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Literature Review: Student Interest and Motivation in Recorder Studies

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Literature Review: Student Interest and Motivation in Recorder Studies

In my experience as a recorder student in 2001-2002, I noticed that recorder learning came quickly to me, but I was slowed down in the group setting by a few classmates who needed that extra attention. This led me to wonder how far into our recorder playing book we would have gotten without the few students who needed that extra time. I eventually disregarded the recorder and looked forward to the excitement and potential of a middle school band instrument. Later as a music education undergraduate college student, I learned about Alexander Technique and the benefits of learning to create good muscle memory building habits, and the effects it can have on our abilities, and I became curious about its potential use in an elementary classroom; I hypothesized that the secret to keeping students interested was their high success on the instrument. Years later, I was given the opportunity to test that theory. I taught recorder at a slow pace, spending extra time on posture and finger placement, and attempted to create great muscle memory for my recorder students. Though they could play effectively, I found that student disinterest began in late-year fourth graders.

Gauthier and McCrary (1999) surveyed professors who teach music methods in elementary music education majors and found that 70% of those professors include recorder learning in their classes. Recorder-based learning has been in the music classroom for around a hundred years. This literature review is an effort to answer the following questions:

1. What does the research show about student interest in recorders?
2. What are the best practices for keeping the learning alive while using recorders?

What does the research show about student interest in recorders?

Many programs in elementary school settings fund and advocate for the use of recorders in the music classroom, but with very few research-based statistics and practices written about it in recent years. An academic publication from Reynolds & Gottschalk in 2009 summarizes a popular theory about why student interest might diminish:

“...they begin to view it as a toy rather than a musical instrument or that they never gained respect for the instrument...On rare occasions, the music teacher might be the reason for negative attitudes or just poor playing technique.” (Reynolds & Gottschalk, 2009 p.1)

Before the turn of the 21st century, one study of 2,481 elementary students reported that 95% of fourth graders liked instrument playing, while only 89% of fifth graders shared the opinion. In fact, all fifth graders reported lower interest in all musical activities compared to their fourth-grade counterparts other than drawing while listening to music. (Bowles, 1998 p.197-201)

In another study, an 8-week recorder unit for fourth graders sparked student interest in the beginning and declined for many students throughout the unit. (Roberts, 2015 p.188) McPherson theorizes that the use of electronic keyboard in classrooms as of late could be a possible reaction against recorders, and in one study were concluded to be the least popular of all instruments amongst children. (McPherson, 2017 per O’Neill, 2001 p. 332) However, these findings should not discourage recorder use in schools, as it does have many benefits, both musical and non-musical. Recorder playing may provide reinforcement of music literacy (Herrold, 2001; Winslow, Dallin, & Wiest, 2001), ability to improvise (Rozmajzl & Boyer, 2006), compositional skill (Stephenson, 2012), musical element recognition (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2014; Marshall & VanHaaren, 2006), coordination/dexterity of the fingers (Campbell & Scott-Kassner,

2014), and it can be modified for young musicians with physical disabilities, providing more accessibility (Darrow, 2012) (per Egger et al, 2013 p.1).

What are the best practices for keeping the learning alive while using recorders?

Generally, music educators young and old can visualize the typical practices for training groups of 4th and 5th graders in recorder use and repertoire, including teaching them the importance of the instrument, guiding learning in the fingerings and embouchure, progressing through a song book and reviewing until precise, and seeking disciplinary action when a student misbehaves in some way with the instrument. Recent findings can contradict a lot of these practices. A study conducted by Egger, Springer and Gooding in 2013 concluded that behavioral contracting in a recorder ensemble environment can have positive consequences in student performance achievement (p.15) Other studies when combined give a sense that a repetitious learning style is best implemented autonomously by the student. A three-year study by McPherson and Renwick in 2001 involving 157 third and fourth graders found that the students who exhibit complex understanding of learning strategies are more likely to progress in their instrument learning than others (p.186), and another study of self-regulated practice behaviors among beginning recorder students found that the use of self-regulated learning strategies while practicing the recorder could be linked to higher performance achievement ability. (Bartolome, 2009 p.49) Using classroom time to enforce responsibility of behavior and self-regulated practice (based on those findings) should improve learning and reduce repetition, which is important to children in these settings. A qualitative study in children's perspectives of participation in music youth arts settings in 2007 found that multiple students comment on the repetitiveness of music classroom learning as opposed to extra-curricular opportunities, complaining about how music curriculum does not change from year to year, rehearsal of a section of music is not helpful to the

majority, and that students should have the ability to rehearse what they think they got wrong individually similar to their youth orchestra extra-curricular experiences. The students also spend a fair amount of time explaining how their mixed-age ensembles make them feel more professional and self-sufficient, which makes them happier even when the material is more difficult. (Barrett & Smigiel, p.45) The same study of musical activity preferences of elementary students by Bowles found that 71% of 5th grade students liked participating in musical programs and large groups, 54% wanted to perform in a small group, and only 26% of students wanted to perform in programs alone. (1998 p.202) Finally, a study in student-selected repertoire and its effect on practicing behavior by Renwick & McPherson in 2002 concluded that the intrinsic motivation of students stemming from selecting their own repertoire resulted in more practice time per note for a piece of music. (p.179)

Conclusion

In this research, we can surmise a common thread of self-regulation and incorporation of student ideas. Giving students the opportunity to define their own goals for achievement, songs for playing, expectations of rehearsal features and amount of time, and consequences for off-task behaviors can improve interest in the recorder. Creating an environment of professionalism seems to bring about a positive experience in your recorder classroom.

The main research yet to be conducted that I would deem vital to addressing this topic would be a qualitative study of 3rd, 4th and 5th graders and their opinions of the recorder. In 2009, Reynolds and Gottschalk scratched the surface of the topic by theorizing that students by and large feign interest in the recorder because it has been defined by sources outside of the music classroom as a toy, and went on to provide some excellent video/audio resources for combating these ideas with children and adults playing recorder instruments at a highly musical and

professional level, and exploring the very much alive culture of recorder playing in Germany

(p.1) If possible, I would like to conduct research within a teacher-researcher role in an elementary school, where I would implement a lesson plan with half of my classes about the musicality, professionalism and transferability of skills that the recorder has and collect qualitative data on the opinions of the students as they progress from 3rd to 5th grade in recorder, then contrast that data with the other half of my classes who would not receive those learning artifacts.

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