

Espiral. Cuadernos del Profesorado
Vol. 16, Núm. 32
Marzo 2023

ISSN 1988-7701

Cómo referenciar este artículo / How to reference this article:

Vicente Nicolás, G. Rodríguez Lozano, C., & Sánchez-Marroquí, J. (2023). Music in Early Childhood Education: generalist teachers versus specialist teachers. *Espiral. Cuadernos del Profesorado*, 16(32), 29-38. <https://doi.org/10.25115/ecp.v16i32.8862>

Music in Early Childhood Education: generalist teachers versus specialist teachers

Música en Educación Infantil: profesores generalistas versus profesores especialistas

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Abstract

Today, there is still a debate in schools about who should be the teacher responsible for teaching music in Early Childhood Education: some believe that it should be the Early Childhood teacher and others believe that it should be the specialist music teacher who takes on this task. The objective of this work is to know the opinion of future teachers of Early Childhood Education on some aspects of their training and methods of teaching music, with special attention to whether they consider that this discipline should be taught by them or, on the contrary, by music teachers. The group of participants of the study was formed by the students of the last year of the Degree in Early Childhood Education of the University of Murcia (Spain). For the collection of information an *ad hoc* questionnaire was designed structured in two sections: (1) personal data and musical training and (2) Music Education in Early Childhood Education. The results reveal a lack of consensus on the specialist who should teach music in this stage. Likewise, the following are indicated as factors that influence this conception: university training, the importance that future teachers attach to music, as well as its potential to be related to other areas.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education; Music education; Music teacher; Primary education; Teacher training.

Resumen

Hoy en día continúa existiendo en los centros educativos el debate sobre quién debe ser el profesor responsable de enseñar música en Educación Infantil: unos consideran que debe ser el docente de Educación Infantil y otros creen que debe ser el profesor especialista de música quien asuma esta tarea. El objetivo de este trabajo es conocer la opinión del futuro profesorado de Educación Infantil sobre algunos aspectos de su formación y la docencia de la música, con especial atención a si consideran que esta disciplina debería ser impartida por ellos o, por el contrario, por el especialista de Educación Musical. El conjunto de participantes del estudio estuvo formado por el alumnado del último curso del Grado en Educación Infantil de la Universidad de Murcia. Para la recogida de información se elaboró un cuestionario *ad hoc* estructurado en dos secciones: (1) datos personales y formación musical y (2) Educación Musical en Educación Infantil. Los resultados revelan una falta de consenso sobre el especialista que debería impartir la docencia de la música en esta etapa. Igualmente, se indican como factores que influyen en esta concepción: la formación universitaria, la importancia que los futuros docentes conceden a la música, así como su potencial para ser relacionada con otras áreas.

Palabras clave: Educación de la primera infancia; Educación musical; Profesorado de Música; Educación primaria; Formación de docentes.

Received: November 12, 2022

Accepted: January 11, 2023

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Introduction

Since the figure of the music specialist in Primary Education burst onto the Spanish educational context, an internal debate began in many schools about who should teach music education at the Early Childhood Education stage. In general terms, and being aware of being somewhat reductionist, we could point out that at the extremes of this 'dispute' there were, on the one hand, Early Childhood Education Teachers (ET) and, on the other hand, Primary Education Music Teachers (MT). Acknowledgement of the situation allows us to affirm that the former demanded music specialists to teach at Early Childhood levels, arguing the lack of training in this subject, as well as the suitability of the MT to carry out music teaching tasks at this stage. On the other hand, the MT refused to take on such competences, as they were overwhelmed by the large number of groups, they taught music and other subjects in primary education.

This internal debate was settled in most cases under the current regulations (Royal Decree 1594/2011), which do not make it compulsory for MT to teach this subject in Early Childhood Education. However, the application of the regulations has not meant the end of the real problem, and there are many ET who still consider that it is the MT who should teach this subject (Barrett et al., 2020; Rajan, 2017; Welch, 2020).

At present, we can speak of four different situations in Spanish early childhood classrooms with regard to the teachers responsible for music education. The first situation is that in which music is the exclusive competence of the ET. The second is when this competence is transferred only to the MT. The third is the result of a combination of the first two, i.e., the MT teaches Early Childhood Education, but the ET also carry out musical activities. Finally, and fortunately infrequently, we find those Early Childhood Education classrooms in which none of the teachers teach music.

Having presented some possible casuistry of our object of study, it would be time to review the specialised literature related to this subject and find out which arguments give ET the leading role in the teaching of music and those that involve the MT in this task.

Order ECI/3854/2007 states that ET should design teaching proposals based on the curriculum and learning theories, using songs and other play activities in order to foster perception, musical expression and creativity. Bond (2012) states that ET have a responsibility to provide students with a well-rounded education that includes all disciplines, including music education. For decades, Mills (1989) stated that the most suitable person to carry out musical activities with children is their teacher, as he or she is the one who spends the most time with them. Along the same lines, Alsina et al. (2008) are of the opinion that all teachers should and can promote meaningful musical experiences in the classroom without the need to be professional musicians, although they do require certain specific skills. Moreover, ET has the possibility of working on the contents of this stage from different areas and, as Moreno Pizarro and Planells Hernani (2016) state, in this way learning can be reinforced to make it more lasting. In relation to the previous idea, Ehrlin and Tivenius (2018) point out that ET without a specific perspective on music carry out few musical activities, those who consider it a specific subject tend to plan more, but those who value it for the possibility of a relationship with other areas organise many more. Likewise, Kirby et al. (2022) state that ET use music activities for different purposes, especially to reinforce language and literacy content. According to Welch (2022), the role of the teacher is to understand the relationships between musical and non-musical development in order to create appropriate musical activities in which children's abilities can be expressed and developed.

Zarza-Alzugaray et al. (2021) establish a model with four content areas to assess the musical competences of prospective ET. Competence 1 (C1) is knowledge and musical didactic applications for Early Childhood Education; Competence 2 (C2) is knowledge related to psychological processes, methodologies and resources aimed at this stage; Competence 3 (C3) is the use and/or design of didactic proposals on musical texts specific to Early Childhood Education; and Competence 4 (C4) is knowledge related to different cultures and styles. Of the 209 students who participated in the study carried out by these authors, those with previous musical training obtained higher scores on the pedagogical scales (C1 and C2), and transformed their musical knowledge into practical proposals (C3), but did not show a broader knowledge of musical culture (C4).

It is striking that there are numerous authors who entrust ET with the teaching of music and who establish very clearly the basic musical competences and skills that this group should acquire. However, it is no less surprising that there are hardly any other researchers who advocate ceding this task to the MT. In an attempt to understand the reasons for this gap in the scientific literature, we could argue that: (1) perhaps it is a truism that the more specialist one is in a subject, the better it will be taught; (2) that the authors are reluctant to promote the incorporation of MT in Early Childhood Education for fear that teachers at this stage will relegate musical activities to the timetable assigned to MT; or (3) that the current regulations dissuade many from reopening a debate that has already been legally settled. These possible justifications should not overshadow the fact that most authors consider that ET should be responsible for the music education of their pupils, although others claim that the planning and development of music education at this stage should be carried out by music specialists (Barry & Durham, 2017).

However, if there are so many arguments in favour of ET teaching music at this stage, why do so many teachers still demand the presence of specialists in their classrooms? In order to answer this question, reference is made to some studies that have been carried out with the aim of finding out about ET training in music. In some cases, according to the review carried out by Bautista et al. (2022), the lack of musical training can have negative consequences for ET (insufficient knowledge, lack of confidence, poor pedagogical practices) and for pupils (limited and superficial musical learning, unachieved curricular objectives or unbalanced development, among others). In the study carried out by Botella-Nicolás and Peiró-Esteve (2018) with 95 ET, only 36.9% carried out activities related to musical language in a significant way and 89.9% requested a greater offer of continuous musical training courses. Bolduc and Evrard (2017) state that ET with more musical training carry out higher quality musical proposals: those with "little musical training" carry out more perception activities, those with "good training" programme more perception and expression activities, and those with "higher training" develop more varied and creative activities.

In other cases, although teachers are aware of the importance of music at this age and know that it is not necessary to have highly specialised musical training, they do not carry out musical activities in the classroom because they believe that they do not sing well or do not sufficiently understand music (Ruiz, 2012). This reality reflects the lack of confidence that ET have in their musical abilities to carry out this type of activities with their students (Kulset & Halle, 2020; Nieuwmeijer et al., 2021; Pestana, 2022). The research by García-Gil and Bernabé Villodre (2019) on the musical training of 118 students of the Early Childhood Education Degree shows that they feel more confident with the development of songs, rhythmic activities and dances, but they consider that the training received is basic and demand more specialised instruction to be able to respond to the educational reality. Furthermore, teacher training should include aspects related to the selection and development of musical teaching materials for this stage. According to the study carried out by Rodríguez Rodríguez and Vicente Álvarez (2017), of the 568 ET interviewed, 80% did not know how to evaluate musical materials and resources and generally chose them intuitively, based on their experience or on indications from publishers or the educational administration, but they demanded more training on these aspects.

Although music education at this stage is the responsibility of ET, the collaboration and intervention of MT can improve the quality of generalist teachers' music activities (Barrett et al., 2020; Baum, 2017; Bautista & Ho, 2021; Bond et al., 2022; Ibbotson & See, 2021; Rajan, 2017). Welch (2020) argues that collaboration between specialists (who have expertise in music) and generalists (who have knowledge of their pupils) can enrich everyone. However, it is important to be aware that the involvement of the school's MT in early childhood classrooms can lead to the ET relegating the implementation of musical activities exclusively to the MT's occasional intervention, a decision which, obviously, in the globalised context of this stage would not be advisable.

It should be emphasised that in the Early Childhood Education Degree there is no possibility, with some exceptions, of doing a 'specialisation' in Music Education (Ruiz Palomo & Santamaría Conde, 2013), a situation that has undoubtedly generated more doubts about who is responsible for carrying out this music teaching. Pavón et al. (2012) are of the opinion that current teachers will have much less musical training, although this will vary according to the curriculum of each university.

Currently, most universities include subjects related to music education as compulsory training in the Early Childhood Education Degree and some may offer a 'specialisation' with more specific and specialised subjects (Calderón-Garrido et al., 2021). Juárez García and López Núñez (2021) describe Music Education in the Early Childhood Education Degree in 96 Spanish universities and point out that 83.3% of the music subjects included in these plans only have 6 ECTS credits and 66.7% are compulsory. In this respect, it would be pertinent to recall the consensus in the scientific literature mentioned by Sánchez-Cabrero and Pericacho-Gómez (2022, p. 72) on "the importance of initial teacher training programmes and their relationship with the quality of teaching and learning in pupils".

Music teacher education has been reduced in other parts of the world, in Finland, for example, music subjects have 5 ECTS credits, so that many content areas are not sufficiently addressed or are overlooked (Suomi et al., 2022). The decline of music education is also reflected at all levels of education and in other countries such as England (Savage, 2020; Whittaker, 2021), Sweden (Mateos-Moreno, 2022), Australia (Barret et al., 2019) or New Zealand (Browne, 2022). This reality of music education is leading to an impoverishment of music in public education and an expansion of private provision (Aprile, 2021; Young, 2021).

In the light of the ideas set out above, it could be argued that the solution to the dilemma about the teachers responsible for teaching music in Early Childhood Education does not lie in arguing one way or the other, but in detecting what is at the crux of the debate. In this sense, we consider that the training that the future ET receives with respect to music will determine whether they feel able to implement it adequately in the classroom and, consequently, not require the intervention of an MT. This consideration is the one that shapes the aim of this paper: to know the opinion of the future ET about some aspects of their training and the teaching of music in Early Childhood Education.

Method

Sample

The participants in this study were the students of the Degree in Early Childhood Education who have taken the subject of *Musical Perception and Expression* (4th year) in the Faculty of Education of the University of Murcia. This is an annual subject, has 6 ECTS credits and is compulsory for students of the Degree in Early Childhood Education¹. Non-probability sampling was used for its selection, and within this category, convenience sampling was used (McMillan & Schumacher, 2005). The total number of participants ($N = 241$) in this study amounted to 83.8% of the total number of students enrolled in the course. Ninety-nine percent of the sample were female. Of these, 76.8% were under 25 years old, 12% between 25 and 30, 5.4% between 30 and 35 and 5.8% over 35, with a mean age of 24.65 years.

Instrument

A questionnaire with dichotomous and polytomous closed-ended questions (Likert-type rating scales) was developed for this study. The questionnaire was validated by the *International Panel for Educational Technology Research* and was structured in the following blocks of information: (a) *personal data and musical training*; (b) *Musical Education in Early Childhood Education*; and (c) *musical aptitudes*. This paper presents the results corresponding to a selection of questions from the set of items that formed part of the first two blocks of the questionnaire. The questions selected were the following:

Section 1. Personal data and musical training

1. *Sex*: (a) Male; (b) Female
2. *Age*: a) 20-25; b) 26-30; c) More than 30
3. *Musical knowledge*: a) None; b) Primary/Secondary c) Conservatory, music schools, music academies

¹ This degree at the University of Murcia does not offer the possibility of studying different specialisations.

Section 2. Music Education in Early Childhood Education (all items in this section, except item 4, had the same response options: a) Strongly disagree, b) Disagree, c) Agree and d) Strongly agree).

4. *Who do you think should teach music in Early Childhood Education?*
a) Early Childhood Education Teacher (ET) b) Primary Education Music Teacher (MT)
5. *A child's musical education is very important during the Early Childhood Education stage.*
6. *The idiosyncrasy of Music as a subject allows us to interrelate it easily with other subjects in Early Childhood Education and favours a globalised approach to education.*
7. *Taking into account the minimum curricular objectives and contents of Early Childhood Education, I am prepared to teach music at this stage.*

Procedure

Once the necessary authorisations had been obtained to carry out the study and the participating students had been informed, the questionnaire was filled in on paper. The explanations prior to its completion, as well as the researcher who carried out the data collection, were the same in the three selected groups that made up the last year of the degree. At the time the questionnaire was administered, the participants had completed 6 credits of music education at the university.

Data analysis

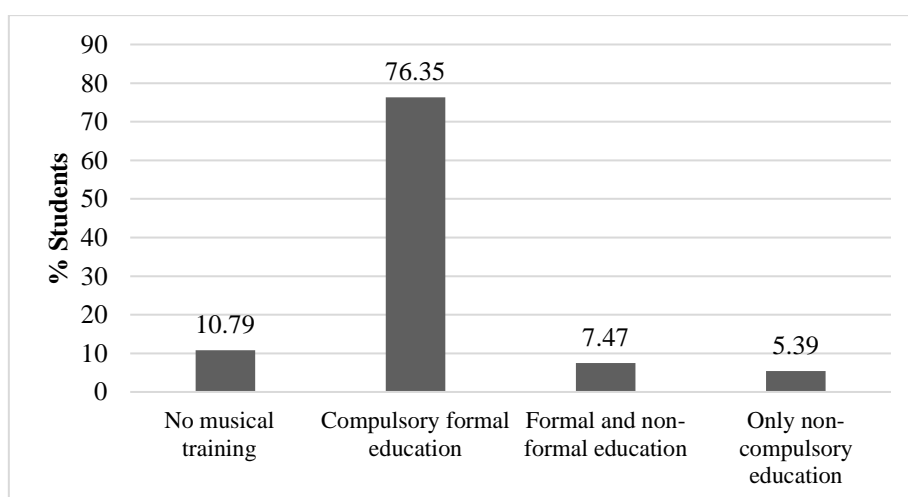
The statistical programme SPSS (version 28) was used for data analysis. For all questions, different descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage and also mean and standard deviation were calculated (except for nominal variables). Chi-Square tests were performed for the relationship of items and Spearman's r_s for the correlation of ordinal variables. The interpretation of results was carried out by establishing $\alpha = .05$ as the critical value.

Results

First of all, we present the results concerning the question that articulates all this work: who should teach Music Education in Early Childhood Education? 48.1% of the sample stated that the ET should be in charge of carrying out this task, while slightly more than half of the participants (51.9%) considered that it should be the MT who should carry out this task.

Figure 1

Musical training of participating students



With regard to the musical training of the participants, 83.8% had studied the subject of music during one of the stages of compulsory formal education (primary and secondary), of which 7.5% had

complemented the knowledge acquired in these stages with musical studies in specific centres (conservatories, music schools, associations or bands, amongst others). Some 5.4% had acquired their knowledge exclusively in non-compulsory educational establishments and one in ten participants stated that they had not studied music at all (Figure 1). A significant relationship was observed between the age of the students and their musical knowledge, $\chi^2(9) = 41.219, p < .001$, with the youngest students having the most musical training, confirming a negative correlation between these two variables, $r_s = -.164, p = .011$, the older the students the less training they had. However, no significant relationship was observed between the students' training and their opinion of who should teach music at Early Childhood Education stage, $\chi^2(3) = 2.750, p = .432$.

With regard to the importance given by the participants to Music Education in Early Childhood Education, 98.4% agreed or strongly agreed with the relevance of music during this stage and only 1.6% considered that music is not important for pupils at this age (Table 1). A significant association was observed between this variable and the assignment to one or other specialist of the task of teaching music, $\chi^2(3) = 18.081, p < .001$, as it can be seen that the more importance is given to music in Early Childhood Education, the greater the role of the ET in the teaching of this discipline, confirming a correlation between these two variables, $r_s = .271, p < .001$. Age also influenced the importance of music for them, $\chi^2(9) = 38.951, p < .001$, since only 0.5% of those under 30 years of age did not consider it important, a percentage that increased to 11.1% in those over 30 years of age, although the correlation between these two variables was not confirmed.

Table 1

Future Early Childhood Education Teachers' views on music and their education (N = 241)

	1 ^a		2		3		4		M	SD
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Music education is very important during the Early Childhood Education stage.	3	1.24	1	0.41	78	32.36	159	65.98	3.63	.56
Music can be interrelated with other areas of Early Childhood Education.	1	0.41	1	0.41	92	38.17	147	60.99	3.60	.52
I consider that I am prepared to teach music in Early Childhood Education.	14	5.81	102	42.32	111	46.06	14	5.81	2.52	.69

^a 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Agree; 4 = Strongly Agree

Regarding the potential for the area of music to be interrelated with other areas, 99.2% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (Table 1). Furthermore, it can be added that there is a significant association between this variable and the participants' opinion on who should teach music in Early Childhood Education, $\chi^2(3) = 16.416, p = .001$ and a correlation between them, $r_s = .240, p < .001$. Thus, the greater the possibility of interrelating music with other areas, the greater the consideration of the ET as a teacher who should teach music. The importance given to music by ET also influenced how they related it to other areas, $\chi^2(9) = 181.421, p < .001$, there being a correlation between these variables, the more importance they gave it, the more they related it to other areas, $r_s = .324, p < .001$. Furthermore, according to the age of the future teachers there were differences in the relationships they established with other areas, $\chi^2(3) = 36.255, p < .001$, those who thought that music could not be related to other areas were older than 30 years old.

Finally, in relation to the participants' preparation for teaching music at the Early Childhood Education stage, 51.9% considered themselves competent to teach music, compared to 48.1% who did not feel prepared. There was a relationship between the preparation of ET and their views on who should teach music, $\chi^2(1) = 4.086, p = .043$, as well as a correlation between these two variables, $r_s = .130, p = .043$, indicating that the more prepared ET felt they were, the more they believed they should be responsible for teaching music. In addition, an association was identified between the musical training received and their self-perception to teach music in early childhood, $\chi^2(6) = 40.390, p < .001$. A large proportion of the participants with no training did not feel prepared (73.1%), nor did approximately half of those who received music in primary and secondary school (47.2%), but the majority of those who

studied music in a specific school did feel prepared (77.8%). A correlation between these variables was confirmed, $r_s = .303$, $p < .001$, so that the more music training the ET had, the more prepared they felt to teach music to children (Table 2).

Table 2

Relationship between training received and teachers' beliefs about teacher preparation

	I am not prepared		I am prepared		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
No training	19	73.08	7	26.92	26	100.0
Primary/Secondary	93	47.21	104	52.79	197	100.0
Specific music centres	4	22.22	14	77.78	18	100.0
Total	116	48.13	125	51.87	241	100.0

Discussion and conclusions

As the most salient aspect of this study, it could be argued that it is precisely the fact of the lack of definition or polarisation of opinions regarding the question of which specialist should teach music in Early Childhood Education that justifies the need to investigate this issue. Bearing in mind that according to current regulations (Order ECI/3854/2007; Royal Decree 95/2022; Royal Decree 1594/2011) it is the ET who should teach music to their pupils, it is striking that more than half of the participants do not consider that they should be the ones to teach this discipline, coinciding with different studies (Barrett et al., 2020; Rajan, 2017; Welch, 2020). In the light of the results obtained, it would be interesting to question whether the non-consideration of many participants as teachers who should teach music would have a negative influence on the subsequent development of music teaching in early childhood classrooms. In this case, it would be necessary and highly recommended that the participants in this potential study be active teachers.

It is also very striking, and dare we say alarming, that approximately half of the participants did not feel prepared to teach music. This confirms once again the lack of confidence of ET in their musical skills that previous studies have pointed to (Kulset & Halle, 2020; Nieuwmeijer et al., 2021; Pestana, 2022; Ruiz, 2012).

Similarly, they confirm that the more training they have, the better the perception they have of their preparation to teach music, while the more prepared they are, the more they consider that it is the ET who are responsible for teaching music and not the MT. It is interesting to remember that the preparation for this profession is the responsibility of Higher Education institutions, which in theory should train them to teach this subject, and that insufficient training could have negative consequences such as those indicated by Bautista et al. (2022) or Bolduc and Evrard (2017). For this reason, these results call for an unavoidable reflection on the musical training received in university studies and require a profound revision of the design and planning of their training: curricula, contents, teaching methodologies and competences, among others.

On the other hand, the relationship observed between the importance given to music by the participants and the profile of the teachers who teach it leads us to consider that if we encourage ET to value music more and to be aware of its importance, it is possible that their perception of themselves as the main players in music teaching will increase.

Related to the previous question, the results obtained indicate that the more importance students attached to music, the greater the relationship they established with other areas. As a consequence, and coinciding with Ehrlin and Tivenius (2018), ET who value the possibilities that music has to relate it to other areas could carry out more musical activities in their classrooms than those who consider it as a specific subject. In addition, it was also found that the more ET conceived of music as a discipline that should be interrelated with other areas, the more they considered themselves to be able to teach it in relation to MT. Logically, if music teaching is relegated to the MT, the interrelation of music with other areas, although not impossible, would be very difficult.

On the other hand, the results related to the age of the participants may indicate that the situation described by Pavón et al. (2012) regarding the deficient musical training of ET is changing in a favourable way, as it was observed that those who were younger than 30 years old had more musical training, considered music more important and were more capable of establishing relationships with other areas, following the line of other studies (Kirby et al., 2022; Moreno Pizarro & Planells Hernani, 2016), all aspects that point to a change in which specialist should teach music at the Early Childhood Education stage.

Finally, we are aware of the limitations of the fact that the participants are not in the teaching profession, which would allow them to give a more contrasted opinion on their pedagogical-musical training and their competence to teach music. By way of prospective and in the light of some of the considerations raised above, firstly, it would be appropriate to emphasise the relevance of studies that allow us to find out and assess what ET need in order to feel like protagonists of this art in their classrooms and, secondly, what should be changed at an institutional and academic level in order to reduce the existing gap between their initial training, including university training, and the reality of the teaching-learning process of music in Early Childhood Education.

Contribution of each Author: Conceptualisation, C.R.L. and J.S.M.; methodology, G.V.N. and C.R.L.; analysis, G.V.N. and J.S.M.; writing, reviewing and editing, G.V.N., C.R.L. and J.S.M.

Funding: this research did not receive any external funding.

Conflict of interest: the authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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