to reduce in lieu of core subjects. A similar curriculum review in New Zealand when the Arts curriculum was introduced in 2000 by the Ministry of Education “presented music in a reduced format” (Webb, 2016, p.2). In 2007, Persellin also reported that seventy-one per cent of United States of America’s fifteen thousand school districts have reduced the time allocated for music to make way for the teaching of mathematics and reading. The focus is now on the support for literacy and numeracy education in primary schools (Rogerson, 2016), putting pressure on teachers to boost pupils’ learning in these supposedly essential curriculum subjects, which, in effect, has created little room for music education in the school curriculum.

Ampeh (2011) and Boafo-Agyemang (2010) found in their research that many Ghanaian primary school teachers are not willing to teach Creative Arts within which music is a strand primarily due to lack of adequate knowledge and skills. Opoku-Asare, Techie-Menson and Ampeh (2015) also identified, through a study, that Ghanaian generalist teachers lack the necessary skills, knowledge and experience to provide learning experiences in Creative Arts to primary pupils. In their study to explore the teaching and learning of music in selected primary schools in Ghana, Obeng and Osei-Senya (2018) identified teachers’ low confidence and competence, lack of teaching and learning resources, inadequate time and priority, and lack of adequate knowledge and skills as some of the challenges teachers face in implementing the music content of the Creative Arts curriculum. These revelations indeed suggest and indicate that music education in Ghanaian primary schools is not receiving the necessary and adequate attention it deserves.

Time constraint, a result of which is the crowded curriculum was also identified by de Vries (2017) as one of the factors that militate against effective implementation of music education in the classroom. This suggests that some primary school curriculum subjects are considered more essential than music and that shows the extent of how marginalised the study of music has become in the primary school.

Music is not externally assessed in some countries. As a consequence, it is not considered as an essential subject to be taught in the classroom. For example, Stunell (2010) explained that since music is not externally assessed in British primary schools, it is always the first subject to be abandoned when pressure is mounted on teachers to concentrate more on literacy and numeracy, which are subjects that are externally assessed. A similar situation existed in Ghana where music did not form part of the curriculum subjects which were externally assessed and, therefore, teachers considered its teaching a waste of time and avoided teaching it altogether. Fortunately, a change in policy and direction by the Ghana Ministry of Education implemented by the Ghana Education Service in 2021, witnessed the inclusion of the study of music and subsequent external assessment of Creative Arts and Design in the Junior High School’ terminal examination, that is the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE). Notwithstanding this positive action, the identified challenges have negatively affected and continue to affect the effective implementation of music education in many countries including Ghana, an issue which needs deeper reflection and consideration to reverse the trend in order to ensure much improvement in pupils’ learning outcome in the subject as part of the Creative Arts Curriculum in the primary school.

The purpose of this study was to identify measures primary school teachers in the Ashanti Region of Ghana adopt to manage challenges they encounter in teaching music which has become an integral component of the Creative Arts Curriculum. The findings provide knowledge on managing to overcome the challenges affecting the effective teaching of music in the primary school and also contribute to the existing knowledge of music education in primary schools.

**Methodology**

The phenomenological research design was employed to gather data through interviews and observations. This design involves the study of phenomenon in natural settings and attempts to derive the meaning people attach to the phenomenon being studied (Qutoshi, 2018). The purposive sampling as a qualitative research technique which emphasizes the use of small number of respondents for detail analysis (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003) was adopted to select nine teachers from three primary schools, that is three from each school to serve as informants. All the selected schools are located in the city of Kumasi, Ghana. Each of the selected informants holds a Bachelor Degree in basic education and are between the ages of age of 25 and 53. They teach pupils who are between six and twelve years, that is learners in basic levels one to six in the primary school.

An ethical protocol was followed by writing letters to seek and gain permission from head teachers of the selected schools in which the selected participants practice their profession. Meetings with the selected respondents were scheduled and held in each of the selected schools in the month of September, 2024 to explain to them the purpose of the research. These meetings were held on different days convenient for each respondent. They were assured of confidentiality of any interactions and communications associated with this research. The participants agreed to sign consent forms to take part in this research, after they had studied a participant information sheet prepared for this study. Data was then collected in the months of October and November, 2024. The main question guiding this study is:

*How do teachers manage to overcome challenges affecting the teaching of music in the primary school?*

Interview questions were derived from the main question guiding this study. The semi-structured interview sessions were conducted face to face with each of the participants, spanning within 15 to 20 minutes each. Data was captured with the aid of a digital audio recorder. It was then transcribed verbatim for validation by all the respondents after which multiple readings were done with comparison of reflections on observations made by this researcher, focus on the research question and the literature, with the purpose of arriving at themes that will emerge from the data for a categorization to be made.

During the interview sessions, the teachers were asked to narrate and explain how they managed to overcome the challenges identified to promote teaching and learning of music in their classrooms. They were asked through probing questions to explain actions they take to manage each of the identified challenges.

**Results and Discussion**

In the following paragraphs are the considerations and explanations of the said challenges and the related strategies employed by the informants to manage and overcome the challenges based on their opinions which they shared through the interviews and the observations made by these researchers. These are organised under four main themes derived from the data gathered.

### Knowledge and Skills for Teaching Music

Seven out of the nine teacher participants said that they lack adequate knowledge and skills to implement the music content comprehensively. Giving their opinions as to what they do to improve upon their practices in terms of teaching music, two teachers in one of the schools said that they usually collaborate with their colleague who has an appreciable level of knowledge and skills about music to plan and implement their teaching. They said, notwithstanding, they are only able to engage their pupils in singing and movement activities. When it comes to providing musical learning experiences other than singing and movement, they lead their pupils to the classroom of their colleague who serves as a resource person and mentor to them. De Vries (2011) and Wiggins and Wiggins (2008) identified a similar teacher ability in their research in which singing dominated music activities in primary school teachers’ classrooms. All the teachers in one of the selected schools argued that they do not have any option as to how to manage the challenge of inadequate knowledge and skills in teaching music other than to do the best they can by selecting from the curriculum contents and topics in that are within their capability to teach.

On the issue of measures that should be adopted to address the identified challenge, they were of the view that opportunities should be made available for them to access in-service training and education in music to equip them with the basic knowledge and skills to effectively implement the curriculum in their classrooms. Sharing an opinion, an informant narrated:

We need some sort of further education on how to teach music in the creative arts curriculum effectively in our classrooms. We really have challenges in teaching the subject. Meanwhile, the officers are aware of this situation and so I want to use your medium to appeal to them to also emphasise the teaching of music as part of Creative Arts during workshops and in-service training session on teaching for us as a matter of urgency. This will help us to, at least, help our pupils to experience demands as codified in the curriculum. Thank you Sir.

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### Lack of Teaching and Learning Resources and Materials

In terms of the lack of teaching and learning materials affecting the effective implementation of the music curriculum, teachers depend mostly on improvised drums and other musical instruments to create rhythms to accompany singing and movement activities. Teachers believe that effective teaching and learning depends on the availability of appropriate and adequate teaching and learning materials. They said that since primary school education is free, it is the responsibility of the government, through the Ghana Education Service and Ministry of Education, to provide the necessary materials to aid teaching and learning music. A participant sharing his opinion stated that:

We are not given any budgetary allocation that caters specifically for the acquisition of equipment and materials to aid the teaching and learning of music. It is also not proper to ask these younger ones to bring them from home or ask their guardians and parents to buy them. So we try as much as possible to improvise some, especially musical instruments. It will interest you to know that my pupils become happy and very active in class whenever I involve them in the making and preparation of materials for teaching and learning purposes. Sometimes I become overwhelmed about the kinds of improvised musical instruments they produce whenever I give them the opportunity. So this has been my strategy.

### Physical Space for Music Activities

The observation and interview data indicate that all the teachers use similar strategy to overcome the challenge of inadequate physical space to provide music experiences to their learners in the school. There are no dedicated rooms for teaching and learning music. Hence, almost all music activities take place in the usual classrooms where all the other subjects are taught. The learners sit in rows, facing the board, with the teacher standing in front of the class facing the learners. Teachers adopt the whole class teaching strategy interspersed with individual, pair and group music activities. A participant explained that there is not enough space in her classroom hence music activities that require movements take place in any available open space within the school. This innovation seemed to be a good solution to the challenge. She, however, complained about the unsuitability of this situation due to the open nature of the school environment and the effect of the weather conditions such as intense heat from the sunshine which may have negative effects on the children’s health.

In the above described circumstance, there is little that the teachers can do to improve upon the physical conditions of the school. It is indeed the responsibility of district, municipality and metropolitan assemblies to ensure the provision and maintenance of adequate school physical infrastructure to boost teaching and learning to develop pupils’ innate potential in music.

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### Time Constraint to Teach Music

In terms of how to manage and address the challenges of inadequate time available to teach music, three teachers provided similar insight. In their narrations, they said that although they have little time to teach music due to the immense pressure on them to meet targets of teaching and assessment in other subject areas, they integrate music in most of the subjects they teach in the classroom. They believe that this strategy makes up for the little attention music receives in the classroom. In any case, it has been found that integrating music into the elementary school curriculum boosts teachers’ ability and confidence to teach music (Colwell, 2008; Hash, 2009). In his study of what beginning teachers were teaching in their classrooms, de Vries (2011) observed that twenty-nine (29) out of forty-one (41) teachers identified to be teaching music on a regular basis integrated it with other curriculum subjects due to lack of time to teach music as a stand-alone subject. A respondent’s comment reflecting on this observation is: “It really makes sense to integrate music with the other subjects to enable children relate all the learning experiences to what happens around them.” Teacher participants also indicated that pupils’ responses to music activities also serve as a means of motivation for them to always integrate the art in their classroom activities.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

As the study indicates, teaching music in the primary school needs more attention. From the findings of this research, music seems to be among the most marginalised subjects in the school curriculum. It is important to recognise the role music plays in children’s holistic development so that the necessary support is offered to serve as motivation for teachers to teach. To this end, a concerted effort is required to provide the much needed teaching and learning materials such as pupils’ course books and teachers’ teaching manuals, audio-visual aids, a variety of musical instruments and related materials for teaching music in the primary school classrooms. The Ghana Education Service should consider this a priority. In their case study on music education in a school in Victoria in Australia, de Vries and Albon (2012) found that the principal and the assistant principal of the school played a key role in accessing and gaining funds to acquire special music facilities for teaching and learning music and also provided a budget for professional development in music for the entire teaching staff. This case suggests that head teachers can take the initiative to solicit funding from various education-based non-governmental organisations with the aim of acquiring resources to ensure effective teaching of music for improvement in children’s learning.

Teachers’ level of content knowledge and pedagogical skills of teaching a subject has a direct impact on learners’ achievements. The Ministry of Education through the Ghana Education Service’ should support primary school teachers in the upgrading of their knowledge and skills in teaching music by way of organising seminars, conferences and workshops. This will ensure an effective delivery of the subject in the classroom for an effective provision of music learning experiences to pupils. Primary school pupils of today are also knowledgeable about technology. Indeed, the characteristics and nature of the twenty-first century learner demand that teachers integrate Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the classroom to aid and refine teaching and learning. In view of this, primary school teachers should be supported, motivated and encouraged to apply Information, Communication and Technology in teaching music. Using ICT will hopefully “encourage greater engagement in children’s explorations” (Acker, Nyland & Niland, 2015, p.72) of music, movement and playing of instruments to develop their knowledge and skills to enhance learning.

The issue of lack of space for music and movement activities was observed and also echoed by teacher participants of this study. The nature of music, with its related sound making and movements, requires special rooms where such sounds and movement activities could be conveniently practised and contained. There is, therefore, the need to create such spaces in all primary schools to facilitate music activities. The Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service should consider converting some of the existing classrooms into dedicated rooms for music and movement activities to motivate teachers and learners to teach and learn music effectively.

It is very important to recognise the immense contribution of music to the holistic development of primary school learners. In considering this, it is recommended to allocate adequate time to its teaching as part of the Creative Arts curriculum to ensure effective learning of the subject.

**Limitations of the Study**

The sample for this study represents a snapshot within one of the sixteen regions in Ghana. The study was limited to three primary schools within the city of Kumasi in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. The participants included nine primary school teachers who possess Bachelor degrees in Basic Education. Similarly, data collected were limited to teaching music in the primary school classroom. Again, a period of two months was used to collect data and this may have resulted in obtaining a fraction of information regarding the many issues concerning music teaching and learning at the primary school level.

**Further Research**

Further research should include larger samples from various primary schools within the Ashanti Region of Ghana to maximise the understanding of the phenomenon under study. It is hoped that the findings, implications and recommendations of this study will encourage educational planners at the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service; head teachers; classroom teachers; civil society and parents to collaborate to provide the needed support for an effective music education in primary schools in Ghana.

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