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Research to Practice: Issues of Relevance for Massachusetts Music Educators

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Research for Practice: Educator-Identified Topics and Implications from Research

*At last year's conference a group of music education researchers and educators met to identify current issues that were deemed critical to teachers. The purpose of this meeting was to connect educators with researchers who would then summarize the most current findings from research on each topic and then offer implications for practice at a panel session at the 2019 conference. The following article is a preview of several of the topics that will be shared by music education researchers at the panel session, *Research for Practice: A Working Partnership*. In addition to the topics introduced below, I will also present about music learners and mental health and we will invite questions from the audience. We hope that you will attend and benefit from findings and implications shared by leading researchers from across the Commonwealth, and also to add your voice to the discussion. Following the panel presentation, we hope to identify a new set of issues facing educators that will inform our focus of the next research to practice panel at the 2020 conference.*

Tawnya D. Smith
Chair of the Research and Teacher Education Council, MMEA
Assistant Professor of Music Education, Boston University

Action Research as Professional Development

Ruth A. Debrot, Boston University

Action research is typically undertaken in school settings by classroom teachers (Ferrance, 2000). It is a research methodology that allows teachers to look for practical solutions to every-day, real problems in education for the purpose of improving teaching and learning. The purpose of doing action research is to allow educators to engage in the immediate and continuing betterment of practice rather than merely being informed by outsiders (Debrot, 2016). Most importantly, action research empowers classroom teachers by allowing them to examine matters of concern that are closely related to their own educational practice.

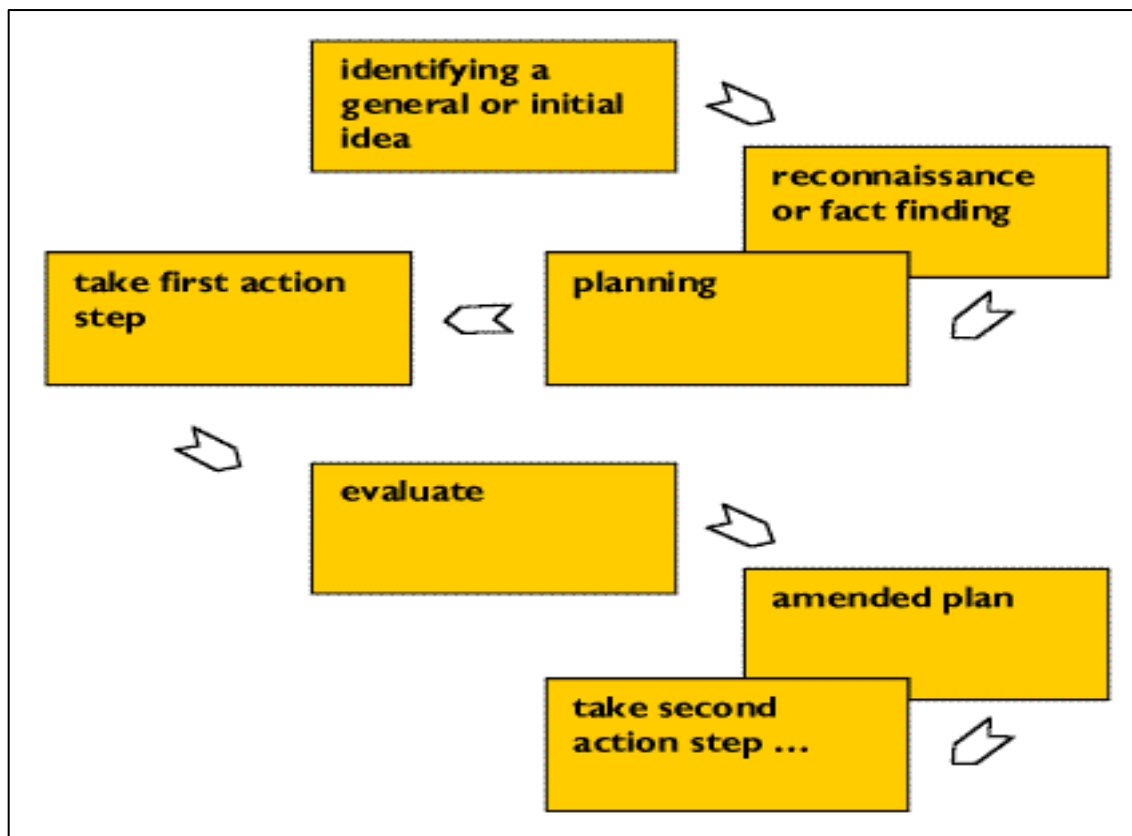
A unique characteristic of action research methodology is that it is a reiterating cyclical process carried out by teachers and students in the classroom (See Figure 1). Topics under investigation are of immediate interest to the participants within a particular school. In education, action research is based on the following suppositions:

- Teachers and other stakeholders work best when attempting to solve relevant educational problems they have identified for themselves.
- Teachers become more effective educators when they are encouraged to examine and reflect on their own work or are encouraged to consider ways to perform their work differently.
- Working collaboratively to solve problems of immediate concern in the classroom is an effective and relevant form of professional development that empowers teachers.

The idea of conducting research in a “natural” setting is not new. It may be traced back to the work of Kurt Lewin (1946), a social psychologist and educator. Lewin is credited with developing a “cyclical process involving a “non-linear pattern of planning, acting, observing, and

reflecting on the changes in the social situations” (Noffke & Stevenson, 1995, p. 2). Implicit in cyclical nature of action research is the idea that teachers will engage in questioning, gathering data, reflection, and action. After completing an initial action cycle, participants continue to move forward by identifying additional questions or concerns and making subsequent improvements and revisions.

Figure 1: Lewin’s Diagram of Action Research (Public Domain)



Source: Smith, M. K. (2001).

Conducting action research can be an empowering process for teachers. When research is conducted in a natural setting, i.e., the music classroom, it can be a highly relevant form of professional development. More importantly, action research can have a direct and positive impact on music teaching and learning.

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Through the Looking Glass: Label, Identity, and Inclusion

Sommer Forrester, University of Massachusetts Boston

In the final moments of musical phenomenon, *Hamilton*, the cast belts out the words penned by Lin-Manuel Miranda:

Who lives?

Who dies?

Who tells your story?

These enduring questions posed by the songwriters speak to implicit relationship among identity, power, hierarchy, voice, and social order.

In 1998, music educator and sociologist Christopher Small wrote, “Music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do” (p. 2). Small’s quote acknowledges the enactment of music as a social reality, which “establishes in the place where it is happening as a set of relationships,” (p. 13) and it is through those relationships that *musicking* is assigned meaning. Thus, *musicking* is something we do - and through this activity, people connect with each other, form relationships, and meaning about themselves and their identity.

As music educators, we interact and engage with students in a creative capacity that is dependent on trust, communication, and the space for all parties to experience self-validation and safety. How can music educators create inclusive and safe spaces that privilege voice and provide students with the opportunity to tell their own story? Humans have a predisposition for categorizing, for labeling, and have done so since the beginning of time. There is an advantage in labeling, in that it provides human with a general sense of *what is what*. Implicit in the examination of identity and perceived identity, is the notion of labeling.

Although humans have a natural tendency to make categorical distinctions, the labels and meanings are socially constructed (Powell & Menendian, 2017). The act of labeling provides a space to acknowledge, define, and note differences. At the same time, the act of labeling assumes certain people are included or excluded from a predetermined, pre-identified, group. The notion of a real or imagined space and identity, begs the question how are terms and representations of identity determined, assigned, and by whom? How does this appropriation relate to power, hierarchy, race, culture, and class?

In his book *Against Common Sense*, Kevin Kumashiro (2009) describes his frustration with the limitations of multicultural approaches to music education. Kumashiro explains; “Too often, we teach and learn about differences in ways that are simplistic and, therefore, comforting” (82). Kumashiro’s theory of anti-oppressive education centers around four different approaches to educating: Education for the Other, Education About the Other, Education that is Critical and Privileging of Othering, and Education that Changes Students and Society (Kumashiro, 2000). Kumashiro discusses the benefits and disadvantages of each of these approaches in his writings. Kumashiro defines “Other” as referring “to those groups that are traditionally marginalized in society, i.e., that are other than the norm, such as students of color, students from under- or unemployed families, students who are female, or male but not stereotypically ‘masculine,’ and students who are, or are perceived to be, queer” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 26).

How can music educators create inclusive and safe spaces that privilege voice and provide students with the opportunity to tell their own story? The labels we adorn are inherited. We are born into them without asking – for better or for worse. When we assume that the labels people inherit define an aspect of who they are, we deny their capacity and voice. As we strive to be inclusive, culturally aware, and teach in racially and culturally responsive ways, it is imperative that we embrace diversity, acknowledging difference, and create safe spaces - while taking pause to ensure that in doing so, we are not assigning labels out of habit or convenience. The process of connecting and engaging with others through music, developing a sense of self, and telling one’s story, is a powerful experience that is uniquely human.

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Competition: When it's a Winner, When it's a Flop

Karin S. Hendricks, Boston University

Two of the most common reasons that competition is introduced in music education settings are (a) for the sheer love of competition itself; and (b) as a means of motivating learners to do something musical that they might otherwise not want to do. In this section I explore these two purposes of competition and discuss what research has revealed about the merits and limitations of each.

Competition for competition’s sake. American music education has a long and deep association with competitive festivals, medals, and performance contests, which coincide with its association with sports and the military (Hendricks, 2018; Radocy, 2001). The level of

competitive rigor has become “faster, higher, stronger” to the point that competitive shows can be virtually jaw-dropping and exhilarating, with young performers now able to accomplish technical and artistic goals previously thought impossible. At the same time, music education programs that focus on competition for competition’s sake may only attract students and parents who value competitive activities, while those who might participate in music for other reasons will find other avenues for music making beyond music classrooms (McPherson & Hendricks, 2010).

Students achieve best in the things they value most (O’Neill & McPherson, 2002). It may be, therefore, that an emphasis on competition continues to be reinforced among students who thrive in that particular climate and then go on to teach in the same way they were taught. Meanwhile, other potential music-makers—with a variety of musical skills and values beyond competitive ones—may be left behind (Austin, 1990). Foxborough High School legend Steve Massey recognized that music-making itself is the greatest motivator; therefore, he focused on guest artists, commissioning works, and building a musical community in the band room so that he would attract, promote, and retain lovers of *music* first and foremost (Hendricks, 2018).

Competition for music’s sake. Encouraging students to make music for the love of music is far more likely to sustain lifelong music making than encouraging them to practice or focus out of a desire to win—or out of fear of losing (see Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to “flow” expert Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (1990), “the challenges of competition can be stimulating and enjoyable. But when beating the opponent takes precedence in the mind over performing as well as possible, enjoyment tends to disappear” (p. 50).

Competition within an ensemble (such as seating challenges) may be particularly detrimental to students’ long-term musical enjoyment. Not only does it focus students’ attention upon a non-musical goal, but it may also limit the sense of community that may make all the difference for young musicians’ long-term engagement (Hendricks, 2018). In music programs where competitive festivals are expected and embraced, savvy music teachers can keep the focus on musical goals by using competition *informing* rather than *controlling* ways. In other words, competition can be used to help educate students toward musical mastery and expressive goals that promote a sense of autonomy, competence, and community (Legutki, 2010; Roesler, 2014).

When students are motivated first and foremost by a love of musical achievement, and then given the resources and techniques to develop musical competence, success in competition may naturally follow. Steve Massey has suggested that a focus first on students can be the real prize:

You’ve got to teach your kids what’s important. . . . A lot of young teachers . . . think, “I’m a good teacher because we won a medal.” [But] the truth is that there’s not a correlation. It doesn’t make you a great teacher. Great teachers do more than win medals; they change lives. (Massey, as quoted in Hendricks, 2018, p. 132)

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Gender Identity Research: How to Create Safe and Inclusive Music Classrooms and Ensembles

Stephen Paparo, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Like race, ethnicity, and sexuality, gender is just one aspect of our identity as human beings. Gender identity, simply put, refers to our internal sense of who we are. We express our gender identity through clothing, accessories, hairstyle, voice, mannerisms, and behavior. Labels such as girl, boy, transgender, cisgender, gender queer, gender non-conforming, female and male also communicate how we self-identify. Gender identity research tells us that gender norms and expectations are socially constructed and reinforced, learned from a very young age, and performed throughout our lives. Those who identify or are perceived as male often enjoy power and privilege that other members of society do not, solely based on their perceived gender.

In music education, we can see this learned inequality in a number of ways. For example, cisgender boys tend to play certain instruments (such as trumpet, trombone, or drums) and sing only in their "manly" voice (if at all). Cisgender men primarily conduct high school and professional ensembles. Cisgender girls sing in choir and tend to play other instruments (such as flute or violin). Cisgender women primarily teach elementary music. Those who identify as transgender or gender non-conforming are often not even acknowledged, which leaves them feeling marginalized and excluded from music all together.

But there is much that we can do to "re-teach" these norms while creating safe and inclusive environments. We can affirm the gender identities and expression of all students. We can examine and question implicit and explicit gender messages in music and music activities. We can provide role models that reflect gender diversity. We can use our students' appropriate names and pronouns (including they/them or ze/ze). We can help connect students to support and resources, and advocate for transgender-affirming schools. Research suggests that these actions can help create learning environments in which all students regardless of gender identity can thrive.