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Music and Gender: A Qualitative Study of Motivational Differences At the Upper-Elementary Level

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Abstract

At the upper-elementary grade levels, motivating students to have the drive to learn can become a major challenge for music educators. Learning differences based on gender may be one main reason for this challenge. This study focused on strategies to increase motivation among upper-elementary level music students. To collect data, the researcher observed and interviewed two female elementary school music teachers and ten 5th grade students. She concluded that music teachers would be well-served to address differences in gender through the design of their lessons and curricula. She found that teachers may motivate music students by providing role models for both genders, providing performance opportunities, using music to stimulate kinesthetic learners, and incorporating current genres and styles of music into the curriculum.

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Imagine you are observing an upper-elementary general music classroom. You walk in at the beginning of class just as the students are arriving. The students are allowed to stand wherever they want for the routine opening activity, and you notice that all of the girls stand on one side of the room and the boys stand on the other. The opening routine for the music class is a singing and movement activity to a known song. Students are required to sing the song and follow the movements of the teacher. You notice that the majority of the boys are singing very quietly, if at all, but are following the teacher in movement. The majority of the girls are singing and doing the movements, but with very little enthusiasm. At the end of the opening activity, you think about the noticeable differences in boy versus girl behavior within the class. You feel perplexed by the fact that most of the students do not appear to enjoy music class.

The general purpose of this qualitative study was to identify and discuss the factors that influence a teacher's ability to motivate students in a general music class. Considering the learning differences between children of different genders can help educators to provide a classroom environment that promotes educational success for all. There are numerous differences in the ways boys and girls learn (Green, 1997; Hallam, 2004; Irwin, 2009; O'Neill, 2005; Sax, 2005; Wilson, 2006). Sax (2005) described American society as "gender-blind" because the educational establishment has erased any gender distinctions in the curriculum in an effort to provide equality for all (p. 234). Ignoring gender distinctions may hinder many students in school and could lead to gender favoritism and gender stereotyping. Marshall (1998) defines gender stereotyping as, "the process by which children are socialized into sex roles and by which adults and children are denied opportunities for more individually varied development" (para. 1). An exploration of these

gender stereotypes in the music classroom as well as differences in boys' and girls' motivation to learn music are the key focus points of this research study.

Background

Extensive research has recently surfaced in the area of gender differences in education (Collins, 2009; Green, 1997; O'Neill, 2005; Sax, 2005; Wilson, 2006). This research currently lacks focus in the area of gender differences in musical learning and in motivation towards the learning process. Research into these differences bridges the gap between gender education and music education. Koza (1993) focused on musical achievement between the genders at the secondary educational level and described males as "missing," either in actual music groups or in their overall attitude in the music classroom (p. 212). This issue could be a result of female elementary music teachers being unequipped to teach young males effectively. If boys do not feel attached to the subject of music, there may be little motivation to continue their education in music at the secondary level. It is only through the consideration of learning differences between genders that boys and girls will feel an equal amount of motivation to succeed in music.

Current research states that educators must create a positive "ecosystem" of learning in order to promote educational success (Collins, 2009, p. 33). However, creating a positive environment may prove challenging, as such an environment relies on the climate of the greater community, school culture, and curriculum. This study attempted to examine different ways in which music educators can create a positive ecosystem to motivate students of both genders to further their education in music.

Recent international research describes attitudinal, behavioral, emotional, and social differences between genders in both general and music classrooms (Collins, 2009; Green, 1997; Irwin, 2009; Sax, 2005). Some research suggests that these differences may originate in the brain physiologically (Sax, 2005). Others suggest sociological differences relative to attitudes toward singing (Koza, 1993; Campbell, 1998), playing instruments (Sax, 2005), peer relationships (Collins, 2009; Green, 1997; Koza, 1993; O'Neill, 2005; Sax, 2005), and image and self-perception (Collins, 2009; Green, 1997). Other researchers (Sax, 2005; Wilson, 2006; Younger & Warrington, 2006) examined the efficacy of music education in single-sex classes versus mixed gender classes. Younger and Warrington (2006) caution that it is not enough to simply segregate classes by sex and continue to teach using the same techniques utilized in a mixed-gender class.

Method

The study included consistent observations of one fifth-grade music classroom in a suburban elementary school in a small community. The study included one-on-one interviews with ten students from the class as well as two interviews with teachers who have had past experience teaching single-gender and mixed-gender music groups. The researcher chose this age-range because fifth grade is the last year of elementary general music within the chosen district and marks the last year before students are able to choose whether or not to join the sixth-grade band. Fifth grade is also a time in which many students are about to begin going through developmental changes related to puberty.

Observations coincided with weekly music classes and took place during the thirty five-minute classes consecutively for six weeks. Behavioral data were taken in the form of

general observation logs noting various points within the class where differences in gender or gender stereotypes may have had effect on behaviors, actions or emotions. The researcher then asked students who exhibited some behaviors that may have related to gender stereotypes or learning differences based on gender to participate in one-on-one interviews. For purposes of anonymity and privacy, all names of study subjects have been changed.

Study Analysis

Based on classroom observations as well as teacher and student interviews, four themes emerged that could act as motivational starting points for elementary music educators: providing role models for both genders, providing performance opportunities, using music to stimulate kinesthetic learners, and incorporating current genres and styles of music into the curriculum.

Role Models

An overwhelming number of elementary teachers are female. Based on gender alone, young girls may be more motivated in music class than boys simply because they can relate to their female music teachers. This is especially true in the area of singing. A young girl with a female music teacher may feel more comfortable and confident with singing because she can hear the similarities between her voice and the teacher's. When asked how her own gender plays a role in teaching music, Mrs. Earley responded:

Female-wise, I'm more of the example. They can match my pitch. I can give them tips on socially being a female, standing up tall, performing, all that kind of stuff. Male-wise, obviously they can't match my pitch, but I still think that I have a pretty good relationship

with the guys. But I don't really know how they see me; probably more like a mother figure.

In her interview, Mrs. Worthington described how she has struggled in the past with bringing boys into the choir. She felt that the fact that she was a woman made a difference in boys' involvement with choir. She stated, "If I was [the P.E. teacher] they [boys] would be here right away!"

Both Mrs. Worthington and Mrs. Earley described how boys in their singing groups mostly perceive them as motherly figures. However, this type of motherly role model may not be the type of role model required to keep young boys involved in singing or music in general.

For male music teachers, acting as a role model for young female students can also be challenging. Mrs. Earley explained in her interview how she constantly uses 'American Idol' as an example in her middle school choir. If a young boy has never heard a man sing in his high voice, he may otherwise think he is being asked to sing like a girl, which is probably not desirable for most pre-pubescent boys (Beery, 2009). As long as the media and popular culture influences are put into perspective with real-life examples and role models, they could actually be used as positive teaching tools.

Mrs. Earley incorporated role models in her choral teaching; in the first concert of the year, she had all the sixth, seventh and eighth grade girls sing a song together. This allowed the younger girls to look up to older girls and to look forward to becoming leaders in the future. It also gave the older girls the chance to act as leaders during the song, providing musical guidance for the younger girls.

Performance Opportunities

Other than providing adequate musical role models for children, providing as many performance and solo opportunities as possible can motivate students to continue their musical education. Getting children on stage can help with a plethora of life skills outside of music. Children who are comfortable performing for others become comfortable in other situations in which they are under pressure, such as public speaking. Student participants were asked during interviews to openly discuss their singing experiences inside and outside of music class:

...with my friends, like when they come with me to Reno or something, we start singing in the car. (Bobby)

I like singing. It's fun...like in the car or at home. (Elena)

...a little, but not really in front of people, though. (Nicole)

Mrs. Earley also directs a musical every spring. She makes sure that there is at least one male and one female lead role, which provides gender role models that may motivate younger students to continue singing and performing. Mrs. Earley incorporated students from other extracurricular areas as role models when the chosen musical was *High School Musical*. Mrs. Earley brought in the boys from the basketball team to play the roles of the “jocks” which allowed her music program to bridge the gap that so often exists between sports and music. This also allowed all of the athletic students in the school to see their peers on the basketball team in musical roles. Providing role models is an extremely important part of motivating both boys and girls in the world of music.

Mrs. Worthington expressed that giving students performance and solo opportunities can help create positive relationships, especially between her and her male students. In an interview she said, “I try and make sure some boys get some solos, and

those boys, it really helps with my relationship with them when it comes to classroom management and other times if they have been recognized as being a singer.” If the students feel that their teacher believes in their musical ability enough to allot them solos, they may feel more motivated to continue their musical education.

Music and Movement

Along with keeping gender differences in mind, music teachers must consider different ways that students learn best in relation to learning styles. For children, the kinesthetic sense may be the most important when it comes to optimal learning. Supporting this idea, Mrs. Worthington stated: “Elementary students have a hard time sitting, so I don’t make them.” For some children, moving is an essential part of the learning process. In an interview conducted by Campbell (1998), one boy’s stance articulated this need for movement perfectly. He said, “Nobody should have to sit still when there’s music” (Campbell, 1998, p. 154).

Many of the children stated that recess was their favorite part of the school day because it gave them a chance to run around, move, socialize, play, and eat. With the exception of eating, music class can include many aspects of recess that children seem to enjoy the most. In multiple classroom observations, there was an obvious increase in students’ energy when movement preceded the activity or was added as part of the activity. In one observation, the class began by singing a known song with a very low energy level. The teacher asked the students to stop halfway through the singing and do twenty jumping jacks. The difference in sound and energy level after this short exercise break was distinctive. It seemed that movement was absolutely essential in activating the students’ brains.

During a different classroom observation, the students practiced specific songs for their upcoming musical entitled *Hop Through History*. Some of the songs included movements, and some of them did not. Judging by the students' smiles and laughs during the songs involving movement, it was obvious that the students thoroughly enjoyed the movements. It clearly made the songs much more fun to perform. Some students were singing very quietly or not at all, but were very exuberant in their movements. Nicole, a noticeably shy student, was just barely moving her lips to the words of the songs, but she did all the movements with excitement. As gender groups, the boys and girls were equally energetic with their movements, but the girls were more enthusiastic than the boys with singing.

For kinesthetic learners, playing an instrument may be more appealing than singing. Alejandro explained in his interview that he dislikes singing because "...you just sit there and it's boring." Maybe Alejandro held this belief because playing an instrument is more tactile than singing or listening. In student interviews, the majority of students who wanted to play instruments were boys, perhaps due to the fact that playing an instrument involves moving.

During observations, many boys added movement to activities that were not meant to include movement. In one classroom observation, the teacher handed out small bags containing cards with pictures of instruments. Music was playing while the teacher passed out the materials, and two boys began hitting each other with the bags. In a different classroom observation, the students played a game in which they needed to guess the instrument being played within a recording. During the activity, many boys simulated how

to play the instrument with their fingers, hands, and arms. When the instrument was a percussion instrument, many students pantomimed drumming on their desks.

Not only does playing an instrument include more movement than singing, but, as previously mentioned, playing an instrument can also be a less emotional or intimate form of music making than singing. This could be part of the reason why some children are more comfortable with playing instruments. Music educators can incorporate movement into many music activities to fit the learning needs of boys and girls who are kinesthetic learners.

Music Genres

Music educators should consider how curricular material relates to the lives of the students. There has always been tension within the educational community over what types of music should be studied in schools.

Mrs. Earley explained her reasoning behind adding popular music into her yearly choral programs: “With pop, it’s easy and they can sing it well, you can add a rhythm section, you can recruit the parents. They like listening to the music because they relate to the music.” Musical variety is an important part of music education because the more styles and genres that are studied in school, the higher the probability that at least one type of music learned will encourage individual students to continue to be involved in music. In one observation, five different boys began doing inappropriate things with their recorders, such as blowing too hard, playing the recorder straight out in front of their mouths like a trumpet, hitting each other with their recorders, and refusing to participate in playing. Although the teacher pointed out the rules for playing the recorder a number of times, it did not affect the boys’ defiant behavior. In this same observation, one boy, Cameron,

complained about the song the class was playing on the recorder, which was an excerpt from *Beethoven's Ninth Symphony*, by saying "This is so stupid." Perhaps complaints such as this would be decreased if the song choices were more current. While teachers cannot ignore compositional icons such as Beethoven, they must find a delicate balance between teaching musical classics and incorporating more current music to which students may feel a greater connection. It is this balance that will help keep children engaged in their musical education.

Mrs. Worthington expressed the importance of song genre and content in teaching music at the upper-elementary level. She described how choosing a song for boys depends a great deal on the lyrics of the song:

I really tried to focus towards songs that boys would like to sing...things that I know boys had sung, like *Swing on a Star* from the old Bing Crosby movie, and kind of rap sort of thing if you can find one. *The Grinch* at Christmas seemed best to be just the boys singing.

And they got into it and I appreciated it.

She also expressed her amazement at the older students' excitement the day she played a Guns N' Roses song as the students arrived to class. She expressed how some teachers might be afraid to include current music in their teaching because many current songs include explicit lyrics. Teachers must be very careful about which songs they chose and may want to avoid songs with explicit language, even if the inappropriate words are changed. Some of the students may be familiar with the actual lyrics and could then share the words with peers, which could lead to altercations between the music teacher and parents.

Most of the students who were interviewed felt that the music they studied during music class was very different than the music they listened to outside of school with their friends or families. Eric shared:

Rock, hip-hop and that type of music...I really get kind of bored about having to listen to them every single year because last year we had to listen to the songs just like in third grade and first grade...like 'This Land is our Land' and all that type of stuff.

Perhaps if lessons incorporated more current music studied, students would be more able to relate to it, and would therefore be more motivated to sing, play, discuss, and listen in class.

Discussion

Figure 1 portrays the various elements that elementary general music teachers might provide in order to get both boys and girls motivated to learn music:

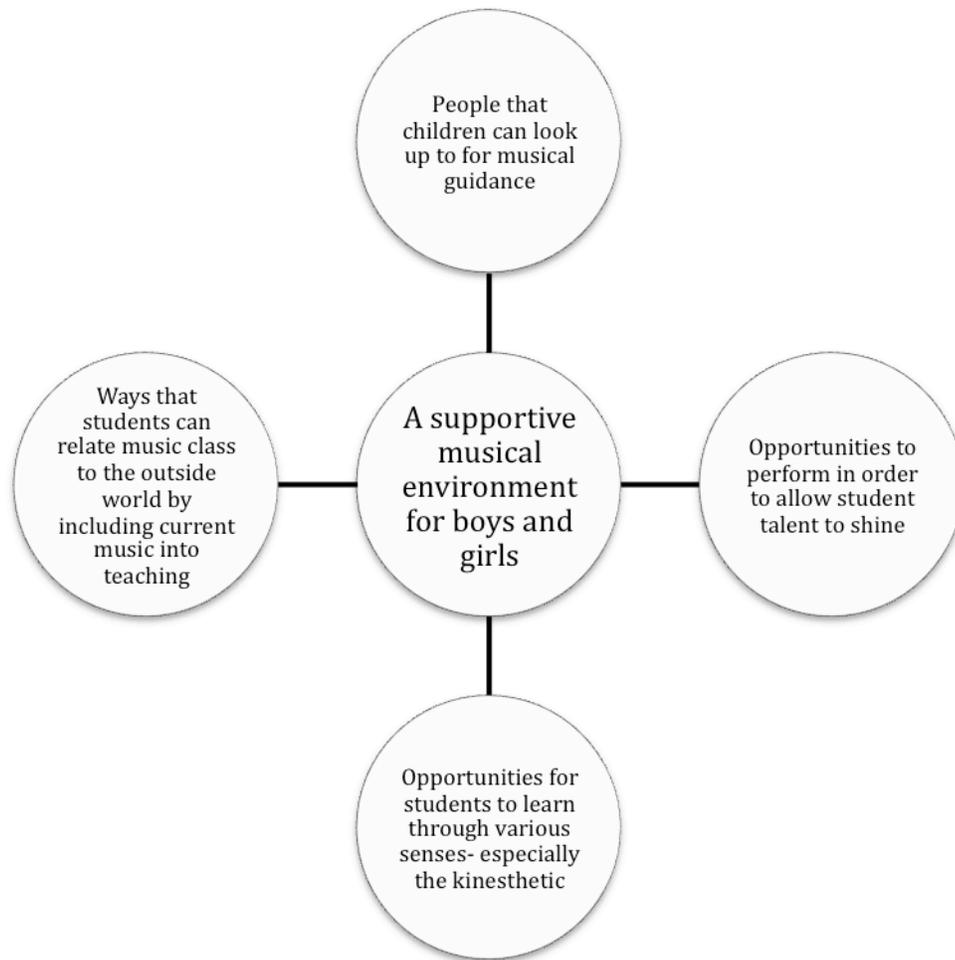


Figure 1. Elements needed to create a supportive musical environment for both genders.

A model of the elements needed to foster both genders in the music classroom.

A “positive” environment can also be thought of as a “safe” environment, which includes mutual respect, trust, and acceptance between the teacher and the students. Collins (2009) describes ways in which a positive motivational environment for boys is drawn from a balance in their “musical ecosystem,” which contains factors inside and outside the classroom that contribute to their musical success (p. 33). This cannot be achieved if the teacher is not knowledgeable about the various ways that boys and girls learn. The elements in Figure 1 can help to create an environment for both boys and girls to be

successful in music. Engaging boys and girls in music means crafting specific pedagogical techniques to fit specific needs of each gender. For teachers, familiarizing themselves with teaching students of the opposite gender may be uncomfortable, but it is essential to creating an appropriate pedagogy.

In addition to the four elements of Figure 1, data from this study suggest effective teaching techniques. Providing role models, allowing performance opportunities, planning for activities that stimulate various learning styles, and including current music during class can all be effective for both genders. Boys also learn a great deal through activities that involve competition or risk-taking. For girls, given their social nature within the upper-elementary age range, it is important to provide activities in which girls get to work together and socialize with each other.

While it is important to embrace gender differences and form ways to teach to those differences in coed classrooms, it is also important to form gender-segregated activities. Students in single-gender classrooms may be less embarrassed and distracted and may be more open to learning. Separating students by gender can also help ‘de-feminize’ the stereotypes of subjects like music, art, and drama that can sometimes exist in schools. An additional key ingredient for students of both genders in learning music is *fun*. Music teachers have an advantage over other disciplines in education because almost any musical skill can be turned into an activity that makes learning fun for the students.

In addition to attending to gender differences to create an effective pedagogy, teachers must also be willing to restructure assessment techniques so they are motivation-based as opposed to ability-based. Assessment should target specific skills according to gender and based on learning differences (Green, 1997, p. 249). If teachers could shift

assessment to consider not only what students are capable of after teaching, but also what factors led them to that level of achievement, teachers could adjust teaching techniques to further motivate students. This would mean taking summative assessment techniques and shifting them towards a more formative approach. If music teachers based their assessment on both motivational factors as well as gender differences, they may be able to improve achievement levels. Ultimately, this may motivate students to remain involved in music.

Students must be confident in music to feel successful, and teachers can play a major role in fostering this confidence. If music teachers take the time to continue their own education and learn about gender differences at the upper-elementary level, they will be more likely to make their students' musical experiences positive. Simply learning about gender differences is not sufficient as strategies that are formed based on differences must actually be implemented in the classroom in order to be effective. In doing this, teachers can raise all students' motivational levels while helping them develop a love for music that will fuel a desire for life-long learning in music education.

Conclusion

Various elements of this study helped validate current research on the importance of having an understanding and a compassion for gender differences in the music classroom. The study also proved that further research is needed, especially in the area of musical motivation. There is currently a disconnect in the world of music education between how educators teach material and how students optimally learn. If students are

not receiving instruction in a way that is clear to them, they may not feel the motivation to learn. For music educators, motivating all students to be engaged in their education can be a daunting challenge. The results of this research study have shown the numerous differences in how boys and girls learn in a music classroom environment. Motivating students of the teacher's opposite gender requires research. However, if teachers are willing to take the time to learn about the various ways that their students learn, gender will matter less than pedagogy. Based on extensive research in gender differences and in connection with the observations and interviews conducted with specific individuals, there are four different elements that music teachers can apply to increase musical motivation in upper-elementary children. By providing role models for both genders, providing performance opportunities, using music to stimulate kinesthetic learners, and incorporating current genres and styles of music into the curriculum, music teachers can increase musical motivation and encourage continued education in music.

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