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Challenges for music in initial teacher education and in schools: Perspectives from music teacher educators in Ireland and Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This article examines challenges for music in initial teacher education (ITE) and in schools from the perspectives of music teacher educators across two jurisdictions of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Spanning primary and secondary music ITE, 17 music teacher educators from across both jurisdictions met to share practice and concerns. Findings from three focus group discussions revealed concerns regarding musical provision within ITE institutions and on a wider systemic level, acknowledging the diminishing status of music in both policy and curricular discourse, and in schools. In terms of identity, a shared concept of the music teacher educator as both advocate and confidence builder emerged. As music teacher educators predominantly work in isolation within ITE institutions in Ireland and Northern Ireland, participants welcomed the opportunity to share knowledge and experience across jurisdictions. As such, we argue that emerging communities of music teacher education practice are of critical importance to combat the multiplicity of challenges that music teacher educators face at a time of turbulence in the status of music in state education systems.

Keywords

community of practice, initial teacher education, Ireland, music teacher education, Northern Ireland

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Introduction

Music education as a profession arguably faces more questions and challenges in the 21st century than ever before (Buchborn et al., 2022 ; Canham, 2023). Internationally, policy-makers are required to regularly reappraise their education systems under external pressures to improve children's academic performance (European Commission, 2015; Gray, 2010; Sahlberg, 2014). Music teacher educators may find themselves responding to shifting educational policies or increasingly fractured "ecosystems" of music education, such as an increase in various private and community-based models (Kimpton, 2005). Moreover, recent studies have found general devaluing and destabilization of music across statutory curricula at both primary and secondary levels (see Bath et al., 2020; Lilliedahl, 2022). In addition to such local or national policy challenges, contemporary global "turbulence" has led researchers to call for social and political activism within music teacher education and in research (Westerlund et al., 2022). Consequently, studies suggest that music teacher educators need to develop sociologically informed as well as critical and reflexive approaches in the preparation of music teachers for primary and secondary levels (Froehlich, 2007; Georgii-Hemming et al., 2013; Teachout, 2005; Westerlund et al., 2022).

While calls for reflexive approaches are welcome, it has been argued that the paucity of research on the experiences of music teacher educators may be attributed to the multiple demands made on music teacher educators in finding time to engage in reflective dialogue or to conduct collaborative research (Kastner et al., 2019; Pellegrino et al., 2018). Research on general teacher education highlights the benefits a community of practice can have in combatting the isolating nature of the profession (Patton & Parker, 2017), while a study within English, Irish, and Scottish educational contexts (Czerniawski et al., 2018) found multiple benefits in dialogue, knowledge exchange, and collaboration within and across jurisdictions. Calls have also been made in the field of music teacher education for professional learning communities to combat isolation (Sindberg, 2011, 2016) and to promote dialogue especially in "turbulent times" for music education (Pellegrino et al., 2018).

Building on this research and the changing landscape of music education, we contribute empirical findings from the second phase of a cross-border study that investigated music in initial teacher education (ITE) from music teacher educators across the sovereign state/Republic of Ireland (RoI) and Northern Ireland (NI), which is part of the United Kingdom. The project was initially informed by a comparative music education (CME) perspective in response to the absence of collaborative and comparative music education studies on the island of Ireland (O'Flynn et al., 2022). More critically, we observed the lack of a professional network for dialogue wherein music teacher educators would have opportunities to discuss their experiences—especially those employed as sole disciplinary experts in their respective institutions. Accordingly, and cognizant of international and national educational policy contexts and literature on the benefits of value creation in social learning spaces (Wenger-Traynor & Wenger-Traynor, 2020), we identified the need to foster partnerships and dialogue with practicing music teacher educators in NI and the RoI. In the sections that follow, we outline the international literature on music teacher education across primary and secondary education contexts, set out our methodological approach, present the main findings from the study, and conclude with implications and recommendations for practice.

Literature on music teacher education

The education and training of primary school teachers to deliver music curricula have been a recurring concern of music teacher educators across the globe, with research studies often

focusing on the perceived lack of subject knowledge on the part of generalist practitioners (Byo, 1999; Russell-Bowie, 2009; Temmerman, 1997; Wiggins & Wiggins, 2008). Several international studies reveal the challenges posed by suboptimal provision regarding time and engagement for music courses within ITE (Hallam et al., 2009; Hennessy, 2000; Holden & Button, 2006), as well as a general lack of confidence among generalist primary teachers to teach music as part of the regular curriculum (De Vries, 2013; Seddon & Biasutti, 2008).

The international literature on ITE music in secondary schools further reveals conflicting professional demands and beliefs on the part of student teachers and recently qualified teachers (Ballantyne & Mills, 2008; Ballantyne & Packer, 2004; Hargreaves et al., 2007; Mills & Ballantyne, 2016). Critical issues include the ever-changing cultural and social contexts that influence teachers', student teachers', and school pupils' musical values (Bates, 2012; Green, 2002; Isbell, 2007). Related to these, a range of studies have explored models of professional development for secondary music teachers, taking into consideration pedagogical issues and those relating to the subject knowledge, skills, and dispositions of future music practitioners (e.g., Abramo & Reynolds, 2015; Ballantyne et al., 2009; Georgii-Hemming et al., 2013; Wiggins, 2007).

Over the past two decades, some music teacher educators in the RoI have carried out practice-based research involving their own pre-service student teachers. Examples based on Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) providing music ITE for the primary sector include research by both Flynn (2008) and Kenny (2014) on pre-service student teachers' engagement with group composition; research by Kenny (2017) exploring student teachers' views of the music curriculum for primary schools; O'Flynn's (2002) case study of student teacher's engagement with "Listening and Engaging" as envisioned under the Primary School Curriculum of 1999; and an evaluation of how student teachers applied perceptions of multicultural music(s) to group composition projects (O'Flynn, 2008).

The aforementioned projects in the RoI context focus on music curriculum content and method within self-contained ITE settings. To date, however, there has been no research carried out by, and with music teacher educators that appraises the relationships between music in ITE courses and what happens in schools, such as in a study by Abrahams (2009) that revealed a considerable disparity between the "methods" class offered at a US-based institution and students' teaching practice experiences in schools. Relatedly, studies of music ITE in the RoI and NI have not yet addressed the various challenges facing school music in the 21st century (Clements, 2010; Kaschub & Smith, 2014) and more broad-based international concerns about the future status of music as a curriculum subject, as reflected in recent articles by Bath et al. (2020) and McPhail and McNeill (2019). Thus, we observe that while there is by now a significant corpus of peer-reviewed studies relating to music ITE practice, various issues regarding primary and secondary curricula, and the experiences and perspectives of student teachers, there is a paucity of research that draws from the views of music teacher educators across jurisdictions or that considers the relationships between this sector and various levels of statutory provision—including policy directions and debates that critically concern the status of music as a school subject. Our study seeks to address this gap.

Teacher education in Ireland and Northern Ireland—Context and literature

While geographically the RoI and NI are close neighbors and the education systems have much in common, politically, socially, and culturally, there are unique differences that influence the structures of educational institutions. Particularly in NI, a system of religious denominational segregation exists in schools, which impacts higher education and has implications for those

entering the teaching profession. In both the RoI and NI, teaching qualifications at primary and secondary levels can be obtained at universities and colleges of teacher education, of which there are 22 in the RoI and 4 in NI. Across both jurisdictions, teacher education is undertaken as either a consecutive or concurrent degree, with the former being most common for secondary teachers.

In NI, the education system continues to be as divided as it has been since the partition of the island of Ireland in 1921. What Bagley (2019) refers to as "religious ethno-national identities" among the population is evident in segregated schooling and is reproduced socially in local communities. This is explored in depth in a study by Odena and Scharf (2022) on music teachers' engagement with the 2007 statutory music curriculum and its potential to promote cross-cultural understanding and collaboration. Semi-structured interviews with practicing teachers in that study suggest a need "to ensure the existence of a wider shared purpose across the NI teaching profession" (Odena & Scharf, 2022, p. 483). It can be argued, therefore, that competing articulations and perceptions of identity can be reinforced through institutional structures underpinning educational pathways for children.

Another distinctive feature of the education system in NI has been the retention of academic selection at age 11, when pupils transfer from primary to secondary schools. Children who pass a specific examination focusing solely on literacy and numeracy may secure a place in a selective grammar school, and this academically selective and religiously segregated system of education is serviced by ITE in NI (Bagley, 2019). Although academic selection is non-statutory, the current procedure has had a considerable impact on curriculum delivery, with teachers at Key Stage 2 (KS2) (ages 7–11) spending more time on this at the expense of other subjects in the curriculum (Department of Education for Northern Ireland [DENI], 2016). Accounts of the marginalization of music in favor of "core" subjects have also been documented in England (Daubney et al., 2019; Devaney & Nenadic, 2021), suggesting that changes in the United Kingdom have had a significant impact on music as a subject within schools and in teacher education.

Many years before these policy shifts and in the context of teacher education in NI, Leitch (2008) argued for a strengthening of dialogue between researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners in teacher education to build communities of practice, to share research, and to inform policy. Our study responds to this by providing an original discipline-specific study of teacher educators (see Kosnik et al., 2015), by investigating the multifaceted, challenging, and complex contexts of music education from the perspective of music teacher educators. We posed the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What kinds of challenges are experienced by music teacher educators in ITE in the RoI and NI?

Research Question 2: How do music teacher educators describe their experiences of values and attitudes to music in ITE and in schools?

Methodological approach

The project first sought to build relationships by bringing music teacher educators together from two different jurisdictions to share practice and concerns. Viewing this group as a potential community of practice (Wenger, 1998) drawn from a range of ITE institutions, program offerings, and contexts, the methodological approach centered on bringing music teacher

educators together at a cross-border symposium to foster dialogue, shared purpose, identity, and meaning. For Wenger (1998), meaning is "a way of talking about our changing ability—individually and collectively—to experience our life and the worlds as meaningful" (p. 5). To capture the dynamic of this meaning-making process, the project team adopted an interpretivist approach that sought to obtain qualitative data through focus group discussions (Creswell, 2007). More importantly, rather than individual interviews, focus group discussions were viewed as an enabling process for music teacher educators to meet and share practice and ideas, as well as peer dialogue (Gibbs, 2017, p. 190) around challenges and concerns in music ITE and in schools.

The study adhered to best practices in research integrity and ethical guidelines for research as outlined by the British Educational Research Association (2014). Ethical approval was obtained by the Principal Investigator's (PI) institutional ethics committee in October 2017. Participants were contacted individually with an invitation explaining the purpose of the research, the commitment involved, how their data would be used, and how findings would be reported. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the research at any point. Safeguards relating to anonymity were guaranteed and participants were assured that names of persons, HEIs and/or schools, and any potential identifiers attributed to the focus groups would be anonymized. Consequently, quotes from focus groups are attributed according to participant and group numbers (e.g., P1, Focus Group 3).

Focus group sampling and discussions

As we estimated that there would be a small population from which to draw our sample, the research team adopted a purposive sampling strategy, collating a list of full-time music teacher educators as possible participants for the study. However, we were also aware that increasing casualization of staffing in higher education has led to the employment of many part-time staff on music ITE programs; therefore, it was difficult to determine how many music teacher educators were involved, particularly in university consecutive programs. While it was impossible to conclusively determine a whole population from which to draw our sample, we contacted 25 participants who we knew were involved in music ITE via email, in addition to Heads of School within institutions to enable us to make contact with part-time staff. Seventeen participants agreed to take part in the study, the majority of whom were working full-time in music ITE. Three focus group discussions took place (two during the Autumn of 2017 and one in Spring of 2018). Each focus group was chaired by one project partner and observed by another (see Table 1), and recorded for the purposes of transcription and analysis. In stressing the dialogic aims of the project, each focus group had mixed representation from North and South, as well as experience and expertise in primary or secondary ITE. This further enabled the exploration of common and divergent issues in both phases of schooling, reflecting the continuum of music education across the respective statutory curricula.

Following independent transcription of the focus group discussions, we coded and analyzed the data separately and then met to discuss emergent themes relating to policy and ITE contexts. As collaborative researchers working remotely across different jurisdictions and educational contexts, we each reviewed the focus group transcripts for accuracy and independently analyzed all data. Data analysis was an iterative process in which the research team identified key themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which, in turn, were contextualized further according to jurisdiction. Analyst triangulation occurred when we analyzed the same documents and findings and compared quotations and codes to arrive at consensus on themes.

Table 1. Focus Group Schedule.

Focus group 1 ($n = 6$) participants Dundalk	Author 2 moderator	Author 4 observer and notes
Focus group 2 ($n = 5$) participants Dundalk	Author 1 moderator	Author 3 observer and notes
Focus group 3 ($n = 6$) participants Dublin	Author 3 moderator	Author 1 observer and notes

Findings

Participants were asked questions about their practice as teacher educators, their experiences of recent policy changes, and the changing landscape of music provision within primary and secondary ITE. Two interrelated themes emerged: first, in relation to a perceived devaluing of music within ITE course provision and in schools, and second, constantly having to circumvent and combat these challenges through advocacy efforts. These efforts were articulated for the first time for many of the participants, affording shared empathy and mutual understanding wherein the participants identified themselves as advocates for music and confidence builders for pre-service teachers.

Devaluing of music in ITE and in schools

A central theme across the data was a perceived devaluing of music in ITE and in schools. This manifested in the first instance in discussions around curriculum content and the place of music and its perceived importance vis-à-vis contact time and number of modules. For example, core modules differ across HEI providers regarding student numbers per class and location of modules within programs. However, similar themes emerged in relation to the challenges associated with not having sufficient contact time with students. Many participants discussed inadequate staffing levels; the low number of modules and credits allocated to music education within the context of teacher education courses; and their collective experiences of trying to balance musical knowledge and skills and pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987). All three focus groups discussed the many demands made on students with regard to all curricular subjects at primary level, with insufficient time allocated to core music education.

All participants spoke passionately about music education and how attitudes to and values toward the subject were not mirrored in their respective policy or practice contexts. For example, one participant raised the proportion of credit weighting[1] on modular provision on primary ITE programs in the RoI and how this curricular offering was perceived as tokenistic and devaluing the subject within a teacher education program:

> In my institution, we are talking credits for music over the course of the degree, so three out of 240 credits. That to me speaks volumes around validation. (P6, Focus Group 3)

From this comment, it could be argued that such a low number of credits for music as part of an undergraduate degree renders music as a subject almost inconsequential. Furthermore, participants agreed that ITE students could devalue music as a subject when contrasted with subjects with much higher credit weightings and, by association, higher stakes assessment.

All participants shared similar concerns at having insufficient contact time with students to teach musical and pedagogical content, knowledge, and skills. In some primary ITE courses in the RoI and NI, music is a component within arts education modules and therefore shares time and resources with other subject areas such as visual art and drama. Consequently, one

participant expressed concerns around trying to achieve multiple aims in prioritizing music within arts education with insufficient resources and/or time:

> There's always a fear with the word interdisciplinary or arts integration . . . that what is negated . . . there's people trying to grasp onto what they think is important . . . (P8, Focus Group 1)

Attitudes to music education and associated minimal contact time were conveyed by participants as inherently devaluing music's importance and the necessary time required for students to become comfortable with teaching music and musical knowledge. Participants in Focus Group 1 shared the pressure they felt to continuously adapt their pedagogical approaches on Bachelor of Education (BEd) primary courses for non-specialist students. One participant explained the concerted energy placed on building relationships and rapport with students and in designing accessible and familiar content that students could identify with:

> It is about trying to connect with students coming into the BEd with all sorts of different experiences . . . trying to connect the things they will need in order to teach with things they already feel confident and familiar with. (P9, Focus Group 1)

The status of music and the role of school leadership

Many of the participants noted the time they devoted as teacher educators and in teaching preservice music teachers (primary and secondary) to advocate for music as a subject in schools. School leadership was deemed critical to ensure music was offered and, moreover, valued within school contexts. The following comment on the importance of secondary school leadership illustrates this concern:

> the perceptions of the principals were really dictating whether the status of music was high, was valued or not, and so if there were a few students in the class, the norm would be that principals will not put on a class because they can't afford to . . . (P8, Focus Group 1)

Within the RoI, music at secondary level is an optional subject often competing with other practical options such as art, technology, and technical graphics. Consequently, resources are dependent on student numbers opting for music, and school principals play a critical role in determining whether music is provided or not. This observation resonates with findings by Bath et al. (2020) on the declining place of music in schools in the United Kingdom.

Equally, in primary school contexts, the role of principals' experiences and attitudes to music was noted as key:

> . . . for me the solution is the principal . . . I think the principal is the gatekeeper of everything that goes on in the school. If the teacher realises that music is important . . . some principals don't get that at all. (P5, Focus Group 3)

One NI participant expressed concerns with the increased emphasis on literacy and numeracy and needing to meet inspection and accountability expectations. This in turn has meant that inspectors[2] for music are no longer required:

> Schools are inspected on literacy and numeracy and so Northern Ireland no longer has any subject inspectors. (P10, Focus Group 1)

As iterated earlier and in our previous work (O'Flynn et al., 2022), policy shifts with emphases on "core" subjects—and literacy and numeracy in particular—seem to have had a detrimental effect on arts education in teacher education and in schools. Unintended consequences of these policy shifts have been a devaluing of music as a subject and a sense of rendering it invisible in schools. One participant expressed the challenges of such policy shifts in relation to ITE student recruitment and standards, and their knock-on effects in schools:

> . . . where's the time for the integrity of the subject? And is there even a small chance we might lose [music] literacy? Yeah there is. Is there a small chance you might lose technical expertise? Yeah there is. (P5, Focus Group 3)

The participant continued by noting challenges related to teacher supply and professional expertise, as already documented in the RoI (O'Doherty & Harford, 2018) and in the United Kingdom (Daubney et al., 2019):

> Is there a small chance that our colleagues who graduate in other subjects might be teaching it [music]? Yes there is . . . so we are [at] a point of criticality in secondary schools. . . (P5, Focus Group 3)

The issue of professional qualifications and the reduction of music within schools were collective concerns among the participants, whereby teacher qualifications and expertise within the specialized domain of music education were perceived as critical to the integrity and value of the subject.

Pre-service teacher practice

In both the RoI and NI, "school placement" is the term that refers to pre-service teacher practice carried out in schools for prolonged periods as part of ITE programs under the supervision of ITE professionals and in cooperation with school principals and teachers. Barriers and enablers were noted with regard to school placement across both the RoI and NI jurisdictions. One participant reflected on her belief that primary students may not always observe or experience good-quality music teaching on placement, as this would not be a necessary criterion when selecting settings and allocating students:

> It is possible that a student would go through four years of placement and never observe or teach a music lesson. (P1, Focus Group 3)

In relation to secondary level, participants shared experiences around working as or with subject-specialist assessors and school mentors. In all focus groups, they spoke about the low number of specialist mentors for pre-service music teachers, most of whom tend to be employed on a part-time basis, further limiting their availability. Consequently, for pre-service teachers, music lessons may be observed by other teacher educators from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, with many lacking an understanding of contemporary music-making in classrooms. As a result, participants agreed that students can receive very mixed messages in terms of feedback or receive generic mentoring over subject-specific feedback. One participant explained,

> the issue is their (mentors') understanding of what music is or was in a classroom . . . where students are getting different ideas from . . . they're being told by a geography lecturer, "oh no, there's too much activity, too much noise" and so it all boils down to misunderstandings within the institutions and the arrangements . . . there's just a disconnect between the practical and the theoretical elements. (P8, Focus Group 1)

This comment illustrates misunderstandings of what constitutes school music from the perspectives of non-music specialist mentors, which may be grounded in their prior experience and divergent understandings of pedagogy and classroom management. The domain-specific (Wenger, 1998) nature of music-making requiring the prevalence of some noise and chaos (Green, 2008) is necessary for creative and collaborative music-making, yet may be perceived as unstructured and out-of-control by others. This underscores the need for professional development for school placement mentors so that pre-service teachers of music could be appropriately supported.

Within primary schools, one participant noted a key enabler when partnerships are built on mutual understanding and shared enterprise (Wenger, 1998). In this ITE context, the music teacher educator shared experiences from a project they led wherein secondary pre-service music teachers worked in partnership with cooperating generalist primary teachers over a 10-week period to bridge the generalist–specialist divide. They spoke enthusiastically when sharing how music learning could be supportive and reciprocal:

> they learn a huge amount on placement; the co-operating teachers are fantastic . . . they learn an awful lot from them . . . in the second year, the students go out for ten weeks, they really become part of the school community. (P4, Focus Group 2)

Contrasting with the RoI context, pre-service teachers in secondary schools in NI receive subject-specific mentoring from a designated university tutor and the cooperating music teacher in school. In discussions, it became apparent that the smaller geographical area and fewer providers within NI were perceived as a key enabler for music teacher educators to build relationships with secondary music teachers, and relations were further cemented through connections with alumni. Indeed, across all of the focus group discussions, it was evident that excellent mentoring for pre-service music teachers' practice was deemed a critical factor in building confidence and professionalism in music teaching.

Music teacher educators as advocates and confidence builders

Much of the shared practice and dialogue among participants centered around shared concerns in relation to constantly having to advocate for music as a subject with ITE colleagues, schools, and students. For example, the challenge of building confidence in pre-service teachers to teach music at primary level resonated across all focus groups and across both jurisdictions. Music teacher educators valued participatory pedagogical approaches to music education, frequently citing their tireless encouragement of student efforts and instilling enthusiasm for music as a subject through confidence-building activities. They expressed a strong belief in advocating for innate human musicality (see Welch, 2005) and discussed endeavors to convey this to the students they encountered, as the following example illustrates:

> I still feel my role very much is a case of trying to help students unlock their own musicality. Because I believe that everybody is musical. But they have an attitude, a closed mind to it. And think, well, music is something that I'm never going to teach . . . So it's raising levels of interest and enthusiasm—developing confidence. (P4, Focus Group 3)

Several participants also spoke of pedagogical approaches that strive to raise the profile of music as a valued subject with intrinsic worth and efforts to change prevailing attitudes. Advocacy efforts shared by participants included introducing students to curriculum policy,

generating enthusiasm for music in the primary classroom, unlocking their personal musicality and creativity, and equipping them with ideas and sample activities suitable for use in primary classrooms. Resonating with Hennessy's (2000) study, creating a safe and motivating learning environment for generalist student teachers was deemed a key prerequisite for successful engagement with music:

> . . . a lot of it is confidence building, and trying to present it in ways that doesn't frighten them. (P9, Focus Group 1)

Developing pedagogical skills and confidence within music ITE primary programs was described by participants as something that requires sequential, incremental development of knowledge and skills. One participant noted the difficulty with the timetabling and reduction in the number of modules and lectures across a program, when a skills-based subject requires a "little and often" approach. She said,

> . . . we work in a very sequential way, and through music-doing, we hope that the vast majority will end up recognising where they are musically. (P1, Focus Group 2)

From the findings, it became clear that advocacy efforts exhausted much of the participants' energy, focus, and time in relation to their practice while also featuring as a common shared "enterprise" (Wenger, 1998).

Valuing openness and diversity

Encouraging student teacher traits such as stylistic diversity and "adaptability" emerged as common values among the participants. For example, one NI teacher educator noted a change in students' musical backgrounds where in recent years, the course had been enriched by students from different musical pathways (such as the music industries) with studio-based and popular music experience. This participant's "philosophy" of the course was to develop a student in secondary ITE who could "turn their hand to anything":

> I know I've made progress when I can say to a student, "go play me a chord progression in E major and I want you to improvise a melody over the top of it, and I want you to put the bass part in, and would you play the drum kit please," and they can do that. And those are the skills that I believe they need to be effective practitioners in the classroom. (P9, Focus Group 1)

Nonetheless, as much as the participant advocated for these skills, they noted an apparent contradiction between progressive curricula and culturally entrenched values of music teaching and learning. In their view, the NI curriculum was "forward-thinking," but this in turn raised concerns about how student teachers would "interpret" or enact it, noting the powerful influence of their previous (mainly classical) musical background (see Moore, 2012, 2014), as opposed to the flexibility and lack of prescription in the curriculum requirements. The participant stated that throughout the NI curriculum, "relevance and enjoyment" were present in the statutory requirements, and, by implication, that required him to "shift the values and make them more eclectic" so that students could deliver musical activities that were stylistically diverse and meaningful to their pupils. A general shift in the student profile alongside openness to new approaches to music teacher education also resonated in the other focus groups.

Discussion

The dialogic nature of the focus groups enabled some articulation of challenges, attitudes, and values; consequently, music teacher educators in this study began to establish a "shared discourse" (Wenger, 1998, p. 26) reflecting perspectives of ITE music across the island of Ireland. All participants expressed concerns relating to provision for music within school curricula, time allocation for music ITE courses, and in building pre-service teachers' confidence to teach music. From the findings, it was evident that external attitudes to music in education were influenced by a number of factors such as statutory policy imperatives, institutional priorities, different leadership styles within schools, and various assumptions about musical knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987). Participants expressed a constant need to advocate for music education in ITE and to negotiate time for subject-specific content and pedagogy within teacher education modules and programs.

The findings also revealed resilience and generosity among music ITE professionals, insofar as most participants engaged in advocacy and additional practices to maximize student teacher engagement and confidence in music, despite a perceived diminishing status for the area. However, as these often take place in extracurricular contexts, they can contribute to fatigue and can further delimit professional collaboration, including time for research and social and political activism (Westerlund et al., 2022).

The participants discovered that they shared many concerns and strategies to cope with professional challenges. By coming together as a professional community, they were empowered to reflect further on the potential agency of music teacher educators across jurisdictions and across different music ITE sectors. To develop a sustainable community of practice, however, these relationships need to be supported with continuous engagement. Moreover, findings suggested that heightened sociological awareness of prevailing structures and activist efforts require increased collaboration, advocacy, and dialogue with other educational stakeholders in the educational systems concerned.

Although the focus group data did not explicitly refer to issues of isolation on the part of participants—the majority of whom operate as the only full-time music ITE lecturers in their respective institutions—a consistent observation made during informal conversations among the three focus groups was an appreciation of the opportunity to meet their peers socially and, in many cases, for the very first time. This is consistent with findings made more generally with respect to teacher education (Czerniawski et al., 2018) and arts education (Bautista et al., 2021), and further reinforces our argument that maintaining a specialized cross-border and cross-sectoral (primary and post-primary) professional learning community ultimately benefits those directly involved in the field, as well as impacting positively on policy direction and implementation (Pellegrino et al., 2018).

Conclusion

The music in ITE project was carried out against a backdrop of increasing turbulence, not only for landscapes of music ITE in the RoI, NI, and internationally, but specifically in the aftermath of the United Kingdom's 2016 Brexit referendum and its geopolitical impacts for both jurisdictions. Despite these political challenges, the project facilitated the establishment of a cross-border and cross-sectoral network of music teacher educators in a spirit of collaboration.

This study represents the first empirical investigation of music ITE across Ireland and Northern Ireland. The research uniquely presents insights into challenges in music ITE from the perspectives of music teacher educators across two jurisdictions. A substantial proportion

of full-time music teacher educators engaged in the study, thereby supporting our argument for specialized communities of practice.

Although the project partners did not set out deliberately to form a community of practice, we succeeded in forging links and new networks with the professional community of teacher educators. In this way, the project provided novel opportunities for music teacher educators in the RoI and NI to voice their experiences and concerns, which our findings show resonated across both jurisdictions and across primary and secondary sectors. With few opportunities to interact with other music teacher educators, we argue that sustained communities of practice are needed to diminish feelings of isolation and to promote research and dialogue.

While our findings are not generalizable, it is possible that they may resonate with similar studies in other jurisdictions. Further research could include comparative studies of challenges for music education across jurisdictions such as Ireland and the United Kingdom. These could consider the potential impact of music teacher educator professional learning communities in ameliorating teacher isolation. Other possibilities for shared practice and inquiry could include dedicated platforms and/or meetings within national and international music education scholarly societies and/or organizations. Further research might also examine quantitative data on the actual provision and uptake of music as a subject in schools in the RoI and NI, similar to the work conducted in the United Kingdom by Daubney et al. (2019).

We believe that our study is the first to capture the views and insights of music teacher educators across two cross-border jurisdictions and to involve personnel from both primary and secondary ITE sectors. It advances an original approach for ITE studies in Irish, UK, and international contexts by bringing together a group of music teacher educators to reflect and conduct research on practice and to discuss issues of common concern. In sum, we argue that bringing together and finding a collective voice for music teacher educators is increasingly important at a time when the professional values and artistic concerns of such communities of practice are at variance with prevailing policy directions, which continue to act to destabilize the hard-fought status of music education across many parts of the globe.

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Notes

1. Under the European Union's "Bologna Declaration" (1999) and the eventual constitution of the European Higher Education Area in 2010, higher education (HE) institutions across the continent aligned with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). This necessitated a strict modular system that would enable transfer of and recognition of ECTS (credits) from institution to institution. A negative effect for music initial teacher education (ITE) was a tendency toward the reduction of available hours within undergraduate and postgraduate programs (see, for example, Flynn and O'Flynn, 2019, p. 79).
2. Both the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and Northern Ireland (NI) have a statutory inspectorate made up of a group of education professionals who, among other roles, support and evaluate curriculum delivery in primary and secondary schools. Historically, their number has included subject specialists

for specific areas of post-primary education, including dedicated music inspectors.

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