

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF MUSIC

Proposal and Abstract for Research Week

Engaging Middle School Students through Music History Mini-Lessons: a Mixed-Method Study

by

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Abstract

Understanding history is a vital part of learning. Nearly every question asked in a music classroom about musical context involves its history, from notation to gestures or technicality to aural listening. History can bring music to life for both the performers and listeners. Despite multiple studies on specific historical music events, music history perspectives have not been addressed in the choral classroom. Research forums have yet to explore engagement factors of middle school students through a music history curriculum in the choir classrooms. Such research could provide a valid model for educators. This mixed-methods research study seeks to determine if music history lessons offer a statistically significant difference in student engagement by identifying viewpoints that have not been explored and documented concerning middle school choir students' learning, values, and understanding of music. The researcher will illustrate an engagement of middle school choir students with the musical genres of jazz, rock, pop, and classical before and after mini-lessons about the historical context. Responses were collected through a pretest and posttest survey and questionnaire. This quasi-experiment will utilize a control and variable group of 40 seventh-grade choir students from a middle school in Iowa.

Proposal: Music Education

This proposal provides a background of middle school student ensemble engagement through music history mini lessons. The arts can significantly boost student achievement, career goals, and civic engagement.¹ A percentage of high-achieving music education programs demonstrate particular outcomes with their students, including positive relationships, increased self-esteem, and a likelihood of continuing to a college program.² Notably, music ensemble participation is often an optional course in middle and secondary schools in the United States. These ensemble courses can include orchestra, choir, or band. Meanwhile music theory and history courses are sparingly offered.³ According to Author Kenneth Elpus, theory and history classes have a zero percent reporting rate as an offered class in elementary music education.⁴ Music education has been synthesized with educational standards and increasing scores which challenges the curriculum to begin incorporating all facets of music. According to the Giveanote Organization, there are also no music history courses offered for reporting American middle schools. Meanwhile, while 99% of schools do engage students through choir ensembles. Author Kenneth Elpus elaborates on middle school course offerings,

Middle schools offered an average of 3.68 distinct music courses. At the middle school level, band (91%) and chorus (83%) were, by far, the most common music courses offered at schools that employed at least one music teacher. General music is available at 56% of middle schools and orchestra or string ensemble is offered at 41% of middle schools. Less common middle school music offerings include jazz band (19%), individual instrument lessons (18%), music appreciation

¹ James S. Catterall, Susan A. Dumais, Gillian Hampden-Thompson, “The Arts and Achievement in at-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies,” *National Endowment for the Arts* (2012): 1 – 27, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED530822.pdf>

² Denise Bradbury, Phillip Kaufman, and Jeffrey Owings, “National Education Longitudinal Study Characteristics of At-Risk Students,” *Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement* (NCES), 1-63.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Kenneth Elpus, “The Status of Music Education in United States Public Schools,” *Give a Note Foundation* (2017): 1-36, https://www.giveanote.org/media/2017/09/The-Status-of-Music-Education-in-US-Public-Schools-2017_reduced.pdf.

(9%), guitar ensemble (7%), piano (6%), music theory (5%), and show choir (4%).⁵

A number of recommendations were made by educational reserachers to improve instuational practices to increase student academic levels and equalize the positive outcomes and curriculum across the States. The stakeholders describe ways for institutions to encourage student scores. In one such forum, the Every Child Succeeds Act was signed into law in 2015. This bill requires that all school districts report Kindergarten through 12th-grade student learning to the federal government and state sponsors to track achievement levels in differing curricular areas such as literacy, math, and science.⁶ Moreover, this mandate emphasizes high-quality learning and well-rounded educational experiences like physical education and the fine arts. In particular, ESSA makes a separate mention of music and the ability to address deficiencies with federal funds. ESSA takes student engagement, parent involvement and socialization into account, instead of focusing solely on standardized test scores. Music education is suited to measuring these agencies of success.

Engagement

While public school teachers are part of the whole child learning experience, providing students with a framework to understand each new music piece students encounter allows a more profound craft development. In support, author Elizabeth Parker concludes, "authors indicated that students participated in order to grow individually, work collectively with other people and make friends and experience stress release in a stress-filled academic environment. Choral singers viewed the school music program as affiliation and saw themselves connected to the larger school setting."⁷ Socialization is a fundamental aspect of how students experience music,

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ NAFME, "ESSA," National Association for Music Education, 2014, accessed October 24, 2021, <https://nafme.org/advocacy/essa/>.

⁷ Elizabeth Cassidy Parker, "The Experience of Creating Community: An Intrinsic Case Study of Four Midwestern Public School Choral Teachers," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 64, no. 2 (2016): 221.

and through these musical; experiences, a sense of community can build in their school programs. Much research between music involvement and increased academic performance and currently, a new wave of research is being conducted on the benefits of mental health and music participation. Engagement principles in public school systems have not been systematically categorized until the last decade. In "A Mixed Methods Investigation of Flow Experience in the Middle School Instrumental Music Classroom," Casey Clementson argues that the research in music classrooms revolves heavily around secondary and collegiate musicians. The purpose of his study was to uncover experiences of middle school students as e points out a need for the following:

Further research is needed to determine if these variables have an effect on student decision-making regarding participation in music classes. The variables of gender, attitude, ability, and musical self-concept have appeared to be stronger predictors for music participation due to the number of studies showing similar results among different music courses.⁸

In return, lack of research causes middle school music teachers to generalize available studies to fit the young adult learners. Clementson examines student experiences in the middle school band and links the culture and community that highlights expectations and transitions to success. Growing research shows positive outcomes between student practices and the influence of teachers or mentors.⁹ These varying levels Moreover, levels of engagement in the middle school music class determine a select set of variables and their changes.

Music History

In efforts to promote history in the music classroom, Author William A. Everette states, "teaching music history is an extraordinary experience, one filled with awe-filled moments,

⁸ Casey J. Clementson, "A Mixed Methods Investigation of Flow Experience in the Middle School Instrumental Music Classroom," *Research Studies in Music Education* 41, no. 1 (2019): 43–60.

⁹ Derek Lester, "A Review of the Student Engagement Literature," *Focus on College Universities and Schools* 7, no. 1 (2013): 1.

exceptional opportunities, and certainly its share of challenges."¹⁰ A music history curriculum in the middle school choir classroom can provide contextual learning and connection to performance. Eva suggests, "Learning the history of music can easily turn into an aesthetic experience if the teacher, instead of lengthily discussing the biography of the composer and enumerating all of its works, applies a more illustrative method and offers pupils the opportunity to hear a musical piece for themselves during each class."¹¹ Music educators can provide more than a rote teaching style within performance-based classrooms by including music history as a shared learning experience for students. The Iowa Department of Education explains the importance of music education as follows,

Music is an essential and enriching part of our lives. Performing, creating, and responding to music can connect communities and foster personal growth and meaning. Music educators enable students not only to perform as effective musicians, but to improve their quality of life through the appreciation and engagement with the arts as lifelong participants, appreciators, and consumers.¹²

Music allows for an outlet for personal expression, and students should have a vast and inclusive experience deserving of our youth. Knowledge of the music history curriculum may enable students to consider how the content helped prepare them for other courses and future life experiences. Tremblay-Beaton continues, "limiting curricular knowledge focused only on performances creates further constrictions on what is included in the music curriculum."¹³ In addition to cross-curricular connections, this project served as an example of the intersection between the fields of music history and state standards that were addressed.

¹⁰ William A. Everett, "Creating a Music History Course, Course Design, Textbooks, and Syllabi," in *The Music History Classroom* ed. James A. Davis (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 1.

¹¹ Eva Peter, "Teaching the History of Music in Primary and Middle School," *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai, Musica* 55, no. 2 (2010): 12.

¹² Iowa Fine Arts Music Standards: November 2017 Iowa Department of Education Brochure (Des Moines: Iowa Fine Arts in Music, 2017) 1-5, accessed July 6, 2021, https://educateiowa.gov/sites/files/ed/documents/FineArtsStandardsGuidanceDocument_508.pdf.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 18.

Research has shown that middle school students long to be understood, and their connection and engagement with music vary across the spectrum of listening and ensemble participation. Author Stanley Holloway writes,

...the conscious contents of musical experiences their cognitive and affective qualities, the way they felt while they last, their short-and long-term effects differ significantly from other forms of experience, including other kinds of artistic experience. Additionally, music-making and listening enable us to experience musical expressions of emotions musical representations of people, places, and things and musical expressions of cultural ideological meanings.¹⁴

Some students have been encouraged to set music goals, work towards solutions within their group, and gain an in-depth understanding of music's power for change.¹⁵ Researchers Adam Winsler, Taylor Gara, Alenamie Alegrado, Sandra Castro, and Tanya Tavassolie tracked 31,322 students with the Miami School Readiness Project. The research findings suggest, "those who experienced arts electives in middle school went on to earn significantly higher GPAs and higher standardized math and reading scores, and were less likely to get suspended from school, compared to students who were not exposed to fine art classes...these are meaningful, important, and ecologically valid measures of actual student performance."¹⁶ Authors collected data from students involved in dance, drama, music, or visual arts through middle school's sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade levels. They concluded that students needed more access to arts education to sharpen brain development, foster creativity, and teach children to be goal-oriented.¹⁷ Many music educators and researchers have advocated for music education benefits by setting, sharing, and suggesting examples of self-expression, creativity, and confidence.

¹⁴ Stanley K. Holloway, "Creating a Music Education Curriculum Based on Current Teaching Strategies," (Master's Thesis, Liberty University, 2020), 7.

¹⁵ NAFME. "Music Standards," National Association for Music Education, 2014, Accessed June 5, 2021. <https://nafme.org/my-classroom/standards/core-music-standards/>.

¹⁶ Adam Winsler, Taylor Gara, Alenamie Alegrado, Sandra Castro, and Tanya Tavassolie, "Selection into, and Academic Benefits from, Arts-Related Courses in Middle School Among Low-Income, Ethnically Diverse Youth," *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 14, no. 4 (2020): 428.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Teaching music history may be an essential factor for peaking student interest, providing a wealth of knowledge, and offering a new way of connecting to varying tastes in music. Bridget Sweet, the author of *Growing Musicians*, shared an example of students discussing their preferences in music.

"I hate opera."

Do you hate opera, or do you not understand opera? There's a difference.

"I don't like opera because it's slow."

Not all opera is slow... let's take a closer look at a few things... You say that you don't like opera because of the tempo of the music. Does that mean that you do not like any slow music?

"No. Opera is boring sounding. Not just because it's slow, I guess."

What do you prefer when you are listening to music?

"I like things to have a beat."

So, maybe you are not moved by opera because there is no hard beat – does that sound more accurate?

"Yea, I guess."¹⁸

Students exposed to varying genres of music developed new ways of articulating their preferences as they were equipped with different capacities for understanding. Widespread exposure could allow opportunities for creative growth. There are many parallels across musical genres in terms of style, notation, and rhythmic skills. Research suggests that varying genres of music affect the brain, triggering different neurons, hormones, emotive states, and cascading memories.¹⁹

¹⁸ Bridget Sweet, *Growing Musicians: Teaching Music in Middle School and Beyond* (New York: Oxford, 2016), 32.

¹⁹ Dale Purves, George J. Augustine, David Fitzpatrick, William C. Hall, Anthony-Samuel LaMantia, and Leonard E. White, "The Quarterly Review of Biology," *Neuroscience 5th Edition* 87, no. 2 (2012): 158.

A recent study by Seth Pendergast and Nicole Robinson, sought to research students' preferred learning conditions. Their initial research question, "what are secondary students' preferred learning conditions for music class regarding teacher role, group size, and repertoire" ²⁰ uncovered that 43.5% of students preferred partial teacher lead instruction. The other student percentages preferred independent learning. Overall, the least favorite instruction was exclusively led teacher instruction.²¹ Furthermore, their research uncovered opinions about large and small group learning preferences and music selection choices.

An overwhelming response from the research survey mentioned above concluded that students enjoy being included in the actual learning process within their music classrooms. In a sense, this data promotes involvement with teacher-student learning relationships instead of the old-fashioned rote vs. note approach to teaching. Students engage with music in various ways, such as listening to their iPhones while getting ready for a sporting event, YouTube videos, TikTok dances, live concerts, and several award shows. There is a vast opportunity to involve music that students connect to within school concert programming.

Author Ann Clements shares a common concern amongst music educators, "positive attitudes towards music have been found to decline with advance in age."²² To reach their full potential through active participation in their music ensemble, students could feel a deep sense of belonging. Creating a sense of belonging takes daily diligence. For students to buy into their music group, all stakeholders have an immense responsibility to set the tone and lead by example. Author Alicia Betz agrees, "...the culture of a school comes directly from the leader,

²⁰ Seth Pendergast and Nicole Robinson, "Secondary Students' Preferences for Various Learning Conditions and Music Courses: A Comparison of School Music, Out-of-School Music, and Nonmusic Participants," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 68, no. 3 (2020): 270–271.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ann Callistro Clements, "The Importance of Selected Variables in Predicting Student Participation in Junior High Choir," (Thesis, University of Washington, 2002), 2.

and it makes sense. If the leader of a school doesn't care enough to devote time and money to students, why should anyone else?"²³ An incredible benefit of student curiosity in music is that the vast history of human social development inherently exists through bonding with mother to children, intergenerational community groups, and cultural connections.²⁴

Music also has emotive features for relaxation and relieving stress-induced feelings.

Author Sarah Watts believes that,

We (music educators) engage children and young people in much-needed artistic expression and exploration, providing what are intended to be safe spaces to investigate the human birthright that is music. Yet, in the practical sense, we frequently have the luxury of interacting with students over an extended time, perhaps even throughout their entire K–12 school music lives. This continuity cultivates relationships and fertile soil for overt and purposeful caring.²⁵

Listening to music and singing together has been shown to create a sense of group identity. It brings about social integration because it directly impacts the neurochemicals in the brain, which facilitate feelings of closeness and connection.²⁶ Despite additional studies on emotions, cross-curricular connections, and specific historical music events, teaching music history for student engagement angels has yet to be uncovered. This thesis will introduce students' levels of engagement in middle school choir through a music history curriculum.

²³ Alicia Betz, "How to Create a Community Culture in Your School," The Education Corner blog, Accessed June 30, 2021, www.EducationCorner.com.

²⁴ Camille Savage-Kroll, "Supporting Parent–child Bonding through Relationship-Based Community Music Programmes: Description of an Elemental Music Pedagogy Programme with Young, at-Risk Mothers and Their Children," *International Journal of Community Music* 12, no. 1 (2019): 27.

²⁵ Sarah Watts, "Caring and Connectivity: a Framework for Active Caring in the Music Classroom," *Music Educators Journal* 106, no. 4 (2020): 51.

²⁶ Jill Suttie, "How Music Bonds Us Together," *Greater Good Magazine: Science-Based Insight for a Meaningful Life*, June 2016, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_music_bonds_us_together 2016.

Problem

Little research exists on students' passion for varying music styles when taught about the historical idiom in class. Research forums are not fulfilling all aspects of the music curriculum, which includes history. For students to feel completely connected to their performance and peers, students should have a working understanding of the historical contexts of each piece. History could be used to unite students under a shared learning experience and connection to compositions. There is value in music history, and to be an accomplished performer, teacher, and student, one must know the history of the craft. Author Pete Burkholder suggests,

For both performers and listeners, another reason to know the history of music is because it brings music alive and makes it more meaningful. History can be a way of imagining what it must have been like to be a person living in a certain place and time, with experiences in some ways very different from our own. If we imagine ourselves back into their world, we can hear and understand in their music something of what they heard in it. That makes it come alive in ways we might never experience otherwise.²⁷

This thesis' research provided music educators with a new mini-curriculum for performance-based ensembles to unite students through shared experiences.

Purpose

The purpose of this current study is to examine the relationship between ensemble student engagement and music history. Participants surveyed include seventh grade choir members at Solon Middle School in Solon, Iowa. Little research exists on the topic of middle school student engagement through music history, therefore, the nature of the dissertation seeks to edify the topic.

²⁷ J. Pete Burkholder, "The Value of Music History," *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 5, no. 2 (2015): 58.

Significance of the Study

This study is essential for music educators, musicologists, and Fine Arts Directors because perspectives concerning the learning gap of middle school choir students have not been identified, explored, and documented as a means for relatability and engagement through music history connection, creation, performance, and response. The significance of this study addresses statistical data and factors relating to engaged middle school choir students. Motivating students become the educator's task, and all teachers must be willing to change and challenge their educational practices by developing approaches that allow students to succeed. This could be achieved by creating a safe and welcoming environment that promotes multi-sensory musical experiences.

Furthermore, educators have researched student engagement by large. A few educational scholars have examined student engagement, teacher behavior, and student achievement in the music classroom. Still, no research currently exists that has studied the potential for student engagement through music history.

Research Questions

There is a need to investigate music history components in the ensemble classroom. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How does the impact of learning about multiple styles of musical genre history engage middle school choir students?

RQ2: Does exposure to music history predict a change in choral student's levels of engagement from pretest to posttest?

Hypotheses

The following are the specific hypotheses for this mixed-methods research study:

H1: Learning about multiple styles of musical genre history engages middle school choir students by emotionally connecting students to other individuals throughout history, informing students' musical interest, and proposing an evaluation process of musical works and performances.

H2: Exposure to music history significantly increases choral students' levels of engagement as identified from pre to post-test.

Using music history as an integrated approach in music class allows research to broaden the scope of tools to engage students. Students who are fully involved with the lesson do not simply complete and memorize but are actively engaged in the subject matter. Mini music history lessons promoted engagement by rewarding participation, thoughtful discussion, and cross-curricular connections to other subjects.

Research Plan

This mixed-methods research study identifies viewpoints and documents Solon (Iowa) Middle School seventh-grade choir students' learning, values, and understanding of music history. Students participate in a pre and post-Likert scale survey and opened ended questions. In response to the music history curriculum used to ignite student's curiosity in the middle school choir setting, the purpose of this mixed-methods study was to explore, understand, and determine predicted factors. Each week, the teacher introduced a music history genre via the music history mini-lesson plans. Statistical analysis and thematic analysis will be used to examine the results and answer the research questions.

It is reasonable to assume these hypotheses because several authors and research studies mention student engagement through the contextual learning process. Author Bridget Sweet fortifies the understanding of students and music as she writes,

...adolescents don't know what they don't know, and their understanding of music is limited by what they have learned thus far in their lives. By teaching students about music through performance, listening, conversation, analysis, dissection, demonstration, composition, and research, while also encouraging critical thinking, we provide them with ways to better understand why they feel the way they do and to more clearly communicate with others.²⁸

All students gained skills for dissecting how they heard music and shared experiences when they listened to music. Sweet continues, "we need to help our adolescent students move forward from our music lessons toward understanding how musical experiences are relevant to them in their own lives."²⁹ Each musical genre had the potential to reach students and adjust their empathetic viewpoints. As students shared their opinions and heard from peers, they could feel more validated and confident about their connection to music.

Summary

Middle School Choir is a part of several of Iowa's schools required and elective courses. However, research is lacking concerning the engagement of adolescents in ensemble-based practices. Author Jack Towarnicky proposes, "the mind, once stretched by a new idea, never returns to its original dimensions."³⁰ Engagement is at the central core of educational learning

²⁸ Bridget Sweet, *Growing Musicians: Teaching Music in Middle School and Beyond* (New York: Oxford, 2016), 32.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁰ Jack Towarnicky, "The Mind Once Stretched by a New Idea Never Returns to its Original Dimensions. Ralph Waldo Emerson," *Plan Sponsor Council of America Blog*, November 2, 2017, accessed June 24, 2021, <https://www.pasca.org/news/blog/mind-once-stretched-new-idea-never-returns-its-original-dimensions-ralph-waldo-emerson>

and is interchangeable with student motivation. If students are motivated to participate and learn, then the music ensembles have limitless possibilities for growth.

Music educators and students can work diligently side by side to create a space for socialization, a love for music through multiple avenues of engagement, and a sense of community and family. Ruth Gurgle highlights, "as music teachers, we work hard to make our classrooms places to experience musical joy—where students engage with the music, the instruction, and each other. When this happens, students and teachers from a range of communities, experiences, and backgrounds can enrich and broaden their perspectives, become a family-community, and create music together."³¹ Music involvement is an essential part of education because it brings together a diverse group of people as a tool for communication, inclusivity, and connection by engaging the mind and body with others. This research demonstrates a need for the history curriculum to be included in music ensemble classrooms, considering the longstanding context of music's importance and reverence throughout history

³¹ Ruth Gurgle, "Building Strong Teacher–Student Relationships in Pluralistic Music Classrooms," *Music Educators Journal* 101, no. 4 (2015): 77.

