

An Exploratory Study Based on Sri Lankan Teacher's Perception of Teaching Music in Primary Education

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Introduction

Music education is acknowledged for its overall impact on the mental, emotional, and social growth of children (Selmani, 2024). Globally, there is a growing body of research affirming that early exposure to music has long-lasting effects on students' academic performance, creativity, and emotional well-being (Hallam, 2010). However, despite the overwhelming evidence supporting its benefits, the implementation of music education in primary schools varies significantly across different regions and educational systems. In Sri Lanka, music has historically played an integral role in cultural expression (Sharma, 2024), yet its place in the formal education system remains relatively underexplored. Understanding the perceptions of teachers, the primary implementers of educational policies is crucial to evaluating the current status and challenges of music education in Sri Lankan primary schools. This study seeks to explore Sri Lankan primary teachers' perceptions of teaching music, focusing on the challenges, pedagogical approaches, and perceived benefits within the context of the country's educational framework. The study sought to address three research questions:

- 1) Are teachers' abilities sufficient to implement music education in primary schools?
- 2) Are primary teachers aware of the benefits of music education?
- 3) What opportunities exist for music education in the current primary curriculum?

Sri Lanka has a rich musical heritage, deeply intertwined with religious, social, and cultural practices (Sharma, 2024). From traditional Sri Lankan folk music, the island nation boasts diverse musical expressions that reflect its multi-ethnic composition (Seneviratne, 2019). This cultural backdrop suggests that music could be a powerful tool for education in Sri Lanka, potentially enhancing students' connection to their cultural roots while also promoting cognitive and emotional growth. However, the extent to which this potential is realized in the classroom is dependent on multiple factors, including curriculum design, teacher training, resource availability, and societal attitudes toward music education. In this context, teachers' perspectives are particularly significant, as they are the ones responsible for delivering music education and shaping students' experiences with music in their formative years.

Research in other contexts has highlighted several key benefits of music education in primary schooling. For example, Hallam (2010) found that music fosters improved literacy, numeracy, and language development in children. Similarly, Schellenberg (2004) demonstrated that music training enhances verbal intelligence and academic performance. Music education has also been associated with enhanced emotional regulation and social skills, as participation in music activities, such as choirs or group instrument lessons, fosters teamwork, patience, and discipline (Eerola & Eerola, 2014). These benefits are not limited to students in well-resourced, high-income countries; studies have shown that children in low-income or resource-constrained settings can also experience significant academic and socio-emotional benefits from music education (Burnard & Murphy, 2013).

In Sri Lanka, the educational system is highly centralized, and curriculum design is primarily dictated by the National Institute of Education (NIE). In the primary school curriculum introduced by the NIE, environment-related activities have been integrated with the subjects including social studies, science, health and physical education, and aesthetic subjects including art, music and dancing (UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2011). Accordingly, music has been included as an integrated

subject in the primary school curriculum, but it is often given less priority than core subjects such as mathematics and science (Harischandra, 2019). In practice, this has led to music being marginalized, with many schools offering it as an extracurricular activity rather than an integral part of the academic curriculum. A study by Perera and Weerasinghe (2020) found that many Sri Lankan primary school teachers feel inadequately trained to teach music, which leads to low confidence in delivering lessons effectively. Additionally, societal perceptions of music as a “luxury” subject, rather than a vital component of education, also contribute to its marginalization (Daubney & Mackrill, 2017).

In Sri Lankan society, there is often a greater emphasis on subjects perceived as having direct economic value, such as mathematics and science, leading to a devaluation of the arts, including music (Seneviratne, 2019). These attitudes can influence parents’ and educators’ support for music education, making it more difficult to secure the resources and institutional backing necessary to implement effective music programs in primary schools. Understanding how teachers perceive these challenges and opportunities is essential for identifying ways to strengthen music education in Sri Lanka. Teachers play a key role in shaping students’ early experiences with music, and their perceptions can offer valuable insights into the practical realities of delivering music education in a resource-constrained context. Therefore, this exploratory study aims to examine Sri Lankan primary teachers’ perceptions of music teaching, focusing on the barriers they face, their methods, and their views on the potential benefits of music education for young learners. By investigating these issues, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing conversation about the role of music in primary education in Sri Lanka and provide recommendations for improving its delivery in schools.

Literature Review

Music education, particularly in primary schools, has been extensively studied for its multifaceted impact on child development. Research consistently shows that early exposure to music contributes to children’s cognitive, emotional, and social growth (Hallam, 2010; Schellenberg, 2004). Despite the recognized benefits of music education, its

implementation in schools varies across different contexts and is often influenced by cultural, economic, and institutional factors (Burnard & Dragovic, 2015; Sæther, 2003). For instance, while global studies demonstrate the positive effects of music education on child development, the challenges of implementing effective music programs are significant in many countries, particularly in Asia, where context-specific pedagogy is required (Ho, 2011).

In Sri Lanka, economic constraints, limited resources, and varying institutional support present notable obstacles to the consistent delivery of music education (Wijewardena, 2019). Moreover, teachers' perceptions and experiences are crucial in understanding these barriers, as they directly influence the effectiveness of music instruction and highlight areas for potential improvement within the education system (Jorgensen, 2003). This review explores the global benefits of music education in primary settings, contextual challenges specific to Sri Lanka, and teachers' perspectives on music education within the Sri Lankan system.

Global Benefits of Music Education in Primary Schools

Extensive research has documented the positive influence of music education on students' cognitive development. Hallam (2010) provides a comprehensive analysis of how music education enhances a variety of cognitive skills, including memory, attention, and problem-solving. Music requires the integration of complex cognitive processes such as decoding rhythm, melody, and harmony, which stimulates brain development, particularly in areas associated with language and mathematics. For instance, Schellenberg (2004) found that students who received music lessons demonstrated significant improvements in IQ, suggesting a broader impact of music education on academic performance.

Moreover, music education has been linked to improvements in emotional regulation and social skills. Research by Eerola and Eerola (2014) highlights how extended music education programs lead to enhanced

social cohesion and emotional well-being in students. Music allows children to express emotions and fosters empathy, teamwork, and discipline, especially in group settings like choirs or orchestras (Burnard & Murphy, 2013). These benefits are not limited to high-income countries. In resource-constrained environments, music education has been shown to contribute positively to students' socio-emotional and cognitive development, providing a crucial outlet for creative expression and emotional regulation (Burnard & Murphy, 2013).

Challenges of Music Education in Developing Contexts

While the benefits of music education are well-established, the practical implementation of music programs often faces significant barriers, especially in developing contexts. In many countries, including Sri Lanka, music education is frequently undervalued, and seen as a peripheral subject rather than an essential part of the curriculum. The study by Perera and Weerasinghe (2020) sheds light on the challenges of music education in Sri Lankan schools, noting that while music is part of the formal curriculum, it is often marginalized due to competing priorities. Subjects like mathematics and science are given more importance, leaving music underfunded and under-resourced.

The issue of resources is particularly acute in Sri Lanka. Many schools lack basic musical instruments and facilities, which hampers the effective teaching of music (Perera & Weerasinghe, 2020). Furthermore, the lack of trained music teachers poses a significant challenge. According to Seneviratne (2019), teacher training programs in Sri Lanka do not adequately prepare educators to teach music. Consequently, numerous primary school teachers feel unprepared and lack the necessary skills to conduct effective music lessons. This is compounded by the fact that music education is often treated as an extracurricular activity, which means it is not given the time or attention it deserves within the school day.

Teachers' Perceptions of Music Education

Teachers' perceptions play a critical role in shaping how music is taught in primary schools. Numerous studies have explored generalist teachers'

perspectives and attitudes regarding their readiness to incorporate music instruction into their classrooms (Crow, 2008; Seddon & Biasutti, 2008).

In the Sri Lankan context, teachers' perceptions are influenced by a range of factors, including their own training, the availability of resources, and societal attitudes toward the importance of music education. Research suggests that many Sri Lankan teachers recognize the benefits of music education but feel constrained by practical limitations. Perera and Weerasinghe (2020) found that teachers in Sri Lankan primary schools believe music can enhance students' creativity, emotional expression, and teamwork skills. However, existing literature has consistently found that pre-service primary school teachers are less confident in teaching music than in teaching any other subject (Jeanneret, 1995). While there are various causes of these confidence issues (Mills, 1989), they eventually manifest as ongoing obstacles to teacher preparedness to teach music.

Furthermore, societal attitudes toward music as a subject of lesser importance contribute to the marginalization of music education. In Sri Lanka, as in many other countries, there is a strong emphasis on academic subjects that are perceived to have direct economic value, such as mathematics, science, and languages (Seneviratne, 2019). This societal bias affects both the allocation of resources within schools and parents' attitudes toward music education, with many seeing it as a hobby rather than a crucial aspect of their child's development.

Music Education and Cultural Significance in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's rich cultural heritage provides a strong foundation for integrating music into the primary school curriculum. Traditional Sri Lankan music, rooted in religious and social practices, offers a valuable resource for educators to draw on in the classroom. Incorporating local musical traditions into the curriculum can help students connect with their cultural roots while also enhancing their cognitive and emotional development (Seneviratne, 2019). However, as Perera and Weerasinghe (2020) point out, this potential is often underutilized in Sri Lankan schools,

where Western classical music tends to dominate the curriculum. This disconnects between the curriculum and local musical traditions may further alienate students from engaging in music education.

Methodology

The methodology for this study involved a qualitative approach, combining document analysis and online questionnaires to gather data on the perceptions and abilities of Sri Lankan primary school teachers regarding the implementation of music education. The sample for this study comprised primary school teachers from the Colombo district in Sri Lanka. The questionnaire was distributed to 165 participants, with 100 responses received. A random sampling method was used to ensure a representative sample, selecting teachers from various schools within the district. The primary data collection tool was a questionnaire, designed based on insights gathered from existing literature on music education. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions gathered demographic information, including teachers' educational backgrounds and their experiences with music education. To gather qualitative data on teachers' perceptions of the implementation and value of music education in the curriculum, open-ended questions were used. Additionally, the questionnaire explored teachers' training in music, their confidence in teaching music-related content, and their understanding of how music can be integrated with other subjects. Document analysis involved reviewing educational policies, curriculum guides, and relevant literature to assess the role of music education in Sri Lankan primary schools. This analysis aimed to identify formal opportunities for music education within the curriculum and highlight gaps in its implementation.

For data analysis, a descriptive approach was employed. The collected data from the closed-ended questions were analyzed using percentages to provide an overview of the teachers' qualifications, teaching experience, training in music education, and perceptions of its benefits. The qualitative responses from the open-ended questions were analyzed thematically to uncover recurring patterns and themes related to teachers' attitudes toward music education and the challenges they faced in implementing it.

Data Analysis and Findings

This section presents the analysis and findings of data gathered from primary school teachers in the Colombo district regarding their perspectives and practices in music related to their teaching. Using a structured approach to data analysis, the section addresses the main research questions by examining teachers' abilities, their awareness of music education benefits, and the opportunities available within the current curriculum.

Teachers' Educational Qualification

According to Figure 1, 51.0% of the teachers hold a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree and 12.0% of teachers hold a Bachelor of Education (Bed.) degree, indicating that over half of the sample possesses a general higher education qualification, which likely prepares them to teach a variety of subjects. Meanwhile, 27.0% have a certificate from a Teacher Training College in primary education, reflecting a strong presence of teachers with specialized training for younger students. Additionally, 6.0% of the teachers hold a Bachelor of Performing Arts or Fine Arts degree (BPA/BFA), suggesting they may focus on teaching arts-related subjects. Lastly, 4.0% of the teachers have only an Advanced Level (A/L) qualification, potentially serving as assistant teachers.

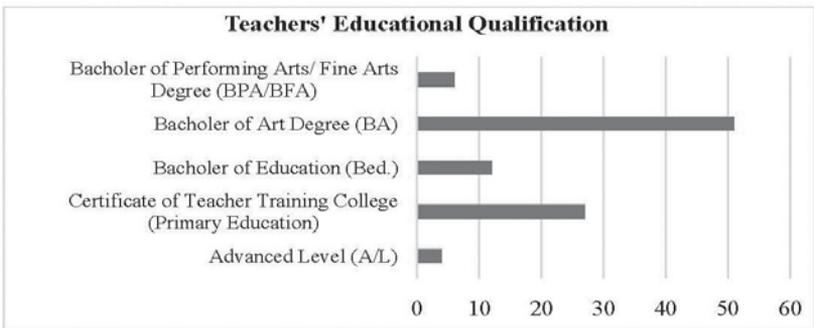


Figure 1: Teachers' Educational Qualification

This sample indicates that the majority of teachers are highly qualified, with most holding either a Bachelor's degree or a teacher training certificate, which aligns with a professional approach to teaching.

Teachers' Teaching Experience

According to Figure 2, the majority of teachers who participated in this study had 6 to 10 years of teaching experience, accounting for 48.0% of the sample. Both the 11 to 15 years and over 20years experience ranges had the same percentage, at 16.0% each. Only 6.0% of teachers had 0 to 5 years of teaching experience in primary education, while 14.0% had 16 to 20 years of experience.

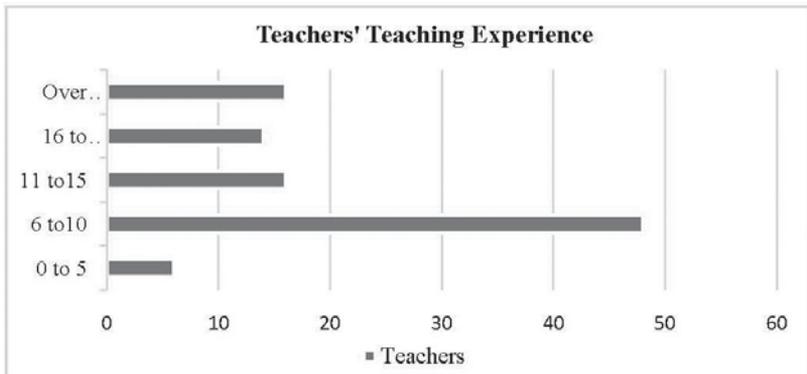


Figure 2: Teachers' Teaching Experience

The high representation of teachers with 6 to 10 years of experience, as shown in Figure 2, suggests a significant influence from those with foundational classroom experience who may be well-positioned to provide insights into current curriculum practices and needs.

Teachers' Experience with Music Studies as Part of their Education

The below (Figure 3) data reveals that a majority of teachers, 58.0%, have never studied music, indicating limited exposure to music education

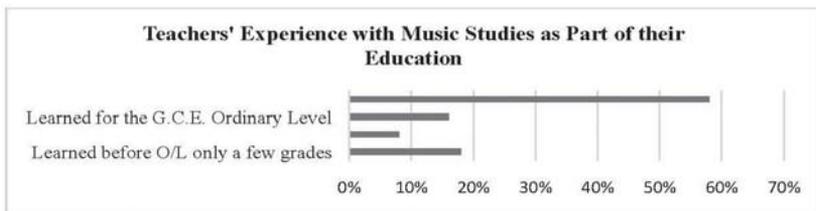


Figure 3: Teachers' Experience with Music Studies as Part of their Education

within this group. Only 8% have studied music up to the G.C.E. Advanced Level, making them the most qualified in this field, while 16.0% have learned music for the G.C.E. Ordinary Level, and 18.0% studied it briefly before the O/L. This distribution suggests that most teachers possess little to no formal music education, which may affect their ability to teach music or integrate it into their teaching. If music education is prioritized, additional training or resources may be needed to bridge this gap.

The findings from the study, based on the collected data, reveal several key themes that shed light on the current challenges and potential improvements needed. The thematic analysis provides a clear picture of the status of music education and underscores the necessity for targeted interventions to enhance teacher training and curriculum development.

Training Disparities in Primary Education and Music Education

The results of the study indicate a significant imbalance in teacher training, particularly in the context of primary education. Out of 100 teachers, 78 were trained specifically or partially for primary education, while the remaining 22 lacked formal training. The 78 teachers mentioned above include those trained by the government as well as various private institutions. This disparity highlights a critical issue: a considerable portion of the teaching workforce is untrained, potentially affecting the quality of education delivered to young learners (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Shulman, 1987; Stronge, 2018).

However, when it comes to specific training in music education, the study found that “more than half of the teachers had no formal learning experience in music.” One teacher remarked, “I feel limited to basic activities such as singing songs or playing simple percussion instruments.” Another expressed their frustration, stating, “I am unprepared to teach music beyond basic activities like singing or playing simple instruments such as bells, thalampota (clapping instruments), small drums, and

jingles.” These insights highlight the need for specialized music training to enhance teachers’ skills and confidence in delivering music education effectively (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Shulman, 1987).

Limited Use of Music in Classrooms

The use of music in Sri Lankan primary classrooms, particularly in subjects like environmental studies, Sinhala, and religion, tends to be limited to simple activities such as singing songs or poems (GovDoc.lk, n.d.). This minimal integration of music reflects a broader challenge within the curriculum. As one teacher noted, “Music is often treated as an ancillary or optional activity rather than a core component of the educational process.” The potential of music to support cognitive development, including enhancing memory, attention, and problem-solving skills, as well as behavioral development through social skills and emotional regulation, is therefore underutilized (Schellenberg, 2005).

Findings also highlight the systemic problem of the current curriculum’s lack of a structured approach to music education. Despite evidence that integrating music more deeply into the learning environment can benefit students across multiple developmental domains, music remains on the periphery. A teacher shared, “We need a better framework for integrating music into our lessons; right now, it feels like an afterthought.” This marginalization is often attributed to both resource limitations, such as the “lack of trained teachers and materials,” and societal priorities that place a stronger emphasis on subjects like mathematics and science (OECD, 2018). Teachers, as a result, may not feel empowered or supported to incorporate music beyond its current scope. One teacher expressed frustration, stating, “I want to use music more in my teaching, but I don’t have the resources or support to do so.”

A more integrated music education approach could help address these gaps, fostering not only creativity and engagement but also improved cognitive outcomes (Rauscher & Hinton, 2011). However, achieving this would require curriculum reforms that place greater value on music as a core educational tool, along with investment in teacher training and resources to support its effective use.

Teacher Support for Deeper Music Integration

Despite limited training, teachers overwhelmingly support the integration of music into the curriculum. The teachers' responses regarding the appropriateness and inappropriateness of teaching music in primary education can be stated as follows.

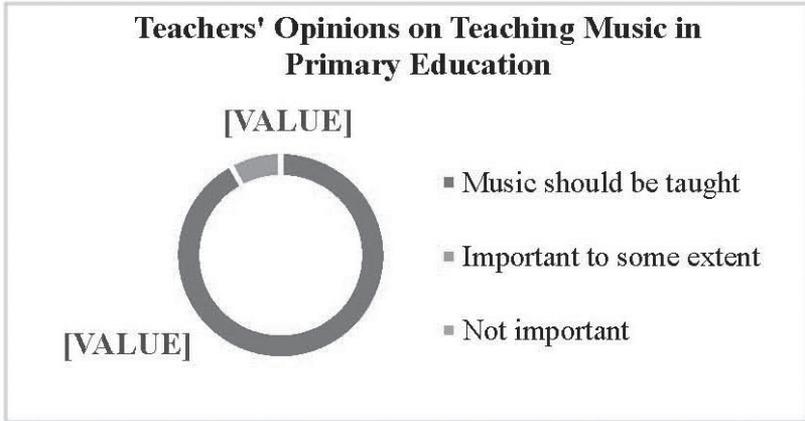


Figure 4: Teachers' Opinions on Teaching Music in Primary Education

According to Figure 4, 92.0% of the teachers in the selected sample stated that music should be taught in primary education. Additionally, 8.0% of teachers mentioned that it is important to some extent. No teachers in the sample indicated that music should not be taught.

Teachers view music education positively but encounter practical challenges that limit its implementation. They believe that overcoming these obstacles could pave the way for a more well-rounded and enriching music education experience for primary school students. This would not only enhance students' creativity and cognitive development (Hallam, 2010; Rauscher & Zupan, 2000) but also foster a deeper appreciation for music from an early age (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019). Addressing these challenges could lead to more engaged learning, improved social skills (Schellenberg, 2004), and a supportive environment that nurtures students' emotional and intellectual growth (Barrett, 2019).

Teachers believe that music can inspire and engage students, improving learning across various subjects. Based on the teachers' feedback, the following key points have been identified:

1. Using music to teach mathematical concepts can significantly enhance students' achievement in math.
2. Music allows students to experience the joy and rhythm of music, promoting emotional balance that supports their future well-being.
3. Music education helps cultivate a group of creative children with strong listening skills, fostering enjoyment and engagement from an early age.
4. Music provides opportunities for children to engage in learning activities that incorporate various methods and styles, promoting diverse learning experiences.
5. Music can be used as a tool to motivate and enhance learning in any subject area.

Teachers expressed the need for more professional development programs and aesthetic workshops to better utilize music as a teaching tool. This enthusiasm indicates that there is a foundation for enhancing music education, but structural support is required (Glewwe & Kremer, 2006).

Barriers to Effective Music Education

The implementation of music education in primary schools faces several significant barriers that prevent it from being fully realized, despite its acknowledged benefits. One of the primary obstacles is time constraints, where teachers feel pressured to cover core subjects such as mathematics, science, and language, leaving little time for music (OECD, 2018). As one teacher noted, "With the emphasis on core subjects, music often gets pushed aside, making it feel less important." The prioritization of these subjects, driven by societal and educational systems that emphasize measurable academic success, often results in music being viewed as less important or non-essential to the curriculum (Stronge, 2018).

Resource limitations further compound the issue. Many schools, particularly in developing countries or under-resourced areas, lack adequate musical instruments, teaching materials, or even trained music teachers, which significantly hampers the delivery of effective music education (Glewwe & Kremer, 2006). A teacher expressed, “Without the right resources, it’s difficult to engage students in meaningful music activities.” Without access to these necessary tools, teachers are unable to provide meaningful, hands-on musical experiences, leading to a reliance on superficial music activities that fail to tap into the deeper educational potential of music.

The societal prioritization of subjects like mathematics and science over the arts reflects broader educational and cultural values. In many systems, arts education, including music, is seen as supplementary rather than integral to the development of well-rounded, creative students (Hallam, 2010). One teacher remarked, “It’s frustrating to see music treated as an add-on when it has so much to offer in terms of student development.” This results in music education being marginalized, with limited curriculum space allocated to it, even though research shows it can enhance student engagement and improve overall academic performance.

Music’s Potential for Holistic Education

Teachers expressed optimism about the integration of music into core subjects such as mathematics, languages, and environmental studies, recognizing its potential to make the learning process more dynamic and engaging. Among the core subjects already taught in primary education, teachers suggested that integrating music with the mother tongue, English language, mathematics, and environmental studies would be appropriate. The integration between the music and core subjects can be shown in the following figure 5.

Most of the teachers have identified music as an effective tool not only for fostering student creativity but also for enhancing emotional development and improving overall learning outcomes. Research has

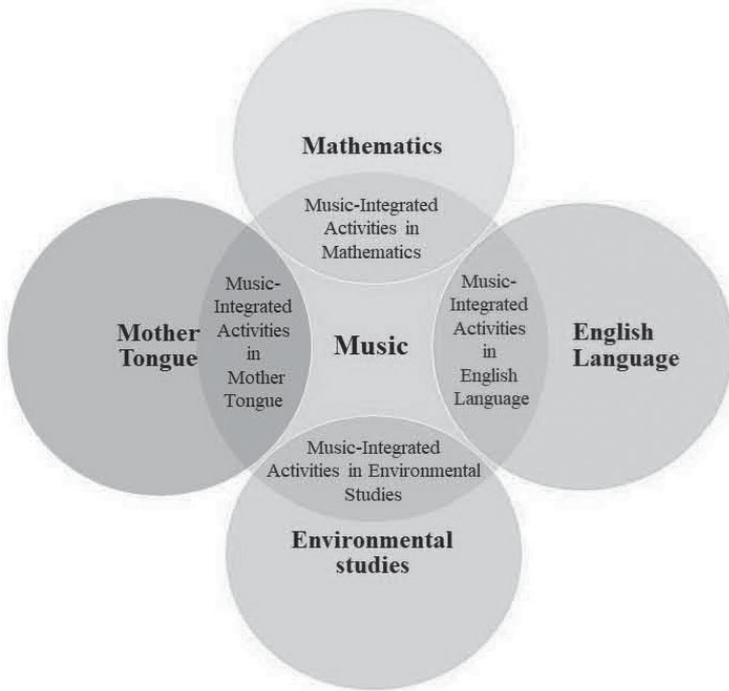


Figure 5: The Integration of Music into Core Subjects

shown that the inclusion of music in interdisciplinary teaching strategies supports student motivation and academic achievement by tapping into diverse learning styles and cognitive processes (Hallam, 2010; Rauscher & Hinton, 2011). However, despite this optimism, teachers pointed out that significant curriculum reforms and professional development initiatives are necessary to realize the full potential of music education. In particular, they emphasized the need for structured training programs that equip educators with the skills and confidence to integrate music effectively into other subjects (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Without these reforms, the integration of music remains superficial, and its broader educational benefits such as enhancing memory, improving attention, and developing social skills remain underutilized (Schellenberg, 2005). Furthermore, studies indicate that the incorporation of music into a well-rounded educational experience can lead to improved cognitive

outcomes and higher levels of student engagement, reinforcing the need for such reforms (Hallam, 2010). Music education not only supports intellectual development but also contributes to emotional resilience and social skills, making it a powerful tool for holistic student growth.

Conclusion

The study concludes that there is a significant gap between the potential benefits of music education in primary schools and its actual implementation in Sri Lanka. While 78.0% of the teachers in the research were trained in general primary education, many lacked formal music training, which restricted their ability to teach music beyond basic activities. Teachers largely limited their use of music to singing songs or poems during lessons, particularly in subjects like Sinhala, religion, and environmental studies. Despite these limitations, the findings suggest that teachers are keen to see music education play a more prominent role in the curriculum. They believe that integrating music into a wide range of subjects would make the teaching and learning process more dynamic and effective. The thematic analysis reveals that while teachers see the potential of music to enrich education, practical challenges such as lack of training, resources, and curriculum structure inhibit its effective integration. To achieve the above requirements, teachers have requested aesthetic workshops and targeted professional development programs to enhance their skills in music education.

This study emphasizes the need for a more structured and supported approach to music education in Sri Lankan primary schools. By providing teachers with the necessary training and resources, as well as elevating the status of music within the curriculum, Sri Lanka could better harness the cognitive, emotional, and social benefits of music education. These changes would ensure that students not only develop academically but also grow into well-rounded individuals capable of contributing positively to society.

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