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Educator Access and Application of Music Research

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One role of music education research is to “enhance knowledge regarding the teaching and learning of music,” as articulated in the manuscript submission section of the *Journal of Research in Music Education* (JRME) (Sage Publications, 2011a). Despite the fact that music education research is published several times each year in multiple journals, a communication gap between music researchers and music teachers continues to exist.

Donald Dillon, past Executive Director of The National Association for Music Education (NAfME, formerly MENC), says, “For years we have heard the complaint that the majority of research being done by doctoral candidates and the academic community is of little direct use to the classroom teacher” (as cited in Brand, 1984, p. 1). Researchers are disappointed in music teachers’ response and music teachers feel impatient with researchers for offering little guidance regarding important pedagogical questions and failing to help them improve their teaching.

Hedden (1979) suggests three reasons teachers have little involvement in research. First, they lack training in research techniques. Second, many regard research as an “ivory tower activity, one best appreciated by a small group of ‘elitist academics’” (p. 35). Third, research jargon and technical terms can be off-putting to those who are not familiar with them. In his study, 25 of 35 respondents agreed “the effort I put in when reading research reports outweighs the benefits I receive from the articles.” Respondents (33 of 38) agreed “more teachers would be interested in research if researchers concentrated their studies on ‘practical’ problems.” Most (26 of 36) thought articles in research journals were not relevant to what they did as a teacher.

The lack of research exposure in undergraduate courses is cited as a possible reason for the lack of music teacher involvement in research. According to Madsen and Furman (1984), it is uncommon for undergraduate students to become involved in ongoing scholarly work or to understand transfer issues in research. They administered Hedden’s *Assessment of Research Knowledge* (1979) and a second test of research comprehension to groups of graduate and undergraduate students. Graduate students scored significantly higher than undergraduates in these tests. This result suggests that those with only an undergraduate education may not have acquired the skills needed to comprehend and apply research.

The readability of research reports is a hindrance for some music teachers (Brand, 1984). According to Flowers, Gallant, & Single (1995), “Teachers will be more likely to read research that is practical, relevant, and free of jargon.” In their study, educational background was found to have little effect on participants’ ratings of music research. But when readers were interested

in a topic, they were willing to read the research despite the style (informal, formal with research statistics and tests, or a hybrid).

Yarbrough, Price, & Bowers (1991) found that teachers were likely to adjust their teaching when presented with research relating to their subject area. Their study asked if teachers would use information from research studies if they were made aware of it. Teachers were taught a sequential teaching strategy and later observed to see if they used the newly learned strategy. The study found that “the teachers chose to change without any contingencies operating to encourage or discourage this change” (p. 17).

Several attempts have been made to bridge the gap between researchers and teachers. Three sessions had this objective at the Ann Arbor Symposium entitled “From Research to the Music Classroom” (Documentary Report of the Ann Arbor Symposium, 1981). UPDATE: The Applications of Research in Music Education, a journal published by NAFME, was designed to make research reports accessible to music teachers. Since 1989, UPDATE has focused on bringing “research in music teaching and learning close to everyday practice to help teachers apply research in their music classrooms and rehearsal halls” (SAGE Publications, 2010). It is available to all NAFME members at no additional cost. NAFME also published *What works: Instructional Strategies for Music Education* (Merrion, 1989), a collaborative project to make research that describes effective teaching strategies known to music teachers. The book is organized by area: preschool music, elementary general music, junior high general music, secondary general music, instrumental music, string music, choral music, perception, and college teaching strategies. Within each area, instructional strategies are presented along with research findings, comments, and a list of references that support the assertions. According to the introduction, “As new findings emerge, revisions will be forthcoming” (p. vii). No more recent editions or similar books have been found.

According to Madsen (1985), attempts like these are highly commendable, but have not yet found acceptance in the appropriate group. Madsen found that in order for teachers to value research, they must first develop the skill of transferring research results to their own activities in the classroom. To that end, Madsen designed a long-term project in which music teachers were taught an approach to reading research and to discuss possible music situations to which the studies might apply. Once successful transfer skills had been practiced, “no longer [were] band directors, for example, upset when they [did] not have a band model. They [learned] from a choral rehearsal, a bassoon recital, or a child’s singing” (p. 19).

The studies described above examined factors that prevent teachers from being involved in research, evaluated teachers’ response to research, and postulated as to how research accessibility could be improved, but I found no recent descriptions of how these issues may have changed since the last cited study was published in 1995. The present study asked these questions of practicing music teachers in Texas, exploring their access to music education research, their impressions regarding research, and ways they believe it could help them more.

Method

Four hundred Texas Music Educators Association (TMEA) members were selected at random from the TMEA website (where they had made their addresses available and given permission for other members to contact them). An online survey asked for basic demographic information from each respondent: level taught, area taught, number of years teaching, the highest degree they had attained, and whether the respondent was enrolled in a graduate program. A checklist of research journals was included, as found in the Music Education Search

System (MESS) (Asmus, n.d.), a nationally recognized music research website, as well as an open-ended question asking respondents to list any other journals they read. Respondents were asked how much time they spent per month reading those journals and whether they perceived that their reading informed their teaching. Next, respondents indicated the methods by which they typically sought to improve their teaching (e.g., workshops, journals, courses). They also noted factors that prevented them from reading or applying music research and suggested ways that research access could be improved. Finally, space was provided for respondents to write how they believed music education research could better serve them.

Results

Participants

Data consisted of combined responses ($N=105$) on the survey, a 32.2% response rate with 326 successful email invitations sent out to TMEA members in November 2003. Multiple levels of music teaching were represented: high school ($n=53$), junior high/middle school ($n=48$), elementary school ($n=28$), undergraduate ($n=25$), graduate ($n=9$) and pre-kindergarten ($n=5$). Forty percent taught more than one level. More respondents taught choir ($n=37$) than any other area, followed by band ($n=29$) and orchestra ($n=9$). Forty percent of respondents taught areas other than band, choir, or orchestra and 20% taught multiple areas.

Respondents selected from a list the number of years they had taught: 0-2 years ($n=0$), 3-5 ($n=6$), 6-10 ($n=25$), 11-15 ($n=23$), 16-20 ($n=13$), 21-25 ($n=17$), and over 25 years ($n=18$). More than two-thirds of respondents ($n=71$) had taught for more than 10 years. Sixty-three percent ($n=66$) of respondents had graduate degrees (49 with a masters and 17 with a doctorate). Eleven respondents were enrolled in a graduate program at the time of the survey.

Journals Read by Respondents

Respondents were asked which journals they read (see Table 1). The most frequently selected journals were *Instrumentalist* ($n=28$), *Choral Journal* ($n=17$), *Music Educators Journal* ($n=16$), and *Journal of Research in Music Education* ($n=11$). Other journals were selected no more than five times. The average amount of time respondents ($n=90$) spent reading journals was 41 minutes per month.

Table 1

Journals in MESS listed by frequency of selection

Journals	Readers
Instrumentalist	28
Choral Journal	17
Music Educators Journal	16
Journal of Research in Music Education	11
Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education	5
Jazz Educators Journal	5
Southeastern Journal of Music Education	5
Journal of Music Teacher Education	4
UPDATE	3
Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning	2
Dialog in Instrumental Music	1
Philosophy of Music Education Review	1

Note. *Southern Music Education Journal*, though currently listed on MESS, was not part of the database at the time this survey was conducted.

Table 2 lists the journals that respondents indicated they read but were not listed as response options. The most frequently entered journal by far was TMEA's Southwestern Musician ($n=53$), followed by the Texas Choral Directors Association's Texas Sings ($n=6$). Teachers submitted forty-two other journals, but none of the others were submitted more than five times. The average amount of time spent reading these journals for those who responded to the question ($n=81$) was 63 minutes per month.

Table 2

Journals entered by participants listed by frequency of selection

Journals	Readers
Southwestern Musician (TMEA Publication)	53
Texas Sings (TCDA Publication)	6
School Band and Orchestra	5
Orff Echo (AOSA Publication)	3
40 other journals	< 3

Respondents were asked about the usefulness of journals from each list (see Figure 1). The most selected response for either list was, “I always find something helpful.”

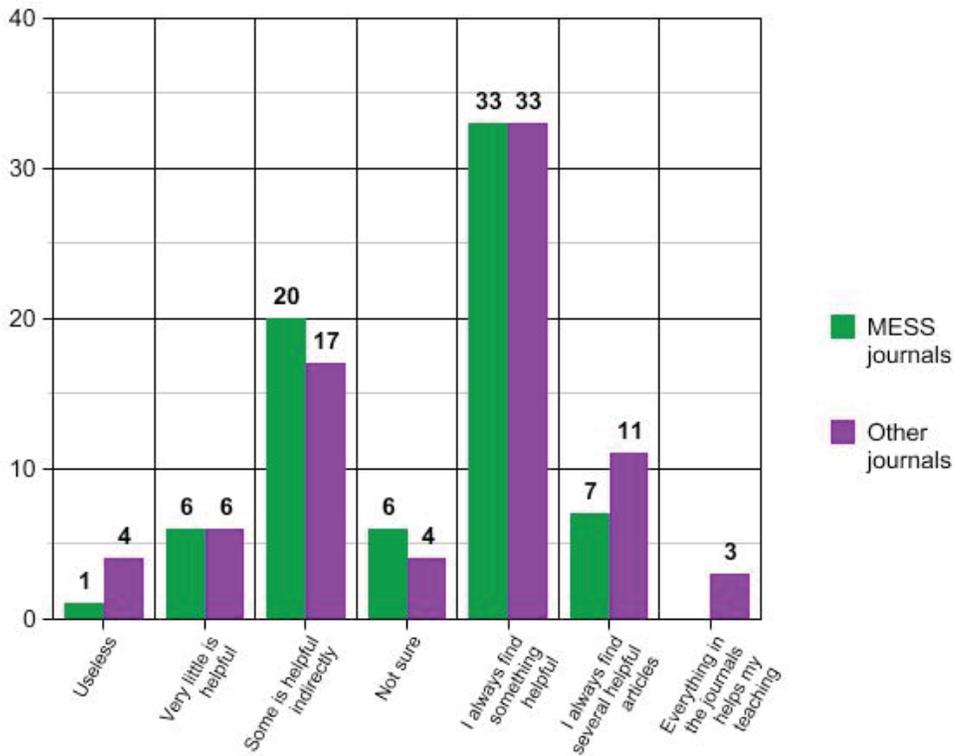


Figure 1. Survey question: “How useful is the information in these journals to your teaching?”

Factors that Prevent Research Reading and Involvement

The final portion of the survey asked respondents about factors that prevented them from reading or participating in research and how it could be more accessible. Respondents were also asked to indicate the resources they used to improve their teaching.

Lack of time was the factor that most prevented respondents from reading or participating in music research ($n=74$) (see Figure 2). Twenty-six respondents (24.8%) did not believe research was relevant to their teaching situation. Fifteen people (14.3%) were inhibited by the cost. Only 3 respondents indicated that they had no interest in research at all.

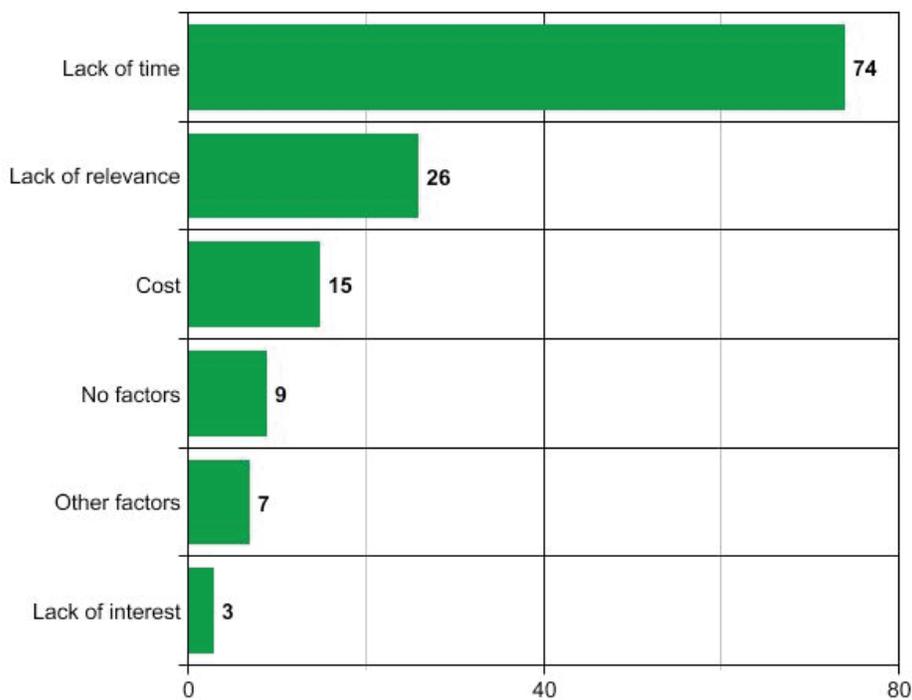


Figure 2. Survey question: “What factors prevent you from reading or participating in music research? (Check all that apply)”

When asked how research could be more accessible, the most requested option was a searchable web resource ($n=73$) (see Figure 3). A monthly column highlighting current research projects was believed to be helpful by 30 respondents. Respondents ($n=23$) indicated interest in the creation of a yearly compilation of major research findings that organizes information by topic.

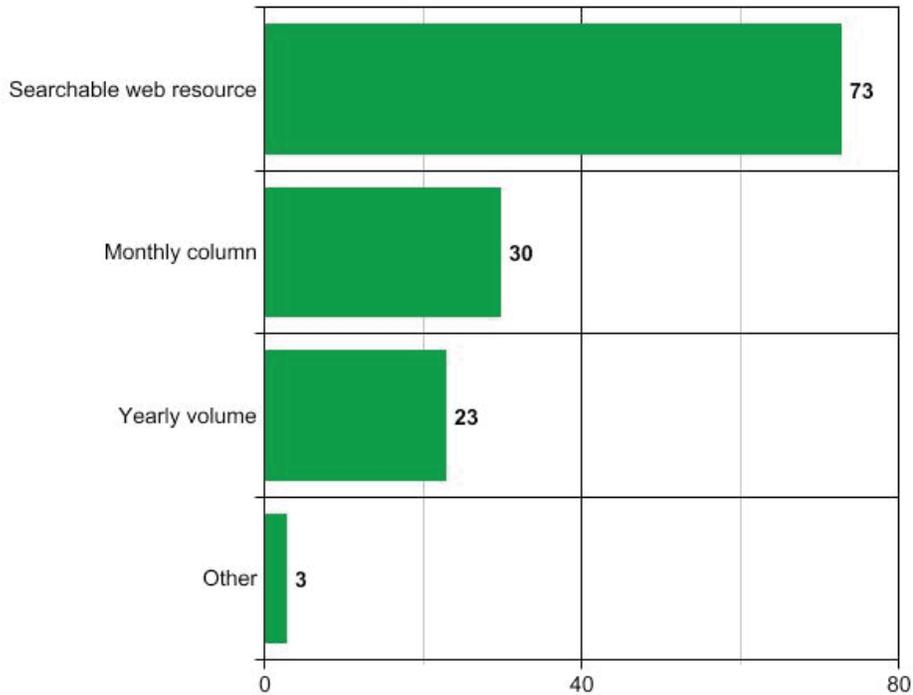


Figure 3. Survey question: “Which of the following would you find beneficial in accessing research? (Check all that apply)”

Most respondents (92.4%) indicated that workshops were important in improving the quality of their teaching (see Figure 4). Fifty-six (54.3%) said reading magazines helped their teaching. The internet and books tied for the third most popular answer with 48 responses each (45.7%). Competitions received 45 votes, graduate courses 26, research journals 18, and 31 “other” responses.

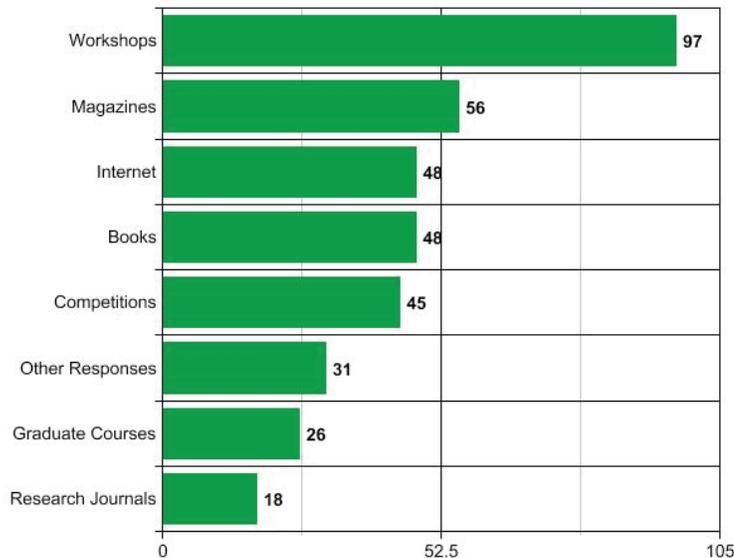


Figure 4. Survey question: “Which of the following help you teach better (Check all that apply)?”

Free Responses

The final question provided a large text box and asked respondents, “How could music education research serve you better?” Most responses fell into a few categories: relevance ($n=14$), accessibility ($n=9$), and advocacy ($n=4$). Below are representative samples of responses from each category.

Relevance.

“Keeping articles relevant and applicable to the average, in-the-trenches teacher will give them higher value.”

“If the research were more applicable. I feel that current research is rather abstract and very useless. Many articles are written for college professors or directors at large schools consequently the information is not useful to the small school director. The problems that small school bands face are different and are rarely addressed in a manner that could be used in a real life situation.”

Access.

“I would be more likely to read highly applicable, readily available, quick and easy to read material . . . I am interested, it's just not easy and so I don't make it happen!”

“Make information easy to find. Publish where to find information in many places (mags./conventions/mailings) There are many sites to find if you look long enough, but once you find sites, it's not necessarily the best place to go.”

“Since I prefer online research, having an easily searchable and central data base would help me most.”

Advocacy.

“I need data that is presentable to parents. I am already sold on music and most data seems to be directed at me where it really needs to be directed at the parents of future musicians.”

“To convince EL [elementary school] administrators that music re-enforces [sic.] academics.”

Discussion

The three most frequently selected journals from MESS were *Instrumentalist*, *Choral Journal*, and *Music Educators Journal*. All of these journals are benefits of membership in a professional music organization (The National Band Association, American Choral Directors Association, and NAFME, respectively). This may be the reason that these journals are read more often than paid subscription research journals like *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* and *JRME* (*JRME* subscription is available only to NAFME members at an additional cost).

JRME was the fourth most frequently selected journal. It was the most frequently selected general, refereed research journal from the list and had more than double the number of responses of any other research journal on the list. Despite these seemingly impressive statistics, only 11 (10.5%) of those surveyed read *JRME*. All of these 11 respondents had graduate degrees except one, and that respondent was enrolled in graduate courses. Only four respondents who read the journal taught in areas other than colleges or universities. These data suggest that most teachers are not reading research from major subscription research journals.

Similar results came from the responses that indicated what other journals were being read. Journals that were included with a membership in a professional organization were, by far, the most read. *Southwestern Musician* is a benefit of membership in TMEA. All of those surveyed

were members of TMEA, so they all received this journal. It is no surprise, then, that this would be the most mentioned “other” journal.

When asked which of several items helped them teach better, the most selected response was workshops, followed by magazines, the Internet, books, and competitions. The least selected responses were graduate courses and research journals. Music education research is designed to help teachers teach music more effectively, and, according to the instructions to contributors in JRME, “to enhance knowledge regarding the teaching and learning of music.” The teachers surveyed in this study do not seem to believe research journals are meeting their objectives. Workshops often give teachers ready-made lessons and strategies they can implement immediately. Teachers search the internet for instant access to resources for their teaching. Teachers read books and magazines that they find interesting or that include topics in which they want to improve. Graduate courses and research journals, however, require money and time. They may be more likely to challenge thinking than to offer strategies.

These data are not consistent with the idea that practicing teachers find that reading journals informs their teaching. It may be that teachers believe that journals contribute to developing ideas or stimulating thought, rather than directly improving how well they teach. Perhaps teachers who do read journals, do so to improve their thinking rather than their teaching.

A web resource, as indicated by teachers, might make a huge difference in reducing the prominence of these factors. More than two-thirds of teachers believed a searchable web resource would benefit them the most in terms of accessing research. It is much easier and more efficient for a teacher to pull up a web page than to search for subscription research journals in print that are rarely found outside of institutions of higher education. Educating teachers about the existence of the MESS may be beneficial, as it is a manually updated, user-friendly web resource for accessing music education research and contains a wealth of information.

The findings of this study are consistent with those of Yarbrough, Price, & Bowers (1991) in that teachers report an interest in research, but are inhibited in accessing and applying it in some way. Perhaps the most exciting of my findings is that only three respondents indicated that they had no interest in research at all.

This study examined the responses of a small sample from a single state. Future research may look at other state populations and at a larger pool of music teachers. Methods for disseminating research more accessibly, perhaps through workshops and use of the internet could also be investigated.

The results of this study suggest that changing the way research is reported may be of benefit to both researchers and practitioners. “The cost in terms of time, money, and student achievement is excessive when methods of instruction are chosen by trial and error and perpetuated because of a lack of alternatives” (Flowers et al., 1995). If music education research is conducted to discover better ways of teaching music or to test current practice, it has tremendous value and can greatly influence the quality of music education in our schools.

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