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Creating Opportunities for Voice and Choice: Elementary Students’ Participation in an After-School Music Composition Group

By

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Abstract

In this qualitative study, I explored the potential of music software to facilitate a sense of agency, and the development of a “musician voice” among participants in an after-school composition group. Six fourth- and fifth-grade students participated in weekly sessions in which they used GarageBand to arrange, record, and compose music. Participants developed idiosyncratic processes for creating, and drew inspiration from their own music and life experiences. They valued the opportunity to compose original musical content using MIDI keyboard controllers and felt a strong sense of ownership and personal pride in their creations. The results of this study suggest that when students are provided with an optimal level of freedom and flexible tools that meet their needs, composition can lead to personally meaningful musical engagements.

Keywords: agency, voice, technology, creativity, music education

“Any choice of pedagogical practice implies a conception of the learner . . . Pedagogy is never innocent” (Bruner, 1996, p. 63).

Influenced by critical theorists such as Freire (1998, 2000), hooks (1994, 2003), Apple (1995, 2004), and Lather (1991), educators have become increasingly attuned to issues of power, control, and agency in the classroom. Within the field of music education, scholars have noted the autocratic practices still prevalent in many music classrooms, and have explored means of making music education more collaborative, reflexive, and responsive to the needs and interests of learners (e.g. Abrahams, 2005; Allsup, 2003; Blair, 2009; Davis, 2008; Green, 2002, 2008; Schmidt, 2005; Wiggins, 1999). As Blair (2009) notes, “Valuing students and respecting their agency about what they are learning, doing, and living are key attributes of a successful learning community” (p. 180).

Davis (2008) argues for the importance of fostering what she calls “a musical say” (p. 15) whereby students’ experiences, strategies, and processes of meaning-making are respected and used to guide learning (p. 362). “A musical say is much more than having an opportunity to contribute in an ensemble rehearsal setting,” Davis writes. “It is also the development of musical voice through ownership, agency, relevance, and personal expression . . .” (p. 16). Blair (2009) likewise suggests that underlying her own students’ sense of agency is “. . . the development of a ‘musician voice,’ a sense of self as a person with personhood validated by others when expressed musically” (p. 183).

Creating music can be a particularly powerful means of developing students’ sense of voice and agency in the classroom. Investigators of children’s compositional processes have noted that, when provided the opportunity and tools, children frequently use composition

opportunities to communicate what is important to them. Utilizing a non-intervention protocol, Stauffer (2002) found that sixth-grade composers were influenced by their sociocultural contexts and created music that was “personally meaningful and satisfying to them” (p. 320). Barrett (2003) views composition as a dialogue of meaning-making, in which children “expropriate the surface features and deep structures of the music they encounter in order to appropriate and submit them to their own intentions and accents” (p. 10). As children organize, manipulate, and think in sound, they convey what is meaningful to them. Composition, according to Barrett, can then “become an act of developing both self-knowledge and cultural knowledge” (p. 295). Likewise, Gromko (2003) believes that when children are allowed to engage with the music that is personally meaningful to them and to invent their own systems for documenting music making, they indicate what they find most important and make direct associations between music and actions, feelings, and thoughts (p. 71).

While composition has potential as a means of fostering a sense of voice and agency among students, Wiggins (1999) notes that “. . . because of our long history of teacher control and our assumptions that students do not really know very much about music, teachers sometimes construct creative assignments in ways that not only fail to promote creative thought but may actually hamper it” (p. 31). Restrictive instructions and insistence on notation are two common features of lessons that can limit creativity. Instead, Wiggins advocates “enabling parameters” (p. 33) that provide just enough structure to offer a jumping off point. Says Wiggins, “Students can use what they know about the music—what they have learned in the classroom and what they have learned living in the world—to create original musical works if we will only get out of their way and let them do it” (p. 35).

Music technology can remove many of the traditional stumbling blocks facing novice composers—particularly the need for notational fluency—and may help students to approach the creation of music in new ways. For example, Tobias (2012) studied the participation of secondary students in a songwriting and technology class and found that in this context participants acted as “hyphenated musician[s]” (p. 329) assuming multiple, overlapping musical roles including songwriter, performer, sound engineer, and producer. Other researchers (e.g. Crow, 2006; McDaniel, 2000; Ruthmann, 2007, 2012; Stauffer, 2002; Tobias, 2010, 2013; Watson, 2011) have explored technology as a means of engaging students in compositional experiences that maximize their freedom and provide opportunities for self-expression.

My own desire to facilitate empowering compositional experiences for students, and my interest in exploring the potential of music software to encourage student creativity, agency, and the development of a “musician voice,” prompted the present study. I created an after-school composition group for fourth- and fifth-grade students attending Piestewa Elementary School¹ and examined the participants’ processes and experiences as they created their own music.

History of the Project

Piestewa Elementary School is an urban, public elementary school serving approximately 470 students. Nearly 90% of the students qualify for free or reduced price lunch.² The school specializes in technology and provides each student with an Apple laptop computer and teachers use a variety of technologies to enhance learning. The ready availability of computers and the willingness of faculty and students to participate made Piestewa

¹ The names of the participants and their school have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

² In the United States, the number of students receiving free or reduced price lunch often serves as an indicator of the socio-economic status of families served by the school.

Elementary School an ideal setting for this study.

I asked the school's music teacher and fourth- and fifth-grade teachers to recommend students who they believed would be interested in the after-school program. The teachers responded by nominating six students aged 10-11, three of whom were in the fourth grade and three who were in the fifth grade. Students Samuel, Carly, Rosa, Andrés, Isabella, and Victoria agreed to participate in the project and we arranged to meet for 75 minutes each Wednesday over the course of ten weeks.

I chose GarageBand as the compositional software because of its ease of use, sophistication, and availability at Piestewa Elementary. I had worked with GarageBand before and was impressed by its simplicity for new users and its potential to keep up with more demanding musicians. At the most basic level, GarageBand enables users to select from a library of pre-recorded music loops, and to arrange them along a timeline. By selecting and arranging loops, novices can create appealing music in a relatively short time. The program has far greater potential, however. Loops can be transposed to create chord progressions, and the individual pitches, rhythms, and instrument of MIDI-based loops can easily be altered. Musicians can also input their own content by recording through a microphone, by plugging instruments such as bass or guitar into the computer through an audio input device, or by using a keyboard or other type of MIDI controller. Though not available at the start of the project, I eventually acquired six keyboard controllers that could be used to input MIDI data into GarageBand.

Mindful of Freire's (2000) belief that a teacher should "trust in people and their creative power" (p. 75) I prepared to act as a facilitator, willing to learn, to exchange ideas, and to problem-solve as a "critical co-investigator" (p. 81) with students. I planned a series of

composition and improvisation activities to help participants become comfortable with the software but expected to adapt or omit these in response to the students' needs and interests.

Procedure

The first meeting of the composition group took place in December, just a few days prior to the school's winter break. Using the classroom SMART Board—an interactive, touch-sensitive whiteboard onto which we projected GarageBand—I showed the group members how to work with pre-recorded loops and we took turns selecting and dragging them into our collaborative piece. The students caught on quickly and enjoyed selecting, adding, and extending loops, although they were initially indiscriminate with their placement and length. Several members informed me that although they had never used GarageBand to create music, they had created podcasts in other classes. This familiarity with the software gave them a degree of confidence, and they were soon exploring, discovering features, and sharing their discoveries with one another. The first session finished with the group members playing their loop-based creations for each other and filling out a short survey with basic personal information and their hopes for the class.

When we met again in January, Isabella and Victoria eagerly showed me the pieces they had created over the holiday. I was impressed by the interesting sounds they had selected and the musical cohesion of each piece. I asked how they had decided what loops to select and Victoria stated what would become a familiar refrain for group members: “I just tried to find sounds that ‘fit.’” During the second session, I demonstrated how to record audio using the computers' internal microphones. The recorded audio could then be trimmed, manipulated using filters, and combined with other sound loops. Each student selected a page from *Listen to*

the Desert (Mora & Mora, 1994), a picture book describing desert sounds in English and Spanish. The students chose classroom instruments and worked alone or in pairs to record sound effects and narration for each page of the story.

While group members enjoyed the *Listen to the Desert* activity its somewhat rigid structure left little time for exploration and experimentation. Moreover, many of the initial activities required more explanation than I anticipated and left little time for the group members to experiment and create on their own and in their own ways. Although the students were patient and accommodating, I believe that the highly structured tasks I presented during these first weeks unduly limited their opportunities to explore and contributed to a vague sense of frustration among the participants.

In the next session I endeavored to provide students with a greater opportunity to explore the software. I challenged the students to create the “weirdest” music they could. Andrés, the quietest member of our group, whisper “cool!” and the students threw themselves into the task. They were enthusiastic about sharing their creations with each other and energized in a way that

I had not seen before. The label of “weird” seemed to free participants to play and try out ideas without fear of judgment. This was one of several lessons the students taught me about the importance of psychological safety when creating music.

A turning point in the project came in the fourth week, when I acquired enough MIDI keyboard controllers for each student. Rather than set forth a particular task or even demonstrate what the keyboards could do, I stood back and observed. The students were engrossed for the entire session. Having acquired a basic understanding of the software and equipped with an

exciting new tool and the opportunity to experiment with it, the students constructed their own learning. From that point on I became an observer, as the participants went on to develop their own processes and create a variety of musical products.

Samuel, Carly, Rosa, Andrés, Isabella, and Victoria all demonstrated pride in their accomplishments, and valued the opportunity to share their progress with each other at the end of each session. The Super Groovy Garage Band Club, as the students dubbed our group, was unanimous in its decision to host a concert, which became the culminating activity of the project.

The concert took place in the music room. Each musician invited members of their family, friends, their classroom teachers, and the school principal—approximately thirty people in all. The members arrived early and eagerly volunteered to fill various roles. “Hosts” greeted guests at the door and distributed programs, “Masters of Ceremony” welcomed everyone and introduced the group, and “Demonstrators” gave the audience a brief lesson on GarageBand using the SMART Board. Each student then introduced her or his piece and played it on the SMART Board. Audience members were able to see the construction of each piece as it played, which added an interesting visual component to the performance. At the conclusion of the concert, the composers enjoyed a final round of applause and joined their families and friends for refreshments.

Over the course of the project I collected data from multiple sources. I conducted frequent interviews with the participants and their music teacher, took field notes during or soon after each session, and kept a research journal documenting my comments, questions, and hunches as the sessions progressed. The students provided written feedback several times during

the study and responded in writing to prompts I gave them. I video- or audio-recorded each session as well as the final concert, and I retained copies of the students' musical compositions. Following the conclusion of the project I assembled the data record and reviewed it multiple times searching for themes related to the research questions and for other insights.

Findings

Because of the open-ended nature of the project and the flexibility of the GarageBand software, participants developed their own processes for creating music. These processes were unique to each composer and tended to change as the students gained experience and found the confidence to try new things. While each approached composition in a slightly different way, all relied heavily on experimentation and repeated listening, and were guided by a sense of what sounded "right." "I got pretty good at hearing what sounds good and hearing things that you wouldn't hear otherwise," Samuel told me. Victoria proceeded by trial-and-error:

I just started putting loops in and then I listen to them and see if they sound good or not. The ones that did I left them there and then I put more in and I listened to it and if I didn't like it I made another one and it sounded better so I kept it. And then when we got keyboards. I put a little bit of those in and I thought it was pretty cool.

Rosa composed a melody for one of her pieces using the keyboard controller. Like Victoria, primarily her ears and a sense of musical "fit" guided her. "I just played all the notes [until] I got something and then I started recording it," she said. Rosa built her melody in sections, recording a fragment and then experimenting until she found the next gesture.

Andrés used mood as a point of departure for many of his compositions. "One day I feel excited so I make an excited song," he explained. "When I feel happy I make a happy song, when I feel

sad I make a sad song.” For Andrés, composing served as a way to both express and regulate his emotions. “It helps me. When I’m feeling happy again I can just play that [happy] song, and when I’m feeling sad again I can play that [sad] song.” His favorite composition was ‘Beach Song,’ “because,” he said, “it really relaxes me. When I’m stressed and tired it really gets the stress out.” Carly and Isabella also discussed mood in relation to their music. Carly called her favorite piece “Bouncing and Smoothing Song.” “When you’re feeling sad or something you can listen to that piece and feel happy,” she said. Isabella favored “The Groovy Smoothies,” because “it was long” and made her feel “happy and jumpy.”

Using keyboard controllers was an important part of the project for these students. Not only were the keyboards prized as “authentic” instruments seldom used in regular music class, they enabled participants to create musical content of their own. Victoria observed that the loops included with GarageBand were “something that somebody else made up” which could then be used to create new pieces. While she didn’t always use the keyboard controller, she valued the option “. . . because you could play whatever you wanted.” Rosa shared a similar perspective. “It’s fun to make songs with the keyboard,” she commented. “It changed things because you got to make your own notes.” Samuel, too, felt the keyboard was an important tool for creating his own music. “If you can’t find the right sounds or something you could make your own, or make your own pieces with the keyboard. If you couldn’t really find something that works with your song you could use that.”

All of the participants experimented with the keyboard at some point during the project, often by adding a melody or a rhythmic accompaniment to a loop-based composition. Samuel, Rosa, and Andrés also created music using only the keyboard. The first half of Andrés’ “Piano

Song,” for example, employed a three-note motive that he transposed, inverted, and finally played on a dissonant chord that resolved to the tonic. Samuel challenged himself to create an entire piece using only the keyboard. “I was trying to do it without loops just to try something different,” he said. Samuel described his process, which took place over a single class. “I did one piece of it after another,” he recalled. “I recorded the first part and then decided what would come next. I played it for a bit without recording to see what would fit best next and I did it in sections.” The resulting piece was sensitively performed, distinctly classical, and was based on several motives. Of the results Samuel concluded, “I think it’s pretty good.”

Creating Musical Products

The students’ musical products were unique to them and grew out of their own musical ideas and preferences. Victoria said she enjoyed making her own music because “. . . it sounds like you made it. It sounds like a kid made it, it doesn’t sound like an adult made it.” Samuel agreed, “I could make things that were what I wanted to hear. When other people make music, *some* things you like but this way you could make just what you want it to sound like.” He suggested that more students be involved in a similar program, “To feel like they finished something. They can be proud they made their own thing and can listen to it.” Rosa said she enjoyed making her own music because “you can do anything with it; make it long or shorter, weird, make it soft or loud.” Similarly, Victoria said she valued composing her own music because “You can make it crazy and you can make it however you think. You don’t have to make it how somebody tells you to make it.” By creating music that was truly their own, the students experienced agency and a sense of their own musical voice.

Sharing With Others

The students were eager to share what they were learning with others. Outside of our sessions they regularly adopted the role of teacher and facilitator for classmates, friends, and family who were interested in creating their own music. “I think it’s a better way to learn with GarageBand,” Andrés said, “because if somebody in your class doesn’t know how to use it, you can go and help them out.” Isabella agreed, “[I feel] happy because I get to show my family and friends. And they all ask me ‘how do you do that?’ and I show them the loops and stuff like that.” “I taught my cousin and two of my friends,” Carly told me. “Any free time that we have we go on [the computer] and play with the loops.” Victoria reveled in her ability to share what she was learning with those around her:

I showed my mom when I took my computer home . . . I just played [the loops] for her and she got to pick them out, and when we were finished we showed it to my brothers and sisters and they thought it was pretty cool. Then I showed them how to make one and then we showed it to our neighbors because we have little girls in our neighborhood. Then we took pictures and we made a podcast about it.

The concert provided another opportunity for participants to share their creations with the important people in their lives. Carly said she valued “making the music and seeing my cousin and my teacher there,” and Samuel found the performance “fun because I got to tell about all our music and show our family and friends and everyone.” For Andrés and Victoria, the performance also provided them with a chance to share something of themselves. Andrés said that the concert was important in order to “let the people hear what [we] made, like, [our] talent” and Victoria noted, “you could show them what you thought about in your imagination.”

The personal nature of composition was also evident in how nervous each participant felt when presenting his or her music. For Carly the concert was initially “kind of hard because you didn’t know what the people were going to say.” She recalled, “When I pushed the button I was like, ‘oh my gosh!’” When the audience broke into applause for her first piece, an eerie programmatic work entitled “Aliens!” Carly was elated. “I felt great. . . . It feels like I’m a star or something,” she said. Samuel’s performance shared a similar emotional trajectory. “At first [I was] kind of scared,” he said. “Like what if people didn’t like it, or if they would think it was good?” As Samuel started his first piece, anxiety gave way to pride. “When you hear it start then you’re kind of like, you made it! You’re excited to hear your own music.” Andrés commented that although he was nervous, he valued the opportunity to share something of himself with others. “I liked it because I can show [the audience] what I know and some of my expressions and feelings about the music,” he said. Victoria agreed, “I thought it was fun because the teachers came and listened to what *we* thought sounded good. That was my favorite part.”

Developing Confidence

An unexpected outcome of the project was the sense of self-confidence gained by several students. Isabella said that her shyness began to wane as she got to know the other musicians in the group. “At first I was scared because I didn’t know the people that were joining but now I know them and they talk to me and I’m not shy anymore,” she said. Victoria recalled growing more confident as she introduced her pieces at the concert: “I was shy at first and didn’t want to say it but after I did the first one I was ready to do it and [I knew] I didn’t have to be shy and not talk very loud.” Andrés, who early in the project was quiet to the point of being inaudible,

volunteered to serve as the concert master of ceremony. He explained this choice simply: “I thought nobody was going to be the MC so I thought it would be a good idea for me.” With a small smile he added, “I learned that if I let my shy go away it will be much better.”

Discussion

Freire (2000) criticized what he termed the “banking model” of education, which positions the teacher as knower and projects onto students “an absolute ignorance . . . [that is] a characteristic of the ideology of oppression” (p. 72). The long-held assumption that students bring with them minimal musical knowledge is characteristic of this perspective. Wiggins (1999) rejects this view of young people and argues that students bring with them “enormous amount of musical knowledge of our culture gleaned from living within that culture” (p. 30).

The Piestewa project, like other creative opportunities, enabled students “to articulate and share what they know and understand about music without the added complication of having to know the vocabulary to describe and label what they know (Wiggins, 2009, p. 30). Participants were both aware of and able to make musical decisions about phrasing, tempo, timbre, texture, dynamics and affect. Because those concepts were encountered and applied organically in the project of creating music rather than isolated and approached artificially through a particular lesson, the students experienced a greater sense of satisfaction and ownership of their knowledge. As Andrés said, “I liked it because I can show . . . what I know.” This experience relates to Freire’s notion of conscientization. Schmidt (2005) writes, “. . . the process of becoming conscious of one’s knowledge, by engaging in learning that connects concepts to the learners’ own realities, leads students to the point where they ‘know that they know’” (p. 7).

Composition can be a highly personal endeavor. The students involved with this project identified strongly with their pieces and felt both proud and vulnerable as they shared them with others. For these students, composition was not simply making up a song; their creations were intimately tied to who they were and what they cared about. Upitis (1992) concurs, writing that when students ask her to listen to their songs, they are asking her to “listen to what I made up, look at how I wrote it down, see what I can do, and – most important of all – listen to who I am” (p. 151).

The personal nature of composition for these students necessitated a learning environment that was psychologically safe. Participants were the most creative when they felt it was safe to take risks. Early on, I suggested that participants create a piece that sounded “weird” or “crazy.” I believe that the students had placed enormous pressure on themselves to do well and to create music that sounded “good.” This burden lifted, the students were able to create music that was playful, humorous, surprising, and just plain weird. All of the students were eager to share their music at the end of the session, and Rosa remembers this class as her “very best day” with the project.

The software itself may also have helped students to explore and take risks. The prerecorded loops in GarageBand suggested a variety of styles and genres, and served as “enabling parameters” (Wiggins, 1999), providing novice composers with a place to start. The six Piestewa participants quickly learned that they could make music that they liked and that sounded good. They began pushing themselves to create more sophisticated music in more interesting and challenging ways. The open-ended nature of the project and the flexibility of the software enabled these students to progress at their own rate and to derive satisfaction both from their initial efforts and their more advanced creations.

Wiggins (1999) argues, “Students need an opportunity to make music on their own—without unnecessary teacher controls” (p. 35). Allsup (2003) concurs, and describes the value of providing students with opportunities to explore during creative activities. “When students are given space to explore freely,” he writes, “. . . they will create (from one of *their* musical worlds) a context about which they are familiar, conversant, or curious. We might refer to context as a workable space, a landscape for exploring the curiosities of a given genre” (p. 35, italics in original). While I worked to create a democratic learning environment I initially struggled to “let go” and provide students the space and time they needed to explore and develop their own processes. The most powerful educative experiences—for both the students and me—came when I got out of their way. The software provided abundant freedom with enough parameters to support students as they created “workable space” for themselves.

Conclusion

Pedagogy that disrupts traditional power structures and empowers students to have a “musical say” takes careful thought but offers many rewards. Biasini and Pogonowski (1979) stress, “It is far more important in the classroom that the child regard himself as a creative musician, experimenting, interpreting and discovering for himself the concepts and potentials of the art, than that he follow any prescribed pattern of teacher-dominated instruction” (p. 5). This study suggests a possible confluence between the uses of music software and the aims of teachers concerned with student agency. Young people in North America are increasingly technologically savvy and many are comfortable building websites, blogging, making movies, manipulating digital photos, and otherwise creating and recreating digital media. Technology is not a panacea, however it does offer new possibilities to consider. Those teachers who wish to

be more attentive to their students' voices, responsive to their interests, and encouraging of creativity, may find music software a useful tool that students are more than ready to wield.

This study also contributes to an ongoing conversation about ways that teachers can make music education more personally relevant, meaningful, and empowering for students. Findings suggest that composition creates rich opportunities for students to experience agency. When students are provided with an optimal level of freedom and flexible tools that meet their needs, composition can lead to personally meaningful musical engagements.

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