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An Investigation of the Process by Which Elementary School  
Band Directors Prepare Students to Choose a Musical Instrument

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### Abstract

The present study was an investigation of the instrument selection processes used by directors of beginning bands in a Midwestern state. What general procedures and timelines band directors used, whether gender bias was perceived to exist, and whether prior research was applicable to Midwest band programs were the major research questions. Directors of beginning bands were identified ( $N = 332$ ) and sixty ( $n = 60$ ) were randomly selected to complete a questionnaire. Of the random sample, 38 questionnaires were returned representing a 63% return rate. It was found that playing tests and analysis of students' physical characteristics were the most frequently used tests and procedures informing the matching of students to instruments. The participants rarely used tests such as Gordon's ITPT or MAP during the instrument selection process. A majority of directors stated that the instrument selection process was not addressed at all (21%) or briefly mentioned (58%) during undergraduate training rather than dealt with in some detail (21%). Further, directors developed their selection processes through experience and not by training received during college. A majority of directors (53%) agreed or strongly agreed that gender stereotyping exists in Midwest band programs and seventy-nine percent (79%) did take steps to address this issue.

## An Investigation of the Process by Which Elementary

### School Band Directors Prepare Students to Choose a Musical Instrument

State mandated changes, teacher training programs, and national education movements have held that creating positive learning experiences early in a child's life at the center of many initiatives. During the recruiting process, directing young beginning band students to those musical instruments most conducive to immediate individual success and enjoyment has a direct impact on the growth and stability of a band program.

A survey of the recent literature related to the instrument selection process revealed that gender stereotyping has been the topic of much research and discussion (Boulton & O'Neill, 1996; Conway, 2000; Cramer, Million, and Perreault, 2002; Green, 1997; Harrison & O'Neill, 2000; and Sinsel, Dixon & Blades-Zeller, 1997). Boulton and O'Neill (1996) focused on gender stereotyping and its relationship to boys' and girls' preferences for musical instruments. The study showed that, "boys and girls have similar ideas about which instruments should not be played by members of each sex" (p. 181). In addition, "differences continue to exist in the types of instruments preferred by boys and girls and that gender stereotyped associations of musical instruments appear to be a critical factor in children's preferences for particular instruments" (p. 179).

Green (1997) found, based on a study of music teachers ( $n = 35$ ) that, "not only do more girls play instruments, but overwhelmingly teachers said that girls play a certain type of instrument, often described as traditional or orchestral, most notably the flute and violin" (p. 153). Throughout the book and based on other studies, Green suggested that the selection of these instruments by girls is an expression of femininity, and that this

may, in itself, not be a negative thing but rather part of developing their identity. Based on a study of teachers' and pupils' opinions Green stated:

The characteristics of girls' musical practices, as described by teachers and pupils, do not merely represent conventions of female behaviour, but perpetuate discursive constructions of femininity itself. Girls taking part in musical performance activities in schools are not just learning to perform music; they are also negotiating a gender identity. (p. 161)

However, throughout recent history there have been many attempts to decrease gender stereotyping not only in the instrument selection process but in society as a whole, even by government mandate. Tempering the polarized positions surrounding gender issues, O'Neill (1997) suggested that expressing femininity or masculinity is not wrong, but that children should be able to develop their own identity without fear of repercussions. In the instrumental music program it is the band director who is responsible for maintaining a safe and caring learning environment, and the instrument selection process is the band director's first opportunity to address this issue.

Recent research on the issue of gender and musical instrument choice lends much support to prior research that there is gender bias and gender stereotyping in the selection of musical instruments by children (Conway, 2000; Cramer, Million, and Perreault, 2002; Harrison & O'Neill, 2000; and Sinsel, Dixon & Blades-Zeller, 1997). With children trying to find their identity during adolescence, gender bias in the instrument selection is a natural result of the stigma attached to certain instruments. However, as physical considerations, playing tests, written tests, instrument selection tests, and a multitude of other processes are used during the instrument selection process there is not a unified

approach towards gender related factors nor in the instrument selection process itself. In general, gender bias and stereotyping exist in schools and are instilled at a very young age. Despite the attempts of music educators to weaken this influence, it remains a variable worthy of consideration during the instrument selection process.

In addition to gender bias there is the factor of family input. Parents can influence both consciously and sub-consciously their children's instrument selections and many other factors related to learning a musical instrument. Not only parents but relatives and siblings can have a great influence on what instrument is chosen when a child is offered the opportunity to choose. In a case study Borthwick and Davidson (2002) stated, "that the parental perceptions of children can become prophecies to fulfil, an expectation becoming a fact, shaping the progress of one specific child, and the paths of the remaining sibling too" (p. 135).

Considered a third influence on children choosing an instrument is personality type. In a study of student personality and their instrument choices and participation across six grade levels, Cutietta and McAllister (1997) found that personality types of instrumental music students did not differ from non-instrumental music students. Instead, "the music teacher is reaching a cross-section of the student personality types in the school. This is important to counter the conventional wisdom that there are 'band types' or 'string types' in the school" (p. 292). However, there is evidence in the study that personality types influenced or were influenced by instrument choice.

Certain tools and procedures used in education have been investigated and found to be effective in controlling influences such as gender bias, peer pressure, and family pressure. Cannava (1994) studied the relationship between professionally guided

beginning band instrument selection and beginning band retention. The tool studied in the experiment was an *Instrument Selection Test* (IST). Results of the study indicated that students who were retained after experiencing the test were more likely: to be suited to their instruments, not to switch to a different instrument, to have parental support, to play their first choice of instrument, and to have a higher ITBS composite score than dropout students. It was found that the IST decreased instrument sex-stereotyping and improved instrumentation balance.

Bayley (2000) studied the instrument selection process practiced by directors of beginning bands ( $N = 249$ ) in the province of Alberta, Canada. “Specifically, this investigation identified the nature of the educational and musical experiences which occur[ed] prior to determining students’ instrument choices” (p. 15). Based on the responses of directors a wide variety of practices were used during the instrument selection process. Bayley suggested that, “in order to develop a better basis for choosing a musical instrument, students need a thorough systematic approach that introduces them to musical instruments through a deliberate combination of aural, visual, and physical representations” (p. 124). Directors also revealed that they were not well trained in their undergraduate degrees for the instrument selection. Bayley concluded that, “in view of the pervasive lack of attention to the musical instrument selection process during respondents’ pre-service teacher education, most Alberta band teachers must learn these techniques during their first years of teaching. To strengthen teachers’ skills in this area, pre-service teacher education programs must allot more time to this topic” (p. 128). It is important to study whether these problems exist in other places.

The present study was a modified replication of Bayley (2000) investigating the instrument selection processes used by directors of beginning band programs in a Midwestern state. What processes band directors used, whether gender bias existed, and whether the findings of prior research were applicable to Midwestern beginning band programs were the major research questions.

## Method

### *Participants*

Directors in a Midwestern state who were involved with elementary or beginning bands ( $N = 332$ ) were identified. Participants ( $n = 60$ ) were randomly selected from this parent population.

### *Materials*

A questionnaire was prepared that would allow the researcher to gather data on various aspects of the instrument selection process. The questionnaire was based on Bayley's (2000) questionnaire investigating the instrument selection process in Alberta, Canada. There were six sections to the questionnaire: band director demographics, band director practices used in the classroom, influence of teachers and music store personnel in the selection process, student gender bias, teacher gender bias, and teacher preparation.

The questionnaire and cover letter were reviewed by two band directors identified as responsible for beginning bands. One was a female, one a male, and neither was selected for the random sample. Each was a band director the researcher had close contact with, allowing for personal communication about the questionnaire. Both noted minor problems with format or grammar and these were edited prior to mailing to participants.

### *Procedure*

The participants were sent the questionnaire with an accompanying letter and self-addressed stamped envelope. There was a request in the cover letter for participants to complete and return the questionnaire as soon as possible.

### Results

Of the 60 questionnaires, 38 were returned completed representing a return rate of 63.33%. Subject 31 was responsible for only fifth grade lessons. This respondent had the questionnaire completed by the director more responsible for the actual instrument selection process. The present researcher decided to use this questionnaire in the data pool as it represented regional input and the procedures of a director belonging to the parent population.

The first section of the questionnaire was provided to return demographics about the respondents. Forty-two percent of directors were male and 58% female. Fifty percent of respondents had a bachelors degree, 11% were working towards a masters degree, and 39% had completed masters degrees. No directors had completed a doctoral degree, nor were working on one at the time of the study. The average number of years of experience was 16.54. The range of experience was from 1 to 36 years ( $SD = 9.36$ ) indicating there was a diversity of first year through veteran teachers in the sample.

Participants were asked to indicate their own primary instruments. The most popular instruments were trombone (18%), clarinet (18%), and flute (13%). Only 2 (5%) respondents played piano as a primary instrument and no respondents were primarily vocalists.

The second section of the questionnaire was structured to gather data about procedures and administrative practices related to the instrument selection process. Table 1 provides the times during the school year when the instrument selection process took place. Most participants completed the instrument selection process during the first three weeks of fall classes (53%) with most others completing it at the end of the traditional school year (37%).

Visiting feeder schools was slightly more often a part of the instrument selection process than not. Fifty-six percent of respondents made visiting feeder schools a part of the instrument selection process with 44% not making visitations (two did not answer). Of the 56% of participants who did visit feeder schools, Table 2 shows the frequency distribution for how often students saw demonstrations of individual instruments prior to selection.

The procedures most often used to assess the best instrument for a student were playing tests ( $M = 4.74$ ), analysis of physical characteristics ( $M = 4.05$ ), and input from elementary music teachers ( $M = 3.82$ ). Of note, tests such as Gordon's *Musical Aptitude Profile* (MAP) (1995) or *Instrument Timbre Preference Test* (ITPT) (1984), and *The Seashore Measures of Musical Talent* (MMT) (1939) were rarely or never used ( $M = 1.32, 1.24, \text{ and } 1.27$  respectively). Table 3 shows the means of how frequently assessment procedures were used.

Students were given many opportunities to view displays and pictures, hold instruments, produce a sound on the instruments, and hear both live performances and recorded performances of instruments. The frequency in which participants used these familiarization activities is shown in Table 4.

A majority of directors (79%) initially excluded certain instruments from the instrument selection process. Double reeds ( $n = 20$ ), tuba ( $n = 9$ ), French horn ( $n = 9$ ), and baritone saxophone ( $n = 9$ ) were instruments most often excluded by participants. Examples of reasons given were that the instruments were too difficult or too large for beginning band students.

The third section of the survey requested data about the roles and influence of band directors and music store personnel during the instrument selection process. Participants indicated that participants guided students in selecting instruments, sometimes from a limited variety of instruments ( $M = 2.41$ ). Frequently ( $M = 4.08$ ) directors encouraged students based on physical considerations, sometimes to balance instrumentation ( $M = 3.43$ ), or sometimes based on financial considerations ( $M = 3.05$ ). A majority of participants (81%) stated that instrument store personnel did not demonstrate instruments to students.

Choices of instruments differed depending on gender. Forty-two percent of participants believed trumpet was the first choice for male students and as one of the top three choices 79% of the time. Flute was indicated by 84% of directors as the instrument least desired by male students. Participants indicated that clarinet was the first choice for female students 47% of the time and as one of the three choices 89% of the time. For females, trombone (50%) and tuba (26%) were the least popular instruments.

Participants believed that students' initial choices of instruments were most influenced by friends or peer pressure ( $M = 4.16$ ), the sound of the instrument ( $M = 3.86$ ), and relatives ( $M = 3.68$ ). Elementary music teachers were the least influential on student

instrument choices ( $M = 2.46$ ). Table 5 shows the means for influences on student instrument choices.

Participants were asked to indicate the frequency of reasons students give when desiring to switch instruments. Wanting to play instruments friends played was the most frequently cited reason for switching instruments ( $M = 3.49$ ). How frequently reasons were given for changing instruments are listed in Table 6.

The fourth section of the survey examined the role of gender bias in the instrument selection process. Table 7 shows the degree to which participants agreed or disagreed with gender bias being a strong influence on student instrument selections. A slight majority (51%) agreed that the influence of gender existed; only 24% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 22% were neutral. Most participants (79%) expressed taking steps to address or weaken the influence of gender on the selection process by noting examples of either gender playing every instrument or showing examples of players not fitting stereotypes. For example, male flautists or female trombonists were asked to demonstrate at feeder schools.

The fifth and final section of the survey investigated the development and growth of directors. Table 8 shows the influences of certain factors upon the growth of directors' instrument selection processes. Most participants indicated that their instrument selection process was developed through experience ( $M = 4.55$ ) and from fellow teachers ( $M = 3.24$ ). College pre-service teacher education was least influential in developing participants' instrument selection processes ( $M = 2.32$ ). Specific to training in college, 58% of participants indicated that the instrument selection process was briefly covered and 21% indicated it was not covered at all. Only 21% of participants stated that the

instrument selection process was dealt with in some detail in their pre-service teacher education. Almost all participants (95%) expressed that changes in their instrument selection process had been made during their career.

### Discussion

There was a high degree of congruence between Bayley's (2000) study and the present study; however differences should be examined. Bayley noted modest graduate study with only 23% of directors having completed any graduate work in Alberta, Canada. Half of the present study's respondents had pursued graduate studies. This may be due to closer proximity to graduate schools or increasing pressure in Midwest states for educators to be continuing their education for license renewal. The sampled band directors were also more experienced than Alberta directors ( $M = 16.54$  years for Midwest teachers;  $M = 10.7$  for Alberta teachers).

Bayley reported piano as the predominant primary instrument of band directors ( $M = 18.6\%$ ), and 3.6% were voice majors and identified this as a possible problem when related to the instrument selection process. Bayley believed that teachers who had performed in wind bands and were experienced performers on wind and percussion instruments were able to offer more informed advice to students than teachers who had not. The present study's participants generally played wind and percussion instruments (95%) as their primary instruments.

In Bayley's study, flute was the first choice (62.3%) for female students, followed by clarinet (58.5%), with tuba as the least desired instrument by female students (46.4%). The present study indicated clarinet (47%) was the first choice for females with trombone as the least desired instrument (50%). As in Bayley's study, responses indicated that females generally possessed an affinity for woodwind timbres while males may have an

affinity for brass and percussion timbres. Based on this and prior studies, directors may need to consider adopting practices to weaken stereotypes. Students should be free to choose the instrument to which they are most suited without the fear of peer pressure. Peer pressure was indicated as an influence on students switching instruments, which may be another factor for band directors to address.

Respondents in the present study indicated that their current practices were developed through experience or asking fellow directors as opposed to during pre-service teacher education. Music teacher education programs should foster research and adopt tested, effective instrument selection processes to train future directors. This would ensure that directors are prepared to deal effectively with the recruiting process without placing more content demands on already strained curricula.

Actively recruiting at feeder schools is a good opportunity to pique students' interests in specific instruments and band in general. It is recommended that visiting and performing for younger grades would contribute to a well organized instrument selection process.

Participants tended to support playing/fitting tests and physical characteristic analysis procedures more than other procedures for guiding instrument selection. Few of the participants' colleges seemed to have adopted a procedure for teaching to future directors. Either participants were not aware of research on published tests or did not find them useful to their instrument selection processes. It is important to set up an instrument selection process that allows students to choose the instrument they are best suited for without fear of any sort of discrimination. However, directors need information to make well informed decisions. Tests and other tools are recommended ways of gathering

information on students. Setting up students for success and enjoyment may stem issues such as switching of instruments and dropout from band programs. A well designed instrument selection process based on research and frequently used procedures is advised.

#### *Suggestions for Further Research*

One participant indicated on their questionnaire that the size of school and program would influence many factors such as pressure to obtain desired instrumentation in a smaller school more than a director in a large urban school. The size of school, enrollments in band, and setting of the school were not examined by the pilot study questionnaire. These would be important considerations to shed more light on differences in the instrument selection process differences.

The relationships of teacher experience and level of education with instrument selection processes was not examined in the pilot study. A review of the literature suggested that expertise could influence instrument selection processes. For example, Bayley (2000) suggested an investigation of expert teachers. Whether novice, intermediate, or experienced directors use different instrument selection processes should be studied.

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Table 1

*Period in which Instrument Selection Takes Place*

Time Period	<i>n</i>	%
At the end of the year	14	37
2nd week of fall classes	8	21
3rd week of fall classes	8	21
1st week of fall classes	4	11
Other	4	11
During the summer months	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2

*Frequency of Demonstrations of Individual Instruments for Participants Who Visited Feeder Schools*

Frequency	<i>n</i>	%
Sometimes	9	45
Always	8	40
Frequently	3	15
Rarely	0	0
Never	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100</b>

*Note.* Participant 24 (see Appendix E) was excluded from this table as they had not answered Question 6.

Table 3

*Means of How Frequently Assessment Procedures Were Used*

Activity	<i>M</i>
Playing tests (“fittings”)	4.74
Analysis of physical characteristics	4.05
Input from elementary teacher	3.82
Rhythm “echo” test	3.29
Aural test	3.22
Physical coordination test	3.13
Academic record	2.55
Music theory test	1.82
Musical Aptitude Profile (Gordon)	1.32
Leblanc Music Talent Quiz	1.32
Measures of Musical Talent (Seashore)	1.27
Instrument Timbre Preference Test (Gordon)	1.24
IQ test	1.13

*Note.* Means as reported on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = never and 5 = always.

Table 4

*Means of How Frequently Instrument Familiarization Activities Were Used*

Activity	<i>M</i>
Look at instruments on display	4.38
Touch/hold a variety of instruments	4.34
Hear live performances of instruments	4.32
Produce a sound on a variety of instruments	4.29
View pictures/diagrams of musical instruments	4.11
Hear recorded performances of instruments	3.68

*Note.* Means as reported on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = never and 5 = always.

Table 5

*Means for Influences on Student Instrument Choices*

Influence	<i>M</i>
Friends (peer pressure)	4.16
The sound of the instrument	3.86
Relatives	3.68
Size/weight of an instrument	3.50
Easy to learn to play	3.13
School performing ensembles	3.05
Cost of an instrument	2.87
Provided by school	2.68
Elementary teacher	2.46

*Note.* Means as reported on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = very weak and 5 = very strong.

Table 6

*Frequency of Reasons Given for Changing Instruments*

Reason	<i>M</i>
Student wants to play an instrument his/her friend is playing	3.49
Instrument is thought to be too difficult to play	3.30
Size/weight of the instrument	2.94
Not believed to be a popular instrument by their peers	2.70
Does not like the sound of the instrument	2.70

*Note.* Means as reported on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = never and 5 = always.

Table 7

*The Influence of Gender on Instrument Selections*

Level of Agreement	<i>n</i>	%
Agree	19	51
Neutral	8	22
Disagree	6	16
Strongly Disagree	3	8
Strongly Agree	1	3
Total	37	100

Table 8

*Factors in the Development of Band Directors' Instrument Selection Processes*

Influence	<i>M</i>
Personal experiences as a teacher	4.55
Fellow teachers	3.24
Director's own music teacher	2.63
Cooperating teacher(s) during pre-service teacher training	2.54
Predecessor's approach to the instrument selection process	2.37
College/university pre-service teacher education courses	2.32

*Note.* Means as reported on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = very weak and 5 = very strong.