

Gender Bias in Music Education

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Abstract

Choosing an instrument is one of the most important decisions a young musician makes. This choice influences musical opportunities and experiences throughout one's musical career. While researchers suggest that instrument choice should be based on timbre and personal preference, gender stereotypes and biases play a more prominent role. These stereotypes and biases intensify with age, leading to a disproportionately small percentage of female high school music educators. Over time, females are experience more exclusion than inclusion in instrumental music education culminating in less than 20% of female music educators pursuing careers as high school instrumental educators.

With the intent of improving instrumental music instruction, the purpose of this study was to explore influences on instrument selection and gain personal insight into musical experiences of female instrumental music educators. Research questions guiding this study were: (1) What reasons do female music educators give for their choice of primary instrument? (2) How do female musicians describe their relationships and social experiences in relation to their instrument selection? Through a feminist lens, I examined how gender stereotypes and biases disproportionately place female musicians at a disadvantage in ensemble participation and career options.

Beginning in fall of 2013, I interviewed two current female high school band directors each three times over a three-month period. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Participants were asked questions regarding their (a) K-12 music education memories; (b) college experiences and teacher training; and (c) current teaching careers.

Based on the data in this study, underrepresentation of females in high school instrumental education can be attributed to (a) gender biases during the instrument selection process, (b) the exclusionary nature of jazz bands in music education, and (c) the lack of female role models at the high school and collegiate level.

Recommendations for future research include (a) replication in different contexts such as age, teaching experience, or primary instrument, (b) the relationship between jazz participation in grade school and jazz pedagogy in teacher training, and (c) continue to examine gender biases at the elementary, middle, and high school level.

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Applications to Teaching:

How can elementary music educators avoid implementing gender biases on their students during the musical instrument selection process? Can instrumental educators teach jazz and improvisation to non-traditional jazz instruments? Based on the data in this study, it is highly important for students to get jazz and improvisation experience during their K-12 music education.

If you are interested in aiding in the equality in instrumental education, the following practices can be implemented:

Holding intervention concerts for students with males and females equally represented on each instrument.

Invite all students to participate in jazz band by creating jazz labs with non-traditional instruments.

Encourage female musicians who want to pursue high school instrumental teaching as a career to do so.