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The Role of Pop Music and Pop Singers in the Construction of a Singer's Identity in Three Early Adolescent Females

By Amy Clements-Cortes

*The **Canadian Music Educator/ Musicien éducateur au Canada** has recently established 'Peer Review Corner' as a regular feature of our journal. Authors wishing to have articles submitted to a panel for review may send them to Dr. Lee Willingham [lwilllingham@wlu.ca] with that request. This initiative within our own publication fills a void for Canadian scholars who wish to submit their writing to peer juries, and disseminate it to a Canadian audience. If you wish to serve as a reviewer, please contact Dr. Willingham.*

The prevalence of music in today's society is enormous. Not only do we actively choose to listen to music by turning on the radio, or listening to a favourite CD, but we are exposed to music in many public places including shopping malls, waiting rooms, restaurants, etcetera. Willis (1990) acknowledges that popular music is always listened to within specific social settings and locations, and operates as a background to a variety of activities ranging from dancing in clubs, to surviving the workday, to defeating boredom in the home.

According to Roberts and Christenson (2001) pre-adolescents (11-14) and adolescents (15-18) listen to music between three and four hours a day; and by grade 11, girls typically listen to 30 minutes more music a day than boys. The music industry is keenly aware of this fact, and produces and markets music specifically to this audience. "Teen pop" is a thriving form of music that is defined by Vannini and Myers (2002) as the genre of music that is the most popular with teenage audiences, and is produced, targeted, and consumed by both pre-adolescents and adolescents. It is not a stretch then to see that extended exposure to, and consumption of, music will have an impact and influence on adolescents.

Regardless of the role of popular culture in shaping our identities, consumer culture and cultural activities such as buying clothes, and selecting the food we eat are identity resources pointing to particular lifestyle choices a person makes. Essentially, identity and consumption have become linked together. Fisher (2002) acknowledges that music, movies, and fashion serve as key informants of identity in today's society, and "Even at the origin of modern western capitalism, identity and status were contested and re-made through consumption choices" (p. 18). He goes on to explain that traditionally what we consumed was determined by our identity; however in today's culture of consumerism, the pattern has become reversed, and consumption determines and defines our identity. Stryker and Burke (2000) (identity theorists), argue that an individual consists of a group of identities, each of which is based on occupying a particular role.

According to Roe (1999), since the 1950's music has played an essential role in the process of identity construction in youth. Music and its texts represent a scheme of significance that consumers may use to delineate their self-concepts as well as personal and social identities. Adolescents are a consumer group that may be particularly influenced by pop music and are apt to appropriate the texts of this music, and the meanings they derive from it, to define themselves. Musicians and aspiring musicians, specifically singers, are likely to be even more influenced or affected in different ways than non-musicians by the music they choose to sing, perform, and study, as well as by their favourite singers, and the images and lifestyles projected by those singers.

This paper seeks to explore how early adolescent female singers use popular music, both the songs and images of their favourite singers, to construct their identities as "musical performers or singers." This theme will be explored by drawing on the literature in the area and personal conversations with three twelve-year-old female vocal students. For the purposes of this paper, Levy-Warren's (1996) classification of early adolescence as those

persons aged 10-14 will be employed. (The real names of the students quoted in this paper have been changed. Verbal permission to discuss issues of popular music and identity was granted by the students themselves, and written consent was obtained from a parental guardian for each of the girls.)

Early Adolescence

Early adolescence is marked by: the onset of puberty, development of new cognitive skills such as abstract thinking and seeing things as relative rather than absolute, continued egocentrism, and the desire to gain social approval. Adolescence is a time of establishing an identity, autonomy, and intimacy, as well as becoming comfortable with one's sexuality and achievement (Huebner, 2000). The early adolescent's self-concept may be challenged by the changes his/her body is making, and females are especially susceptible to pressure to conform to gender stereotypes.

Hamilton and Masecar (1997) discuss the tasks of early adolescence as a time for: withdrawing from parents; achieving emotional independence; being accepted by peers; biological maturity; identity formation; and, development of self-esteem and independence.

Psychologically, the self-focus that adolescents have at this time causes them to worry what others think about them. Greater importance is given to peer relationships as adolescents begin the process of establishing their own identities as separate from their parents and families. There can be increased conflict between parents, and peer relationships may involve the development of cliques and become based on sharing of values and confidences. Some adolescents begin dating, and romantic crushes are common (Ozretich & Bowman, 2001).

Adolescents have complex relationships with popular culture and there are many messages that they receive and interpret from such engagements during their process of negotiating the developmental tasks. Many of these messages address issues that are at the forefront for them during early adolescence such as romance, sexuality, and independence. How teens go about interpreting these discourses plays a role in how they construct their identities as they learn about their sense of place in the world, and in the many roles that they hold.

Identity

There are numerous definitions of identity and many psychologists have studied identity formation at great length. One of the most well-known theories of personal identity was developed by Erikson (1974) (as cited in Head, 1997), who described identity as simultaneous sameness and differences. Identity has also been described as "The distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity" (American Heritage, 2000). Huntemann and Morgan (2001) acknowledge that "Identity is fluid, partly situational, and thus constantly under construction, negotiation, and modification" (p. 311). The process of constructing one's identity is central in adolescence, and therefore this time period poses an interesting point not only to look at how identity unfolds, but also how the identity of specific roles that a person holds are formed. Erickson (1968) elucidates adolescence is a phase of exploratory self-analysis and self-evaluation, which brings about the development of an integrative self or identity. According to Allison and Schultz (2001) there has been a lack of attention to identity development in early adolescence as the substantial body of knowledge established has focused on older adolescents and college-age persons.

Literature

There is a growing body of literature that began in the 1950's that looks at how youth engage with and consume music, and how this impacts their identities. The following four studies focused on adolescent females and their engagements with popular music and provide a framework for my group discussion with the three adolescents. Frith (1978) maintains that boys and girls build their identities differently from their engagements with music icons, therefore supporting a need to study males and females separately.

Tracy (2001) explored how pre-teen urban elementary school girls' engagement with popular music impacted their identity construction and how their interactions and interpretations of music were entrenched in their daily lives. She found that when the girls talked about popular music, and sang and danced in the lunchroom and playground, they expressed pleasure but also showed their racial, gender, and age-related identities. Essentially Tracy found that these girls constructed a sense of self through their performances which was dependent on contextual conditions, the girls' understandings of socio-cultural relationships, and their interpretation of "what it means to be me."

Jennings (1999) interviewed six teenage girls in an attempt to show how they use their music, in this case by playing musical instruments typically defined as masculine (drums, and electric guitar) to create and communicate their identities. Making music provided these girls with pleasure, self-confidence, and a voice. These girls showed that popular culture continues to present stereotyped messages about femaleness to girls; yet through their music they were trying to resist these stereotypes.

Lowe (2003) conducted two focus groups with groups of five and six early-adolescent middle-class girls, which focused on current "teen pop", and in the end revolved around Britney Spears. The girls had a certain amount of admiration for Britney even though they identified and described her in very negative terms and they were envious of her fame and lifestyle. They recognized that

by grade 11, girls typically listen to 30 minutes more music a day than boys

Britney used her body image to sell her CDs, and they applauded her ability to manipulate men and get what she wanted. These girls were articulate about condemning patriarchal views and seemed aware of the media texts and the messages that they received from them. They had strong feminine convictions, but were still able to consume pop music that did not go along with the beliefs they articulated.

O'Neill (2002) interviewed four female musicians aged 17 and 18 on how they construct an identity around music. One student saw music as a private experience; another saw being a musician as both personal and social; the third expressed confusion over being rejected and then validated by adjudicators of a musical performance; and the fourth said that musical identity was core to her being.

These smaller studies have produced rich descriptive results; however, there is very little that can be extrapolated to the population of "preteen girls" with such small sample sizes. Similarly, there are problems generalizing results from a group of middle-class or urban subjects to the whole population, and different ethnic groups will experience music, pop culture, and identity-formation differently. Some studies have focused on various ethnic groups and genres of music (St. Lawrence & Joyner, 1991; Hansen & Hansen, 1991; Arnett, 1991; Frith, 1996; Brown & Schulze, 1990; Zillmann et al., 1995). For example, there may be a tendency towards "subversive" listening to or purchasing of certain kinds of music if it is not permitted in the home. That being said, these studies do form a basis for future research and provide useful information for pedagogical consideration especially in designing musical programs in the school system for this age group.

Interviews

The information from the three girls was obtained in a group interview. "Jessica", "Sarah" and "Sydney" are each twelve years of age, and are private voice students of the author. The girls know each other from their participation in recitals at the music studio over the past few years. Jessica has been studying voice and performing on stage since she was seven; Sarah has been taking vocal lessons and performing since she was eight; and Sydney has been taking voice lessons and performing for two years.

The group conversation focused on how each of the girls sees and portrays themselves as singers and performers and their engagements with music, pop music, and pop icons. The conversation was open and built from comments received from each of the girls. Some of the questions that guided the interview were: How do the girls experience and use popular music? and What influence does the text of music have on them, and their choice to sing or not to sing it? (Please note this was not a formal research study. The group conversation was tape-recorded and transcribed by the author. Sentences were coded, broken down into points where necessary and analyzed. Several quotes from the girls have been included below and a few of the comments were clarified individually with the girls.)

In the discussion with these three early adolescents, it should be noted that it is not feasible to focus solely on how popular music and the images of pop stars contribute to their identity formation as singers. Peers, parents, and the community also contribute to their identity formations and are not easily separated out of the discussion.

The following are the themes that arose out of the group conversation and individual follow up with each of the girls: the need to continually evolve; authenticity; multi-threat (i.e. multiple talents such as singing, song-writing, and dancing); independence; seeking admiration and being glamorous; career women; beauty: the body is the voice; popularity and power. Details of the discussions are provided below.

Space to Try On a New Identity, and the Need to Continually Evolve

What emerged from the three girls was that performing as singers on stage gave them an opportunity to "try on" new identities, or to experiment with different parts of their personalities. They felt they could portray themselves as different people on stage, and essentially change their identity as performers depending on what they were singing and for whom. Their comments appeared to indicate that they saw their "singer" identities as separate from their identities as regular twelve-year-old girls. As singers they described feeling powerful on stage, but that power did not necessarily translate to their everyday lives. Sarah said, *"On stage I feel so important and like everyone is watching me, but normally I just blend in with everyone else, no-one really notices me, or listens to me all that much"*.

In the group conversation the girls arrived at the conclusion themselves that some of the singers they talked about (Kelly Clarkson, Taylor Swift, and Avril Lavigne) were probably very different people on stage than off, and they too wanted to be able to have this ability to create, re-create, and have a stage persona. Sarah said, *"It's fun to pretend to be someone else"*. Sydney's comments made it evident that she recognized that it was important for singers to change who they are from time to time or the audience gets bored.

Through these realizations which can be extrapolated to their engagements with "pop stars", the adolescents learned that identity is not purely a process of discovering oneself, but also a process of creating oneself, and as singers they wanted to change their images and identities frequently to maintain the audience's

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interest. Further to their realization that one could re-define oneself, the girls appeared to like that this re-defining was playful and spontaneous, and these were characteristics that they wanted to be part of their own personas as singers. Jessica said, *"I really like how I can change how I look on stage depending on what I'm singing, and it's like important to do that so that your look goes along with the song"*.

Authenticity

The three girls felt they could relate to their favourite singers and the songs that these artists performed, and they imagined personal relationships with their icons. The fact that they felt like the texts of the songs spoke to them was important, and they wanted others to feel that way about the songs they sang. Longhurst (1995) found that the identity of a fan may be designed by their affect for a particular musical personality or type of music. These girls know all the words to their favourite songs and can tell you a multitude of facts about their favourite singers.

Jessica said, *"They sing about things that I've been through, and when I am on stage I want others to um… well kinda think that I sing about things that matter to them too?"* As singers these girls wanted to be seen as having something important to contribute to their audience, which they realized through their own consumption of popular music. Perhaps this desire for their audiences to feel a connection with them spoke to their need to fit in and be accepted by their peers, which of course is one of the developmental tasks of adolescence that Hamilton and Masecar (1997) outline.

Essentially, they spoke about what could be described as an "authenticity" of their favourite singers' performances, and they too expressed a desire to display this authenticity to their audiences, and be seen as genuine. Sarah said, *"Well remember when Ashlee Simpson got caught for lip-singing, like I lost all respect for her. I would just die if that happened to me"*. Jessica said, *"I like Gwen Stefani because she seems to really care about her fans and she is really nice in interviews. That's how I want others to think of me"*.

It seems that that the girls learned that in order to be considered a favourite performer, or even a legitimate performer, an artist must be perceived as authentic, both in the lyrics of their music and in their public appearances, and in constructing their own identities as singers they too wanted to display authenticity and genuineness in order that they along with their music would be viewed favourably, and as making a valuable contribution to the music scene.

Multi-Threat

The girls spoke at length about how they admired singers who wrote and sang their own songs, choreographed, danced, played instruments, acted, and produced. They saw value in being more

than just a singer and these additional abilities made the singer more legitimate as a performer, and someone who would be taken seriously as a true musician or entertainer. They learned this through their own engagements with popular music and also by their peers' and others' engagements. Jessica said, *"That's totally why I started guitar lessons, like its kinda cool to play, and I want people to think that I am a serious musician. My Mom wanted me to take piano lessons, but guitar is way cooler"*.

Through this recognition they came to understand that substance and legitimacy can be constructed to some degree, and that by the singers' representations of themselves as more than just singers they potentially appealed further to their audiences and built up their potential for consumption. As part of their identity construction as singers, these girls wanted to have several areas in which they were talented or had skills, such as being able to write music or act in addition to singing. In essence, they wanted to be known as "multi-threats" and saw this as an integral part of their identities as singers. They recognized that being seen in this light created more respect for them as entertainers and would potentially contribute to them becoming or remaining successful for longer.

Independence

The majority of the musical texts that the girls spoke about, and the songs they wanted to sing themselves, dealt with intimate relationships, and portrayed the image of girls being independent. The texts appear to have meaning for them because what they articulate speaks to their lived experiences and understandings of social expectations. (E.g.: *Beautiful* by Christina Aguilera; and *Because of You* by Kelly Clarkson).

Sydney, Sarah, and Jessica wanted their audiences to see them as independent and strong females and incorporated these aspects into their singer identities. Their desire to portray themselves as independent coincides with Schave and Schave (1989) who claim early adolescents struggle "…for increased independence and sense of psychological separateness from their parents" (p. 3).

In particular the song *Don't Tell Me* written by Avril Lavigne and Evan Taubenfeld (2004), and sung by Avril Lavigne was one that appeared to resonate with each of the girls, and one that was discussed in detail during the group conversation.

The text of this song along with others that were discussed demonstrate that women have power by: resisting male dominance; negotiating the terms of an intimate relationship; leaving relationships that were not satisfying to them; being assertive; and, raising their levels of self-esteem.

Sydney said, *"I really like Avril Lavigne because she isn't a sell-out.*

> the adolescents learned that identity is not purely a process of discovering oneself, but also a process of creating oneself

She sings about what's important to her and that's how I wanna be too". Jessica felt *"Avril looks in control, she doesn't let anyone tell her what to do"*.

In addition to the overriding theme of independence and strength, within the category of independence two sub-themes emerged as being incorporated in the girls' identities as singers: being admired and glamorized; and, career-focused.

Seeking admiration and being glamorous.

In creating their identities as performers, the girls wanted their audiences to see that they had the same potential and independent lifestyles as singers like Kelly Clarkson. The allure of these singer's lifestyles, for example, the fact that singers like Kelly travel on the road and are not living at home with their parents, was attractive to them and speaks to their desire to withdraw from their parents and be admired by their peers, much in the way they admired the singers. Another example is Avril Lavigne who began writing her own songs at the age of 12. These girls admired her abilities and wanted to portray similar images to their audiences. Hall and Whannel (1994) maintain that pop stars that girls admire "are not remote stars, but tangible idealizations of the life of the average teenager" (p. 35).

The girls also glamorized the world of famous singers, such as Gwen Stephani from watching her videos, and from watching how she is portrayed in the media. Sarah said, *"Gwen has everything. She's pretty, she's loaded, she has a hot husband and she like gets to go to all the best parties and she doesn't even have to work that hard"*. Jessica replied, *"It would be so awesome to be that famous, you get pretty much whatever you want"*.

In shaping their own identities as singers, they wanted to create an allure and lifestyle that was seen by others as glamorous and admired.

Career women.

In constructing their identities as singers the adolescents wanted vocal music to be their career, and to be seen as serious musicians who could successfully navigate careers as singers and performers, independent of men. Sydney stated, *"I want to be a singer. I know not everyone can make it, but maybe I'll try out for like Canadian Idol when I am a little older and see if I make it to the finals"*. Sarah said, *"My dream is to be a famous singer, like Kelly Clarkson, who girls will look up to"*. Jessica said, *"The only thing I want to do is be a singer. Well, I guess I could also act and perform in musicals and stuff like that but I probably wouldn't be famous doing that"*. What was surprising was that even though the girls wanted to be famous singers, and to be known as serious musicians as part of their overall identities, they did see that they could have performing identities separate from their identities

as 12-year-old girls as was discussed earlier.

Interestingly, none of the early adolescents were at a stage yet where they identified that studying music might help them to attain success as musicians, and appeared to have developed that thinking pattern from viewing young singers who had already garnered success without fully understanding the study or amount of work it would take to maintain a successful career. They idealized the worlds of their favourite pop singers.

Beauty: The Body Is The Voice

It materialized for these three girls that their personal identity constructions as singers were closely linked to their physical appearance and body image. This aligns with Brumberg (1997) who acknowledges that girls make their bodies a passionate focus and engage in "body projects" in order to fit into a culturally imposed beauty ideal. Mazzarella and Odom-Pecora (1999) convincingly argue that culture submerges girls with messages that their bodies are their voices, and their identities. Certainly these three girls learned and subsequently held this belief from their engagements with popular culture.

By watching their favourite singers perform in videos and seeing how they are portrayed in the media in magazines and television the girls learned that women who are defined by our culture as "attractive" have prestige and command male attention. They appeared to understand that these performers' success as singers was closely tied to their physical attractiveness (e.g. slim build, long hair, smooth acne-free skin, et cetera) and that this attractiveness was what was of value, not necessarily the fact that the performer was talented or could sing. They too, wanted to portray this attractiveness on stage in order to feel that prestige and power, and spoke about that in the group conversation.

Sarah said, *"At the last recital, do you remember I totally wore that cute hat and you* [referring to Jessica] *wore that t-shirt with the glitter. It's really important to like look the right way"*. Jessica responded by saying, *"You're right 'cause look how we dissed Lady Gaga* "Jessica said, *"And what about Kelly Clarkson, her weight goes up and down"*. They also talked about how many of the songs and CD titles had to do with physical attractiveness.

The girls learned to understand that society tied their worth as singers up in their physical appearance, and therefore they had to make themselves physically attractive and portray a certain image in order to be good and valuable singers. This need to become a singer whom others view as attractive became a central part in their identity construction as performers.

> Interestingly, none of the early adolescents were at a stage yet where they identified that studying music might help them to attain success as musicians

Popularity and Power

By choosing to perform "pop songs" at their semi-annual recitals as opposed to the other genres of music that they also studied (and admitted liking), the girls showed that they liked the empowerment, interest and acceptance they felt they received from the audience as described in their comments, and they recognized that it was important for a singer to please their audience even if it meant not singing something that they liked more because others might not like it. For example, Sarah said *"It seems like I get a lot more attention when I sing pop songs instead of those classical songs we have to learn. Well I guess I actually like some of those songs too, but nobody cares if you sing them on stage, that's why I like to sing the stuff that everyone knows. Like I'll never be famous singing The Water Is Wide, even though I love that song. I don't mind singing those songs at the competitions but everyone's singing stuff like that, and well only older people like my parents and other people's parents are there"*. These comments point to Sarah's desire to construct her identity as a singer as one that conforms to society's expectations of what a pop singer is; and her need to fit in with her peer group and audience by performing the type of music that will resonate with them.

These girls wanted to be identified by others as pop singers because that is by definition what is popular amongst their peers. They were not interested in performing other genres of music at the recitals because they felt that no-one else would like it, and in turn perhaps would not value their performance as much. Jessica said, *"We had like Grand River Idol at our school and half the people that got to the finals couldn't even sing, but they are popular at school and so their friends voted for them and they sang like, what's most popular now. Can you imagine if I sang one of those Italian pieces? I would have been talked about for days!"*

The girls wanted to be popular so that they would be appreciated and realized that popularity was an important part of being a successful performer, and therefore they tried to create themselves in a way that would be most appealing to the majority of potential audience members.

Conclusion

Frith (1981) acknowledged that there is a special relationship between pop music and youth. According to Bennett (2000) music is to be considered "a primary, if not the primary, leisure resource for young people" (p. 34). For those persons studying and pursing music as a career choice, music may have an even greater influence on their identity constructions. Music is very prevalent in the lives of adolescents, and it plays an influential role in identity formation. In particular, for these three girls it played a central role in shaping their identities as singers.

Through the group conversation with these early adolescents it became evident that they recognized the need for performers to continually change their identities. They wanted to been seen as authentic singers with important and valuable messages that spoke to their audiences. They wanted to possess many talents (multi-threat), and be known as independent career women who were: playful; spontaneous; admired; glamorous women who were beautiful and popular; and, powerful and serious musicians.

They learned that on stage they could construct, re-construct, and experiment with their identities, and this experimentation was enhanced by their negotiation of the developmental tasks of early adolescents such as withdrawing from their parents, becoming more independent, and trying to gain the acceptance of their peers.

Surprisingly to this author, the issue of national identity did not come up as a factor in creating an identity as a singer for these three females. Even though several of the singers they had a connection with, and subsequently were influenced by, were Canadian there did not appear to be any identification with or pride in these singers as fellow Canadians. Perhaps this is not a central issue for adolescents of this age group. Additionally, there was no mention of interest in music from their own ethnic cultures.

One area that would have been interesting to spend more time on, or perhaps to focus on in future investigations is that of expression. What specific messages did the girls want to communicate to their audiences? They spoke about sending messages that were seen by others as important, but what would those messages contain? The discussion touched on those issues specifically with reference to independence, but there are additional messages there that were not fully explored due to the time frame of only conducting one group session.

Investigations to consider for the future would be to conduct in-depth individual interviews with early adolescent singers and assess whether or not there are similar themes amongst a larger group. Other studies could follow previous interviewees to see how their identities and interests change later into their teen years. Another investigation might compare singers with other instrumentalists to examine how they form their performing identities, and to see if any similarities exist.

Relevance to Music Educators

This topic raises issues and question for music educators to reflect upon. These include such things as: repertoire selection, and adolescent participation in choirs, bands, ensembles, and other music programs. How can we get more musicians to join our ensembles if they are lacking in numbers? Why are some schools more successful at recruiting for ensembles? Does difficult ensemble recruitment stem from how the ensemble will be perceived by the students' peers, or from the repertoire that has been selected?

> culture submerges girls with messages that their bodies are their voices, and their identities
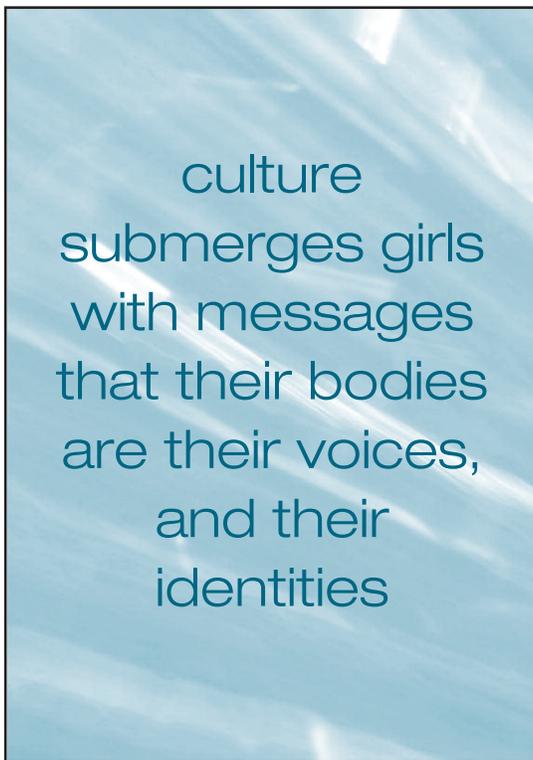
The role of music in identity construction also raises questions about performance venues, performance opportunities, instrument choice, and audience members. In designing course syllabi for the music classroom and for those teachers selecting teaching material for private lessons it is important to reflect and think on how we can encourage the development of the complete musician, via experiences in music history, theory, playing, and performance. It is also fundamental to determine how we may implement programming for students to maximize their independence and allow them opportunities to feel strong and comfortable as "musicians." CME

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