

The Importance of General Music Education and Educator Preparation to Equal Opportunity for Children and Youths in U.S. Music Education

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An undergraduate degree in music education encompasses many aspects of teaching and learning in music and sometimes surprising revelations, new understandings as to the value of music education to humankind, and insight into the importance of each area of K-12 music education in the schools. Looking back on a long career as a music educator, since the onset of my undergraduate degree, my understanding has grown substantially as to the importance of general music education to children's musical development, overall well-being and ability to engage in life-long music making. Due to their socioeconomic status and/or family schedule, general music classes are the only formal music education that thousands of Americans will experience during their lives. Although middle school, and especially high school level students are allowed to choose their courses, including ensemble music education, not all have the socioeconomic

ability to do so. For some students, their parents may not recognize the many values derived from participating in an instrumental or choral program, and for others, their parents may not have the economic means or work schedules to support the extra rehearsals, contests and performances that commonly are a part of ensemble classes. For example, in some districts or schools, ensemble rehearsals are scheduled both inside and outside of the school day. To participate in an ensemble group, students must commit to attendance at all rehearsals.

Economic means restrict a portion of high school students from participating in ensemble music classes that require fees for uniforms, instrument rental, contest fees and travel costs. Even in schools where most of these costs are absorbed by the school or school district, there are parents who cannot afford the smaller costs that periodically arise such as fees for group travel, lunch money, and tickets for field trips to performances to name a few. At the high school level, if a student has a part-time job, they might have the ability to cover costs like these themselves. However, at the middle school level, few youths have jobs and are dependent on their parents to cover fees for their education.

Another factor that has bearing on children's and youths music education in the United States is the opportunity for private music lessons. The cost of private music lessons outside of public-school education and fees for afterschool enrichment programs are out of the question for many families.

When one reflects on this situation, one realizes that the opportunities for all children and youths to receive music education are limited and that even public school education may not always provide the equal opportunity for all students that we like to believe exists. At the high school and middle school level, to claim that the opportunity to receive a quality music education is equal for all students just because they are able to choose enrollment in an ensemble class does not necessarily translate as equal opportunity for all. Socioeconomic conditions are a driving factor in youths' ability to choose ensemble music classes.

The quality and availability of general music education in grades Pre-K-8 is also a factor that has bearing on equal opportunity for music education in the schools; especially for children whose families cannot afford to supplement their education with private music lessons and enrichment programs outside of the school day. For these students, only with consistent and substantial quality teaching and learning in general music in the elementary and middle school grades will they develop enough musicianship skills and understanding in music to be able to enter any music class of their choice at the high school level. Not to mention that education in the early grades should also provide groundwork for an individual's life-long engagement in music and other subjects. This statement may seem strong, however, if one compares teaching and learning in other subjects to music it is easy to understand. For example, if an elementary school math program is of poor or average quality and math class is provided only once or twice a week for 30 minutes, will the children be prepared and able to choose higher order math classes in high school? Availability and opportunity for excellent education, regardless of the subject area,

enables choice. In most U.S. school districts, *general music* education is the only opportunity for music education that is equally available to all children and youths in the public schools; i.e., in schools where general music is a required subject in the school curriculum and 100% of the teaching and learning takes place during the school day. And, thankfully, some form of general music is still offered in most U.S. schools. Teaching and learning in general music education must be of the highest quality possible.

Thus, the responsibility on general music educators and the whole profession of music education – from music educator preparation programs and advanced degrees in higher education to those who teach pre-K-8 general music– to nurture the musical potential of the young in our country is staggering. The preparation of individuals to become educators of general music is critical to the wellbeing of U.S. children and youth, the adult portion of U.S. society, and the survival of music education in the schools. When American adults look back on their general music experience in the schools as one of value, one that was enjoyable, and one that provided substantial learning in music towards their lifelong, learning and participation in music, the question of music education as a necessary part of the curriculum will become an issue of the past.

Teaching and Learning in General Music

There are few experiences in this life that are as rewarding as helping other human beings learn. Nowhere in the school curriculum is this truer than in the general music classroom. By nature, children are musical and love to learn about themselves and the world around them through musical activities. According to Levitan, the aptitude to develop musical skills and understanding is part of what it means to be human: musical potential is in the evolution of human heredity (Levitan, 2006).

Music has many meanings and functions in children’s lives (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2014 p. 6.) Not only learning *in* music is important to childhood development, children learn many things about their world *through* music (NAfME, 2000). From songs and music activities that help children develop their bodies, minds and spirits, including the development of understandings about themselves and the behavioral norms of their culture, to learning curriculum content in music and other subjects, the role of music in children’s lives is critical to their musical, aesthetic, social, emotional and kinesthetic development. Connecting music with familiar understandings can help children build on what they already know and have experienced in their home environments. Additionally, music making, and the phenomena of musical experience appears to be a unique way of knowing, and critical to human beings’ ability to express life experience and to make sense of the world (Reimer, 2003). Making music is of critical importance to human wellbeing and meaning making.

Influences on musical development begin early in the life of human beings (Reynolds and Valerio, 2017). In a study that examined the effects of music on unborn children, Woodward (1992) found that the fetus not only hears music, it responds to music. Levitan (2006) proposed that “all humans are born with the capacity to learn any of the world’s musics,” and “that the basis for understanding music is formed during the first few years of life due to rapid neural development after birth and the rapid formation of neural connections continued during the first few years of life” (Levitan, 2006, p. 107). Similarly, in her formative article on teaching and learning in early childhood music, Levinowitz (1998) found that the ability to hear and match pitch, and numerous musical skills are best learned in early childhood during the time that the brain is forming. May (2013) confirmed Edwin Gordon’s (1988) earlier attestations that the critical years for musical development were age 3-5 however warned educators of the possibility of mis-education and its long-range effects if educators were not in full understanding of how to nurture musical ability in the very young and not fully aware of the differences in approaches to music education between music education for young children and approaches to teaching and learning in music for older children (p. 41).

Many veteran music educators readily accept and understand these findings based on their experiences, over the course of their careers, in making music with children and youths. They understand that musical behaviors are learned behaviors and that all children and youths are able to develop musical abilities when given the opportunity and when engagement in musical activities is an ongoing, consistent part of the child’s lived experience. The research discoveries cited here are critical to teaching and learning in general music. They can support general music educators’ understandings and decision-making processes surrounding their teaching, curriculum design, the learning opportunities that might be offered and the possible ways to differentiate and adapt them according to students’ needs.

Children learn *in* and *through* music when general music educators design curriculum content, instruction and activities according to children's social, emotional, cognitive and physical development. Neatly stated, however the acquisition of knowledge, development of musicianship skills and mature understanding in teaching and learning that can make the statement a reality is a tall order. For educators of general music, learning the many developmental stages of children and youth, and numerous learning theories and educational practices including several music-teaching methodologies, and how to apply this knowledge and acquisition of teaching practices in the design of comprehensive, sequentially-ordered, standard-aligned curriculum and instruction, per age level, can be daunting. During degree programs and beyond, learning everything one needs to know and be able to do to enter the field as a general music educator requires perseverance and dedication to the purpose. Additionally, besides the student teaching experience, preparation to enter the field requires extensive field experience in both observation and practice to develop mature understandings in the many aspects of what it means to be a general music educator of humankind. Those who dedicate their lives to a career in general music are often individuals who are dedicated not only to the profession, but to children: their interests, their wellbeing and their futures.

Undergraduates and Preparation Programs for Teaching General Music

The love of making and performing ensemble music is a common motivating factor for those who choose to major in music education. Thus, it is understandable that during the early years of pursuing a degree in music education, few individuals are fully aware of the potential value of general music education to the American public, the importance of becoming a stellar general music educator, and the importance general music methods classes are to the very survival of the career they have chosen to pursue. In university music departments, where preparation in general music is regarded as important as the development of musicianship towards teaching and learning in secondary ensemble performance classes, undergraduates have the opportunity to grow and develop towards a mature understanding as to the importance of general music in the schools and the importance of their own preparation for teaching general music in the schools.

While it is not the purpose of this article to provide a review of the learning goals per methods course, or to remind individuals of the numerous pages of reading and applied fieldwork that is experienced during the pursuit of a degree in music education, a synthesis provided here of a few overriding principles for teaching and learning in general music might serve as a useful list; a helpful reminder of many of the aspects of teaching and learning in general music. Under these principles, *balance* in all areas and aspects of the teaching and learning is key to children and youths' well-being and to the efficacy of the instruction. Developing musical skills and understanding is a life-long process that can and should be an enjoyable one. Part of our role as general music educators is to facilitate that process for our students.

Principles for Teaching and Learning in General Music: A Matter of Balance

There are many areas and aspects of music teaching and learning in general music that require a sense of balance when preparing, planning, and carrying out instruction:

- Balance between the amount of verbal explanation and opportunities for applied music making an educator uses when engaging children in music teaching and learning
- Balance in the amount of time spent to provide students with substantial experience in the various areas of the curriculum with the amount of time spent to rehearse and practice literature towards the performance of a program or concert
- Balance in the variety of styles, ethnic and world musics represented in the materials chosen to support content areas in music, curriculum design and instruction
- Balance in the various practices and strategies chosen for the process of teaching and learning
- Balance between educator-centered teaching and learning that includes the modeling of skills (such as pitch matching and fingering on instruments, etc.) with

student-centered learning that provides students with opportunities to explore, experiment in and create music

- Balance between providing students with instruction to develop musicianship skills and knowledge with opportunities to develop creative thinking through assignments in improvisation and composition
- Balance in how we go about designing assignments aimed to nurture students' creative potential; i.e., balancing the amount of structure and freedom of choice in the actual design of assignments we give to students that are aimed to develop their abilities to solve musical problems, use their creative and critical thinking, and thus develop creative potential in music
- Balance in the various ways we assess students' understanding (those that assess factual understandings, others for skill achievement, and embedded assessment as an authentic way to assess students' ability to apply what they are learning)

Teaching Music within a Balance of Verbal Explanation and Applied Music Making

Children and youths go to their general music classes with the anticipation that they will experience music. It is in the students' interest that general music educators keep verbal explanations short and use as much of the class time as possible to engage the children and youths in music making activities that support the concepts and skills they are learning. Children and youths can be lost in the teacher's explanation of concepts and context and become tired, confused and even lose their desire to try to make the music.

Human beings need opportunities to **construct** their own knowledge and must learn how to think in a **discipline** (the term discipline in this context means **domain** or subject area) in order to truly understand it. It is not enough to learn **about** music through verbal explanations. Children and youths must learn **in** music through active thinking, feeling and bodily doing of music that makes music what it is. In the early years of children's music education, effective nurturing of children's musical potential includes an educator's ability to model musical behaviors (not perform for) and ability to apply practices that are research and practice based and have shown to be successful for nurturing children's musical potential. For example, using the development of children's singing ability as an example, one educational practice that has met with success in helping many children to develop singing ability is the use of solfege. As part of their preparation in methods courses or in post-degree professional development, educators learn how to use solfege as a teaching tool in combination with research and practice-based forms of song teaching. Learning accepted practices is foundational to an educator's development of their own ideas and creative teaching. Another extremely important factor in an educator's ability to successfully nurture and preserve children's singing voices is the educator's knowledge and awareness of the developmental stages of children's vocal ranges – usually learned in methods classes. This knowledge is critical towards an educator's ability to make informed selections in song literature and in understanding what practices, old, new or original, might be possible in nurturing children's singing voices. Engaging the children in the processes of excellent teaching and learning in singing activities, with as limited verbal explanation as possible, supports children's development and joy in singing. Children learn to sing as a result of hearing good vocal models (singers) in their environment, from engaging in singing, and from educators who effectively use song teaching and pitch matching strategies that demonstrate their awareness of the child's singing range and vocal development. These understandings, and the development of the knowhow to apply them, are foundational to successful teaching and learning in general music. They are learned practices, most often learned and developed in methods courses and practiced in field experiences. In preparing and teaching music methods courses, demonstrating and sharing knowledge, and supervising and conducting fieldwork with pre-service educators, college and university educators must also be informed on past, present and emerging practices and research on new and possibly better ways to teach general music. At times limiting, and always balancing verbal explanations with discussion and hands on experiences is also essential in the higher education classroom.

Educators can work towards engaging children and youths in music education in a balance of the ways people make music, namely by **(1) Actively playing or singing music – (2) listening/responding** to music and **(3) creating** music. General music educators can collaborate with classroom educators or work alone to offer students learning opportunities that **(4) connect** experiences in music to their historical, social and cultural contexts (NAfME, 2014). Even during *connecting* experiences, i.e., interdisciplinary teaching and learning that can provide students with meaningful cultural and social-historical understandings, design of instruction should allow for substantial learning in music.

Balance between Variety in Curriculum and Practice for Performances

As musicians, we are well aware of the necessity of practice toward successful, confident performance and that the preparations for performance are in themselves a learning experience. Yet, we can overdo the practice with our students and limit the variety of literature the students learn by having them practice and perfect a small group of songs for a program or concert. It can also be a disservice to our students when other areas of the curriculum are given little time due to the number of class times allocated towards the rehearsing of songs. Knowing that principals and parents will be in the audience, it is easy to perhaps place too much emphasis on the desired product for the upcoming performance instead of on the many content areas and processes in teaching and learning in general music. A balance in our own thinking during planning, preparation and instruction that includes reflection as to the value, purpose and goals of music education can, in part, drive an educator's decisions regarding how much time is devoted to practice towards performance perfection. Being aware and watchful of potential fatigue or boredom in the responses from students is useful towards keeping this aspect of general music in balance. A healthy balance might also help to avoid undesirable behavior from children who might tire of the practice. During the times the general music class time is used for practicing and rehearsing in preparation for a program, focusing on teamwork and the performance as a shared experience with the audience can also help in making the practice, preparation and performing experience a positive one for all students.

Balancing Choices Made for Curriculum and Content Areas

There are **multiple intelligences** within the discipline of music (Reimer, 2003). As educators, we need to understand that children have differences in abilities, differences in background experiences in music, and differences in their current levels of achievement and interests in music. The cultural and socioeconomic situatedness of the school must also be carefully taken into consideration in order to tap into children's backgrounds in music and build on what they know. Successful learning is often dependent on new learning experiences that connect with and build on students' former knowledge. Taking these factors into consideration, we must design curriculum and instruction accordingly, differentiating and adapting as needed.

Vygotsky (1986) and Piaget (Myers, 2004) believed in the importance of experience that would allow for connections between new knowledge and students' former knowledge. Children could form new understandings, or schemas, constructed from a foundation of prior learning experiences. Vygotsky (1986) also argued that children's informal understandings learned in such places as the home combined with formal learning in the school to create new schemas of understanding, all of which were culturally situated. Children grew in their knowledge and understanding by interpreting new information based on schemas they had already formed. Social interactions with educators, adults, and peers were critical to the child's learning and development of new schemas of understanding (Guderian, 2014; Vygotsky, 1986).

Piaget's theories, and especially Vygotsky's social constructivist theory of human learning give rise to an aspect of learning that is critical to our own time: **Culturally responsive** teaching and learning takes into consideration the cultural background of the population of children in a given classroom with the realization that the children are coming to the learning experience from various, particular cultural perspectives and understandings of the world based on their life experiences and what they have seen and heard in their home environments. **Culturally responsive** teaching and learning recognizes that a child's foundations for learning lies in the lived experiences of their culture and home environment (Abril, 2013). Educators who adhere to the wisdom of Piaget and Vygotsky and the many individuals who have further developed their ideas will understand the importance of designing instruction that includes learning experiences that connect to their students' cultural backgrounds and informal learning environments.

Balance in Instructional Practices Including Educator-Directed and Student-Centered Learning

Providing students with a balance between educator-directed instruction and student-centered learning is essential. In music, some educator modeling is necessary for children to learn musical behaviors, and to acquire knowledge and skills in music. Student-centered discovery methods of instruction, where children are given opportunities to apply what they have learned and further construct and deepen their understandings through assignments that require creative problem solving, is also essential to the development of children's creative ability in music.

With limitations on the amount of time general music educators have with their students, it is tempting to "tell" information instead of asking students questions that better engage them in the learning process. Use of *inquiry* during instruction is essential for engaging children in learning curriculum content, in thinking in and about what they are learning, and in using their creative and critical thinking. Use of *inquiry* as a teaching and learning strategy allows children to engage in thinking and learning processes, figure things out on their own, contribute to and be a part of the teaching and learning, develop new understandings and to change preexisting understandings.

Balancing experiences in *sound before symbol* aimed to develop students' understanding of conceptual music knowledge is imperative to the development of children's understanding in music. Children should experience sound before learning symbols and engage in experiences in music many times and in a variety of ways before learning symbol systems. For example, how can one understand the concept of beat unless one has had many experiences in responding to beat through clapping, tapping, moving, and playing the beat of music? It is also beneficial to children's understanding in symbol systems to allow them to create their own ways, i.e., their own symbol system for showing and sharing their creative music products.

Due to the nature of music, and the strong connection between cognitive and kinesthetic ability needed towards to acquisition of skills, the study of music requires order, often a sequentially designed music curriculum that includes consistent reinforcement of skills and many opportunities to practice and apply learning in both learned and creative ways.

Balance Between Instruction that Supports the Learning of Skills and Knowledge in Music with Opportunities to Create Music

During the last 20-25 years, much emphasis has been placed on the development of creative and critical thinking in all human beings, especially in children. In music teaching and learning, this has given rise to increased understanding as to the importance of including teaching and learning in music improvisation and composition in comprehensive curricula for music education. However, there is still some controversy as to *how* to go about the design of curricula, instruction and assignments that will result in meaningful creative music making, nurture students' creative potential and ability to improvise and compose in meaningful ways, and have a positive effect on student learning. Questions surrounding the amount of freedom and structure in the formation of assignments and guidance during instruction leading up to the actual creative music making and during the process are important ones for those who teach general music. In music classroom teaching and learning, the idea of complete creative freedom provided for children, with no prior instruction or context building, raises questions. Even the various forms of *free improvisation* are based in some kind of understanding of musical practices dependent on the particular form or strategy used as a framework for the *free improvisation*. Allowing children to explore and experiment with sound is always desirable. However, it does not necessarily result in learning in music or understanding in how to compose music under the child's cultural system of music or various other cultural systems of music. Nor does complete freedom necessarily result in substantial learning in music. To learn how to compose music according to particular cultural practices requires a balance in learning in that system while consistently providing students with opportunities to explore, experiment and apply what they are learning in creative ways (Guderian, 2009; 2012, 2014, 2017). Assignments that provide some structure and are open-ended can be very effective. Another aspect to keep in mind is that in the schools, educators nurture children's creative ability in music under the restraints of schedules, standards and school or district curriculum goals. Open-ended assignments – those that provide some structure for guidance and have a strong correlation with curriculum content and instruction, and yet still provide students with many opportunities for choice in the creative process, have shown to be effective in nurturing children's improvisation and composition abilities in music

(Guderian, 2009; 2014, 2012; 2017). Providing students with opportunities to apply what (content) they are learning in creative ways is also a form of embedded assessment (Guderian, 2009, 2014, 2017).

Providing Balance in Assessment by Using a Variety of Assessments

Since music educators need to assess skills, conceptual knowledge and the ability to apply knowledge (understanding), assessments can take a variety of forms. Evaluation is also be part of the assessment process. For example, a rubric assessment might include levels of expectation per area or aspect of learning that is assessed. It is the assessment made within these expectations that further facilitates the evaluation of student learning and often provides another level of meaning to the assessment process. Assessment and evaluation can inform educators as to where a student might have difficulties in learning curriculum content and where and how the plan and design of instruction needs to be differentiated, adapted or improved.

Since educators must remain informed on how students are developing in many skills and understanding, balancing informal and formal forms of assessment, and formative and summative forms of assessment is beneficial in teaching and learning in general music. A form of informal assessment could be an observation of students' behaviors during whole group or small group learning and/or discussion. Checklists are useful and time-saving to make notes on students' progress without the child even knowing they are being assessed or feeling some amount of stress or pressure from the assessment. For example, when reading a book that includes timed, pitch or rhythmic response, an educator can carefully observe whole group and individual response to assess children's development in ability to match pitch or echo rhythms.

Formal assessments often involve a task or written demonstration of students' understanding. Often, rubric grading comprising several levels of achievement and quality of an assignment is useful for evaluating and measuring student learning. Worksheets on factual knowledge usually involve straightforward grading.

Formative assessments inform educators as to where students are in their learning. A formative assessment could be a question-and-answer session at the end of a learning segment aimed to summarize main points of the instruction and to assess whether or not students have understood the content. Another formative assessment might be to provide students with a non-graded written questionnaire on the content they had just learned, or an observation of students demonstrating something learned earlier in the week. "Let's see if we remember the movements we learned on Tuesday for the song *We Love to Eat*. Everybody up and let's form our circle to review what we learned."

Summative assessments provide educators with information on what a student has learned, retained, and is able to do as a result of the teaching and learning experience. Summative assessments usually reflect learning over a period time. A summative assessment might be a written theory test or rubric assessment of a demonstrated skill practiced over several weeks. Summative assessments assess what should be the logical outgrowth and results of the teaching and learning instruction and learning activities. Unit tests and portfolios of student learning are two common forms of summative assessments.

A very important form of assessment for general music educators is *embedded assessment*: A task or assignment that is part of the learning activities whereby the product of the assignment demonstrates the level of understanding of the instructional content and learning activities experienced during the instruction. *Creative Corner* assignments in the text *Playing the Soprano Recorder for School, Community and the Private Studio* are examples of embedded assessment (Guderian, 2008; 2017). *Cornerstone Assessments* as part of the 2014 National Standards for Music Education are also an example of embedded assessment (NAfME, 2014).

Authentic assessments are assessments that provide information on students' progress in learned skills and understanding for application in "real life" situations. For example, use of a rubric or other tool to evaluate sight reading ability would be an authentic assessment.

There are numerous forms of assessments, and most are very useful when carefully aligned with learning goals and the instruction students have experienced. Excellent examples are provided in method classes textbooks, and various online resources. See also excellent text resources on assessment for music education by Dr. Timothy Brophy including his resource *Assessing the Developing Child Musician: A Guide for General Music Teachers* (Brophy, 2000).

In Conclusion

Besides the short list of principles, under the umbrella of *balance*, to keep in mind when teaching general music, there are many additional aspects and considerations for teaching general music. An individual cannot learn everything in a four or five-year degree program. However, they can learn a substantial amount and certainly enough to enter the field as an effective educator whose work will benefit children and youth in wonderful ways. The life-long learning journey, post degree program, through self-learning and professional development is an exciting one.

The development of musicianship and understanding in education are ongoing throughout life. While the many areas of preparation to teach general music may appear daunting, during the first few years of teaching in the schools, educators can start by introducing music teaching and learning in the areas of general music they feel are their strengths and build their knowledge and abilities over time. Successful preparation in music methods classes and successful music making experiences with students in general music classrooms help to build an educator's understanding and abilities to teach general music. Opportunities for professional development are numerous both during the school year and during summer months. Human beings develop musical skills and teaching abilities over the span of a lifetime. There are many effective ways to teach and learn in music.

The opportunity for a career in teaching and learning in general music is a golden opportunity to contribute something of substantial value to humankind: the nurturing of children and youths' musical potential towards the ability to participate in and make music throughout their lives. As general music educators, not only do we need to know how to nurture children and youths' musical potential, we need to know how to accomplish the teaching and learning in ways that children experience joy, meaning, a sense of accomplishment and musical experience during the learning process. The personal joy, satisfaction and meaning derived from helping children and youth to develop their musical ability is well worth the efforts and often, sacrifices made by general music educators. As mentioned earlier in this article, "There are few experiences in this life that are as rewarding as helping other human beings learn. Nowhere in the school curriculum is this truer than in the general music classroom."

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