

An Investigation of Contemporary Assessment in Music Education

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ABSTRACT

Measurement and assessment are becoming increasingly important tool to all music educators. National education legislation like No Child Left Behind has recognized music as a core curricular subject¹¹. Since then, little has been done to assess music students to ensure that a set of basic skills and knowledge is being achieved. While national and state music standards exist, these standards are usually not mandatory and merely serve as a guide or recommendations for music educators to follow¹⁰. While other core subjects endure severe oversight and rigorous testing at state and local levels to measure whether or not students are attaining minimum standards, some music educators are pushing for national testing of music students to demonstrate that music has an academically measurable component. Yet other music educators are fearful that assessment of music education will have the same negative effects that other core subject high-stakes testing has had on schools⁶. The purpose of this research is to investigate the current debate on national music assessment and whether music education's place in the core curriculum demands an increase in oversight through standardized music assessment of students in music education classes.

INTRODUCTION

Music education literature is abundant in promoting assessment within the music classroom. In today's data-driven educational climate, there is a great need to demonstrate that learning is, in fact, taking place. According to Asmus⁵:

While the ultimate purpose of assessment is ensuring the most effective instruction possible to enhance student learning in music, assessment can also be used to determine the effectiveness of the teacher and the instructional program⁵.

The recent attention on assessment is not necessarily because teachers have become suddenly interested in improving performance, but rather due to the state testing movement and accountability established through legislation such as No Child Left Behind. Based on this argument, without some form of assessment of music students, there can be no accountability¹². National assessment of music students serves to gauge what students currently know, what they do not know, and informs educators as to what specific areas and concepts need reinforcement⁹. Without national assessment, it becomes quite difficult to evaluate the status of music education in the United States.

Though those in opposition to national music assessment have compelling arguments that deserve consideration, the benefits may far outweigh the drawbacks. Music education must become progressive in order to survive in the quickly evolving educational reform movement³.

METHOD

The purpose of this research was to determine a) Whether music teachers recognized the importance of national music assessment in schools, and b) If they believed assessment

would be beneficial to their schools and students. A quantitative research design was used for this study of participants' perspectives, and was based on the National Standards of Music Education.

A music teacher sample for this study comprised of 50 K-12 teachers in the Dayton, Ohio area. One-hundred-fifty teachers were originally invited to participate the study, with a 33% response rate. Email survey was chosen over the traditional survey, because public school teachers were likely to respond to email surveys with faster response time.

Research Questions

Survey questions were developed utilizing the nine content standards and based upon teacher's opinions of standardized music student assessment in their music program, curriculum, student's understanding, and whether teachers are currently evaluating their students on all nine of the national standards of music education. *See Appendix.*

Procedures

The questions were sent to 150 potential participants with a brief introduction via email. They were invited to participate by filling out the survey embedded in the message. It was indicated they must fill out the brief survey within a ten day time frame, and that their participation would assist the music education research community in identifying the most important research questions, and that their responses were anonymous.

RESULTS

Survey results indicated a very wide spectrum of results for all questions. When asked their opinion of whether they believe standardized music assessment would enhance their school's music program, the results were split almost directly in half with 35.9%

agreeing, 35.1% disagreeing, and 29% stating no opinion. Results were similar when asked if their curriculum would be better defined if there was standardized music student assessment, and if they believe their students' learning outcomes would be greater if there was standardized music assessment.

Interestingly enough, though there was such evenly divided bias, teachers overall admitted to evaluating students of only seven of the nine national standards of music education, more than half omitting evaluating student's ability to improvise melodies, variations, and accompaniments; and compose and arrange music within specified guidelines.

Although this study met with a low response rate (33%), the diversity of respondents (i.e. teachers who primarily teach elementary, secondary, both, and who teach band, choir, orchestra, and general music) provided strength, credibility, and integrity to this data.

DISCUSSION

Results suggest that this sample of teachers believe standardized music assessment would be beneficial in defining what they need to teach, but would not necessarily strengthen their music program or their students' knowledge of music. On the contrary, they admit to not evaluating their students on all nine of the national standards of music education. The data reveals a large gap between desires for standardized testing and need for it^{2,7}. The only way for these changes to occur is for national arts and music organizations to increase their commitment level to national testing through more funding and resources^{6,13}. Music education must move beyond the rhetoric and begin to take active steps toward fully committing to large-scale assessment¹⁰. But these assessments cannot

be one-shot measurements. A commitment to regularly assessing students nationally must be made so changes over time can be clearly delineated and the effectiveness of national initiatives can be seen^{1,2}.

CONCLUSION

National music assessment as been and continues to be a controversial subject. Within this report, support in favor of assessment has been argued. The field of music education must decide whether it is fully a member of the core curriculum, or an honorary member in nation but not in action. With music being placed as a basic subject, more responsibility and accountability is required and greatly needed⁵. To increase accountability, improve political influence, protect music instruction time, and gauge national progress of music students, national music assessment must be administered⁷.

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APPENDIX***Survey Questions***

1. Please check the grade level(s) in which you primarily teach
 - a. Elementary
 - b. Secondary
 - c. Both elementary and secondary
2. My school's music program would benefit from standardized music student assessment.
3. My job as an educator would benefit from standardized music student assessment.
4. My students would benefit from standardized music assessment.
5. I currently evaluate students' ability to sing, alone, and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
6. I currently evaluate students' performance on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
7. I currently evaluate students' ability to improvise melodies, variations, and accompaniments.
8. I currently evaluate students' ability to compose and arrange music within specified guidelines.
9. I currently evaluate students' ability to read and notate music.
10. I currently evaluate students' ability to listen to, analyze, and describe music.
11. I currently evaluate students' ability to evaluate music and music performances.
12. I currently evaluate students' understanding of relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts.
13. I currently evaluate students' understanding of music in relation to history and culture.

AUTHOR NOTE

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