

## **An Investigation of Improvisation in Elementary General Music Classrooms**

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The purpose of this survey study was to determine: (1) the nature of improvisational activities in elementary general music classrooms, (2) the extent to which improvisation is occurring in elementary general music instruction, and (3) current teacher attitudes regarding the implementation of improvisation in elementary general music. In November 2010, with assistance from MENC, emails were sent to 1,174 elementary general music teachers across the United States with a link to an online questionnaire using *Survey Monkey*. A total of 148 elementary general music teachers responded to the survey, resulting in 103 completed questionnaires. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency counts, percentages) and qualitative methods that support a systematic search for and categorization of emerging patterns and themes.

Teachers from all six geographic divisions of MENC participated in the study. Participants were primarily veteran teachers, with 71% reporting 11 or more years of experience as certified music teachers. Regarding the nature of improvisational activities occurring in classrooms, the most common improvisational activity reported was call-and-response/question-and-answer singing (97%), followed by improvising on unpitched (96%) and pitched (94%) percussion instruments, improvising rhythmic patterns using instruments (92%), and individual students improvising (90%). Specifically, question-and-answer/call-and-response conversational experiences were reported at every grade level with students improvising vocally, with body percussion, through movement, and on unpitched and pitched instruments. When teachers were asked to reflect on their reported improvisational activities and to discuss student achievement in relation to their instructional objectives, two broad themes emerged: (1) teacher planning and instruction, and (2) student response to the activities. Many teachers indicated that at the elementary level, they are most interested in the quality of improvisational process rather than with the product. Discussion about importance of sequencing in preparing students for improvisation was prevalent throughout the teacher responses, indicating that structure, parameters, and a step-by-step process is necessary support at any developmental level. Many teachers described the nature of student improvisations as appropriate for the student's developmental skill level, indicating that improvisations varied according to experience.

Regarding the extent to which improvisation is occurring in elementary general music classrooms, results are mixed. While 73% of teachers reported that improvisational activities are included in the music curriculum documents of their school districts, 58% of teachers indicated that they include improvisation between zero and 10% of their instructional time with students.

Teacher attitudes suggest that improvisation is an important part of a comprehensive music education, with 90% of respondents indicating that improvising should remain in the National Standards. When asked to identify

factors that have or could inhibit their inclusion of improvisation, teachers cited a lack of instructional time, lack of training and/or experience with improvisation, and their priority given to other musical skills. When asked to identify factors that have or could assist them in including improvisation, teachers cited professional development/training, more instructional time with students, collaboration with other music teachers to learn best practices and see models of teaching improvisation, personal experience improvising, helpful teaching resources, and having an open mind regarding improvisation.

While these data provide a valuable lens into the nature of improvisational activities in these teachers' classrooms, further research with a larger sample is warranted. Generalization of the current findings should not be assumed, however, similar findings from previous studies and characteristics within the current data, such as overlapping themes among the teachers' responses in regard to the narrative questions suggest that this sample may be a good representation of the population in spite of the low return rate. Future investigations could be conducted at the state level within and among districts and schools to determine regional and local practices and perceptions.

Because themes from the narrative data indicate these teachers would welcome more training and professional development including workshops and collaborative opportunities with other teachers, it is suggested that teacher educators, providers of professional development, and teacher leaders in schools offer more extensive experiences and training that support teachers in the development of their own improvisational skills: that model best practices for teaching, sequencing, and planning curricula rooted in improvisation; and that support teachers in developing sound pedagogical skills for teaching improvisation from the beginning to the more advanced stages of skill development. Several teachers in this study reported personal networking opportunities such as gathering with colleagues to share, practice, and participate in improvisational activities. These gatherings could provide rich contexts for future case study or ethnographic research that would provide insight into valid and desired types of collaborative professional development for music educators.

While some teachers in this study put less importance and priority on improvisation than other musical activities, the majority of respondents perceive improvisation as necessary to the development of students' musical skills, as an important way for students to show their musical understanding, and as an empowering and creative process that produces more independent thinkers and musicians. In order to better understand the impact improvisation has on children's musical development and understanding, future research could include case studies of individual teachers, their musical practice, and the perceptions of their students in regard to participation in improvisational activities.

It is hoped that this study will positively inform teachers, teacher educators, professional development providers, administrators, and policy makers about the nature of improvisation in elementary general music and the impact that these kinds of learning opportunities may have on children's musical development and understanding. We believe that it is necessary to listen to the voices of those who are directly involved in the day-to-day instruction of our youngest musicians and hope that each of these constituencies will seek opportunities to further understand and collaborate to provide the best possible educational experiences and support for elementary general music teachers and their students.