

Students' motivation to study music: The United States of America

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Abstract

As a part of a larger international mapping exercise to examine students' motivation to study music as compared to other school subjects, this article draws upon data from a sample of 3037 students in the USA to observe perceptions of values, competence and interest in music study (in school versus outside of school) among music learners and non-music learners. Students were grouped into three grade levels: (a) 6, (b) 7–9, and (c) 10–12. Music learners in the USA had significantly higher motivational profiles for music and some other school subjects as compared to non-music learners. Music interest inside of school was ranked significantly lower than for any other subject, while music interest outside of school was ranked second highest for any subject in grades 6 and 7–9, and highest of all subjects in grades 10–12. This article addresses cultural and contextual issues in the USA to consider how music advocates might better demonstrate the importance and usefulness of music study as an academic course. Practical recommendations include encouraging a broader emphasis beyond performance and competition, and promoting opportunities for autonomous music learning within the school setting.

Keywords

competence beliefs, cross-cultural comparisons, expectancy-value theory, motivation, music education, school subjects, self-beliefs, task difficulty, values

The context for this article

This article reports data drawn from an international mapping exercise that involved eight different countries (Brazil, China, Finland, Hong Kong, Israel, Korea, Mexico and the USA), which examined students' motivation to study music as compared to other school subjects (e.g., art, mother tongue language, physical education (PE), mathematics, science). Readers should refer to the lead article in this series (McPherson & O'Neill, this issue), for a full explanation of the theoretical assumptions underpinning the study, reliability and validity of the questionnaire scales, and description of the methods used to gather and analyse data. Further information

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on the eight-country analysis can be obtained by contacting the research team leader (McPherson).

The studies in this series draw on the expectancy-value theoretical framework (Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998) in order to examine the competence beliefs, values and perceptions of task difficulty of 24,143 students across the eight countries. Competence beliefs were defined as expectations for success or the belief about how well each student thought she or he could do in each subject or upcoming task. Subjective task values were conceptualized in terms of four major components: *attainment value* or importance, *intrinsic value* or interest, *utility value* or usefulness, and the *cost* of participating in the subject.

Four key issues in the overall eight-country analysis as reported by McPherson and O'Neill (this issue) were investigated: (a) whether competence beliefs and values declined across all eight countries; (b) whether perceptions of task difficulty increased across school levels; (c) differences in students' rating of competence beliefs, values and task difficulty for music as compared to other school subjects; and (d) differences among boys and girls, and those students who were or were not learning an instrument or voice (either in or outside of school).

Across the lead article and individual country analyses, a variety of multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) and mixed-design ANOVAs were used to examine students' cumulative mean ratings for each of the three motivation measures (competence beliefs, values, task difficulty). The within-subjects factor (school subjects) and between-subjects factors and interaction effects for school level, gender and music learning are reported for each country. Tukey tests were used for post hoc comparisons. Because of the large sample size, a statistical significance level of .001 was set in the lead article, but adjusted where necessary in individual country analyses.

Gary E. McPherson (research team leader)

Introduction

Education at all levels within the USA has a long and proud history. In a country of just over 300 million people, nearly 50 million students are enrolled in public elementary or secondary school (US Census Bureau, 2009; US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). Public school education is locally administered at the jurisdiction of elected community school boards, whilst monitoring and evaluation of standards within school districts, including the administration of standardized tests, is normally the province of state and federal authorities. Funding is allocated at local, state and federal levels and therefore varies by district in expenditure and distribution. Depending on the state, attendance at elementary and high school levels is mandatory beginning between the ages of 5 and 8 years, and until the ages of 16 to 18 years, with some state-based provisions for employment (US Department of Labor, Employment Standards Administration, 2008).

Children can begin formal schooling in either public or state-certified private schools, or in an approved home school setting, starting with kindergarten (grade K; generally ages 5 or 6 years) and then moving on to elementary school (school grades 1 through 5–6), middle school (grades 6–8) or junior high school (grades 7–9), and high school (school grades 9/10–12).

An overall literacy rate of 99% of the population over the age of 15 years can be contrasted with (a) lower rankings as compared to other developed countries in science and mathematics, and (b) a 71% high school graduation rate in 2008 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2009; Miller, Sen, Malley, & Burns, 2009; Swanson, 2009). Failure to compete academically with other developed countries has led to efforts by legislators to impose stricter controls on school curricula (see US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). One of the most

important pieces of legislation is the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), an Act of Congress that was proposed by President George W. Bush soon after he took office. In essence, the law increased accountability for states and school districts by providing federal funding that was made contingent upon the states' implementation of standards-based reform. In order to receive federal funding, states and districts must set high educational standards and evaluate those standards through the use of state-based goals and assessments (see US Department of Education, n.d.).

The NCLB policy has been, and continues to be, hotly contested. One of the most prevalent ongoing accusations is that it encourages a 'teach to the test' mentality rather than allowing teachers to focus on more individualized student needs. On the other hand, advocates suggest that the testing of acquired skills, knowledge and understandings places educational systems in a better position to identify poorly achieving schools and students, which can then lead to making improvements through more effective interventions. Importantly for the present study, NCLB has often been criticized for its narrow focus upon mathematics and English, which can limit opportunities for students in other fields such as music, art, and gifted programmes.

The election of President Barack Obama in November 2008 has resulted in several educational reform initiatives. As a part of his election campaign, and in his first few months in office, Obama proposed to improve education through five key approaches: (a) providing increased funding for early childhood programmes; (b) encouraging improved standards and assessment techniques; (c) recruiting, training, and rewarding excellent teachers; (d) improving charter schools; and (e) making higher education more universally affordable (see Organizing for America, n.d.; White House Blog Post, 2009). The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which was signed into law just one month after Obama took office, provided \$44 billion to be distributed among states and schools that demonstrated improvements in teacher effectiveness, assessment techniques, and student achievement (US Department of Education, 2009a). The budget for Fiscal Year 2010 further advanced Obama's educational reform agenda by cutting educational programmes that were found to be ineffective, while allocating increased funding for school improvement initiatives, teacher incentives and early childhood programmes (US Department of Education, 2009b).

Music in elementary school

Elementary school music classes (grades K through 5–6) commonly include music listening and appreciation; singing; movement; and playing instruments such as pitched and unpitched percussion, recorder flute and guitar. In elementary schools, general music is sometimes taught by a specialist elementary music teacher, as a means of support for the general classroom teacher who covers most other school subjects including mathematics, English, science and social studies. In some schools, instrumental performance instruction (e.g., band, orchestra) may be offered during the regular school day, before or after school, or during lunch or recess. Most string instrument programmes in the USA start in the 4th grade, while most band programmes start in the 5th grade (Hartley & Porter, 2009).

Music in secondary school

At the secondary level (i.e., middle or junior high school and high school), music course offerings vary according to school size, funding and community support. Common music electives include general music, which has traditionally focused on music listening, history or appreciation; guitar; keyboard; and performance ensembles including band, choir and orchestra. Some high school programmes offer an Advanced Placement music theory course, in which

students prepare for an end-of-year examination. If students pass the examination, they may receive college or university credit in music theory at participating institutions (see College Board, 2008).

While high school music courses are similar to those of middle school and junior high, they often place a greater emphasis on performance ensemble classes and offer a larger number and variety of performance opportunities. The sequencing and repertoire selection for school performance ensemble instruction may be driven by external competition and performance demands, at the expense of more comprehensive musical instruction, including composition, creativity and music history and/or theory lessons (see Austin, 1998; Hendricks, 2010; Radocy, 2001; Schmid, 2000). Efforts have been made to increase 'performing with understanding' through the National Standards (see Reimer, 2000), yet more comprehensive performance approaches remain less popular (see Austin, 1998). According to Radocy (2001), the competitive emphasis common in North American music education programmes can lead to (a) restrictions in learned repertoire, (b) limited opportunities for an elite minority of students, and (c) a focus on achievement-centred rather than student-centred instruction. Competitive high school performance events, such as statewide performance festivals, may also encourage students to connect their music performance self-beliefs with their ability to impress others rather than with their ability to perform expressively (Hendricks, 2009).

Depending on the location and interest, other types of ensemble experiences are offered either as a part of the school-day curriculum or as a before/after school programme. Music programmes that extend outside of the school day consist largely of activities that support the school's athletic programme by providing marching bands for football games or pep bands for basketball tournaments. Other school ensemble opportunities include jazz bands, show choirs, madrigal choirs, chamber music, fiddle ensembles, and musical productions. The increase in Mexican immigrants to the USA is reflected by a recent growth in the popularity of school Mariachi bands (Clark, 2005).

The National Standards for Music Education

After a 2-year period of consultation within and beyond MENC, the National Association of Music Education, the 'National Standards for Music Education' (see MENC, the National Association for Music Education, 1996) were accepted in 1994 by the US Secretary of Education at a press conference in Washington, DC. They were soon hailed as 'an extraordinary moment in the history of music education' (Straub, 1994, p. 4). The National Standards were designed to 'provide a basic framework for all music teaching, that is applicable in every setting, regardless of how much or how little time the teacher has' (Lehman, 2000, p. 4). In defending the scope and function of the standards, Lehman (2000) suggested that they would:

- *Benefit students* – because they provide a template whereby every learner will have access to a sequenced and balanced music education.
- *Focus effort* – by aligning all aspects of the educational process, which in turn would allow teachers to establish ways of improving curricula, reforming teacher education and evaluating the outcomes of learning.
- *Clarify expectations* – through clearer explanations for music teachers, parents and students about what will be taught in music.
- *Bring equity* – around one-fifth of students change schools each year, which underscores the need for more consistency across schools and across school systems throughout the nation.

- *Move music beyond entertainment* – by setting the bar high and reinforcing the need for minimal levels of time, and the materials, resources and support for music teachers to do their job effectively.
- *Provide the basis for insisting on qualified teachers* – by providing reasons for music to be included in the curriculum and reinforcing the need for, and advantages of, employing qualified music educators at all levels of schooling.
- *Develop better assessment practices* – through a clearer definition of the skills, knowledge and understandings that are derived from more effective music teaching and learning processes.
- *Give music a place within the school's curriculum* – through a broad national consensus that music is important, which can underpin efforts to ensure that music can claim its fair share of the school curriculum.
- *Provide a vision* – by providing a compelling reason for music and a means of defining the future of the discipline within schools.

Since the development of the National Standards for Music Education, MENC has worked actively to develop a series of resources which explain and clarify the standards to music educators, and complementary publications that aim to inform school boards, school administrators, the business community, parents and educational leaders about how the standards might be implemented.

According to Mahlmann (1993), one of the main aims of the National Standards was to 'halt the marginalization of the arts in American education and to restore, or achieve, a place for each of the arts among the basic disciplines in the K–12 curriculum' (p. 48). In this way of thinking, the National Standards reflect 'aspirations, not the status quo' and are therefore pitched high in order to place pressure on states, local school districts and schools to publicly commit to providing a quality music education for all students. Based on this view, a National Committee for Standards in the Arts, drawn from leading educators, business personnel, government organizations and practitioners within the arts, was formed to tackle a number of issues for further action, including cultural diversity, classroom technology, and interdisciplinary approaches. Fifteen years after their release, the National Standards still dominate thinking and discussions within the discipline, and various state music curricula have been developed or revised with these standards in mind.

In addition to promoting the National Standards, MENC also continues to be a major force in music education advocacy efforts. In light of current economic pressures, and with the recent appointment of Arne Duncan as US Secretary of Education, MENC members and executives are presently petitioning lawmakers for assurances that music and the arts will have a respected and central place in US schools (Fehr, 2009). MENC Immediate Past President Barbara L. Geer has expressed an optimistic outlook for national support of music programmes, as a result of national MENC advocacy efforts and visible coalitions between MENC and several other national and international arts organizations (Geer, 2009).

Analysis and results

The above-mentioned issues facing the US education system led us to consider how music study might be viewed by students in the US sample according to two major themes: (a) efforts of music education advocates to demonstrate the importance of music as a part of the academic curriculum; and (b) an emphasis upon high standards of performance in education and music, as shown in the prevalence of standardized tests and accountability in general education,

national music standards and competitive music performance traditions. Differences in reported values, competence beliefs, task difficulty, interest and perceived expectations of parents were observed between music learners versus non-music learners in order to observe how the beliefs of students in these two subgroups might shape their decisions to be involved in music within the standards- and performance-based culture described above.

The students in the US sample attended middle schools or high schools where music was an elective class, meaning that they had the option to participate in music as a part of their academic coursework, or not. An examination of the differences in students' interest in music in school and out of school was therefore also considered important to understand why some students might elect to participate in music during school, while others might not. Findings were examined in relation to the two themes described above, to determine how general philosophies regarding the place of music in the curriculum and the emphasis upon high standards of performance might influence, and be influenced by, differences in student interest to participate in music at school.

The above considerations formed the basis of three questions that guided our analysis:

1. How do music learners and non-music learners in the USA differ in their values and beliefs about music?
2. How do student competence beliefs and values for music compare with those of other subjects?
3. How interested are students in the United States in musical activity in school, compared to outside of school?

By addressing these questions, we sought to clarify key issues regarding student values, beliefs and interest for music within the context of the American educational system, as discussed below.

Music learners and non-music learners

Similar to the results for the combined eight-country analysis (McPherson & O'Neill, this issue), music learners in the USA reported significantly higher motivation profiles as compared to non-music learners on every dimension, as follows: *values*, $F(1, 3008) = 264.77, p < .01$; *competence beliefs*, $F(1, 2985) = 256.51, p < .01$; *task difficulty*, $F(1, 2906) = 102.23, p < .01$; *interest in school*, $F(1, 2971) = 246.83, p < .01$; *interest outside of school*, $F(1, 2955) = 144.78, p < .01$; and *perceived expectations of parents*, $F(1, 2839) = 36.22, p < .01$. Music learners also demonstrated higher motivational profiles in some non-music subjects as well. As discussed in the combined country analysis (McPherson & O'Neill, this issue), Tukey–Kramer post hoc analysis revealed that music learners in the USA reported higher competence beliefs in art and English; higher values for art, English and science; and lower task difficulty beliefs in art than their non-music learning peers.

Competence beliefs and values

Students in the USA reported lower competence beliefs and values for music and art than for all other subjects. Repeated measures analysis revealed significant differences by subject for student competence beliefs, $F(5, 3060) = 157.85, p < .01$ and values, $F(5, 3068) = 524.69, p < .01$. According to Tukey–Kramer post hoc analysis, competence beliefs and values for art and

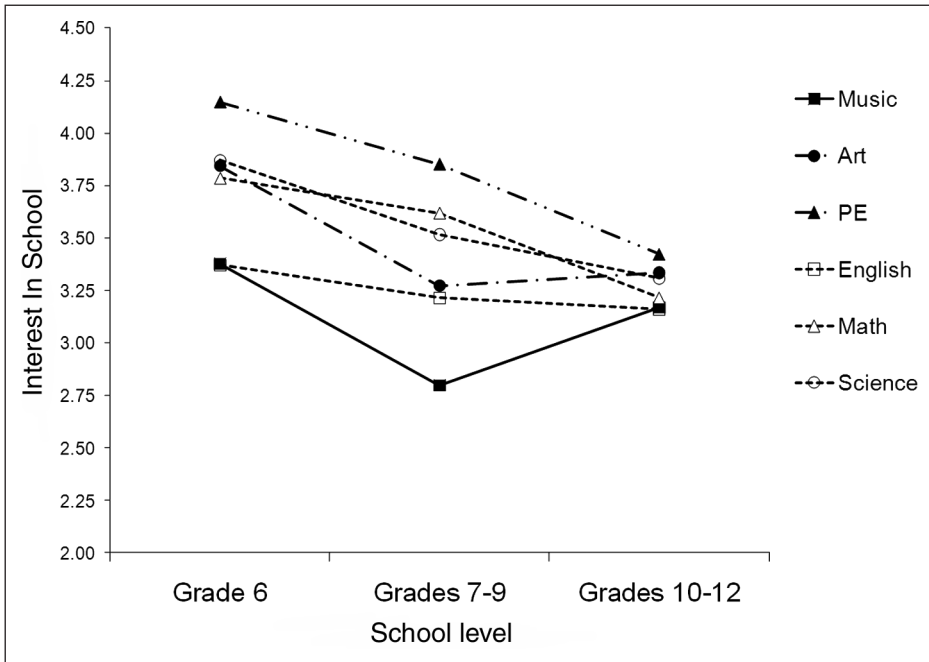


Figure 1. US student interest in school, by school subject

music were not statistically different from one another, but were significantly lower than all other subjects.

Interest in music: In school and outside of school

Interest in school. Trends for interest in school music in the USA show a dramatic drop in interest in school music between school levels 1 and 2, with an increase again between school levels 2 and 3. Figure 1 shows the profiles for US student interest by school subject over time. While general student interest in all school subjects decreased by grade level, $F(2, 3066) = 102.43, p < .01$, Tukey–Kramer analysis revealed that the rise in interest in music between Grades 7–9 and 10–12 was the only significant increase of interest in any subject at any time point. Despite this increase, however, music was generally the lowest-ranked subject overall ($M = 3.12$), showing significantly lower scores than all other subjects.

Interest outside of school. School-level trends in subject interest outside of school were similar to those for subject interest in school. As illustrated in Figure 2, interest in subjects outside of school showed a general decrease by school level, $F(2, 3055) = 69.91, p < .01$. Similar to findings for subject interest in school, Tukey–Kramer analysis again revealed the only significant increase in interest for any subject to be for music between Grades 7–9 and 10–12.

The ranking of interest for music is notably different outside of school. While music interest in school was the lowest-ranked subject overall (as discussed above), music interest outside of school was the second-highest ranked subject in Grades 6 ($M = 3.67$) and 7–9 ($M = 3.36$), lower only than PE in each case ($M = 4.13$ and 3.76 , respectively). Music was the highest

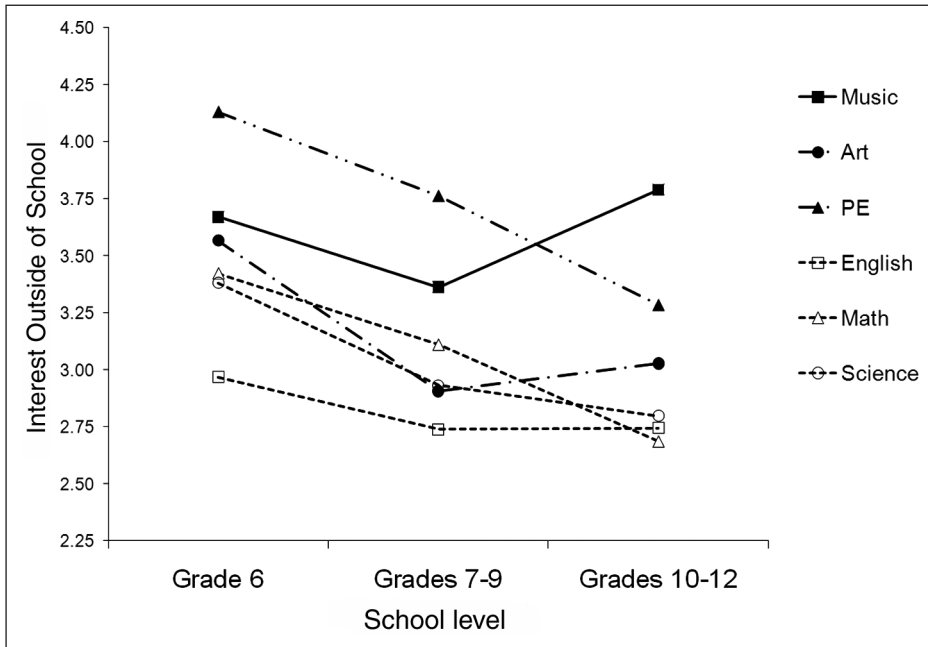


Figure 2. US student interest outside of school, by school subject

ranked subject for interest outside of school in Grades 10–12 ($M = 3.79$), higher than PE at this point ($M = 3.28$). While differences between music and PE were significant at each time point, the overall rank between music and PE was not significantly different at $p < .01$.

Discussion

The US students reported low competence beliefs, values and interest in music as a school subject, yet they demonstrated a high interest in music participation outside of school that was equal only to their interest in sport. These findings suggest inherent issues in students' understanding of the role of music as an academic subject as compared to a leisure or extra-curricular activity, and help to refine the debate about what issues need to be addressed in advocacy efforts as well as in educational practice. The following sections are devoted to a discussion of these two issues.

Advocacy

Non-music learners in the USA reported lower values, competence beliefs and parent expectations, and higher task difficulty than music learners. Considering the high performance demands in general core classes as well as in music performance classes, it would not be surprising for students with lower expectancies and values for music to focus their efforts on subjects that are test driven, such as mathematics and English, rather than on music, where the task difficulty may not be perceived to be worth the effort. In this case, advocacy efforts may be necessary to demonstrate the value of music to administrators and policy makers who create the

curricula, as well as to non-music learning students and their parents who select elective courses students will take.

A number of methods have been used to convince individuals outside of our field that music has a critical place in the academic curriculum, including some approaches that have emphasized the pleasurable or social aspects of music. The findings of this research suggest, however, that students already demonstrate a strong interest in musical participation, but value it less as an academic course. Discussions showing the importance and usefulness of music may therefore be more efficacious in promoting perceptions of the value that music can have in students' educational lives. This is especially important given that the value component of the expectancy-value motivational framework has been shown to be a strong predictor of students' future choice. Students choose subjects that they believe are important for helping them do well at school, that they enjoy learning, and that they believe will have utility value for helping them succeed well into the future.

One possible avenue for demonstrating the importance and usefulness of school music is to align music learning to local and national education goals for general education, and to demonstrate how music study can help to accomplish particular aims that have been prioritized by policy makers. Such an approach was undertaken by Australian arts advocates, for example, to demonstrate how music and other arts can help students develop key competencies, including communicating ideas and information, planning and organizing, working with others and in teams, using mathematical ideas and techniques, problem solving, using technology, developing self-discipline, and imparting cultural understandings and an empathic commitment to cultural diversity (see Livermore & McPherson, 1998).

Results from the present research can also help in advocacy efforts. For example, findings in the combined eight-country analysis (McPherson & O'Neill, this issue) showing that music learners have higher motivational profiles in some non-musical subjects may be helpful in demonstrating a connection between music learning and motivation to engage in other academic subjects – an argument that demonstrates the instrumental value of music such as 'may be persuasive for those educators of members of the public who would otherwise not value music and musical study for its own sake' (Jorgensen, 2003, p. 91).

Educational practice

Despite the low value that non-music learners placed on school music, US students generally reported a high interest in music participation outside of school. This finding suggests that music participation itself may not be what is undervalued, but that music study in US schools may not presently serve a broad population of students in ways that sufficiently promote the value of music for them at an individual level. While a number of practical recommendations might be explored, we have chosen two that align with the performance standards and competition, as addressed earlier in this article. These recommendations include (a) providing a broader performance emphasis, to include more experiences of personal creative expression; and (b) encouraging opportunities for autonomous, self-directed learning.

Broader emphasis. A narrow emphasis on competition and performance repertoire may limit the accessibility and appeal of school music to some students. Individuals such as the non-music learners in our study who perceive music to have a high task difficulty may consider school music to be a subject for an elite or so-called 'talented' minority. Opportunities for non-competitive and creative musical engagement within the school curriculum may provide such

students with musical experiences that help them to recognize the personally expressive benefits that music study can offer.

Autonomous learning. The high interest in music outside school reported by both music and non-music learners may also reflect a student interest in more autonomous, self-directed musical activity that incorporates students' own musical tastes. The considerable decline in student interest in Grades 7–9 may unfortunately parallel similar research findings that have been obtained in Britain, where 'a good deal of lower secondary school music is unimaginative, out of touch with pupils' interests and unsuccessful' (Hargreaves & Marshall, 2003, p. 265). Conversely, since musical preference has been found to have a positive relationship with self-concept, self-esteem and understanding of social norms during the formative adolescent years (North & Hargreaves, 1999, p. 75), student-directed school musical experiences that provide adolescents with opportunities to express their own social and personal identities may be more successful.

Performance and competition hold an important and fundamental place in the tradition of musical excellence in the United States. A broader emphasis and opportunities for autonomous and student-directed musical activity may, however, be inviting to students who are not presently served within the American music education system. Providing more extensive, enriching, and more varied musical experiences at school may make music more accessible to a larger and more diverse population of students, and help students to experience first-hand the value that music can have in their lives.

Conclusion

The above issues reflect an ongoing dilemma in our profession regarding the various functions and foci that are possible in school music learning. While efforts have been made to justify music as an academic subject with standards and content knowledge to be measured and assessed, music learning also offers a number of opportunities for experiential growth and creative expression that can enrich student understanding and development in ways that reach beyond the boundaries of a more structured curriculum. Is it possible to advocate one approach without sacrificing the merits of another? Can a number of approaches be advocated simultaneously, presenting the value of music in such a way as to demonstrate its broad and diverse capacity to enrich students' lives? Alternatively, would a shift in educational emphasis toward greater relevance to students' lives increase the way school music is valued, and make advocacy an issue of the past? According to Reimer (2004), such an approach may be worth considering:

Music is thriving in America, in its rich array of types and styles and ways to be involved that our multimusical culture makes so readily available to all. Music education is not thriving comparably. We have tended to hunker down with our narrow preferences and limited opportunities and then, because we are dangerously irrelevant, we advocate, advocate, advocate – not for fundamental change in music education but for unquestioning support for what we have traditionally chosen to offer . . . Our most urgent task, our way out of our unreality, is to more fully satisfy the actual musical needs and enthusiasms so plentiful all around us while adding to people's musical satisfactions the breadth and depth we are professionally qualified to help them achieve. (p. 34)

The Mayday Group (2009) has suggested, 'The contributions made by schools, colleges and other musical institutions are important to musical culture, but these need to be systematically

examined and evaluated in terms of the directions and extent of their influence' (paragraph 7). As we strive to establish the identity of music education among ourselves, and then to spread a message of advocacy among policy makers, parents and students, it is therefore important to consider how our approaches are valued and perceived by the individuals whom we serve. The intent of the present research has been to provide one such perspective.

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