

Assessing, Extending, or Disregarding? Building on Elementary Music Skills in Sixth Grade Ensembles

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Background

Sixth-grade band, orchestra, and choir directors face a complex challenge when starting their new ensembles in the fall. Sixth-grade students are diverse; some come from strong music programs with adequate resources and others from weaker music programs with fewer resources. In addition, student populations are often ethnically and socio-economically diverse.

While most students entering middle school have had five or six years of some form of elementary music instruction, the content may differ greatly from school to school. The 2014 National Music Standards (NAfME, 2014) state that all fifth graders should, “Use standard and/or iconic notation and/or recording technology to document personal rhythmic, melodic, and two-chord harmonic musical ideas.” In Texas, the state standards, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) (TEA, 2013) are more specific and require that all fifth graders are to “read, write, and reproduce rhythm... and extended pentatonic and diatonic melodic patterns using standard notation.” How these skills are taught to fifth-grade students at both the national and state levels is not prescribed in these standards. The methods, approaches, and terminology used to teach music skills and understanding in elementary music programs may be as diverse as the students themselves.

Elementary music teachers have many options in their approach to music education such as Kodály, Orff, and Dalcroze, (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2016). This leads to a variety of experiences and differing levels of music understanding for students finishing the fifth grade. Furthermore, some students entering middle school have had several years of individual or private music instruction while others have not, adding to the wide range of skills these students possess.

Elementary teachers often choose to use terminology to describe music notation in

elementary music programs that is different from terminology used in middle school. For example, elementary students often use solfège names (*do, re, mi*, etc.) rather than absolute pitch names (E, G, B, D, F) when reading notes on the staff. Rhythm notation labels more specific to elementary music programs such as “ta, ta-ka-di-mi” (Houlahan & Tacka, 2008) or “ta, ti-ti” (Choksy, 1998) are also used in primary grade settings. Notational labels and skills learned in elementary grades may not easily transfer to labels and skills used in middle school ensembles.

Elementary music skills may also prove difficult to assess because teachers may impart knowledge of music and notation using a variety of approaches. Some teach musicianship through singing or playing the recorder. Others may apply instruction with Orff tonebar instruments, with World Drumming, by improvising on a pentatonic scale, or by moving expressively (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2016). Elementary music educators may have specific musical objectives for their students that may or may not be directly related to priorities of a middle school ensemble director.

Middle school music educators are faced with a dilemma. Do they assume that entering sixth-grade students have music skills and understandings or is it necessary to start at the beginning to read music notation? If they don't start at the beginning, then they must decide whether to formally or informally assess students' prior knowledge and skills. Musical understanding and skills may not be easily evaluated by an ensemble director who uses different music labels. If assessments are administered, teachers must also determine how to build on those results.

Most middle school instrumental ensemble directors use traditional band or orchestra instruments rather than classroom instruments and approaches used in elementary schools. While music concepts taught at each level may be similar, the instruments and pedagogy in middle school typically vary considerably from that in elementary music instruction. Several instrumental pedagogy books (Lautzenheiser, 2013; Duke & Byo, 2011) assume that entering sixth graders are familiar with rudiments of reading simple rhythm patterns on a staff. They do not, however, provide formal assessment of previously learned music knowledge and skills.

Vertical alignment of learning objectives in the PreK-12 curriculum has been found to be highly successful in other disciplines such as math. Schielack and Seeley (2010) found that when mathematics teachers communicated across grade levels to understand the content and processes of instruction at all levels, students moved from level to level more successfully. One goal of the 2014 National Music Standards (NAfME, 2014) and the music TEKS (TEA, 2013) was to provide a model of vertical alignment between elementary and middle school music skills and knowledge. Texas public elementary, middle, and high schools are required to provide instruction based on the TEKS at each level (CEDFA, 2016). This vertical alignment provides a sequential curriculum from one grade to the next. When students can build on skills and understanding learned the previous year they can maximize their musical development. “It is the responsibility of each district and its teachers to develop curricula that will provide the basis for what teachers will teach and students will learn in the classrooms throughout the district” (TMEA, 2016).

An “Educator Toolkit” provided by TMEA also stresses the importance of aligning a K-12 music education closely with the TEKS (CEDFA, 2016). This toolkit demonstrates the level of effort that state/national organizations have expended in creating a sequenced PreK-12 music education in accordance with state standards.

Chandler & Mizener (2011) found that while vertical alignment between elementary and middle school was a laudable goal, it was not always practiced. The majority of elementary music educators in their study did not align themselves with the middle school music programs. Chandler and Mizener (2011) hypothesized that this was due “to lack of communication between directors or administrators or to a lack of enforcement of an aligned curriculum by the immediate supervisor” (p. 9).

The purpose of this study was to determine how elementary music educators and middle school music ensemble teachers assess music notation skills and understanding of their students. Specifically, we sought to determine answers about vertical alignment and assessment of skills and knowledge of students exiting fifth grade and those entering sixth grade ensembles

by asking the following questions:

- 1) Do middle school music teachers assess and consequently build on the skills developed in elementary schools or do they start over when teaching music notation?
- 2) Do middle school ensemble directors and elementary music educators communicate with each other about their respective programs and the targeted skills and musical goals they have for their students?

Method

To determine answers to these questions, two similar surveys were developed: one for middle school ensemble directors, and one for elementary music educators. The surveys were posted on national professional social media pages designed for music educators. The elementary survey was posted on a private social media page entitled “Elementary Music Teachers” and the middle school survey was posted on a private social media page entitled “Band Directors Group” which also attracts middle school choral and orchestra directors. Two follow-up reminders were posted on each page, to help ensure participation. The surveys comprised questions requiring responses on a five-point Likert-type scale as well as open-ended questions. Ninety-seven ($N = 97$) surveys from across the country were returned, Fifty-four ($n = 54$) were completed by elementary music educators, and 43 ($n = 43$) were completed by middle school band, choral, and orchestra educators. The qualitative and quantitative data were subsequently analyzed.

Results

Results from the survey data of the elementary ($n = 54$) and middle school teachers’ ($n = 43$) assessments of their students’ skills were analyzed. Of the middle school respondents, 95% were band directors, 16% were choir directors, and 5% were orchestra directors with some directors teaching more than one type of ensemble. When asked to describe the rhythmic reading skills of their exiting fifth graders, the 54 elementary teachers stated that 7% of their students’ skills were

“very strong”, 43% were “strong”, 43% were “average”, with only 5% as “weak” and 2% rated “very weak”. This is in contrast to middle school teachers who rated none of their incoming sixth-grade students as “very strong” in rhythmic reading. They rated 14% of their students as “strong” in rhythmic reading skills, 35% as “average”, 35% as “weak”, and 16% as “very weak” (see Figure 1).

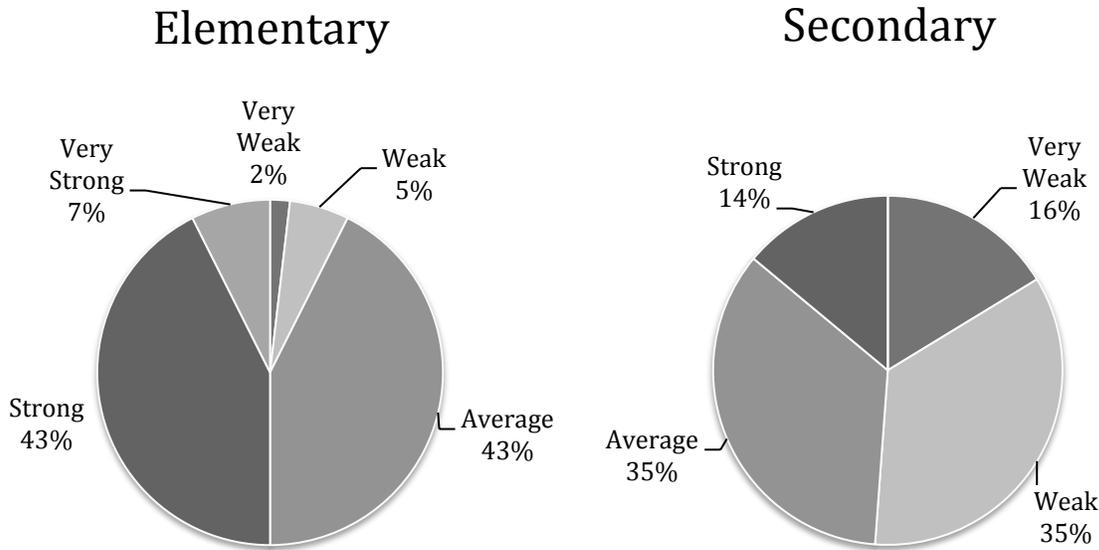


Figure 1. Comparison of responses between elementary and middle school music teachers to the question: “How would you rate your students’ rhythmic reading skills?”

Elementary music educators also rated their sixth graders’ tonal/pitch reading skills more highly than did the middle school directors. The elementary teachers rated 7% of their students as having “strong” skills, 54% of their students “average,” 35% with “weak” skills, and 8% with “very weak” skills. Middle school educators rated 5% of their students as “strong,” 35% as “average,” 35% as “weak,” and 25% as “very weak.” Neither group of teachers rated any of their students as having “very strong” tonal/pitch reading skills.

When asked about their students’ overall musical ability, elementary teachers rated 6% of their sixth graders as “very strong” and 31% as “strong.” They rated 54% of their students as “average,” but only 6% as “weak,” and none as “very weak.” This is in contrast to middle school teachers who rated none of the students’ overall music ability as “very strong” and only 6% as “strong.” They

rated 42% as “average,” 38% of their students as “weak,” and 14% as “very weak” in overall musical ability (see Figure 2).

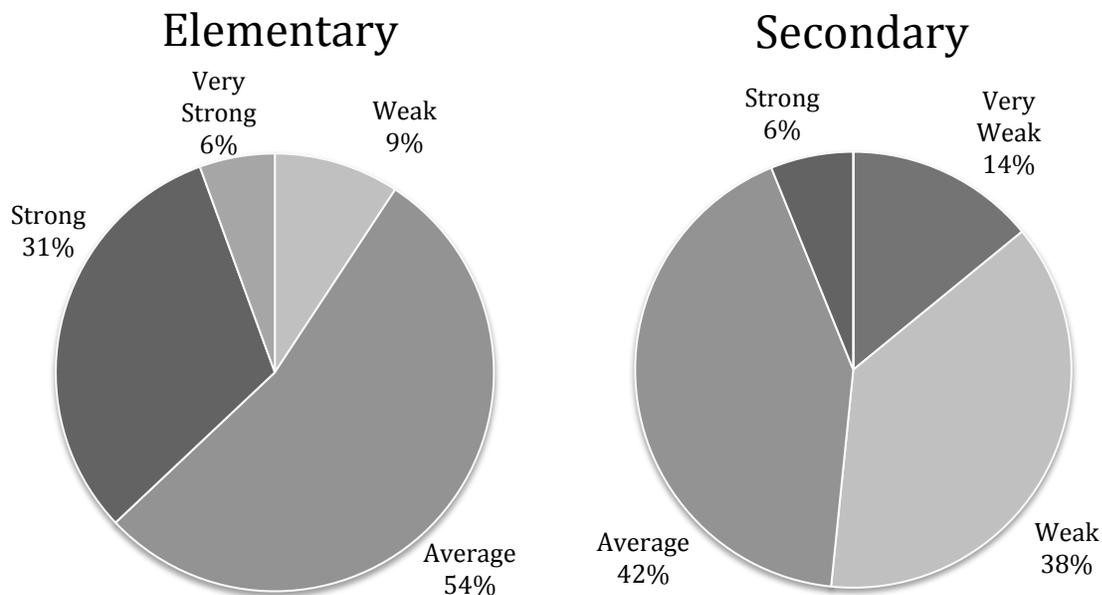


Figure 2. Comparison of responses between elementary and middle school music teachers to the question: “How would you rate your students’ overall musical ability?”

Elementary music teachers cited examples of the knowledge and skills their students have developed by fifth grade. One elementary music teacher commented that by the time his/her students exit elementary school, “[they] can immediately tell if a song is in major, minor, or another mode. They can tell whether a song is in duple or triple time, identify the resting tone of a song, and improvise rhythmic and melodic patterns. They compose their own pieces orally and are much more musically creative than they would be if we just focused on reading notes. When they get to 6th grade band [they are] creating their own songs...” However, it was not stated whether or how these music skills would be assessed or valued by middle school ensemble teachers.

Middle school directors were asked, “How do you assess all sixth grade students who enter with a variety of skill and ability levels?” Only three (7%) middle school directors cited assessment strategies for their entering sixth graders. Some assessment strategies were shared: “I give private lessons based on their scores in the Selmer Music Survey”; “I pre-test all students” (no additional details were provided); “I do lots of informal and formal assessments so I know where everyone is.”

These three teachers who took time to assess knowledge and skills of incoming sixth graders felt that it was important to do so to keep students engaged in their music program. The other 93% of middle school directors responding ($n = 40$) indicated that they tried to keep the students engaged through group activities, external motivation such as prizes, and differentiating instruction with auditory, visual and kinesthetic teaching. Simultaneously, they start with the rudimentary basics with all students. Representative comments were: “I start from square one.” “We all start at the beginning. Even though we have elementary music in our system.” “We all start from the beginning (presuming) everyone knows nothing and build from there.” “I have to start them from knowing absolutely nothing about music.” “I start from scratch and tell my kids that it’s review for those who know.”

We asked both elementary and middle school educators to report the amount of time spent collaborating with music colleagues at other levels. Only 11% of elementary teachers reported spending a “substantial” or “great amount” amount of time collaborating while 65% of elementary educators reported spending a “small amount” or “little to no time” collaborating with teachers at the next level. Middle school teachers in this survey felt they spent more time collaborating with their feeder programs with 23% of them reporting that they spent a “substantial” or “great amount of time” collaborating, but 63% of them reporting that they spent a “small” or “little to no time” conferring with their feeder programs. It is noteworthy that an average of 64% of both groups of teachers responded that they spent a “small amount” to “little or no time” collaborating with their colleagues at the other level.

Discussion

These findings illustrate that elementary music educators rate the skills of their fifth graders much higher than middle school educators rate similar skills of their entering sixth graders. Because so few middle school teachers formally or informally assess their incoming students, they may not have a complete picture of their skills. Several elementary music teachers commented that middle school directors labeled notation with absolute pitch names and

numerical rhythm counting, as opposed to using labels such as solfège and “ta, ta-ka-di-mi.” The elementary teachers considered their students as well-prepared for middle school music programs. The practice of teaching absolute note names as well as rhythmic counting systems could then build and extend on what was learned in elementary school without having to start from the beginning. Potentially, this could also keep more students engaged in music programs and could lower attrition rates in music ensembles.

It is unknown whether students who possessed strong musical skills entering sixth grade were able to transfer these skills when placed in a new secondary ensemble that used a different language for describing notation. Such skills include transferring solfège labels of notes to absolute names of pitches (E, G, B, D, F) when reading music from graphic notation, or reading rhythm patterns using labels such as “ta, ta-di” rather than “1 te, 2 te”. If middle school teachers were to assess skills of entering sixth graders using either of the above systems learned in elementary school, they could learn more about these students’ cognitive knowledge and musical skill and build upon those skills.

A limitation of this study is that the elementary and middle school teachers were not asked to rate the same group of students with a detailed rubric as they exited fifth grade and then entered sixth grade a few months later. This could be considered a limitation of this study. Respondents in this study also volunteered to participate in these surveys; thus, there was a degree of self-selection. Elementary teachers may be comparing their exiting fifth grade students who have the strongest skills in the school compared to the abilities of the younger students in that school. Conversely, middle school teachers may be comparing the wide-ranging abilities of their entering sixth-grade students to the more skilled older students in that school. It would be of interest to assess fifth graders both in the spring and then again in the fall as sixth graders using the same instrument. This could determine to what extent there is a loss of skills and knowledge over the three months of summer between fifth and sixth grades. It would also be interesting to gather data from middle school choral directors about incoming students’ use of pitch and rhythm names practiced in elementary school.

We found little collaboration between elementary and middle school music educators. A majority of the respondents in this survey did not report collaborating with teachers in other levels in their district to promote a smoother transfer of skills and knowledge for students moving from elementary and middle school. Insufficient time was expressed as a major reason for this lack of collaboration. We speculate that increasing teacher conversations on this matter could smooth the transition between elementary music and instrumental ensembles and keep more students engaged in music.

Attrition of student participation in middle and high school music programs is a concern. Over half of the students who enroll in a music ensemble in middle school opt to drop their study of music within the first two years (Lautzenheiser, 2010; Mazzocchi, 2015). Our findings reported in this study indicate increased communication between teachers and more assessment of skills would be helpful.

In summary, Kathy Kuddes (2010), Director of Fine Arts in the Plano school district, stated, “It is clearly in our students’ best interest to smooth this important transition between elementary general music and middle school ensembles. Doing so requires a number of strategic conversations to improve mutual understanding, respect, curriculum design, and instructional delivery on both sides of this programmatic divide.” Music educators are encouraged to prioritize talking to each other, sharing goals and objectives, and working more closely together for stronger, more cohesive music programs and to keep more students engaged in making music.

Keywords

elementary music, assessment, music notation, vertical alignment, national standards

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