

“What Is a Good Musician?” An Analysis of Student Beliefs

Clint Randles

University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida, USA

The purpose of this study was to discover relationships in student perceptions of what it means to be a “good musician” across grade level, with regard to gender, and according to different school music affiliations among an intact school culture. The specific problems were to determine (1) what percentage of students choose to participate in school music, (2) if there is a trend in self-reported good musicianship across grade levels, (3) if there is a relationship between gender and music self-efficacy, and (4) which factors defining “good musician” are indicated most frequently across different grade levels. Subjects ($N = 1,219$) were students grades 4 through 12 at a moderate-size, suburban school district in the midwestern United States. Subjects were administered an online researcher-devised survey protocol inquiring about areas of musicianship. Results indicate that a majority (56%) of students chose not to participate in school music, that student self-perceptions of being a good musician decreased in relationship to grade level, that girls indicated being a good musician significantly more than boys ($p < .0001$), and that the category “Performs/practices an instrument” was the most cited response for each grade level.

Keywords: gender, motivation, participation, self-efficacy, symbolic interactionism

From an early age, children develop a sense of identity in the area of music. Identity formation of musicians has been previously addressed by music education research (Green 2002; McDonald, Hargreaves, and Miell 2002). One of the great ethnographic works in music education exploring this area is *Songs in Their Heads: Music and Its Meaning in Children's Lives* (Campbell 1998). Campbell's dialogue with and observations of young students engaged in music making is invigorating. It seems as though young students are motivated to engage in music simply for the experience of the engagement itself. Unfortunately, some of this early zeal is lost when students enter school and progress through school music programs.

K–12 music programs in the United States typically offer general music instruction for students K–5; some districts extend general music offerings into middle and high school. Then, music as a curricular offering becomes a choice that students make from a number of competing disciplines (e.g., physical education, art, computers). The more options that

students have, the higher the likelihood that they will choose activities to the exclusion of school music. It is therefore in the music teacher's best interest to know who is staying in and who is leaving music and, more important, to understand the belief systems that are guiding both groups of students. At the heart of this issue is students' belief of what a good musician is, and whether or not they see themselves as that musician.

Knowing students' perception of a good musician brings music educators a step closer to understanding what makes some children seek to participate in the school music program and others not. After all, if students were given the opportunity to be the good musician that they aspired to be within the school music program, is it not logical to assume that they would show a stronger desire to be a part of school music programs, in which their participation would be viewed as personally meaningful?

Finding meaning or purpose in something might be essential to understanding what lies at the heart of why people engage in any activity (Frankl 1959; Ryff and Singer 1998). This study is an attempt to measure what students in one school setting—one culture—believe to be a good musician, and how that belief system is manifested within the subculture of grade-level. A recent study by Hallam and Prince (2003) asked professional musicians, music educators, other

Correspondence should be sent to Clint Randles, Center for Music Education Research, School of Music, University of South Florida, 4202 East Fowler Ave., FAH 110, Tampa, FL 33620, USA. E-mail: randlesc@msu.edu

adults, and students to complete an open-ended response item statement “Music ability is. . .”. Musicians and educators favored responses reflecting the belief that music ability is learned or developed, while adults and students favored responses reflecting the belief that music ability is a product of biologically predisposed talent. Open-ended response items like those used in the Hallam and Prince (2003) study have been used by researchers to explore children’s conceptions of ability and intelligence (Kinlaw and Kurtz-Costes 2003). This study applies this line of psychology research methodology to musician identity as it relates to elements of culture and school context.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

One of the theories guiding this study is that of symbolic interactionism (Goffman 1959). The crux of this theory is that identity is constructed through a synthesis of individual and socially or culturally agreed-upon meanings, and that “shared meanings and individual particularity are presumed for the maintenance of identity and interaction” (Mueller 2002, 595). Students define themselves as both individuals and members of a culture. Furthermore, identity is the lifelong pursuit of “being like everybody else and like nobody” at the same time (595). Students form a concept of themselves in part based on the manifestations of identity belonging to the students that make up their group. It is important, then, to look at the ways in which students are grouped in schools.

The predominant division of school systems in the United States is by grade level. Within the grade-level structure, there are particular grade levels that are more pivotal in regards to the school music program, and others that are less pivotal. In the school culture examined in this study, student testing and placement on instruments occurs in the fourth grade. Instrumental music study begins in the fifth grade. Sixth grade marks a change in the lives of students as they move to another building, the middle school, and assume a schedule that includes choosing only two “enrichment” courses out of five possible areas (art, band, choir, technology studies, and gym). The next big change occurs when students move from the eighth to the ninth grade, when they again move to another building, the high school.

MOTIVATION

As students move through grades within the school system, what motivates them to participate or not participate in school music? In an attempt to answer questions such as this one, theorists have cited a number of principles contributing to what is known about motivation. Music is intrinsically motivating (Sloboda and Howe 1991); early experiences with music draw children into pursuing greater involvement, including formal training (Lehmann, Sloboda, and Woody 2007).

The support of both parents (McPherson 2009) and teachers (Davidson et al. 1998) is vital to motivation. This finding should not be a surprise, given that parents represent the core of students’ home social network, providing support or lack of support for school pursuits, and teachers often are critical to students’ first formal exposure to the study of music. These interactions alone, however, cannot explain all of culture’s influence on student motivation.

Another part of students’ social network and, consequently, an influence on motivation is interaction with peers (Burland and Davidson 2002). In the United States, peers are usually, but not always, made up of students within the individual’s grade level. Classes are organized primarily by age-delineated grade level from kindergarten through the eighth grade. From ninth grade on, at the high school level, more mobility is allowed as students are able to choose more of their courses depending upon their chosen career track. At this point, mixing of students from different grade levels can occur. However, it is important that much of K–12 schooling in the United States occurs within the grade system, thus presenting a way for researchers interested in the workings of symbolic interactionism within schools to sort students for the purpose of research. The grade, then, functions as a subculture within the culture of the school system. Using the theory of symbolic interactionism and an understanding of the literature on motivation in mind, researchers have developed models to organize the salient components of motivation for purposes of guiding further research.

Austin, Renwick, and McPherson (2006) propose a model of motivation based on the work of Connell (1990). In their model, motivation is viewed as the dynamic interaction of four areas: *self systems* (perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, emotions), *social systems* (teachers, peers, parents, and siblings), *actions* (motivated behaviors, including learning investment and regulation), and *outcomes* (learning, achievement; Austin, Renwick, and McPherson 2006, 213). In this model, self and social systems—the main components of the theory of symbolic interactionism—interact to influence actions and outcomes.

THE STUDY

Symbolic interactionism and the model of motivation proposed by Austin, Renwick, and McPherson (2006) provide the framework for understanding this study and its place within the literature. Individual music self-efficacy and conceptions of what it means to be a good musician—surrounded by cultural values, within specific settings—work to define the meaning of participation in school music for students. Because school systems are intact cultural entities, I sought to examine how students within each grade level within a single school system classified what it means to be a “good” musician.

By examining these beliefs in the context of the theory proposed by Austin, Renwick, and McPherson (2006), I hoped to collect a snapshot of the theory of symbolic interactionism at work within the culture of one school. I chose the specific focus of what it means to be a good musician, because I believed that student responses might provide information that could possibly help music teachers and music teacher educators understand what students in this culture perceive as being "good" in music. Although it was understood that results from this study could not be generalized to other populations of students, since only one school culture was examined, I believed that the uniqueness of a study measuring the psychological belief systems of many individuals within a sociological framework could encourage similar research on a larger scale and with more diverse populations. If this information was found to be valuable, similar measures might be employed as diagnostic measures for music programs that were suffering as a result of a lack of student interest or declining enrollment.

The purpose of this study was to discover how student perceptions of what it means to be a good musician change across grade level, with regard to gender, and according to different school music affiliations among an intact school music culture, as well as to obtain descriptive information regarding differences in gender beliefs about being a good musician and information regarding school music participation. The specific problems were as follows:

1. What percentage of students chooses to participate in school music?
2. Is there a trend in self-reported good musicianship across grade levels?
3. Is there a relationship between gender and student beliefs about whether or not they are good musicians?
4. What factors defining a good musician are indicated most frequently among different grade levels?

METHOD

The School Culture

The participants ($N = 1,219$) were students in grades 4 to 12 from a moderately sized suburban school district in the midwestern United States. The school district was located near a city of 800,000 people on one self-contained campus. The racial make-up of the town was 95 percent Caucasian, 5 percent minority (Hispanic American, African American). These numbers translated identically to the student population. The area surrounding the school was rural, with many working farms within sight in two directions. This school culture was selected based on the willingness of the school administration to allow the study to take place.

Data Collection

Students were categorized according to grade level rather than actual age, recognizing the importance of culture or context as affecting both knowledge construction and identity construction (Campbell 2007); in this study, the focus was perception of qualities belonging to a good musician. Students in grades 4 to 12 were asked to complete a researcher-devised survey containing five items. Grade 4 students were included in this study even though they cannot elect to participate in the school band until grade 5, because, as stated previously, students are tested and fitted for instruments for the following year in grade 4 and so are already forming conceptions about both what it means to be a good musician and what it means to be involved with school music. All students were given the survey, because the culture of a school is made up of students who participate in school music and students who do not participate. Although students who choose not to participate in school music do not themselves participate, they share beliefs about the meaning of participation with the grade-level subculture and the school culture at large. Therefore, I decided that the beliefs of all individuals—disregarding participation status—must be included in the overall data.

Survey items included items about grade, gender, and school music affiliation (none, band, choir, or both band and choir), and an open-ended response to the statement "A good musician is someone who. . ." The primary reason that I did not use a more robust data collection method, such as personal interviews, was the size of the population ($N = 1,219$). To obtain a snapshot of the culture, by way of a large number of individuals, I had to keep the measurement task relatively simple.

Data were collected over the course of one week by administering the survey protocol in an online format, to be completed in a computer lab setting. The survey took students an average of four minutes to complete. Participants in grades 4 and 5 were given the survey as part of a weekly required computer class, grades 6 through 8 received the survey protocol during their required language arts class, grades 9 through 11 completed the survey when they registered for classes for the following year, and grade 12 students were given the survey as a part of their language arts class. Assent procedures were followed in accordance to guidelines established by the university research board. Participation by grade was: 99 percent in grade 4, 48 percent in grade 5, 77 percent in grade 6, 91 percent in grade 7, 49 percent in grade 8, 76 percent in grade 9, 78 percent in grade 10, 73 percent in grade 11, and 60 percent in grade 12.

Answers to the open-ended response items were sorted into fourteen different response categories by the researcher (table 1). Each participant response was then analyzed and sorted according to how each related response used the fourteen response categories. Counts of response categories were tallied for each participant response to address each specific research.

TABLE 1
Response Categories for Open-Ended Response
Item

Response Categories

1. Performing/practicing instrument
2. Performing/practicing singing
3. General music characteristics—listening—instrument pedagogy
4. Personal effort—persistence—pays attention
5. Talent
6. Love of music—passion—desire—heart
7. Money—profession—audience
8. Music as an aesthetic object
9. Fun—happy—enjoyment
10. Referential
11. Composes—improvises—writes songs
12. A person
13. Takes lessons—has a degree
14. Teaches

RESULTS

Four Key Questions

What Percentage of Students Choose to Participate in School Music?

An analysis of school music affiliation by grade revealed that among students grades 5 to 12, 56 percent indicated no school music participation, 25 percent indicated participation in band, 16 percent indicated participation in choir, and 3 percent indicated participation in both band and choir. Grade 4 students were excluded from this analysis because of their inability at that point to elect participation in band.

Is There a Trend in Music Self-Efficacy Ratings Across Grade Levels?

An analysis of grade by participant indication of being a good musician revealed that as students progress through grade levels, their perceptions of themselves as being good musicians decrease (figure 1; $p < .00001$).

Is There a Relationship between Gender and Indication of Being a Good Musician?

An analysis of gender by perception of being a good musician revealed that 56 percent of girls indicated being a good musician, while only 44 percent of boys indicated being a good musician ($p < .0001$).

Which Factors Defining a “Good Musician” Are Indicated Most Frequently among Different Grade Levels?

A count of response categories was made for each grade level. The responses were then ranked according to frequency of citation. The five most cited responses for each grade level are listed in table 2, suggesting a cultural schema regarding

TABLE 2
Top Five Response Categories, by Grade Level

| | |
|----------|--|
| Grade 4 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Performing/practicing instrument 2. Personal effort—persistence—pays attention 3. Composes—improvises—writes songs 3. Love of music—passion—desire—heart 4. Performing/practicing singing 5. General music characteristics—listening—instrument pedagogy 5. Money—profession—audience |
| Grade 5 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Performing/practicing instrument 2. Personal effort—persistence—pays attention 3. General music characteristics—listening—instrument pedagogy 4. Composes—improvises—writes songs 5. Performing/practicing singing |
| Grade 6 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Performing/practicing instrument 2. Personal effort—persistence—pays attention 3. General music characteristics—listening—instrument pedagogy 4. Performing/practicing singing 5. Referential |
| Grade 7 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Performing/practicing instrument 2. Personal effort—persistence—pays attention 3. Performing/practicing singing 4. Love of music—passion—desire—heart 5. General music characteristics—listening—instrument pedagogy |
| Grade 8 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Performing/practicing instrument 2. General music characteristics—listening—instrument pedagogy 3. Personal effort—persistence—pays attention 4. Performing/practicing singing 5. Love of music—passion—desire—heart |
| Grade 9 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Performing/practicing instrument 2. General music characteristics—listening—instrument pedagogy 3. Performing/practicing singing 4. Personal effort—persistence—pays attention 5. Love of music—passion—desire—heart |
| Grade 10 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Performing/practicing instrument 2. General music characteristics—listening—instrument pedagogy 3. Personal effort—persistence—pays attention 4. Love of music—passion—desire—heart 5. Performing/practicing singing |
| Grade 11 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Performing/practicing instrument 2. General music characteristics—listening—instrument pedagogy 3. Performing/practicing singing 4. Love of music—passion—desire—heart 5. Composes—improvises—writes songs |
| Grade 12 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Performing/practicing instrument 2. General music characteristics—listening—instrument pedagogy 3. Performing/practicing singing 4. Composes—improvises—writes songs 5. Love of music—passion—desire—heart |

the concept of a “musician” that is unique to each grade level. “Practicing/performing on an instrument” was the most cited response category for every grade level.

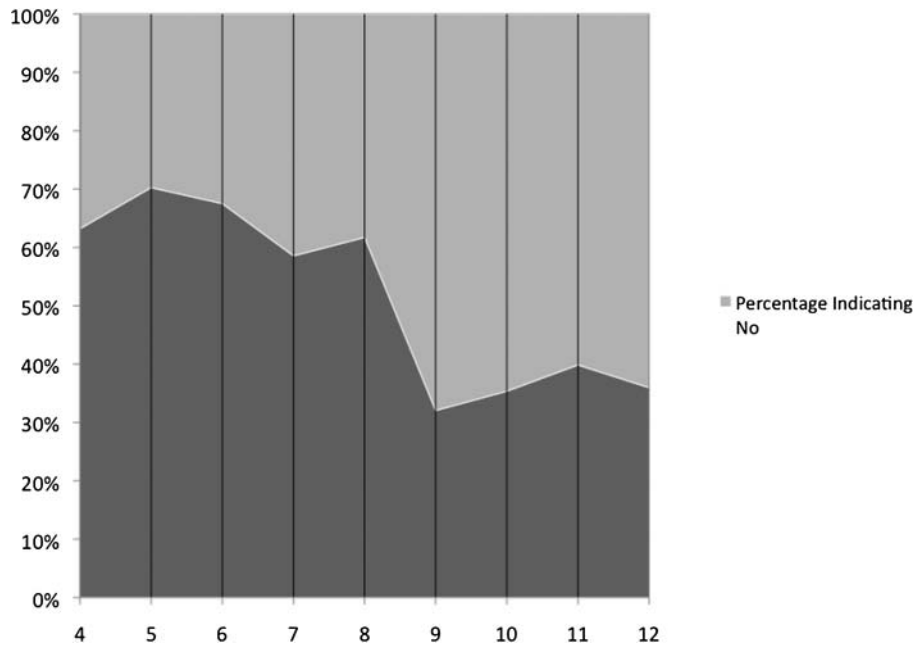


FIGURE 1 Contingency analysis of good musician, by grade.

“Personal effort—persistence—pays attention” ranks high initially according to student descriptions of a “good musician”; however, by grade 11, this response disappears from the collective schema. There is a significant relationship between grade and “general music characteristics—listening—instrument pedagogy” ($p < .001$). The response category “composes—improvises—writes songs” appears in the grade 4 and 5 schema and then disappears until grades 11 and 12.

DISCUSSION

It is worth mentioning again that although the results of this study are not generalizable to other populations of students, the method employed here of using psychological measurement strategies—the open-ended response item regarding beliefs—in the context of school systems warrants further thought and consideration within the field of music education. The theory of symbolic interactionism, based on individuals situated within a framework of grade-level cultural beliefs and interactions, has numerous applications for music educators. The research line of Hallam and Prince (2003) and Kinlaw and Kurtz-Costes (2003) may be followed as a means of understanding dynamic psychological and sociological processes in different areas of music education research.

This study indicates that in this school music culture, a majority of students (56%) are not involved with school music. While 44-percent participation is a good market share, more could be done to improve curricular offerings that might fos-

ter increased participation. Within each grade level, the top-cited meaning of *good musician* is “performing/practicing on an instrument”; these data suggest that the music education faculty in this school district might benefit from exploring new ensemble environments and music learning situations that differ from traditional instrumental music (Allsup 2004; Boespflug 2004; Campbell 1995; Durrant 2001; Frith 1981; Green 2004; Hebert and Campbell 2000). If “practicing/performing on an instrument” is indeed what this culture views as an important indicator of a good musician—keeping in mind that a majority (56%) of students are not involved with any kind of school music within the culture at large—it seems reasonable to believe that by offering a wider selection of instruments, perhaps those that the students themselves recommend for inclusion, would help increase the participation levels within the school music program. North, Hargreaves, and O’Neill (2000) have found similar results with adolescent British students regarding the value placed on “practicing/performing on an instrument.” Declining self-reported good musicianship among members of this culture is cause for concern. One might propose that because students are more focused on the characteristics and qualities of music in their schema of “musician” (as evidenced by the relatively strong relationship of the response category “general music characteristics—listening—instrument pedagogy” to grade level, $p < .001$), then they are realizing that they are not living up to what they see as being important aspects of a “good musician.” In other words, the more they learn about rhythm, melody, and harmony, as well as proper instrument technique, the more they realize that they are not measuring up to the standards.

It is difficult for the music teachers that serve this student culture to formulate possible solutions to this problem, because a majority of students are not involved in the school music program. Changes in the environment of school music ensembles will only potentially affect the schemas of 44 percent of the total population of this culture. When thinking about enacting change and influencing student schemas relating to the concept of a “musician” as a cultural construct, it is therefore important to ensure that music education as a profession is concerned with making changes or developing strategies that will influence the school culture as a whole. It seems probable, as was mentioned previously, that because of the strength of the category “practices/performs on an instrument,” music teachers may increase participation in this culture by offering study on instruments that the school culture sees as meaningful. Again, it is important to mention that many of the students in this study who made comments that fit the category “practicing/performing on an instrument” did not play one in the school music program. Music teachers in this district should be aware of this point.

It is worthy to note that the disappearance of the “composes—improvises—writes songs” response category after grade 5 coincides with the decline of self-reported good musicianship. The category reappears in the grade 11 and 12 schemas. Are these grade 11 and 12 students (65 percent of whom do not feel they are a good musician, and 60 percent of whom do not participate in a school music ensemble), who are nearing the end of their involvement in the culture of this school system remembering a past schema that was perhaps more meaningful and citing that characteristic? This might be an overinterpretation; however, further research might explore the areas of creative music making and creative identity as a part of musician identity, how these areas are different from performer identity, and how music teachers can encourage the development of creative identity with their students.

“Personal effort—persistence—pays attention” ranks high initially according to student descriptions of a “good musician”; however, by grade 11, this category disappears from the collective schema. These findings agree with previous research (Stipek and Tannatt 1984; Bempechat and London 1991). These findings suggest that students over time develop a learned sense of helplessness. Individuals in the lower grades believe that if they work hard and persevere, they can overcome any obstacle that stands in the way of becoming a good musician. What these findings show is that students’ sense of being able to overcome challenges through perseverance changes as they move through the grade levels. This discovery implies the importance of early positive experiences in music, so that students have a higher probability of forming a strong identity as a musician.

Musician Identity Progression

I developed a model of musician identity that incorporates the influence of teachers and peers along with the self as

influences on identity formation (figure 2). This model is similar to a model developed for a previous study (Randles 2009). In this model, student identity is mapped over time, with various cross-sections located above the line to show reference points in the life of identity during the school years of students. Collective musician identity (the cylinder) is shown as containing different musician role-identities (interconnected circles) that could be band, choir, or a number of out-of-school music activities. Each of these role-identities is influenced by socio-cognitively influenced interpretations of the influence of self, peers, and teachers. This model is conducive to the theory of symbolic interactionism and does not conflict with the model of motivation proposed by Austin, Renwick, and McPherson (2006). An interpretation of my study’s findings in light of the model shown in figure 2 might suggest that as students progress through the school music environment, each is forming schemas concerning the concept of “musician” in the process of working out their own identity in light of their perceptions of self and the influence of their peers and teachers. My model builds on the existing research (Austin, Renwick, and McPherson 2002; Connell 1990) by employing a tenant of symbolic interactionism that identity formation is a process that occurs over time (Mueller 2002). As was stated earlier, “peers” are not only music peers; rather, the school culture is made up of every student, and not just students who are involved with school music. Furthermore, “teachers” are not always music teachers, but every teacher who teaches within a school district contributes to the identity of the students that make up that population. Therefore, proposals for change within school music offerings must take into account that school music programs exist within a larger cultural framework composed of culturally bound personal psychological beliefs about what it means to be a good musician.

Although significantly more girls (56%) than boys (44%) indicated involvement with the school music program ($p < .0001$), the overall participation rate (44%) suggests that there is certainly room for improvement. This study did not examine the difference between the female cultural ideal of a good musician as compared to the male ideal. However, this area is worth further investigation. Differences in gender conceptions could provide an important line of research for researchers interested in gender studies within music education.

Research examining the self, peers, and teachers as contributors to identity formation would be helpful in making suggestions for practice. Researchers could use similar open-ended response items that target beliefs about the relationship of the individual to teachers and peers within music settings. It would also be helpful to know how members of the school music culture perceive the support of teachers and peers outside of the music program. Also interesting to know would be how teachers and peers who are not involved with the school music program perceive the program’s value. Within these last two areas of inquiry, how would these beliefs be mapped

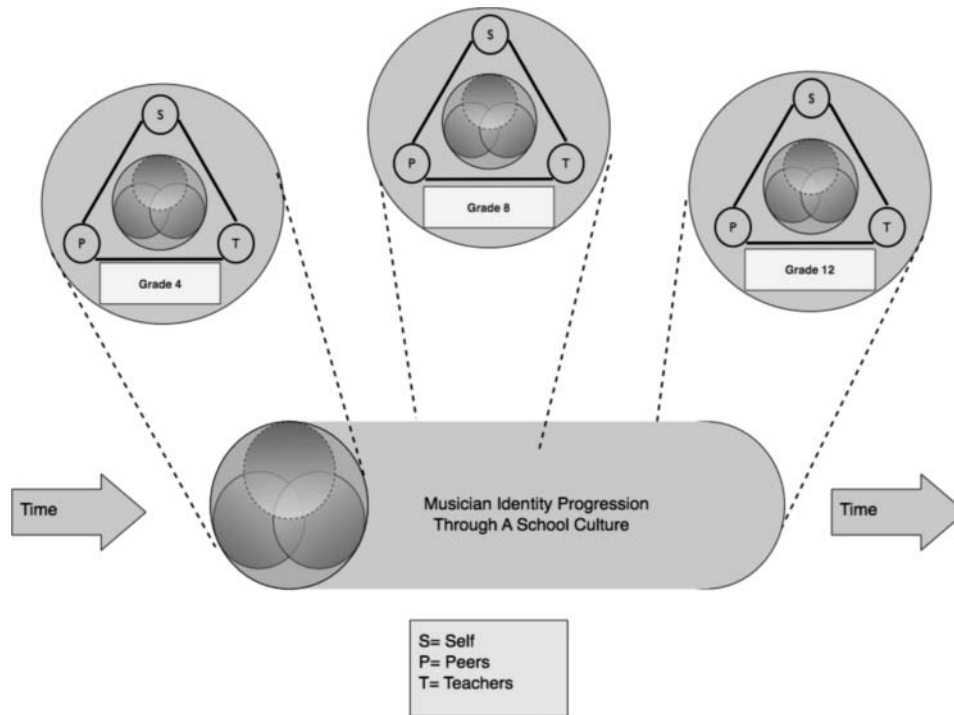


FIGURE 2 Musician identity progression model.

out according to grade level? In other words, how does each segment of the school population regard the value or meaning of the other group? These types of questions should be asked if the music education community is to gain a better understanding of why students are motivated to pursue music over other activities offered in school. Cross-cultural studies will also be necessary so that music education cultures around the world can learn from each other.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Higher Education

Based on the results of this study, I have a number of recommendations for music education programs at the college level. First, instrumental music education must begin to incorporate the teaching of instruments that exist in popular music outside of the school music environment. There are many students who will spend hours of their lives pretending to play an instrument on a video game simply because they wish to identify themselves with making music in that way. If only these same students could play an instrument with which they already naturally identify in school!

Second, I recommend placing a higher priority on the teaching of music composition, improvisation, and songwriting in the school music program. Increased inclusion of these types of musical engagement might foster an in-

creased sense of being a “good musician” among students. These forms of music making offer students a point of view that is different than that gained when they sing or perform music on an instrument. Students are able to express more of their unique musical selves when they create music in these ways.

I also recommend incorporating digital sound design into the curricula of colleges and universities granting degrees in music education. Recognizing that music exists not only as a process, but also as a product that can be shared with others, is key to understanding this recommendation. Knowing how to record and edit student work is important if teachers are to be able to help students produce the music that they have created.

College music education programs should help future music educators understand how to recognize the musical identities of students within their respective teaching settings. Every setting will have some kind of related music-making opportunities that occur outside of the school music environment. If teachers are able to connect the music-making opportunities that occur inside the school music environment with the music making that occurs outside it, they will be more successful at reaching students.

Finally, prospective music educators must understand the specific characteristics of the school communities in which they work. Each school building has a “cast and crew”—teachers and support staff—who share beliefs about the importance of music education and, consequently, the

function of music education in the lives of children in their particular school community. Ideally, each community member would embrace the music teacher's vision for music education so that the students they serve would have a clear and positive representation of the status of a member of the school music community. Certain dissenting members of that community can be encouraged to be supportive of the music program if they can see the relevancy of the music program to improving the quality of students' lives and the school community.

Professional Development

Teacher preparation and in-service training should encourage the development of skills in performing on instruments that are unique to or characteristic of the local school music community. Also, the ensembles that are unique to a particular location should be studied and incorporated into the professional development of the music teachers of that locale. The rise of mariachi ensembles in Texas is an example of such a phenomenon. Ways of incorporating the rock band and new music ensembles into the school music curriculum would be a worthy component of teacher professional development at the local level.

Another focus of professional development could be the development of teacher skills with regard to recording student work. Music sequencing programs should be viewed as a valuable addition to the music teacher's collection of teaching tools, and they should therefore be incorporated into every aspect of music teaching, including the areas of performance and creativity. Student performances, improvisations, and compositions can be recorded, burned to CDs, sent via e-mail, and loaded on to personal MP3 players. Students seem to value their music as a collection of playlists on their personal MP3 players. It would be positive if the music they made in school could also be a part of the music found in their playlists.

In conclusion, I advocate the incorporation of any professional development that would encourage bringing aspects of musicianship and musical identity found in the out-of-school music environment into the realm of the school music environment. The goal for the music education community is to help students recognize that "good musicians" are found in the school music environment, and that they can be "good musicians" too.

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