Subjects in Music Education Research, 1961-1990

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Periodic reviews of the state of the published research in a field are beneficial in determining where the field has been and in projecting where it is going. Such reviews in music education tend to focus on two dimensions of research: content and method. Reviews of research content, such as Atterbury's (1991) examination of research questions for elementary general music, suggest future topics and hypotheses. Critiques of research methods (e.g., Reimer, 1985) challenge researchers to adopt improved means to understand and explain phenomena.

Quantitative analysis has also been employed to examine content and method in music education research. Yarbrough's (1984) content analysis of the articles published in the *Journal of Research in Music Education* examined the frequency with which various methodologies and topics occurred during the period from 1953 to 1983. Stabler (1987) conducted a similar study of articles in the *Council for Research in Music Education* from 1963 to 1985. Both authors found that descriptive and experimental methods were used most frequently and that studies of perception and measurement were prevalent.

One question about music education research that has seldom been addressed in reviews, perhaps because it is so fundamental and obvious, is: Who are the subjects being studied? Certainly, the types of subjects employed in studies reflect the kinds of research questions being asked. An analysis of the subjects in music education research can reveal information about the implicit value of certain lines of inquiry. If one type of subject is studied disproportionately in the literature, it follows that the research community places a greater value on research with this population.

Two questions were addressed in this study. First, with what frequency do music education researchers study subjects of various ages and musical backgrounds? Second, have there been changes in the past 30 years (1961-1990) regarding the subjects employed in music education research?

Method

Articles from three journals (*Journal of Research in Music Education,* volumes 9 through 38; *Council for Research in Music Education,* vol. 1-106; and *Contributions to Music Education,* volumes 1 through 17) were analyzed for the period 1961 to 1990. These were the only journals found to meet the following criteria:

- published empirical research;
- focused on music education;
- encompassed all aspects of music education;
- were distributed nationally; and
- were in print during most of the 1961-1990 period.

Only articles that employed subjects in some fashion were included in this analysis. Articles using historical or philosophical methods were not included, nor were literature reviews or dissertation reviews. A total of 777 articles from the three journals fit these criteria. For two of the articles, it was unclear who the subjects were, and these articles were deleted from the study, leaving an N of 775. Of this total, 101 were published proceedings from Research Seminars of the International Society for Music Education (see Table 1).

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First, the ages and grade levels of the subjects in each of the 775 articles were surveyed and recorded. Then the subjects were classified as belonging to one of eight age categories: Birth to Kindergarten (birth to age 6); Primary (grades 1-3, ages 6-9; Intermediate (grades 4-6, ages 9-12; Junior High (grades 7-9, ages 12-15); Senior High (grades 10-12, ages 15-18); College-Undergraduate; College-Graduate; and Professional/Adult (e.g., teachers, administrators, parents). Categorization was straightforward for those articles that reported the grade levels of the subjects. For the articles that reported subjects' age only, categorization was problematic in those cases which the age was on the cusp between two adjacent categories. In such cases, equal fractions were assigned to both adjacent categories. For example, if the subjects in a study were reported as being 6 years old, one-half were assigned to the Birth to Kindergarten category and one-half to the Primary category.

The subjects' status regarding their music involvement was also noted. Subjects were classified as either musically select or musically nonselect. Musically select subjects were those who had chosen to participate in musical activities. Examples of musically select subjects are ensemble members, college music majors, music teachers, and students taking applied lessons. Musically nonselect subjects include such groups as nonmusic majors, students in general music classes, and parents. It may be assumed that some of the nonselect subjects could have been considered musically select in another context. For example, a subject who was a nonmusic major (nonselect) also may have been an ensemble member (select). But for the purpose of classifying subjects' status, only the context of the population from which the sample was drawn was considered.

A majority of the articles surveyed employed subjects from more than one age category or musical status. For example, a single study may involve musically select subjects in junior high, nonselect subjects in high school, and nonselect adults. In these cases, the studies were divided into equal fractions, and the fractions were assigned to the various age categories and status classifications. In the example cited above, one-third of the study's subjects would be considered as musically select Junior High, one-third would be nonselect High School, and one-third would be nonselect Adults. This

Table 1. Numbers and Sources of Articles Surveyed, Including Published Proceedings of the International Society for Music Education Research Seminars (in parentheses)

Source	Years			
	1961-70	1971-80	1981-90	TOTAL
JRME	127 (14)	208	167	502 (14)
CRME	37 (6)	54 (28)	100 (53)	191 (87)
CME	0	33	49	82
TOTAL	164 (20)	295 (28)	316 (53)	775 (101)

JRME = *Journal of Research in Music Education*
CRME = *Council for Research in Music Education*
CME = *Contributions to Music Education*

method was used to avoid giving disproportionate weight in the analysis to those studies with multiple types of subjects.

For historical comparisons, the resulting data were organized according to decade of publication (1961-70, 1971-1980, 1981-1990). For each decade, the percentage of subjects in each age category was computed, and these percentages were further divided into musically select and nonselect classifications.

Results

The percentages of subjects in the various age categories and musical status classifications for the three decades surveyed appear in figures 1, 2, and 3. The largest single category for all three time periods was College-Undergraduate, comprising approximately one-third of the subjects in the research surveyed. The majority of the subjects in the College-Undergraduate category were classified as musically select, indicating that they were music majors, ensemble members, or applied music students. Musically select undergraduate and graduate students as a group made up 24 percent of the music education subjects in 1961-70 (Figure 1) and 1971-80 (Figure 2) and 26 percent of the subjects in 1981-90 (Figure 3). The second largest subject category for the 1961-70 and 1971-80 periods was Intermediate (grades 4-6), and for the 1981-90 period, the second largest category was Professional/Adult.

Among the precollegiate subject categories, the smallest categories in the 1961-70 period were Birth to Kindergarten and Primary (grades 1-3), in the 1971-80 period were Senior High and Birth to Kindergarten, and in 1981-90 were Junior High and Senior High. The smallest category in all three time periods was College-Graduate, but this result may have been an artifact caused by incomplete reporting procedures in some of the

Note: In Figures 1, 2, and 3 (next page), ■ = Select; □ = Nonselect

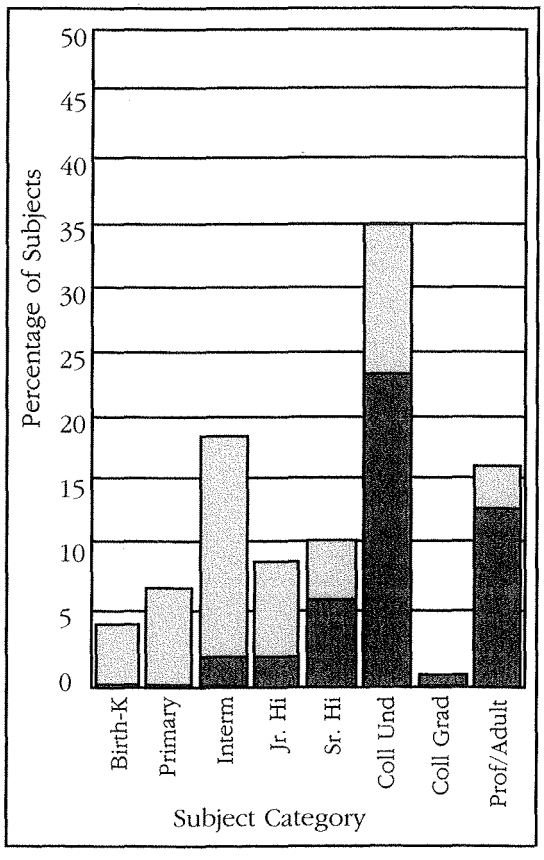


Figure 1. Percentage of Subjects by Age Category and Select/Nonselect Status, 1961-1970

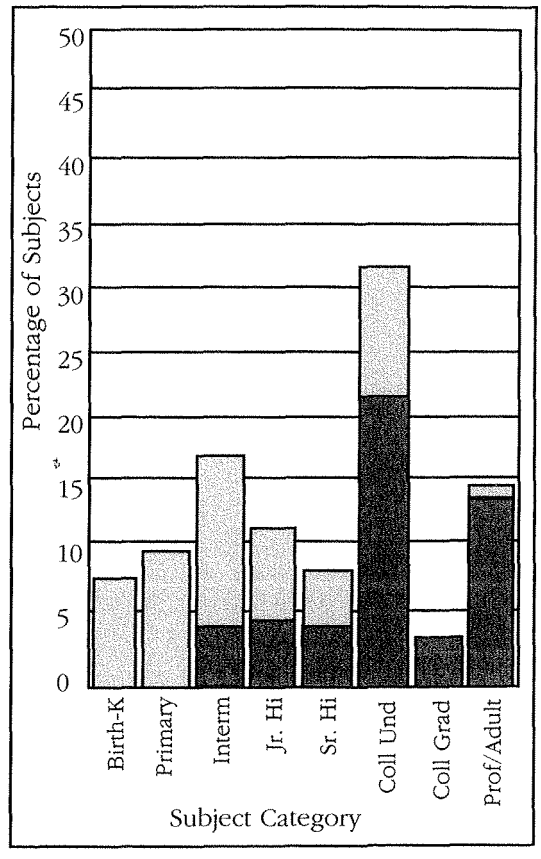


Figure 2. Percentage of Subjects by Age Category and Select/Nonselect Status, 1971-1980

studies. Several studies of college-aged students simply described their subjects as "college music majors" or "nonmusic majors." In these cases, subjects were categorized as College-Undergraduate, unless specific reference was made to the sample being comprised of graduate students. It is possible that some of the studies, especially those in the earlier periods, categorized as College-Undergraduate also employed graduate students.

Figures 1, 2, and 3 illustrate changes over the three decades in several of the subject categories. The percentage of research studies employing Birth-to-Kindergarten subjects more than doubled from the 1961-1970 period (4 percent) to the 1981-90 period (9 percent). Concurrently, research on Junior High subjects decreased from 11 percent in 1971-80 to 5 percent in 1981-90, and research on Senior High subjects showed a similar decline from 10 percent in 1961-70 to 7 percent in 1981-90. The percentage of studies with Primary subjects increased slightly over the three decades, and the percentage of studies with Intermediate subjects decreased slightly. The increase in the College-Graduate category, from 1 percent in 1961-70 to 5 percent in 1981-90, may have been due to researchers' clearer distinctions between undergraduate and graduate subjects in the more recent articles surveyed.

The decrease in the percentage of studies employing secondary students can be accounted for almost entirely by the decline in research on nonselect secondary subjects. The amount of research on musically select subjects in the Junior High and Senior High categories was small but stable over the three decades. However, research on nonselect junior high subjects decreased from 7 percent in 1961-70 to 3 percent in 1981-90, and research on nonselect high school subjects decreased from 5 percent to 2 percent across the same periods.

Taken as a group, the College-Undergraduate and College-Graduate categories in-

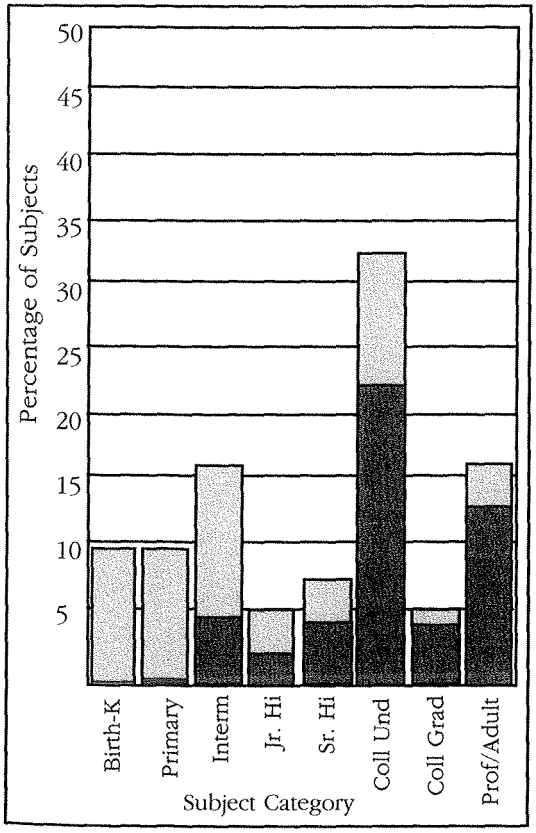


Figure 3. Percentage of Subjects by Age Category and Select/Nonselect Status, 1981-1990

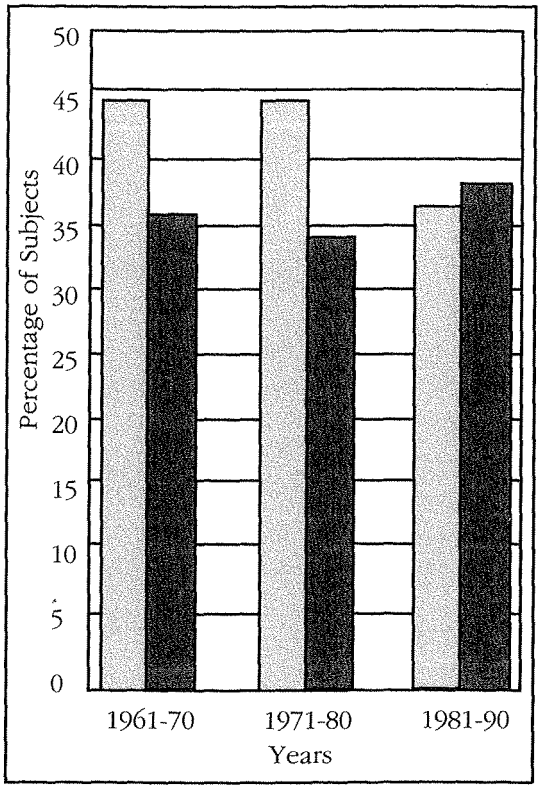


Figure 4. Comparison of Percentage of 1st-12th Grade Subjects with College Subjects, 1961-70, 1971-80, and 1981-90. Key: □ = 1st-12th; ■ = College.

creased slightly from 34 percent in 1971-80 to 38 percent in 1981-90 (see Figure 4). Between the same periods, the combined Primary, Intermediate, Junior High, and Senior High categories decreased from 45 percent to 37 percent. In the 1981-90 period, college students were employed more frequently as subjects in music education research than were elementary and secondary students combined.

Discussion

The two main findings of this study are as follows: (1) college students, primarily musically select students, are the most frequently studied subjects in music education research, and (2) researchers have given increased emphasis to research with young children and concurrent decreased attention to research with secondary students. The first finding is similar to that of Yarbrough (1984), who found that research with college and university students comprised 45.6 percent of the experimental and behavioral articles published in *JRME* between 1953 and 1983.

If published research in a field is representative of the primary questions in the field, then the results of this study would suggest that the most fundamental problems in music education concern undergraduate music majors. Certainly valid and necessary research questions regarding music teacher education and collegiate music learning can be addressed most effectively by studies of college students. However, researchers should ask whether the importance of such questions outweighs questions relating to elementary and secondary music education. Furthermore, the shift away from using precollegiate school-aged subjects may be accelerating. Of the 30 studies surveyed from 1990, 54 percent of the subjects were college undergraduate and graduate students, and only 23 percent of the subjects were from grades 1 - 12.

One particularly important issue for the music education profession is the instructional content of nonperformance music classes at the secondary level (Reimer, 1988; Lehman, 1988). Yet, the nonperforming secondary student population has been all but abandoned by music researchers. In 1981-90, only 3 percent of the subjects were nonselect junior high students and 2 percent were nonselect senior high students.

A number of studies employing college students investigated music perception and cognition. But the results of these studies may not be generalizable to the broader adult population. LeBlanc (1991) points out that college students differ in important ways from young adults who do not attend college, and college students are not necessarily representative of adults, either. Researchers should consider the possibility that subject samples comprised of college students may only represent a population of similar college students.

One uncomfortable and inescapable conjecture is that college students are studied so frequently because they are so readily accessible to the music education professors who publish the vast majority of the research. How else can one explain that in 1981-90 undergraduates were studied four times more frequently than high school students, who are only a few years younger? Music education researchers should consider whether the ease of data collection and availability of subjects should dictate the nature of the research base.

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