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Instrumental Music Educators' Confidence in Teaching Improvisation

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate instrumental music educators' confidence in teaching improvisation, according to the grade level structure set in the NAfME Achievement Standards. Participants for the study were 204 instrumental music educators who responded to the Survey of Confidence in Teaching Improvisation (SCTI). Descriptive data were computed for all SCTI responses, including means and standard deviations for K-4, 5-8, and 9-12 standards, by years of teaching experience, primary grade levels taught, and experience with jazz. Combined participants reported "moderate confidence" for teaching grade K-4 standards of improvisation, "slight" to "moderate confidence" for grade 5-8 standards, and "slight" to "moderate confidence" for teaching improvisation standards at the 9-12 grade levels. Statistically significant differences were found among the means for all three grade levels ($p < .01$). While respondents found the improvisation standards easier at earlier grade levels, they were more likely to report confidence in their own teaching at higher grade levels, and as a result of experience with jazz ($p < .01$). No statistically significant differences were observed based on years of teaching experience ($p > .05$). Participants reported "slight" to "moderate confidence" in their own ability to improvise, but "moderate" to "great interest" in learning more about how to teach improvisation.

Keywords: improvisation, instrumental music education, teaching methods, creativity, standards

Educators and researchers advocate the use of improvisation in K-12 instrumental music education, suggesting that it affords students a unique means of representing aural and notational stimuli, aids in the comprehension and performance of diverse genres, and enables self-awareness, ensemble cohesion, and free expression (e.g., Azzara, 2002; Feldman & Contzius, 2011; Hamann & Gillespie, 2009; Hickey, 2009; Higgins & Campbell, 2010; Oshinsky, 2004). The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2004) supported the need for all students to develop skills in critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity, while The National Coalition for Core Arts Standards (2013) affirmed improvisation and creativity in general with their development of new music standards. As Campbell (2009) stated, “more than any other experience, improvisation as an instructional technique allows music students to receive a holistic musical training in which music theory, ear training, and performance can be woven together in an information-rich context” (p. 133).

Much research regarding instrumental improvisation has been conducted in jazz settings (e.g. May, 2003; Watson, 2010; Wehr-Flowers, 2006), and many teachers limit perceptions of improvisation exclusively with that genre. Riveire (1997) surveyed 54 California K-12 string teachers regarding implementation of improvisation and found that, while many of the participants demonstrated positive attitudes toward the idea, they tended to associate improvisation exclusively with jazz performance. Stringham, Thornton, and Shevock (2013) surveyed music teacher educators regarding perceptions of creativity in instrumental music education, and also found that respondents tended to assume improvisation would only occur in jazz settings.

Regardless of genre or area of teaching specialization, many music teachers feel inadequately prepared to teach improvisation, and few do so in K-12 classrooms or rehearsals.

In a study of 14 New York State music educators, Bell (2003) found that participants perceived improvisation to be too difficult for elementary school students, and that they lacked confidence in their own abilities to improvise and introduce the practice to advancing students. Brophy (2002) described the results of a survey completed by 237 music educators (primarily elementary general music specialists) regarding preservice preparation to teach. Among other results, only 11.39 percent of survey respondents felt prepared to teach improvisation. Similarly, Madura Ward-Steinman (2007) surveyed participants from six vocal jazz conference sessions and found that they rated their own ability to improvise quite low, and their ability to teach improvisation with decreasing confidence as grade level increased. However, interest in learning more about improvisation was the highest rated survey item.

Byo (1999) surveyed elementary-level music and non-music teachers regarding perceptions of the National Standards for Music Education. Participants for her study were 177 teachers from Florida, who evaluated their abilities to implement each of the nine standards relative to seven categories (training, interest, ability, sense of responsibility, resources, assistance, and instructional time). Results indicated that music specialists felt more comfortable teaching standards than did generalists, but that all teachers stated a need for more time and resources. Music teachers reported improvisation as their least comfortable standard in all seven categories surveyed. Wilson (2003) surveyed secondary-level music educators from Missouri and found that close to half of the respondents had made no changes to their teaching based on the 1994 publication of the National Standards. Furthermore, among those respondents who had made changes, composition and improvisation were the least commonly implemented standards. As Bailey (1993) stated, “One reason why standard Western instrumental training produces non-improvisors is that it teaches that the creation of music is a separate activity from playing that

instrument” (p. 98). While the National Association of Schools of Music (National Association of School Music, 2013) indicated that preservice teachers should acquire a rudimentary capacity to create music through improvisation, the aforementioned literature suggests this instruction is not always sufficient.

The purpose of the current study was to investigate instrumental music educators' confidence in teaching improvisation, according to the grade level structure set in the 1994 National Association for Music Education (NAfME) Achievement Standards. “These standards are designed to reflect a national consensus concerning the highest-priority skills and knowledge young people should have acquired upon exiting grades 4, 8, and 12” (National Association for Music Education, 1994, p. 2), and are thus grouped by grades K-4, 5-8, and 9-12. Specific research questions were: 1) To what degree are instrumental music educators confident in implementing the improvisation achievement standards for grades K-4, 5-8, and 9-12? 2) To what degree are they confident in their own improvisation ability? 3) To what degree are they interested in learning more about how to teach improvisation? 4) Are there differences in confidence among instrumental music educators by years of teaching experience? 5) Are there differences in confidence among instrumental music educators by primary grade level taught? 6) Are there differences in confidence among instrumental music educators based on experience with jazz?

Survey Instrument

The *Survey of Confidence in Teaching Improvisation (SCTI)* was developed by Madura Ward-Steinman (2007) for a study of inservice vocal music educators, in which reliability of the measure was .95 (N = 213). This researcher obtained permission from Dr. Madura Ward-Steinman to use the *SCTI*, and internal consistency of the current survey, using Cronbach's

alpha, was 0.97. The researcher used a 16-item questionnaire to assess participant confidence in teaching NAfME Content Standard # 3: Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments (see Table 1). The following instructions accompanied the survey: “Please rate your confidence in teaching each of the following improvisation activities, as specified in the National Standards for Arts Education. Even if you have had no opportunity to teach improvisation at the stated grade levels, reflect on your confidence in your ability to do so,” and the survey presented items in the order listed. Items one through eleven used the exact wording of the 12 improvisation achievement standards for grades K-4, 5-8, and 9-12. Due to the redundant nature of grades 9-12 achievement standards c. and e., only the c. statement, “improvise original melodies over given chord progressions, each in a consistent style, meter, and tonality,” was included. The survey involved a five point rating scale to indicate confidence in teaching each achievement standard with: 1) no confidence at all, 2) almost no confidence, 3) slight confidence, 4) moderate confidence, and 5) great confidence. The final five questions provided opportunities for participants to rate their own improvisation ability (same scale as above), as well as their interest in learning more about teaching improvisation (no interest at all, almost no interest, slight interest, moderate interest, or great interest) and to indicate their years of teaching experience (0-5, 6-15, or more than 16), primary grade level taught (elementary, middle, or high school), and experience with jazz (yes or no).

Table 1

Survey of Confidence in Teaching Improvisation (SCTI)

- 1) Improvise answers in the same style to given rhythmic and melodic phrases (Grades K-4).
 - 2) Improvise simple rhythmic and melodic ostinato accompaniments (Grades K-4).
 - 3) Improvise simple rhythmic variations and simple melodic embellishments on familiar melodies (Grades K-4).
 - 4) Improvise short songs and instrumental pieces, using a variety of sound sources, including traditional sounds, nontraditional sounds available in the classroom, body sounds, and sounds produced by electronic means (Grades K-4).
 - 5) Improvise simple harmonic accompaniments (Grades 5-8).
 - 6) Improvise melodic embellishments and simple rhythmic variations on given pentatonic melodies and melodies in major keys (Grades 5-8).
 - 7) Improvise short melodies, unaccompanied and over given rhythmic accompaniments, each in a consistent style, meter, and tonality (Grades 5-8).
 - 8) Improvise stylistically appropriate harmonizing parts (Grades 9-12).
 - 9) Improvise rhythmic and melodic variations on given pentatonic melodies and melodies in major and minor keys (Grades 9-12).
 - 10) Improvise original melodies over given chord progressions, each in a consistent style, meter, and tonality (Grades 9-12).
 - 11) Improvise stylistically appropriate harmonizing parts in a variety of styles (Grades 9-12).
 - 12) Rate your own ability to improvise.
 - 13) Rate your interest in learning more about teaching improvisation.
 - 14) Indicate your years of teaching experience.
 - 15) Indicate your primary grade levels of teaching responsibility.
 - 16) Do you have experience teaching or playing jazz improvisation?
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Method

The researcher distributed the *SCTI* by email with a Survey Monkey link to 400 instrumental music educators, selected randomly from the membership directory of a state school music association in the northeastern United States, during the spring semester of 2013. Of these 400 potential participants, 133 had returned completed surveys within one week. At the beginning of the next week, the researcher sent a follow up email and another 51 completed surveys came back, for a total of 184 responses (46 percent of 400).

Due to the concern that nonrespondents' answers might differ from those of respondents, the researcher randomly selected 20 nonrespondents and asked them to complete the *SCTI*. Results of an independent-samples *t* test revealed that nonrespondents did not differ significantly from the respondents in any question category ($p > 0.05$), so the researcher combined nonrespondents' answers with the respondents' data ($N = 204$, 51 percent of 400).

Results

Descriptive data computed for all *SCTI* responses included means and standard deviations according to grade level standards K-4, 5-8, and 9-12, by years of teaching experience, grade level taught, and experience with jazz (see Tables 2, 3, & 4). According to Madura Ward-Steinman's (2007) categorizations, combined participants reported "moderate confidence" for teaching grade K-4 standards of improvisation ($M = 4.06$), "slight" to "moderate confidence" for grade 5-8 standards ($M = 3.74$), and "slight" to "moderate confidence" for teaching improvisation standards at the 9-12 grade levels ($M = 3.46$). The researcher submitted these means to analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures and Bonferroni adjustment, using a Greenhouse-Geisser correction for violated assumptions of sphericity in order to determine differences among the three grade level standards. The analysis found

statistically significant differences among the means for all three grade levels ($F = 79.19$; $df = 1.63, 329.92$; $p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.28$). Thus, on average, participants' confidence in teaching improvisation decreased as grade level of achievement standards increased ($p < 0.01$). Regarding the second and third research questions, combined participants reported "slight" to "moderate confidence" in their own ability to improvise ($M = 3.68$), but "moderate" to "great interest" in learning more about how to teach improvisation ($M = 4.27$).

To answer the last three research questions, the researcher compared participant responses (average of all 11 achievement standards) by years of teaching experience, primary grade levels taught, and experience teaching or playing jazz. Participants with 16 or more years of teaching experience tended toward "moderate confidence" for teaching improvisation ($M = 4.06$), while those with zero to five years or six to fifteen years of teaching experience tended toward "slight" to "moderate confidence" ($M = 3.59$ and 3.44 , respectively). Participants with primary responsibilities for elementary school instruction tended toward "slight confidence" in teaching improvisation ($M = 2.75$), while those primarily responsible for middle school or high school instruction tended toward "moderate confidence" ($M = 3.83$ & 4.10 , respectively). Participants with jazz experience tended toward "moderate confidence" in teaching improvisation ($M = 4.19$), while those without jazz experience tended toward "slight confidence" ($M = 2.89$). A three-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) measured statistical significance, with years of teaching experience (three levels), primary grade level taught (three levels), and experience with jazz (two levels) serving as independent variables, and confidence means of standards for grades K-4, 5-8, and 9-12 serving as dependent variables. Results of the MANOVA revealed statistically significant effects for grade levels taught ($F = 9.48$; $df = 6, 378$; $p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.13$), experience with jazz ($F = 38.92$; $df = 3, 189$; $p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 =$

0.38), and interactions ($F = 4.57$; $df = 3, 189$; $p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.07$), but not for years of teaching experience ($F = 1.60$; $df = 6, 378$; $p > 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.02$).

Post-analysis univariate ANOVAs with Bonferroni adjustment revealed significant differences by primary grade levels taught (K-4 Standards: $F = 6.40$; $df = 2, 191$; $p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.06$; 5-8 Standards: $F = 7.94$; $df = 2, 191$; $p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.08$; 9-12 Standards: $F = 18.47$; $df = 2, 191$; $p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.16$). Teachers with primary responsibilities for elementary school reported less confidence teaching all improvisation standards than did those with primary teaching responsibilities for middle or high school. Analysis revealed significant differences by experience with jazz (K-4 Standards: $F = 26.92$; $df = 1, 191$; $p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.12$; 5-8 Standards: $F = 62.05$; $df = 1, 191$; $p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.25$; 9-12 Standards: $F = 115.64$; $df = 1, 191$; $p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.38$). Participants with experience teaching or playing jazz reported greater confidence teaching all improvisation standards than did those without jazz experience.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Confidence in Teaching Improvisation by Grade of Achievement Standard (K-4, 5-8, and 9-12) and by Years of Teaching Experience

Years	N	K-4 Mean/ <i>SD</i>	5-8 Mean/ <i>SD</i>	9-12 Mean/ <i>SD</i>
0-5	30	4.12/.97	3.53/1.41	3.13/1.40
6-15	79	3.71/1.09	3.42/1.03	3.20/1.25
16 or more	95	4.33/0.69	4.08/0.66	3.79/0.89
Total	204	4.06/0.94	3.74/0.99	3.46/1.16

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations for Confidence in Teaching Improvisation by Grade of Achievement Standard (K-4, 5-8, and 9-12) and by Primary Grade Level Taught

Level	N	K-4 Mean/ <i>SD</i>	5-8 Mean/ <i>SD</i>	9-12 Mean/ <i>SD</i>
Elementary	33	3.32/0.64	2.58/1.24	2.35/1.33
Middle	96	4.11/1.11	3.92/0.80	3.47/1.09
High	75	4.32/0.61	4.04/0.69	3.94/0.78
Total	204	4.06/0.94	3.74/0.99	3.46/1.16

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations for Confidence in Teaching Improvisation by Grade of Achievement Standard (K-4, 5-8, and 9-12) and by Experience with Jazz

Experience	N	K-4 Mean/ <i>SD</i>	5-8 Mean/ <i>SD</i>	9-12 Mean/ <i>SD</i>
Yes	135	4.42/0.55	4.17/0.59	3.99/0.76
No	69	3.35/1.13	2.90/1.09	2.43/1.11
Total	204	4.06/0.94	3.74/0.99	3.46/1.16

Discussion

Beckstead (2013) stated, “If you ask a group of high school music students to say the first word that pops into their minds when you mention improvisation, their most common response will likely be “jazz,” and if one could somehow measure this, their most common emotion may well be fear” (p. 69). Results from the current study may support this statement, as teachers who had no experience with jazz reported less confidence teaching improvisation than those with jazz experience, and combined participants reported only “slight” to “moderate confidence” in their own ability to improvise. While further research is necessary in order to determine whether

confidence differs based on genre of improvisation taught, non-jazz forms of improvisation may need support.

Several authors have published approaches to non-jazz improvisation (e.g., Agrell, 2008; Hamann & Gillespie, 2009; Hickey, 2009; Higgins & Campbell, 2010; Oshinsky, 2004), and the National Association for Music Education (1994) and Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2004) suggested that all students should have experience with this type of learning, not just those enrolled in jazz ensembles. Higgins and Campbell (2010), for example, described 21 “events” for group improvisation among any combination of instrumentalists. One example encourages relaxation by allowing students to focus breathing before singing any desired pitch. The resulting tone clusters require careful listening and tuning, and transfer to instruments. Similarly, Oshinsky (2004) documented principles and activities from *Music for People*, an “organization that promotes an improvisational approach to music with the goal of empowering people to take part in the arts rather than be passive observers” (p. i). Slogans of the group include, “no wrong notes,” “play what you sing, sing what you play,” and “quality, not quantity” (p. vi).

Sixty-six percent of teachers in the current study reported experience with jazz, and it is possible that those with jazz improvisation experience were more likely than others to accept the invitation to take part in the survey. Future researchers should study differences in jazz experience to help determine more specifically what skills and knowledge might lead to confidence in teaching improvisation. These researchers could also investigate whether it is preservice education, inservice experience, or a combination of the two that influence this confidence.

Teachers who identified elementary school as their primary level of responsibility reported less confidence in teaching improvisation than did those who teach primarily middle

school or high school, supporting previous research by Bell (2003) and Brophy (2002). Jazz bands, often including improvisation, tend to occur at the high school level, and sometimes in middle school, but there is research to suggest that it is particularly important to improvise with younger students, and to make connections with general music curricula (e.g., Kratus, 1989; 1996). It is important to note that observed differences between elementary and secondary teachers might be due to experience with jazz, not exclusively by grade levels taught. It is also worthy to consider that many instrumental teachers in the state where this study was conducted teach multiple grade levels (the survey required participants to identify *primary* grade level of teaching responsibility). Future research to further examine whether primary grades/ages taught may truly relate to confidence in teaching improvisation may be prudent. Nevertheless, music teachers need support in order to better teach improvisation consistently throughout an instrumental music curriculum, making connections with general music classes and including both jazz and non-jazz styles.

Participants in the current study reported greater confidence teaching improvisation standards at the elementary school level (K-4), followed by middle (5-8) and high school (9-12), as Madura Ward-Steinman found in her 2007 study. While it is possible that bias based on the order of presented achievement standards influenced the result, further research to measure confidence in teaching improvisation using other standards, including those from the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards (2013), which are grouped by labels of novice, intermediate, proficient, accomplished, and advanced for instrumental performing ensembles, is necessary.

“Because most K-12 teachers were not trained as improvising musicians, improvisation is a vague and distant notion, and pedagogical approaches are unclear when they themselves have had no firsthand experience in the process” (Campbell, 2009, p. 137). Inservice teachers in

previous studies reported interest in learning more about teaching improvisation (Byo, 1999; Madura Ward-Steinman, 2007; Riveire, 1997), as did participants in the current study. Early-career teachers did not differ significantly from more experienced teachers regarding confidence in teaching improvisation, which could suggest that preservice settings foster improvisation, but could also suggest that inservice teachers are not seeking opportunities to improve improvisation instruction as their careers progress. Further investigation, as well as curricular collaborations among P-16 music educators from various specializations, will likely improve confidence in teaching improvisation, and thus the vitality of instrumental music education.

Epilogue

During the spring semester of 2013, the researcher collected data based on the 1994 Standards of the National Association for Music Education (NAfME), formerly known as Music Educators National Conference (MENC). However, in June of 2014, NAfME released new music standards in cooperation with the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards. Instead of nine content standards with corresponding achievement standards, the new materials revolve around four artistic processes of creating, performing, responding, and connecting. Regarding improvisation, instead of being listed as standard number three with the corresponding achievement standards used in this study, it is now included among anchor standards, process components, essential questions, and enduring understandings of the “creating” artistic process. For example, instrumental music educators are now encouraged to have students improvise through anchor standards of imagining, planning/making, and refining/presenting at levels of novice (i.e., 4th or 5th grade), intermediate (i.e., middle school), proficient (i.e., early high school), accomplished (i.e., traditional high school student), and advanced (i.e., students who could major in music at the collegiate level).

Further research to determine whether the structure of these new standards might impact perceptions of instrumental music educators regarding confidence in teaching improvisation is necessary. In-service continuing education will be important for keeping current teachers informed, as will updates to teacher education programs. Possible outcomes include improvisation becoming combined with composition to the extent that the creating artistic process becomes interpreted as an either/or choice. Thinking more positively, the positioning of creating as one of only four artistic processes (and appearing first among those four) could inspire instrumental music educators to think more carefully about how they might incorporate improvisation into a traditional performance-based curriculum. Regardless, further research will be important in helping the profession move forward during this time of change.

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