Research to “Real Life”: Implications of Recent Research for Elementary General Music

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Many music teachers perceive research as being wholly removed from education practice, something that only those in the “ivory tower” find interesting or meaningful and having little direct connection to teachers’ day-to-day lives in the classroom. Some teachers believe research is cumbersome to read and understand, littered with academic prose and jargon. Still others feel they have no time to read about current education research; they have to plan tomorrow’s lessons! However, it is worth it for music teachers to be aware of current research in music education because it can be invaluable in informing teaching practice and guiding decision-making in the classroom. This article will summarize three recent research studies of relevance for elementary general music teachers and discuss their implications for teaching practice.

“The Effects of Harmonic Accompaniment on the Tonal Improvisations of Students in First Through Sixth Grade”

What Did the Researcher Want to Know?

What are the effects of root melody (bassline) accompaniment on the tonal improvisations of elementary school students?

What Did the Researcher Do?

Guilbault (2009) studied 419 of her own students in grades one through six for almost an entire school year. These students were divided into two groups, with approximately half of the classes (the “treatment” group) experiencing “root melody” accompaniments during music instruction and the other half (the “control” group) experiencing only a cappella singing.

Similar to a bassline, “a root melody is the melodic line created by the fundamental pitches of the harmonic functions found in a song” (p. 84). Pitches in a root melody can be played/sung and sustained once per chord change or repeated on each beat. The students in the treatment group experienced root melodies with approximately 80% of the songs included in each class period and during improvisation activities. These root melody accompaniments were either played on a pitched instrument (e.g., xylophone, piano), played by a voice recording, sung by the teacher/researcher as the students sang a song, sung by the students as the teacher/researcher sang a song, or sung by the student(s) as another student(s) sang a song. The students in the control group experienced all the same songs and improvisation activities as the treatment group but without any accompaniment.

What Did the Researcher Find?

At the end of the school year, Guilbault (2009) recorded each student vocally improvising an ending to an unfamiliar song without accompaniment. Three music educators judged the recordings, rating the degree to which each student improvised a melodic ending that used clearly implied harmonic changes and good harmonic rhythm. Statistical analysis of these ratings revealed that the students in the treatment group (who had experienced root melody accompaniments throughout the school year) were able to vocally improvise song endings that made more harmonic sense than students in the control group (who had not experienced root melody accompaniments).
What Does This Mean for My Classroom?

Exposing students to harmonic progressions in familiar songs helps them develop better harmonic understanding, which in turn enables students to vocally improvise with a better sense of harmonic progression. If elementary general music teachers wish to help their students develop the ability to vocally improvise with a good sense of harmonic progression, they might consider providing students with many opportunities to experience root melody accompaniments to the songs they learn in music class. Teachers could do this by playing root melody accompaniments on an instrument, singing them while students sing a song, teaching students to sing root melody accompaniments while the teacher sings the song, or having students sing songs and root melody accompaniments in two groups or even as duets.

“Exploring Informal Music Learning in a Professional Development Community of Music Teachers”

What Did the Researcher Want to Know?

How do music teachers in a professional development community implement informal music learning in their classrooms, and how do their beliefs and practices evolve as a result?

What Did the Researcher Do?

Kastner (2014) studied four elementary music teachers as they participated in a professional development community (PDC)—a group of teachers who work together to develop their teaching practice and grow their professional expertise. This PDC focused on the topic of informal music learning, which “is the term commonly used to describe processes individuals use when learning music without teacher-directed, formal instruction” (p. 72) and typically involves vernacular music genres such as popular music. The teachers met biweekly for six months to discuss readings about informal music learning, develop ways they could implement informal music learning in their classrooms, and share their experiences in trying those ideas. In addition to studying the teachers’ interactions during these PDC meetings, Kastner also observed informal music learning activities in each teacher’s classroom. These informal music learning activities included “music share days” that involved students performing music from outside of school during their music classes, playing popular melodies on recorder, and aurally creating and performing vocal or instrumental covers of popular songs in small groups.

What Did the Researcher Find?

Among several themes, Kastner (2014) found that the teachers utilized a variety of pedagogical practices in implementing informal music learning in their classrooms. The four teachers varied in the amount of control they gave their students during informal music learning activities, including in the selection of songs and the organization of students into small groups. For example, when having students create “covers” of popular songs, some teachers chose specific selections for their students while others gave students complete freedom to choose their own songs. The teachers also varied in the amount of scaffolding they provided during informal music learning activities. While some teachers were completely “hands-off” in letting students work on informal music learning activities like arranging cover songs, other teachers found that students needed more guidance in order to be successful and provided this guidance by modeling examples, providing song lyrics, or “giving permission” for students to make their own choices (p. 82).

Kastner (2014) also discovered that the teachers in the PDC felt their implementation of informal music learning in their classrooms was extremely valuable. First, these teachers found that informal music learning experiences enhanced student motivation; they observed that student engagement was quite high during informal music learning activities, even among students who “were typically reluctant to participate” in music class (p. 83). Second, the teachers also valued the ways in which informal music learning helped develop their students’ musical independence; one participant noted that, as a result of their experiences with informal music learning, her students “can hear it [music], they can jam” (p. 83).

What Does This Mean for My Classroom?

In addition to formal instruction, elementary music teachers might consider incorporating informal music learning activities in their classrooms. Potential benefits of providing elementary students with opportunities to experience informal music learning include an increase in student motivation and development of students’ independent musicianship. Elementary music teachers can vary the amount of freedom and control they give their students in the selection of repertoire and the organization of students into small groups and can provide their students with different types and amounts of scaffolding in order to help them experience success with informal music learning activities.
“Elementary Students’ Definitions and Self-Perceptions of Being a ‘Good Musician’”

What Did the Researcher Want to Know?

What do elementary students believe it means to be a “good musician” and to what extent do they perceive themselves to be “good musicians?”

What Did the Researcher Do?

Shouldeice (2014) individually interviewed 347 students in grades one through four. The students answered questions pertaining to the kinds of things a good musician can do, how one knows if a person is a good musician, and who can be a good musician. At the conclusion of each interview, each student was asked to choose the statement that best described him/herself (see scale in Figure 1) and explain why.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>I am NOT a good musician.</th>
<th>I am an OK musician.</th>
<th>I am a PRETTY GOOD musician.</th>
<th>I am a VERY GOOD musician.</th>
<th>I am one of the BEST musicians in my class.</th>
</tr>
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Figure 1. Scale to measure students’ perceptions of themselves as ‘good musicians’.

What Did the Researcher Find?

While students across all grade levels most commonly described a “good musician” as someone who plays an instrument, practices, and/or sings well, other characteristics fluctuated across grade levels, suggesting that students’ perceptions of what it means to be a “good musician” may change over time in relation to their own experiences. Statistical analysis showed that students in grade one perceived themselves as better musicians than did students in upper grade levels, indicating that elementary students’ perceptions of their own musical ability may diminish as they get older.

Qualitative analysis of the data revealed that some children’s ability self-perceptions were based on how they believed others perceived their abilities, such as a first-grade girl who knew she was a good musician “because my [music] teacher always picks me first” (p. 336), or were reached as a result of comparing themselves to others. A number of students believed that innate musical talent is necessary in order for a person to be a “good musician;” their comments included the belief that “only some people are born with the talent” and “either you got it or you don’t” (p. 339). Additionally, responses from some students implied the belief that skill in certain musical genres or modes of music making do not qualify one as a “good musician,” such as one second-grade boy’s statement that rappers and beat-boxers cannot be good musicians and that he himself was not a good musician despite describing himself as a “rapping pro.”

What Does This Mean for My Classroom?

Elementary music teachers should be aware of the tendency for students’ musical ability self-perceptions to diminish over time and work to help students maintain positive musical identities as they get older. Teachers also should be aware of the ways in which they might inadvertently communicate their own judgments of students’ musical abilities and/or beliefs about the value of certain musical genres or modes of music making. Additionally, teachers can encourage students to focus on effort and practice as determinants of musical ability rather than emphasizing innate musical talent.

The Value of Research in “Real Life”

Rather than assuming we know what is effective or doing something because “that’s how we’ve always done it,” music teachers can advance their teaching practice in an evidence-based way by reading current music education research. Research can illuminate phenomena pertaining to music teaching and learning, moving the profession forward by informing our actions in the classroom, encouraging us to try new ideas, and posing new questions for further exploration. Specifically, the implications discussed in this article illustrate ways in which research findings can shape practice for elementary general music teachers.

In providing these summaries of recent research studies, my hope is to not only provide a bit of insight to inform your teaching practice but also to inspire you to read more research, including the full articles cited. As a member of the Michigan Music Education Association and the National Association for Music Education (NAfME), you have access to NAfME’s free online journals, including General Music Today and Update: Applications of Research in Music Education, both of which are excellent sources of music education research publications. Recent articles in these journals that are of particular interest to elementary general music teachers include Hedden’s (2012) review of research on children’s singing and Koops and Keppen’s (2015) review of research on enjoyment in musical interactions.

In addition to reading more music education research, you might also consider getting involved in music education research yourself! Teacher research, sometimes called ac-
tion research, is a way for teachers to pose questions and gather information regarding what goes on in their own classrooms as a means for “gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment (and on educational practices in general), and improving student outcomes” (Painter, n.d., para. 3). If there is a topic you are curious about or a problem you want to solve in your classroom, why not conduct your own teacher research project? If do not feel knowledgeable (or adventurous!) enough to conduct research on your own, you might contact a music education faculty member at one of the Michigan colleges/universities in your area to let them know you would be willing to allow them to conduct a research project in your classroom. All three of the studies summarized in this article took place in Michigan and involved local teachers and/or students!

Regardless of how you might choose to get involved, I hope you acknowledge the value of music education research. It is not just for those in the “ivory tower.” Research has the power to illuminate teaching practice, inform your day-to-day actions in the classroom, and help you provide the best possible music learning experience for your students.

References


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