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# Children's Musical Empowerment in Two Composition Task Designs

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate elementary students' creating processes and perspectives through composition.  Two fourth-grade classes took part in this action research, which consisted of creating four compositions—two with acoustic instruments and two with computer software. For each of the two sound sources, the first composition was written with specified constraints and the second with freedom. Research questions included: 1) how do students respond to composition tasks with differing levels of freedom and constraint; and 2) how does composing in different group sizes impact composition? Data included field notes, recordings, student interviews, and response forms.  Major themes included: students benefit from continuous variations of freedom and constraint in task design; autonomous decisions about grouping and leadership can benefit students' processes; and teachers must consider facilitation roles with sensitivity. Results of the study suggest that given time to compose, students can improve in ability to facilitate and participate in compositional processes.

Introduction

Musical composition and other creative endeavors have become increasingly present in general music curricula. Shouldice (2014) reported that 84.2% of Michigan elementary music teachers incorporated composition in their music classrooms. While composition has been included as a national standard in music education since 1994, its practice has been recently re-emphasized as an important element in music learning. Compositional processes are commonly associated with critical thinking, creativity,

analysis, and problem solving, skills highlighted among overarching topics of creating, performing, and responding to music in current Core Arts Standards (2014).

Despite interest among music educators and inclusion in many state standards, compositional practices vary (Shouldice, 2014), as do their inclusion in teachers' enacted curricula. Research about the importance of composition is well documented (Burnard & Younker, 2004; Freund, 2011; Randles, 2013), yet reluctance still occurs about how to implement these processes. This reluctance can be attributed to many factors including limitations of time (Shouldice, 2014), techniques necessary on the part of students (Burnard & Younker, 2004; Major & Cottle, 2010; Shouldice, 2014), and of teachers (Volz, 2005). Additionally, tools such as digital media continue to facilitate new avenues for working in sound (Folkestad, 2011; Ruthmann, 2007), but present challenges for teachers without preparatory experiences. Music teachers may feel confident including composition practices, but may question whether or not they are able to provide helpful feedback or assessment (Hopkins, 2013; Reid, 2002) while honoring students' choices.

Despite these challenges, a compositional curriculum can be successfully implemented even among inexperienced teachers (Kaschub & Smith, 2009). Research and resources have become increasingly available (Kaschub & Smith, 2009; Major & Cottle, 2010), yet teachers may have lingering questions about how best to include composition in their curricula and how it might look and feel when implemented.

The purpose of this research study was to investigate fourth-grade students' creating processes under two different task designs: 1) freedom and constraint, and 2) within two compositional settings that differed in location and sound sources. Research questions included, 1) how do students respond to composition tasks with differing levels

of freedom and constraint; and 2) how does composing in different group sizes impact composition?

Review of Literature

Music composition may take on many forms, including individually and in groups. Whether composing with software or acoustic instruments, students may do so as a collective activity within a social context (Folkestad, 2011). Each member of a group has the potential to contribute to, as well as detract, from one's ownership in a project (Kaschub, 1999). Kaschub (1997) studied composition led by composers in sixth-grade general music classes and a high school choral ensemble and found that group decision-making and the process of revision can be challenging with large groups. Although more students may increase ideas, larger groups necessitate the negotiation of ideas.

At times group size may be dictated by available instruments or technology. Ruthmann (2007) discussed composing with computers as a means to encourage musical thinking for general music students. Although media can dictate group size and the nature of a creative project, it can also provide a different medium for thinking in sound. According to Ruthmann, when students are engaged in this way, ownership over their music may be deeply felt. Ownership, however may be enhanced by smaller groups or individual projects.

While large groups may contribute to diminished feelings of ownership, peer problem solving can also benefit the creative processes. Positive aspects of group composing include modeling techniques and ideas, and collaborative support (Ruthmann, 2007). Additionally, McGillen and McMillan (2005) found that composition benefits

students' motivation and sense of equality, as well as interdependence, ability to share power, and overall sense of cooperation. Kaschub (1999) recommended that opportunities to compose individually and in groups should be balanced for students.

Many researchers have examined the topic of composition task design (Barrett, 2003; Burnard, 1995; DeLorenzo, 1989; Hickey, 2012; Kaschub, 1997, 1999; Smith, 2008). Our study centered on what Barrett (2003) terms *freedoms* and *constraints*, which in our case consisted of task structure with guidelines (constraints) or an absence of guidelines (freedom). Although some researchers indicate that more structured tasks lend themselves to compositional products with increased musicality (Folkestad, 2004; Smith, 2008), others recommend a balance of composing opportunities with freedoms *and* constraints (Barrett, 2003; Kaschub, 1999). According to Hickey (2012) it is necessary for students to experience freedom prior to structure, as it creates a need to learn about structures and techniques that allow one further musical expression. The type of structure is important, and according to Goodkin (2002) a well-designed compositional task includes both boundaries and context.

The ways students respond to freedoms and constraints vary. Students may respond to the project requirements (Burnard, 1995), which may be tied to prior experiences. According to Burnard (1995), students with no formal background may find it easier to approach an open-ended composing task, whereas students taking formal music lessons may benefit from increased structure. Students' perceptions of the task can also affect their ability to solve creative problems, as was the case with DeLorenzo's (1989) study of sixth-grade students.

Others have also discussed teacher role in creative tasks (Berkley, 2001; Deutsch, 2013; Hogg, 1994; Hopkins, 2013; Leung et al., 2009; McGillen & McMillan, 2005; Reid, 2002). Teachers' facilitation of music composition may be an activity with which they lack confidence or experience (Reid, 2002). Teachers who include composition must consider students' skills related to musical generation, realization of creative ideas, and editing processes (Berkley, 2001). Teachers who have inadequate time and experience with composition may in fact, perpetuate a lack of creativity in their music classrooms through such tasks (Hopkins, 2013; Reid, 2002). As Hickey (2012) notes, the seemingly "safest" way for teachers to begin leading composition assignments often involves what she refers to as structured, closed assignments "with very strict parameters" (p. 16). While these types of assignments may lead to feelings of success in that students are able to create something simple and tonal (therefore "good"), opportunities to explore sound and create with imagination are likely limited.

Several authors suggest that teachers must become facilitators so that students might negotiate their own learning (Hogg, 1994; Hopkins, 2013; Leung et al., 2009; McGillen & McMillan, 2005). Willingham (2002) describes the process of becoming a facilitator as a shift in power that allows the student to make decisions. Moreover, a balance must be created between types of support that enable risk taking (Deutsch, 2013) and space for students to feel autonomous (Hogg, 1994). Although finding this balance might be challenging, Willingham (2002) enthuses that sensitive teachers can gain skills in knowing when to scaffold and when to allow students space to struggle or experiment.

Many authors note that adults should be aware of potential for interference and should avoid imposing solutions for what they perceive to be students' musical problems

(Deutsch, 2013; Hogg, 1994; Ruthmann, 2007). Some suggest that with validation of students' musical ideas, they may feel personally invested (DeLorenzo, 1989) and valued as people (Webster, 2002). Validation may be accomplished by questioning students about their processes (Major & Cottle, 2010) and simply listening to what students have to say (Hogg, 1994; Younker, 2000). Teachers' intentions to facilitate composition activities via specific questioning without evaluation promotes students' focus on processes, particularly important when considering that teachers may not personally enjoy students' "tricky" or "unpleasant" musical compositions (Volz, 2005, p. 50).

## Method

As graduate students and general music teachers, we became interested in ways composing might be implemented with children. Prior to this study, we both led composition activities but did so with a degree of teacher direction that we now questioned. We wondered how it would look and feel to allow understandings to emerge from students' own processes. Consequently, this study is considered action research, as one researcher was "practitioner as researcher" (Glesne, 2011, p. 23) working in her typical environment. Our prior experiences creating our own, and leading students' compositions informed ways we approached this study. Prior to the study, Author 1 took a certification course in composition that involved individual lessons with a professional composer. Author 2 composed with her students, sharing her compositions with them.

For Author 1, who previously taught PreK – 8 general music, earlier composition activities with students included collaborative songwriting, form-based pieces with digital software, film scoring for open source video, and guided group compositions using

classroom instruments. For these types of projects, students had specific task constraints. Author 1 felt that students completed requirements but lacked ownership.

In Author 2's classroom, students were also familiar with creative tasks; the yearly music curriculum included opportunities for composition and improvisation activities. She included improvisation throughout her curriculum, crediting Orff-Schulwerk courses with her comfort leading improvisation tasks. These types of activities typically included pentatonic melodies, Orff-type instruments, and songs or poetry with which students might improvise using a familiar rhythm. She described previous composing activities as fill-in-the-blank worksheets that asked students to make limited decisions about rhythm or melody. She reflected that composition activities were so structured that they typically sounded similar to one another. In reflection and discussion, we considered ourselves in a process of broadening perspectives about creative task leading. We wanted to enact a student-centered approach and were curious how students themselves felt about composing music. We were curious how task constraints might affect students' creative processes and wondered how students felt about composing with software and with acoustic instruments.

Data collection took place at a suburban K – 5 elementary school in the southwest, where Author 2 was employed as the full-time music teacher. The school was located in an upper-middle class neighborhood; only 12% of the students were eligible for the free and reduced lunch program. Two fourth-grade classes took part in this research. Class A had 27 students and class B had 28 students. At the time of this study students were between the ages of nine and eleven.  Each class met twice weekly for 45 minutes.

Author 2 articulated expectations for each compositional task to students while also acting in a researcher role, which included taking field notes and asking questions. She sometimes composed alongside the students, as she had done previously. Author 1 was a guest in the school and acted as a teacher assistant and researcher. Author 2 introduced Author 1, who participated with the two classes on two occasions prior to the start of this project.

Throughout the study, Author 1's role involved setting up classrooms and technology, posing questions, taking field notes, recording acoustic compositions, and collecting student response forms. Author 2, as the school's music teacher, also took notes, posed questions to students, and helped with technology.  In addition, she facilitated daily tasks such as taking attendance and communicating with colleagues.

Research took place over nine class periods.  Students created two compositions with acoustic classroom instruments and two with computer software; each of the four projects were bound by two class periods.  The two acoustic compositions were created in the music classroom during the first four sessions.  Instruments included recorders, Orff-type xylophones, and a variety of classroom percussion.

Students were permitted to form their own groups and then created compositions using computer software in the lab during the last four class periods, grouping themselves into pairs with headphone splitters.  Some students chose to work alone.  Consistent with the recommendation to allow time for tool exploration (Stauffer, 2001) and definition of materials (Freund, 2011), one additional class period between the acoustic and digital composition tasks was used as an exploratory opportunity for students to become accustomed to Morton Subotnik's computer software program, *Making Music* (see Figure

1). As Hickey (2012) recommends, task freedom should come first so that students gain a need to learn about structure. While we began acoustic compositions *with* structure, we felt that the structure was loosely defined, with "more leeway to explore" (p. 16) in a way that allowed students autonomous decisions, or freedoms.

| Composition | Class | Setting | Task Type |
|---|---|---|---|
| Composition 1 | Sessions 1 and 2 | Music classroom | Constraints |
| Composition 2 | Sessions 3 and 4 | Music classroom | Freedom |
| Exploratory day | Session 5 | Computer lab | Software exploration |
| Composition 3 | Sessions 6 and 7 | Computer lab | Constraints |
| Composition 4 | Sessions 8 and 9 | Computer lab | Freedom |

*Figure 1*. Composition Tasks and Schedule

The four composition tasks alternated between tasks with constraints and tasks with freedom. For the constrained task condition, we provided three specific guidelines to students. We told students to compose music that could be any length, with any available classroom instrumentation (or sound sources on the software program). We mentioned to students that it should "sound good to them," and that they could, but did not have to write anything down. Constraints included instrumentation (*1. use at least one melodic instrument*), form (*2. Intro, A, B, A, Coda*), and dynamics (*3. some dynamics must be present*). These three constraints were the same for the classroom instrument and computer-based compositions. We attempted to provide constraints that allowed students opportunities to make creative interpretations of them, therefore encouraging wide

differences among each group's compositions. The acoustic and software compositions with no constraints were created during the second two sessions in each setting and included no guidelines. We simply told students to create "something that sounds good to you/your group." This design attempted to balance acoustic composition (familiar to the students) and computer software composition (a new experience for them), as well as freedom and constraint conditions.

Data included researcher field notes (Glesne, 2011) about students' compositional processes, recordings of acoustic compositions, and daily student response forms. Observations were sometimes clarified by asking students to talk about their processes during and after the class. We conducted informal interviews throughout students' processes to determine opinions, perceptions, and attitudes (Glesne, 2011). We limited these informal interviews in an attempt to intervene as little as possible with composing processes (Ruthmann, 2007). The acoustic compositions were audio recorded, however the recording conditions in the computer lab were made difficult due to district prescribed conditions for saving student work. Students saved their work on computer desktops, but throughout the district computer data were cleared at midnight, therefore we were not able to save digital compositions.

At the end of each class period students were given a response form used to document perceptions about their compositional processes. Students were asked to circle one of three faces (smiling, neutral, or frowning) that described how they felt about composing during that particular session, then answer two questions: "What did you learn today?" and "What would you like to tell Author 2?" At the end of each session we worked separately to compile response forms into a shared document. We counted the

smiling, neutral, or frowning faces for each form and totaled each category for the composition day. This provided us a picture of students' overall satisfaction or enjoyment. We also compiled all of the open-ended comments per day and categorized them. Later, we collectively combined and organized these categories by emergent themes (Glesne, 2011). We grouped observation notes and student interview data into overarching categories. We each coded emergent themes, then compared and discussed them to ensure coding agreement. Three categories of data emerged from the analysis process: 1) student ownership and agency as related to freedom and constraint in compositional tasks, 2) the impact of social support and group size on the compositional process for students, and 3) facilitation roles required of teachers.

## Findings

This section includes data from our research and is organized by categories of data that arose in relationship to the research questions. First, we discuss data related to freedom and constraint in task design, followed by group size, and teacher role. We then address some of the limitations of our study design.

### Freedom and Constraint

Students' post-composing comments often referenced the freedom or constraint guiding the project and typically referred to constraints as *rules*, though their comments varied. For example, students wrote, "with no rules we have nothing to compare to so I think it was harder," "it's easier when there are no rules," and "it is fun with rules; it

makes us get along better." As students' comments indicated, preferences for freedoms and constraint conditions differed.

When initially composing with constraints, we heard students asking for freedom; conversely, we noticed when composing with freedom, students imposed rules of their own. For example, when composing a "free composition," one student referred to the form he used stating, "having no rules is way easier! We did an ABCD rule." Other students appeared to appreciate a lack of structure stating, "composing lets me go free whenever." As students gained experience composing, they seemed to express agency by actively seeking opinions, perspectives, and interpretations from their peers within and across groups.

Regardless of freedom or constraint for each task, we found that students did not face difficulties finding ways to construct their pieces. While we did not specify how or whether students were to remember their pieces, we did provide pencils and paper. As indicated in others' research, we saw students communicate their musical intentions in many ways, such as gesturing; singing; playing for each other; manipulating one another's hands, mallets or the computer mouse; and using descriptive sounds and words. Despite the freedom, we allowed for students' second (free) acoustic task, we were nevertheless surprised that some students included singing and dancing in their compositions. Students performed complex rhythms and melodies, and though some made reference notes, many chose to write in nontraditional ways or not at all.

In all of the projects, we noted that students typically began by experimenting with musical extremes. While this was true of each project, it was most apparent in the first (constraints) within each setting. For instance, we saw students creating the *loudest*

sounds, using the *most* instruments at once, involving the *most* group members, and in general experimenting with the maximum capabilities of the instruments, software, or people involved.

When working through many ideas present in a large group, students sometimes splintered off into sub-groups that either re-convened or sometimes did not. In the initial stages of experimentation many students played loudly and at the same time. This was uncomfortable for us because we wondered about the students' seriousness. In fact, students experimented with a serious exploration of sound, instrument capability, and of their own abilities. In their own ways, students seemed to become frustrated by unmanageable or unorganized sounds; in time they tended to solve their own problems.

Similarly, in the computer lab many students began by completely covering their screen with colored representations of sound.  While students found such sounds unpleasant, it seemed to provide them with a barrier from which they could then temper their efforts. From there, students scaled back the amounts of sound visually and audibly present so that they were able to experiment with spaces for silence, variations in dynamics, and textural change. Students seemed to undergo a logical progression from extreme capabilities to intentional sound. We observed that as students composed, their compositions became increasingly purposeful, an interpretation informed by our observations of their compositional processes. Author 2 observed, "I didn't see much 'fill in the screen' composing [today] . . . the composition styles were completely different from Monday's 'exploration time.' Students said things like, 'the A-section should be pink, the B-section blue, and the Coda can be a couple of things.' They seem to be thinking in timbres [designated by color] and about unity and variety."

Throughout the project we saw agency develop concurrently with enthusiasm for composing. Students noted that they were making discoveries about music saying, "when one music is playing don't just randomly bring another one in," and "it took us probably six times to get one section right." Student comments provided us reassurance that they were learning and cared deeply about their compositions.

Group Size

Students chose their own groups, only limited in the computer lab by partnered headphone splitters. In other words, groups could be no bigger than two in the computer lab. As mentioned, large groups sometimes emerged for the acoustic compositions and many student comments addressed group size. One boy said, "my group is bigger and harder to control." In larger groups leadership roles sometimes emerged and tended to be visible during the creative process. Other group mates seemed to allow this leadership as a way to reconcile disagreements and organize themselves. Some students worked alone or in small groups, commenting, "I felt really good after I accomplished something all by myself!" and "I learned that when your partner is not here, you can do whatever you want with no arguing." Another student mentioned, "I learned that two people is all you need! Because if you have a large group everyone disagrees!" Students working in partnerships seemed to have fewer disagreements, but also fewer musical ideas from which to draw.

Teacher Role

As part of our research protocol, we acted as facilitators and allowed students to compose without direct instruction or interference, sometimes holding ourselves back

from comments we wished to make. We noticed some students using instruments in non-traditional ways such as playing the cymbal stand rather than the cymbal itself, but refrained from correcting them. We struggled with the fact that student composing was a messy process. We understood that students' preferences for what "sounded good" might not be ours. While we had our own opinions about how the music sounded, or how it might sound better to us, we felt students needed to have ownership over their own processes. This included decisions about when the composition was deemed finished and to what degree the students felt they achieved their intent or found the composition satisfying.

As teachers accustomed to leadership roles, we found that the job of facilitation did not come naturally. When students asked for help we grappled with our role and came to realize how difficult it can be to hold back opinions or ideas. Non-traditional sounds drew enthusiasm from students and we often thought pieces sounded unorganized. We kept opinions to ourselves and attempted to understand student compositions from their points of view. At times, we found that students did not need our help; we discussed our observations as a way to harness our desire to interfere. Some of the things we noticed included that students were on the whole, extremely focused. In the classroom students made use of space with embodied music making, which included gesturing, body percussion, and choreographed dance. We saw students sharing ideas, listening to one another's compositions-in-progress, and discussing what they heard.

Our Limitations

During this time, we came to some realizations about the limitations of our study and its design. The two classrooms we used for acoustic compositions had space, but sound limitations. Students who experimented with loud sounds tended to overwhelm other groups who wanted to think, talk, or make music quietly. The computer lab allowed for only paired groupings as dictated by the headphone splitters. Software occasionally shut down on students during their composing processes. We were not able to save students' digital projects due to district technology policies, and at times a sound delay occurred so that visual and audio feedback did not align. Despite our attempt to provide more time, the time was nonetheless limited and no opportunity existed for students to combine acoustic instruments *with* software. Additionally, our research findings are limited to the particular people and place this study involved (mostly middle class students in a suburban environment).

We did not video record students' processes; this limitation should be acknowledged and accounted for in further research. Additionally, in both settings we consistently ordered the composition approach: first composing with constraint, then with freedom. It is possible an order effect could have occurred. Students' experiences with acoustic instruments (prior to and during our study) likely contributed to the ways they later engaged with the software. *Making Music* was a new program for students, and its novelty possibly increased motivation. Composers however, often do find inspiration in new sound sources. It is also important to note that we did not evaluate the quality of students' compositions, only their feelings about them. Researchers should replicate different versions of task order, implement constraints that include familiar and novel sound sources, and provide descriptors of the quality of students' compositions over time.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to investigate students' creative processes under two different task designs: freedom and constraints, and to consider the ways group size may impact composing. Themes were related to research questions and we discuss them in the following three sections: continuous variations of freedom and constraints, autonomous grouping and leadership, and facilitating students' creative processes with sensitivity.

Continuous Variations of Freedom and Constraint

Decisions about which guidelines students might benefit from is a balancing act (Barrett, 2003) that takes a variety of approaches, resources, and knowing students well. While authors disagree about this balance, in particular whether freedom or constraint should come first, we found students worked well within specified guidelines and we saw variety in compositions, advancing our belief that constraints cultivated rather than suppressed creativity. We were purposeful about the constraints we chose, attempting to provide loose guidelines that allowed for a variety of interpretations, therefore a variety of compositions.

At the same time, students seemed to benefit from open-ended tasks, implementing personal structures as they chose. Although free tasks could be intimidating for some, students with experience may welcome the opportunity. In our study, students encountered compositions with freedom after constraint tasks in each setting and therefore might be considered to have experience from which to draw. While

this was our intent, it is possible students may have encountered difficulties without this prior experience. Indeed, students in our study stated, "composing is more easy without rules because you can make up your own rules," indicating an awareness of the need for structure in a composition task. While the second composition within each setting provided freedom to make decisions, these tasks were not entirely open-ended due to the limitations of time, space, instruments, and in the computer lab, group size. Hickey (2012) recommends encountering free tasks first, in order to create a need to provide structure, but does not advocate for entirely open-ended tasks, pointing to a continuum of task design possibilities.

We observed that preference toward freedom or constraint likely involved students' personalities and learning preferences. As authors suggest, offering a variety of compositional opportunities may nurture and challenge different kinds of students (Burnard, 1995; Kaschub, 1999). While we limited this study to a four-composition unit, we saw students' growth in skills related to listening; articulating and discussing musical ideas; negotiating; composing with intention and representation; identifying form; and manipulating and revising musical ideas. Additionally, students seemed to gain ownership, pride, and motivation through their compositional processes.

As authors indicate is common, students in our study developed ways of articulating and discussing their musical ideas (Barrett, 2003; Kaschub, 1999; Ruthmann, 2007). Students' comments became detailed as they gained experience, moving away from value-based judgments like "good" or "bad" and describing musical elements, emotions, or representations the music held for them. For instance, some students stated,

"I like to use the bird and crystal noises," and "You could make calm or wild music [in this section]."

We found that composition takes time, a concern among teachers (Hopkins, 2013; Reid, 2002). When students are given *continuous* creative opportunities however, they may begin to require less time. As Stauffer states, "time for composing implies not only sessions that are long enough for exploring and developing ideas, but also repeated opportunities to create in consecutive sessions" (2003, p. 107). To improve decision-making and revision skills necessary to compose (Willingham, 2002) students require time. Although time is never in abundance, teachers might consider offering, as Shouldice (2014) suggests, small but continual opportunities for students to compose and make creative decisions. These types of task may reduce processing time while encouraging continued, out-of-class composing.

Autonomous Grouping and Leadership

Although researchers recognize the importance of students choosing their own groups (Hogg, 1994), and positive aspects of group work (McGillen & McMillan, 2005; Ruthmann, 2007), it does not guarantee a positive experience for students. Ruthmann (2007) discusses the ownership an individual or small group may feel about a composition. When strong leadership emerges, members may feel vulnerable to share musical ideas. In our study we did not intervene (Hogg, 1994; Ruthmann, 2007), but allowed students to find solutions to their own problems. During the computer lab portion students either worked by themselves or with a partner, and one boy commented that sharing was difficult. In addition to musical growth, students seemed to be learning a

great deal about their individual learning styles and musical tastes. Our findings support Kaschub (1999), who states that students benefit from composing in a variety of group configurations.

Although feelings of ownership might indicate a growing confidence in composing, students sometimes did not express these feelings in large groups. Similar to Kaschub's (1997) study, we found that the process of revision changed for large group composition. While negotiating a composition can be challenging, it can also allow for multiple perspectives, opportunities to verbalize intentions to others, and growth in skills of compromise. Students, however, do not always experience group work in positive ways; potential for intimidation and competition can result in anxiety and should therefore be considered.

Facilitating Students' Creative Processes with Sensitivity

Authors state that a sense of ownership is important for students (DeLorenzo, 1989; Hogg, 1994; Webster, 2002) as well as teachers' recognition of their ideas. Students in our study showed pride in their compositions and seemed excited to share their music. Our recognition however, seemed to be related to an interest and acknowledgment of students' musical ideas and processes, rather than valuing of their products. We held our opinions back in an effort to understand compositions from students' points of view (Major and Cottle, 2010). This was made difficult when our opinions did not align with students' preferences for what sounded good to them (Volz, 2005). We followed a protocol of questioning, an approach used to value their processes

(Hogg, 1994; Ruthmann, 2007). We felt these focused efforts increased students' senses of ownership (DeLorenzo, 1989; Hogg, 1994; Webster, 2002).

As mentioned, students also benefitted in musical ways as they created, communicated, and adapted musical ideas. As Younker (2000) suggests, we listened to or prompted students' comments to provide opportunities for them to articulate their own understandings. Students organized ideas with repetition and form that they evaluated and adapted on their own until reaching a point of apparent satisfaction.

We strove to be reflective about our roles leading creative tasks in this action research. Although we had included composition in our classrooms, we nevertheless felt challenged and underprepared, which some state can prevent teachers from attempting such tasks (Hopkins, 2013; Reid, 2002; Volz, 2005). Typical classroom power structures have the potential to put teachers in positions of control and authority. Altering this dynamic proved challenging because we realized there were no right ways to facilitate the tasks, but that they simply required, as authors suggest, sensitivity (Hogg, 1994; Hopkins, 2013; Leung et. al., 2009; McGillen & McMillan, 2005; Willingham, 2002).

Implications and Conclusion

While we are not the first to realize benefits of student-centered approaches to creative tasks, our study corroborated earlier research (Berkley, 2001; Webster, 2002; Willingham, 2002) and importantly, strengthened our resolve to provide space in our respective curricula for students' musical agency. The significance of our study lies in valuing students' feelings about and interactions with different compositional tasks. Our

four-project composition unit existed as both connected to, yet furthered from students' prior experiences in music class.

Our study supports research that suggests that teachers consider students' thinking and musical skills (Berkley, 2001) and draw on their own musicianship in order to facilitate creative tasks and offer feedback. As well, the results of our work suggest that teachers should consciously provide significant time and continuous opportunities to compose. To enhance students' experiences, even small compositional exercises might be implemented, as well as an encouragement to compose (or continue a composition project) out of class or out of school. Music teachers might also consider allowing for variations in instrumentation and media, as well as setting. Rather than thinking about task design as free or structured, or open/closed, music teachers will benefit from considering task design on a continuum of more and less structured. This may encourage constraints that allow for a wide variety of interpretations as well as freedoms that are based on guiding structures.

Additionally, students should choose their own groups as well as be provided many different types of group configurations, including opportunities to compose alone and as a whole-class. Students will not only learn about their preferred working styles, but will benefit from experiencing group negotiation, inspiration from interaction with others, and opportunities to explore their own, unique compositional voice.

Teacher role should be continually considered. While no clear process exists for facilitating with sensitivity, an awareness of students' feelings and perceived challenges should be a goal. Teachers can question rather than comment, encourage students to discuss their processes and articulate their perspectives, and consciously set aside

opinions in favor of valuing and appreciating students' own perspectives. Although we questioned students as a way to harness our enthusiasm and gain awareness of students' processes, we came to realize that sensitive questioning actually led to what Major and Cottle (2010) mention provides scaffolding, even in open-ended tasks. This may be one reason researchers have disagreed about relationships between freedom and constraint. Teacher voice, whether assessment-minded questioning, value-laden comments, or scaffolded dialogue, contributes to ways students learn from, learn with, and/or respond to teacher voice.

At times our students' comments seemed to be unrelated to our hopes for their musical growth; many remarked that they learned composing "was fun," "had a good beat," and they could "do whatever." While we sought students' comments and appreciated them, we initially struggled to interpret them. We realized that students' descriptors, such as "bird and crystal noises" may initially appear to lack depth. Despite a potentially underdeveloped ability to articulate musical thinking in ways that were familiar to us, students' words were loaded with understandings and associations, providing insights into what Folkestad (2011) refers to as their inner musical libraries. Students may not be aware of the rich knowing that can envelop their own musical thinking, and much like the processes of composing and facilitating, they improved in their abilities to articulate their thoughts just as we improved in our abilities to interpret them.

While we felt our students learned valuable skills and seemed highly motivated, we continue to adapt our practice and question our implementation of composition activities. Further research might investigate teacher-researcher partnerships and

relationships between individual and group composition. Additionally, researchers should

investigate changes in task structure, relationships between time and type of task, and

approaches teachers use when including composition in their curricula.

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