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# Exploring effective music teaching strategies of primary school teachers

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## Abstract

This study aims to investigate primary teachers' teaching strategies in music Turkish primary classrooms. In the study the 'qualitative' research approach was adopted in order to fulfil the aims and objectives of the study. The study carried out in two state primary schools in Turkey. Total of six primary school teachers with different educational backgrounds participated in the study. Semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were used as tools for data collection. Findings suggest that there is a range of factors influence teachers' music teaching activities in negative ways in classrooms. These factors were encountered as students, curriculum, lack of teacher competencies, inadequate facilities and resources for music education, limited support from parents and negative effects of audio-visual media. It is suggested that due to the lack of confidence and competence of primary teachers, music specialist teachers should be assigned to the task of delivering music curriculum.

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*Keywords* Teaching music, teacher strategies, primary education;

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## 1. Introduction

As elsewhere, in Turkey, primary school teachers are expected to be competent and skilled in teaching all subject areas including music. As music is a compulsory subject for all teachers to teach in primary schools (Mills, 1991), primary school teachers have to consider that music education is a part of the curriculum (Gamble, 1998). However, it is well documented that the music is an area of the curriculum which teachers often feel anxious about (Hennessy, 1995). Many primary school teachers are frightened of teaching music and many believe that this specialised subject should be left to the specialist (Kempton, 1992), or at least these teachers expect to have a music specialist present in the school in order to get daily support. Main question here is 'what happens if the school does not have enough resources or power to employ a specialist music teacher?' In Turkey primary school children generally do music with their class teacher, usually a non-specialist teacher, as there is a great shortage in specialist music teachers throughout the country. Either trained or not, or talented in music, class-teachers (as non-specialists) have to take the responsibility of delivering the music education in primary classrooms without the support of a music specialist (Altun, 2005).

In these circumstances, particularly in recent years, in Turkey, music education at the primary school level has been generally poor and students' achievements in the aspects of music have often been low. In addition, there have been many examples of negligence in the practice of music education (Hoskyins, 1996). Often teachers' lack of

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confidence and competence in teaching music is voiced as the main inhibiting factor in reducing the quality of teaching music in Turkish primary schools. It is for this reason that there is a need for a closer examination of music education in Turkish primary schools to find out what level of music education is taking place in the classrooms and what strategies non-specialist primary teachers apply to deliver the compulsory music curriculum. There are many studies which draw attention to the way a teacher's approach can affect both the learner and the type of learning achieved (Struthers, 1994). In this vein, investigating styles and strategies of primary teachers when they teach music in classrooms would help to identify the approaches as well as challenges and difficulties as a starting point. Then, one can move on to the consideration of how to overcome these problems in order to help non-specialist primary teachers to improve their performance in the area of teaching music.

In general terms teaching strategies and styles have to do with the “how” of music teaching. Depending on the situation, the teacher may use a combination of strategies, which can be referred to as the style, that contributes to the teaching profile of a teacher (Tait, 1992). Philpott (2001, p.83) argues that for teachers' activities, the approaches and tactics used by the teacher for bringing about learning are important. However, it is suggested that activities and strategies differ from each other in their description. According to Philpott (2001:83) “strategies are the ways in which you bring about musical learning and these require a rich description of ends and means, for example, the use of question and answer to elicit subjective responses from pupils such that we can introduce and develop musical vocabulary”. This means that teaching strategies are related to the actions and interactions that take place in the classroom after planning (Tait, 1992). As Tait (op. cit) argues, teaching strategies involve a range of procedures (i.e. vocabulary choice and usage, modelling, management and implementation) in the classroom, and the combination of these strategies is referred to as teaching style and several teaching styles produce the teaching profile of a particular teacher (p.525). Teachers generally use two main strategies: verbal and non-verbal. The general features and keywords associated with these strategies are presented in the table below:

Table 1. Teaching strategies in music

<i>STRATEGIES</i>			
<b>Verbal Strategies</b>	<i>Description</i>	<b>Nonverbal Stratégies</b>	<b>Description</b>
Professional	- <i>Technical: Vibrato, articulation, legato</i> - <i>Conceptual: tone, rhythm, crescendo</i> - <i>Aesthetic: blend, balance, intensity</i>	Musical modelling	Teacher performance provides a total image of what is desired either vocally or instrumentally
Experiential	- <i>Imagery: colourful, pastoral, religious connotations</i> - <i>Metaphor: evoke qualities of feeling or movement, such as dry, violent, or nervous</i> - <i>Analogy: includes words with living processes such as cohesion, expectation and stability</i>	Aural modelling	Teacher employs phonetic vocalization including humming and syllables in order to convey particular meanings or points of emphasis within the music
<i>Process</i>	Analyse, imagine, describe, explore, express, and demonstrate	<i>Physical modelling</i>	Includes facial expressions, physical gestures, formal conducting

## 2. Aim of the study

The study aims to identify if and how teachers develop teaching strategies in music education. The study also aims to provide a framework for categorizing and analyzing the data from this study in order to discuss whether primary school teachers who are non-specialists in music can develop effective teaching strategies based on their personal and professional profiles (background and teaching experience), and how they develop these strategies and apply them in their classrooms.

## 3. Method

The study carried out within qualitative research approach. In order to obtain in depth data about practices of primary school teachers in teaching music, “case study” method was adopted.

Case studies allow researchers to examine a single phenomenon within its *real context*, restrained by *time and activity*, and collects *detailed information* (Stake, 2000; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). In this respect the current study utilizes the case study method through concentrating on primary school teachers' music teaching strategies. The study was carried out in two state primary schools in Turkey. A total of six primary school teachers with different educational backgrounds participated in the study. As one of the research instruments, a semi-structured interview schedule was prepared and participant teachers were interviewed regarding their perceptions about music education and experiences in the classrooms. As a second means of data collection, classroom observation was used as an instrument. Each teacher was observed during their music lessons for a period of two hours (two lessons).

Due to ethical reasons schools and teachers were given nicknames. Obtained qualitative data analyzed through "constant comparison method" (Robson, 1993; Rubbin and Babbie, 1997). Findings were presented in tables and direct quotations from interviews are provided where appropriate.

#### 4. Findings

In this section, data obtained through interviews and classroom observations are presented one by one in a narrative way.

##### 4.1. Music teaching strategies of primary school teachers

It is found that teachers employ a range of teaching strategies to teach a particular subject in classroom settings. Teachers' selection of teaching strategies depends upon different variables such as the subject being taught (maths, science etc), the topic, the availability of resources, and time and curriculum targets. Music as a foundation subject and a form of art requires teachers to have a certain level of musical ability (musical hearing, voice management) and expertise. It is for this reason that teaching strategies in music education may differ from other core subjects as literally it involves aesthetic and artistic elements. The observation data reveal that participant teachers employ a range of strategies and in terms of teaching styles there are more similarities than differences in music lessons. The following table describes the characteristics of music lessons and summarises the data regarding classroom activities in this vein:

**Table 2.** Research participants and their background information

School	Teacher	Grade	Tasks	Activities	Learning Style	Teaching Strategies	Teaching Styles and Techniques	Teaching Format	Use of Musical Instrument
New Central Primary	Mr. Kemal	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Performing previously learned songs</li> <li>Learning a new song</li> <li>Singing the song</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Listening</li> <li>Performing (singing)</li> </ul>	By hearing and memorising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Direct instruction</li> <li>Explaining, story telling</li> <li>Teacher modelling</li> <li>Drill and practice</li> <li>Group competitions</li> <li>Musical games</li> </ul>	Whole class, group, pair, individual  Teaching through Hearing.	Teacher-directed Student involved (participating in singing activities and select songs)	None
	Mrs. Muge	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning a new song</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Breathing exercises</li> <li>Listening</li> <li>Performing (Singing)</li> </ul>	By hearing and memorising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Direct instruction</li> <li>Explaining</li> <li>Teacher performing (recorder)</li> <li>Practicing</li> <li>Repeating</li> </ul>	Whole class, group, pair, individual  Teaching through hearing.	Teacher-directed student involved (participating in singing activities)	Recorder

Old Town Primary	Mr. Mustafa	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Repeating previously learned school songs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Breathing exercises</li> <li>Listening</li> <li>singing</li> </ul>	By hearing and memorising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Direct instruction</li> <li>Explaining, story telling</li> <li>Teacher modelling</li> <li>Drill and practice</li> <li>Group competitions</li> <li>Musical games</li> </ul>	Whole class, group (choir), pair individual Teaching through hearing.	Teacher-directed student involved (participating in singing activities)	No
	Mrs. Ozlem	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning a new song</li> <li>Singing the song</li> <li>Repeating previously learned school songs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Listening</li> <li>Singing</li> </ul>	Hearing and memorising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Direct instruction</li> <li>Verbal Explanations</li> <li>Teacher singing</li> <li>Practicing</li> <li>Repeating</li> </ul>	Whole class, group, individual Teaching through hearing.	Teacher-directed Student involved (students select songs)	No
	Miss. Elgin	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Performing previously learned songs</li> <li>Learning a new song</li> <li>Singing exercises</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Listening</li> <li>Singing</li> </ul>	By hearing and memorising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Direct instruction</li> <li>Verbal Explanations</li> <li>Teacher singing</li> <li>Practicing</li> <li>Repeating</li> </ul>	Whole class Individual Teaching through hearing.	Teacher-directed Student involved (students select songs)	No
	Mrs. Ayse	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New song</li> <li>Singing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Listening</li> <li>Performing (singing)</li> </ul>	By hearing and memorising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Direct instruction</li> <li>Verbal Explanations</li> <li>Teacher singing</li> <li>Practicing, repeating</li> </ul>	Whole class individual Teaching through hearing.	Teacher-directed student involved (participating in singing activities)	No

It can be seen clearly that all the observed classroom teachers demonstrated similar characteristics and strategies in their music lessons. In all observed lessons the activities were planned (checked teachers' daily plans) as "learning a new song" and "repeating previously learned songs". In all lessons teaching a new school song was the main task to be done. At the time when these observations were made "Mothers' Day" was approaching. In Old Town Primary, two teachers (Mrs. Ozlem and Mrs. Ayse) taught the song called "My Dear Mother". Other teachers selected different school songs and taught in classrooms. As explained in the Literature Chapter of this study, in the first phase of primary school, the music curriculum does not require the teaching of notation, and does not cover other music elements such as composing and the performance of instruments. These elements are generally covered in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades. As can be seen, in observed lessons listening and singing took place. In fact teachers mentioned this distinction in their interviews. However, as explained in Chapter 2, the music curriculum for the 1<sup>st</sup> Phase covers other topics such as theoretical topics on types of music and the music around us, and practical topics on voice management, rhythm, musical speed, tone etc. However, all the observed teachers planned "singing" and "listening" activities in their music lessons.

In almost all classes, group, individual, or whole class singing activities took place. The teachers organised the groups (such as groups of boys and girls, groups of students in rows) in the classroom. Although group activities took place in classes, children never changed their positions, or desks were never moved. A different place (sports hall, play garden) had never been considered. Group activities were arranged between rows which were arranged in three columns and each column was regarded as a group. Small singing competitions between these groups were arranged (for example, in Mr. Kemal's lesson). Individual singing was generally directed by the teacher, but in some classes voluntary students were brought in front of the classroom and allowed to sing the song that was learned in the lesson. Again, in some lessons, individual singing performances were based on children's own preferences and choice of music. In most classes, the students sang songs selected from daily life (pop, traditional etc). Mrs. Ozlem, however, encouraged children to choose school songs. During individual singing some teachers intervened in the

singing activity and tried spontaneously to correct the students' mistakes in tone, rhythm, lyrics etc. by demonstrating the correct form, but most teachers ignored this.

Children's participation in the songs was high but the quality was in dispute as performances were weak in terms of the musical qualities of singing activities. All music lessons were taught by teachers using almost the same strategies. Generally, children were passive and teacher directed instruction was dominant in music lessons. When all observation data are combined together, a typical music lesson in the observed classrooms can be drawn.

In most parts of the lesson the children were in the position of "listening". They were listening either to the teacher's verbal explanations or instructions or the teachers' or other friends' singing. Group activities were mentioned earlier. However, it is worth noting that these group activities are different from the group work activities. In these lessons groups were used to perform (sing) songs only. There were no interactions between groups, or teamwork activities between group members. In this vein, the meaning of group activities in music lessons differs from other group activities taking place in other lessons where interaction and communication skills between groups and group members are greatly required. Here, in music lessons, group members try to sing the song as best as they can but they can do nothing for the singing qualities of other members.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Analysis of data revealed that the teachers employed a range of teaching activities in music lessons and demonstrated various styles of teaching. However, there are no major differences in these strategies. In fact, quite similar teaching techniques and styles were observed in the music lessons. As illustrated in all cases, teaching songs was the main task in all lessons, and rehearsing and learning through hearing and memorising was the major activity.

It is necessary for a classroom teacher to acquire a certain level of musical ability and expertise in order to employ these techniques when teaching music in primary schools. However, when examined closely, these techniques are related to the pedagogy of teaching any subject matter. The techniques observed in the studied classrooms (1, 5, 7, 11, 12, 13) are related to the **pedagogical competence** of a teacher, which can be applied to other subjects. For instance, using hand movements, or whispering words clearly (perhaps with music), grouping children, and explaining are techniques to be used by teachers in any other teaching activity. Other techniques, however, require a certain level of knowledge about singing and teaching particular songs. This can be named as **technical competence** in music. For example, the teacher should be able to differentiate verse and chorus in a song, to know elements of music such as pitch, pace, tempo, dynamics, rhythm, melody, measurement of the song, and should be able to read notes of a song. These types of musical concepts and skills can be gained through a certain level of training in music. As can be remembered, some teachers in the sample (Mr. Kemal, Mrs. Muge, Mr. Mustafa, and Mrs. Ozlem) had proper music training during their Initial Teacher Education (they were experienced teachers with a range between 11 years and 32 years of teaching experience). In the classroom, observations of these teachers' pedagogical skills and knowledge of music were recorded often. Other teachers, however, used a lot of talk but mostly in trying to make pupils be quiet or listen to others. To some extent this could be related to their training background in music as well as in classroom teaching as two teachers (Miss. Elgin and Mrs. Ayse) had not gained teacher status from education faculties or related institutions. This leads to the conclusion that the studied teachers lack competence and confidence in their own abilities to teach music. Studies in this field (Pugh and Pugh, 1998) report that one of the subjects which teachers felt least confident about teaching was music. One of the main factors for this situation was connected to 'the adequacy of the musical training offered to both teachers and student teachers' (Pugh and Pugh, 1998, pp. 110). A similar situation is apparent in a Turkish context as teachers have lack of technical and pedagogical competence in music education.

It is suggested that the notion of continuous professional development (CPD) to the improve teachers' own capacity in music education (e.g. recommending teachers to train and develop themselves in music, collaborating with experienced teachers, learning to play an instrument, improving the quality of ITE, more INSET and ongoing support) should be established in primary schools (Altun, 2005). It is recommended that music education in primary schools should be handed over to specialist music teachers, as in secondary education teaching contexts.

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