

## **A Response to “Specialist vs. Non-Specialist Music Teachers: Creating a Space for Conversation” (Shelley Griffin and Amanda Montgomery)**

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The debate regarding the specialist versus the non-specialist music teacher at elementary school level is ongoing both nationally and internationally. The dialogue contained in this paper provides an informative narrative between two Canadian elementary music teacher educators. All those involved in music education will recognise the need for this discourse. A number of topical and controversial issues arise in this paper providing the impetus for others both nationally and internationally to become involved in this debate. Griffin and Montgomery highlight the need for a specialist music teacher in every elementary school.

The position of specialist versus non-specialist music education is first considered in a geographical perspective, establishing distinct regions in which the music specialist is seen to play an important role and other regions in which the opposite is true. An interesting observation in the dialogue is the fact that specialist music teachers at elementary school appear to be the norm in Atlantic Canada whereas the opposite appears to be the case in Western Canada. It is not the norm in Ireland to have specialist teachers teaching music in the primary school. In some instances schools provide the funding to support a specialist music teacher but this is the exception rather than the rule.

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Following on much discussion the authors define the specialist music teacher as a certified teacher whose main assignment in the elementary school is teaching several grade levels of classroom music. The authors suggest that the definition of a non-specialist music teacher is a certified *elementary classroom teacher* who teaches music to his/her own class . . . assuming that this person would have little, if any university level music and/or music education background. The authors recognise the value of both specialist and non-specialist music teacher when they define the specialist as being one who is a highly skilled performer but who does not necessarily have pedagogical skills. This situation is reflected in Ireland with many of the general primary school teachers having a very small period of pre-service support in relation to the teaching of primary school music.

Griffin and Montgomery discuss points of tension regarding differing teacher qualifications and their implications. The need for supportive pre-service and in-service training for non-specialists is considered while the expertise of the specialist music teacher is given due recognition. The authors outline the need to be proactive and look ahead to how non-specialist teachers can be supported, both at the pre-service and in-service levels. It would be useful to note that this type of support is also essential for the specialist music teacher, many of whom could be working in isolation. This isolation can lead to a lack of knowledge in relation to the full curriculum and in relation to assessment requirements.

In Ireland the National Curriculum must be taught to all primary school students. The new curriculum was published in 1999 and contains a comprehensive music programme for all primary school students. Many of the primary school teachers felt that

they did not have the competence and expertise required to teach this curriculum. The Department of Education and Science has funded a Curriculum Support Service in Music to assist in implementing the introduction of the new curriculum. The members of the Curriculum Support Service in Music are primarily teachers who have been seconded from the Primary School classroom. The Curriculum Support Service in Music will provide both individual and group in-service for all primary school teachers in 2005-2006 and compile resources, which are designed to assist the classroom teacher. The school plan will cover the nature and extent of music in the school, recognising the social and cultural environment, the varying needs of the children and available resources (Primary School Curriculum/Curaclam na Bunscoile, 1999). Given that the music curriculum is closely linked with other arts subjects and integrated with other areas of the curriculum, the class teacher is the most appropriate person to teach the music programme (Primary School Curriculum/Curaclam na Bunscoile, 1999, p. 9). As the vast majority of primary school teachers in Ireland are non-specialist teachers the implementation of the curriculum will pose a major challenge. Many believe that an understanding of music derives from notational skills—Music instruction might be conceived of as a balance of receptive-passive and participatory-active experiences (Campbell, 1991, p. 212). This can be a daunting task for the non-specialist music teacher. Griffin and Montgomery point out that the majority of curricula are designed to be taught by music specialists and are very complicated in implementation for the non specialist. The recommendation for improvement of non-specialist music teacher education made by Griffin and Montgomery would be welcomed by the non-specialist teaching community in Ireland.

Griffin and Montgomery's recommendation that more specialist music teachers should be employed in Canada is not a viable possibility in Ireland when the curriculum clearly states that the class teacher is the most appropriate music teacher. The authors outline the strengths of a performance-based education and recognise that many of the ensembles and performing groups in Canadian schools would not realistically be possible without the direction of a specialist music teacher. The most important long-term goal of the music education profession is not only music for every child, but more accurately *musical* teachers for children everywhere (Elliott, 1995, p. 253).

Griffin and Montgomery highlight the common problem experienced when students are taught by a non-specialist music teacher – because this teacher is also the generalist classroom teacher there is no guarantee that the children will receive consistent musical attention from one year to the next. Montgomery states that if we can do a better job at assisting pre-service non-specialist elementary teachers in preparing for music teaching, then we may be able to empower them to work through some of the challenges.

The authors conclude by recommending a national symposium where Canadian music teachers could gather to continue the conversation. As the dialogue is common to many countries would be recommended that attendance at a further symposium would include international specialist and non- specialist music educators and also music teacher educators.

### References

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