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Fostering Musical Creativity in the Elementary Classroom

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research ARTICLE

Fostering Musical Creativity in the Elementary Classroom

—**Brian Miner** (Edited by Jennifer Lee)

If you watch young children listening to music, you will find that they spontaneously respond to what they are hearing, often making their own kind of music by humming, singing nonsense words, or drumming with their hands or feet. As children grow older and enter school, however, they tend to lose this natural spontaneity. Therefore, it is important for elementary school music teachers to foster those natural, spontaneous and creative responses to music. Participation in creative musical activities will help children become more fully involved with and better appreciate music in their adult lives (Elliott, 1995). As a future elementary music teacher, I wanted to investigate ways of fostering natural musical creativity in children, especially in their music making.

I was influenced in my decision by the Music Learning Theory, a theory about how children learn music most naturally, developed by Edwin E. Gordon (1988). Gordon discovered that music learning is similar to language learning. When learning a language naturally, children develop the ability to speak by first developing vocabularies of individual words and phrases (the parts) and then learning to use complete sentences (the whole). They do this by absorbing the language in their environment. Similarly, in music, children learn to respond and create musically by developing vocabularies of individual musical patterns (the parts) and then by using them in complete songs or pieces (the whole).

Gordon has found that the most important time for music learning is during the very early years of one's life–ideally from birth to age nine. For optimal language or music learning, the child must be in an environment of rich linguistic or musical stimuli. Although many homes in the United States are rich in language stimuli, fewer are rich in musical stimuli. Therefore, learning music in elementary school becomes that much more important.

In my research project, I looked at the nature of musical creativity in children, what is needed to foster this creativity in the classroom, and how effectively three popular approaches used by elementary music teachers promote the development of musical creativity.

Creativity in Music

Musical creativity is a cognitive process through which one consciously and unconsciously arranges familiar musical patterns in unfamiliar or novel orders (adapted from Gordon, 1988). That process requires two types of thinking. First, one generates a number of novel musical ideas. Then, one chooses among those ideas and puts them together in ways that make musical sense (Hickey & Webster, 2001; Webster, 2002). Teachers can

encourage both kinds of thinking by stimulating students' imaginations and inventive powers and, at the same time, giving them knowledge and skills to use the ideas produced to create music others can hear and, at least to some extent, understand.

Music certainly can be *created* which is not considered *creative*, that is, which lacks imagination and inventiveness or logical musical sense. I found this out when improvising with my trumpet in jazz ensembles and when attempting composition in my music theory classes. In the first case, I was not satisfied with the inventiveness of my improvising. In the second, I had not acquired the information and skills needed to combine my ideas in logical and effective ways. These two activities, improvisation and composition, are vital to musical creativity. The Music Educators' National Conference, when they published their National Standards for Music Education, emphasized the importance of improvisation and composition in music education (1994).

Improvisation and Composition

Improvisation refers to the act of creating music spontaneously by generating original responses to musical and non-musical stimuli. When jazz musicians improvise, they most often are playing over the harmonic or melodic guidelines of a particular song. At the same time, they also may be responding to non-musical stimuli, such as audience feedback. Improvisation is the musical "equivalent of extemporizing in verbal discourse" (Robinson, 2003, p. 1). During a conversation, one generates original responses to verbal and non-verbal stimuli, improvising on the topic being discussed.

Composition refers to "the act of creating new music with the intention of revising the created music to the composer's intentions" (Brophy, 2001, p. 34). In other words, composers write down their ideas using musical notation and then, like writers, revise these musical ideas until the final composition emerges. In many musical traditions, however, composers do not notate their ideas. Just as many stories are created and transmitted orally, so can music be created and transmitted orally. Composers revise their musical ideas by memory and through singing or playing a composition over and over again.

Much evidence suggests that young students can and should begin to compose without using notation. Given proper instruction, students can begin to compose short melodies, remember them, and transmit them orally to classmates as early as the second or third grade (Kratus, 1987; 1994). When students do use conventional notation before they are ready, they tend to focus on the notation rather than on the process of composing (Wiggins, 2002). After they have learned how to read and then write conventional notation, students can begin to use it to compose and transmit their compositions. With proper instruction this can happen as early as the fourth or fifth grades.

Skills for Musical Creativity

Though improvisation and composition are both ways of creating music, they are very distinct activities requiring different skills. To improvise, a musician needs to be able to generate and select musical ideas in virtually the same instant. Composition requires a musician to be able to generate ideas, remember them and find better ways of presenting those ideas. Research shows that children develop the ability to improvise before they can compose (Kratus, 1991; 1994). In other words, children can generate musical ideas spontaneously before they are able to remember and revise those ideas thoughtfully. This suggests that in the classroom

children should be engaged in improvisation before composition. As students progress in their ability to improvise, some of the skills they have developed can be applied to composing.

Before students can improvise and compose in a meaningful and creative manner, they must develop their audiation skill. The term *audiation* means the ability to "hear and comprehend [music] silently, that is, when the sound is not physically present" (Gordon, 1988, p. 7). To develop their audiation skill, students must develop large vocabularies of musical patterns. The development of those vocabularies follows a process similar to the development of linguistic vocabularies. When learning a language naturally, children assimilate patterns of words and phrases from their environment through both informal and formal instruction. Similarly, children naturally assimilate musical patterns through informal and formal instruction (Gordon, 1988).

In Kratus's (1991) model for the development of improvisation, he makes a clear distinction between students who are audiating during the process of their improvisations and those who are not. He argues that when students are audiating, their improvisations become more pattern driven, which emphasizes the connection between audiation and the development of musical patterns. Azzara (2002), too, distinguishes between improvisation guided by audiation and that which is not. He refers to improvisation not guided by audiation as *exploration*.

Many researchers have found a distinct connection between one's ability to audiate and one's ability to be musically creative. Gordon (1988; 1989) argues that musicians can only create music thoughtfully when they are able to audiate what they are creating. When creating music, Gordon argues, musicians are arranging in new orders musical patterns that exist in their audiational vocabularies. Similarly, Hickey (2001) has found that young students who are labeled by their teachers as being highly creative exhibit the use of structured patterns in their compositions.

Three Common Approaches in Music Education

The results of this wealth of research on the processes of audiation, improvisation and composition should be reflected in the approaches used to teach elementary school music. Three widely used approaches are the Kodály and Orff-Schulwerk approaches and the approach based on the work of Edwin E. Gordon, as realized in the *Jump Right In* curriculum. To assess their effectiveness in fostering musical creativity, I examined the methods each proposed for helping students gain the needed skills and information and for promoting the processes of improvisation and composition

I looked at teacher's manuals and published curricula, and sought the experience of master teachers of each approach. Though there are many workshops and writings on the Orff and Kodály approaches, there appear to be no published teacher's manuals or curricula. Therefore, to understand these two approaches more fully, I looked to what are considered the definitive writings and web sites about them, and corresponded by e-mail with experts on them. To investigate *Jump Right In* , I was able to use the teacher's manual that accompanies the published curricula (Gordon and Woods, 1992).

While all three approaches have elements that can be used to foster musical creativity in elementary school students, the *Jump Right In* curriculum best reflects the research on audiation and musical creativity. It stresses the importance of teaching individual musical patterns and complete songs in a sequential manner, according to

the way children learn music most naturally. Furthermore, it stresses active music making through engagement in improvisation and composition.

The Kodály approach also promotes the development of musical creativity through composition and improvisation activities. To build audiation skill, however, musical patterns are not sequenced in a manner that is based on information about how students learn music most naturally. Some of the material on this approach recommends that students learn less than twenty different patterns over the course of five years. This would be akin to teaching students only four or five words each year in school. There is very little a child can create with so few patterns or so few words.

The Orff approach, too, promotes activities in improvisation and composition. When this approach was first developed by Carl Orff in the 1930's, however, no consideration was given to the learning of musical patterns to promote audiation. The Orff approach is "predicated in the fact that children enter school already possessing a vast repertoire of internalized structures that can be evoked" (Robinson, 2003, p. 7). This simply cannot be assumed in American schools today, as many children come from homes that are not rich in musical stimuli. Therefore, today there is little consensus among educators who use this approach as to which patterns should be taught to students and in what order.

An additional difficulty with using both the Orff and Kodály approaches is the confusion among educators using these two approaches about the definitions of composition and improvisation. Often these two terms are used interchangeably.

What Music Teachers can Do

There are three things that elementary music teachers can do to foster musical creativity among their students. First, they can help students develop vocabularies of musical patterns by exposing them to many different age-appropriate songs and chants and to individual musical patterns. Gordon has researched the most natural order in which to teach these patterns (1988). If patterns are sequenced in this order, students will develop large vocabularies with which to create music.

Second, teachers can engage their students in projects emphasizing improvisation and composition, the two main creative activities in music. Improvisation should precede composition, and teachers must be careful not to give students overly detailed restrictions on either their improvisations or their compositions. However, if students are not given some restrictions, it will be hard for them to decide what to improvise or compose. Therefore, teachers should set a general context for an improvisation or composition project. Wiegold (2002) advocates "a process that is placed somewhere between free creative work and formal exercise" (p. 242).

Finally, all of this must happen in a psychologically safe and accepting environment. The development of musical creativity will be better fostered in classrooms where students' attempts at creating music are accepted and the emphasis is on learning the process of creating music (Rogers, 1954; Hickey, 2001). In classrooms where the emphasis is on correct answers and where students are made to feel that their attempts at creating music are not good enough, the development of musical creativity will suffer (Amabile, 1983).

Children who have had the opportunity to participate in creative music making will come to a greater appreciation of music and will be more likely to continue making and enjoying music in their adult lives. Because music learning happens most naturally in the early years of one's life and because many homes in the United States are lacking in musical stimuli, it is crucial that children experience creative music making in the elementary school classroom. Music teachers can use the Orff, Kodály, and/or *Jump Right In* approaches to set up a positive, supportive environment where students actively engage in improvisation and composition, and develop the necessary musical skills to make music creatively.

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Author Bio

***Brian Miner**, from Acushnet, Massachusetts, looks forward to a career in elementary music teaching after he receives his bachelor of music next December. His summer project taught him a lot about the research process: how to find resources in databases, how to think and read critically, and how to synthesize the information he found. "What I* really *enjoyed," he said, "was writing my report and then editing it for* Inquiry. *I've always been interested in writing and in learning how to communicate my subject more effectively." He found working with his mentor and the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program staff very useful in developing his communication skills.*

Mentor Bio

*Dr. **Susan Hatfield** inspired many students when she was the elementary music education specialist at the University of New Hampshire from 2003 to 2005. In addition to Brian, she mentored Jessica West and Jessica Cawley through their research and resulting* Inquiry *articles in the 2005 and 2006 issues respectively. Dr. Hatfield is particularly interested in the informal environments and stimuli that best promote young children's music learning. Although she is now in New York City, she worked with Brian on his research project and writing his article. This long distance collaboration, which did at times present communication problems, succeeded because, she said, of "Brian's work ethic, enthusiasm and good thinking... He always accomplished what he said he would... and he writes well." For Dr. Hatfield, the extra effort was worth it: "It was tremendously satisfying to listen to Brian's thinking and hear it become more and more refined as the project evolved. By now, his knowledge of the musical creativity research literature exceeds mine. I couldn't wish for more."*