High School Students’ Musical Achievement and Improvisation on the Steel Drum

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationships between high school students’ musical achievement and improvisation on the steel drum. Research questions guiding this inquiry were: (1) What effect does audition-based instruction in improvisation have on students’ ability to improvise (a) melodically, (b) harmonically, and (c) rhythmically on the steel drum? (2) What is the relationship between students’ performance of steel drum repertoire and their ability to improvise? and (3) How do students describe audiation-based instruction using the steel drum? Using an explanatory mixed methods design, I (a) instructed beginning steel band students (*N* = 11) from a mid-Atlantic United States high school, using a curriculum comprised of audiation-based instruction in aural learning and improvisation; (b) recorded participants’ performances of repertoire and improvisation; (c) facilitated a focus group (*n* = 3) to document students’ descriptions of audiation-based instruction in improvisation; and (d) used qualitative findings to explain quantitative results. I concluded that (a) improvisation is a viable part of a comprehensive music education; (b) aural learning is important in developing students’ musical vocabularies; and (c) regardless of prior experience in music, the steel band can be an inclusive ensemble.

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**Applications to Teaching:**

Steel Drum

* Regardless of prior experience in music, the steel band can be inclusive of all students.
* Steel drums are accessible for beginning musicians and students with specialized academic or social needs.
* If you would like to consider starting a steel band, consult the following resources: *Engaging Musical Practices: A Sourcebook for Middle School General Music* (Burton, 2012) and *The Steel Band Game Plan: Strategies for Starting, Building, and Maintain Your Pan Program* (Tanner, 2006)

Aural Learning

* Aural learning stimulates students’ audiation and is important in developing students’ musical vocabularies.
* If you are interested in including aural learning in your classroom, consider singing, teaching melodies and bass lines by ear, and asking students to perform repertoire by ear.

Improvisation

* There is a positive relationship between students’ performance achievement and improvisation achievement.
* Teachers can make informed curricular decisions regarding prioritization of improvisation.
* If you are interested in including improvisation in your classroom, explore following resources: *Jump Right In: The Instrumental Curriculum* (Grunow, Gordon, & Azzara, 2000) and *Developing Musicianship through Improvisation* (Azzara & Grunow, 2010)