



Case studies in music education: investigating and understanding the adolescent student perspective

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Category: Scientific investigation

Abstract: In the current study, the researchers investigated adolescents' overall experiences learning music, in both formal and informal settings, in order to examine their perspectives, attitudes, and experiences. Guiding questions were: 1) How do adolescent learners characterize their musical learning experiences, and 2) how might their perspectives inform the ways teachers structure meaningful music education contexts? The researchers collected data from three passionate adolescent musicians from the United States via semi-structured interviews, journal entries, and musical artifacts. After using open-coding analysis, the authors found that the participants demonstrated multi-faceted forms of motivation, diverse learning processes and habits, and personally rewarding forms of creativity. Implications for music education are to diversify the range of pedagogical experiences for learners, both formally and informally, while honoring their personal development through music.

Keywords: Music education. Adolescent learners. Creativity. Motivation.

Introduction

If music educators are concerned about providing meaningful contexts for learners to engage with music, then music teachers should understand something about learners' experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about music. The ways in which people engage with music today are different than in the past. Currently, music education conferences in the United States and in Europe are encouraging researchers to examine themes related to students' perspectives of music education and diverse learning contexts. As Kaschub and Smith (2014) suggested in their book on music teaching practices in the 21st Century, "...the nature of teaching and learning must be revisited" (Kaschub & Smith, 2014, p. 7).

Previous studies focusing on adolescent music learners have examined: (a) adolescent musical experiences and motivations for pursuing a career in music education

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(Henry, 2015); (b) the listening and performance characteristics of secondary school students (Williams, Geringer, & Brittin, 2019); (c) the role motivation plays in learning music (MacIntyre, Potter, & Burns, 2012); (d) the culture of the high school music classroom (Adderley, Kennedy, & Berz, 2003; Kellett, 2016); and (e) the intersections of adolescents' musical lives with their school music culture (Snead, 2010; Tobias, 2015). Each of these studies focuses on music experience in relation to a particular event or setting. In the current study, we investigated adolescents' overall experiences learning music, in both formal and informal settings, in order to examine the perspectives, attitudes, and experiences of three adolescent students (ages 16 to 18) studying music formally and informally. We wanted to know: How do adolescent learners characterize their musical learning experiences, and in turn, how might their perspectives inform the ways teachers structure meaningful music education contexts in an increasingly complex musical landscape?

1 Method

We collected data for this study via semi-structured interviews. We also collected journal entries and musical artifacts (i.e. notated / recorded arrangements, compositions, and videos). To select participants, we contacted music teachers in the proximity of our universities in three United States states to help us identify passionate adolescent musicians who engage with music in a variety of contexts. By doing so, we recruited three participants, one female and two males.

2 Participant profiles

Our first participant, Linda, was a 17-year-old, high-school junior from the Midwestern United States who participated in her school choir program as an alto vocalist as well as pianist for the show choir. She played the oboe in the wind ensemble and the clarinet with the marching band. Linda previously completed her school's Advanced Placement Music Theory course, being the second youngest at her school to do so. Outside of school, she sang in her church choir "Crooked Halo," frequently listened to music on her phone, and enjoyed composing and improvising music using technology. She is currently working on designing her own show choir production. In college, Linda intends to study music therapy or music education.

Our second participant, Aaron, was also an 18-year-old high-school senior from the southeastern United States. His primary musical experiences centered on percussion



instruments, piano, and singing. Although he could have graduated a year early, Aaron chose to stay in high school for his senior year to participate in school music activities. A composer and performer, Aaron has been making music in both school and extra-curricular groups for years. He is enrolled to begin a Bachelor of Music Education degree at a university this fall.

Our third and final participant was Neal. A 16-year-old sophomore, he had middle-school experience playing saxophone but then focused on electronic music-making. Although he initially gravitated toward electronic music for practical reasons, such as having enough scholastic time for demanding non-music courses, Neal enjoyed working with music technology and the freedom to create his own music. He plans to learn more about music theory through AP courses during the next few years.

3 Themes

The three emergent themes discussed in the next section are: (a) multifaceted motivation, (b) learning processes and habits, and (c) creativity.

Multifaceted Motivation

The theme of motivation was multifaceted as shown by the ways the participants described their own reasons for engaging in a variety of musical activities. Broadly defined as any factor that increases the vigor of engagement with a task (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2014), the participants' motivations included internal, external, achievement, and intrinsic factors. Although some participants reported distinct examples of one particular motivation, many of these factors overlapped in their experience.

Linda provided the most obvious examples of achievement motivation, by reporting that she was focused on doing her best in the band class. She was frustrated because other students were not taking the musical tasks as seriously as she was. Especially in instrumental music, this attitude appears in the related literature as connected ideas of student motivation and performance achievement (Colwell, Hewitt, & Fonder, 2017; MacIntyre et al., 2012; Miksza, Tan, & Dye, 2016). Linda also reported that she was intrinsically motivated to make music. Aaron echoed a similar motivational theme by saying it was not the instructor's responsibility to motivate the students. From his perspective, motivation was a student responsibility. This attitude supports self-efficacy and self-motivation while also promoting musical achievement. Aaron articulated



this point further by saying, “I’ve only ever seen people grow from that [motivated] mindset when they realized that I can take my learning into my own hands” (interview 2).

Learning Processes and Habits

The theme of learning processes and habits characterizes the ways in which the participants grew and developed themselves both musically and personally through music. Their approaches included learning music through critical listening and observing others in formal settings or via technology (i.e. YouTube). They also used self-discovery, reflection, and critical thinking as avenues to further their own learning.

Linda described herself as an auditory learner, one who listens to music in order to understand how to perform it. She explained that she learned best by listening to musical phrases and then figuring them out. Even from a very young age, she recounted, she was able to remember melodies and reproduce them.

For Aaron, the learning process was most powerful when he discovered something himself, thereby being in charge of his own learning. “...I’m not waiting for someone else to tell me how to get better. I’m figuring it out on my own and I’m asking for help if I need it” (Interview 2). He credited this mindset to band as he reported the lessons he learned in self-discipline and critical thinking. He said, “[...] I don’t like being told how to do my job. It’s my job to learn. (Interview 2).

Creativity

Each participant demonstrated creativity through varied forms of musical engagement and experience. They enjoyed composing music via technology and/or acoustic instruments. Most played multiple instruments and participated in different types of musical ensembles inside and outside of school. The ways in which they integrated their informal and formal learning experiences added another dimension to their creative work (Tobias, 2015).

Aaron’s creativity and engagement with music was evident in his works as a composer, his participation in school and church ensembles as a vocalist and percussionist, making music with his father and brother, as well as informally playing the piano. In addition, he expressed his own personal growth by writing and performing an original piece. He said, “...that was really important to me and it still is because I don’t think I ever would have risen out of where I was, if I hadn’t had that” (Interview 1).



Describing his experience in the beginning music technology class at school, Neal claimed it was the highlight of his day. He reported experiencing “... immense joy from the creating of it” (Interview 1). He described his music technology class as “the polar opposite of band, where the band is very much teacher-directed...while in Music Tech, the music teacher gives us an assignment and says, ‘Go Wild’” [Interview 1]. With this freedom, Neal created his own compositions.

Linda’s creative projects emerged during her year in AP Music Theory. She recounted, “When I started composing, it was for music theory. Those were like projects. [...] And originally it started off as arrangements. [...] I like arranging because it’s fun to throw in little secrets of other songs in there” (Interview 2). Linda also shared that she was designing her own production for show choir.

It is evident from these quotations that Aaron, Linda, and Neal engaged with music in a multitude of ways and contexts. They demonstrated multi-faceted forms of motivation, diverse learning processes and habits, and personally rewarding forms of creativity.

4 Implications / Conclusions

Highlights of our findings include facilitating students’ desire to learn about multiple facets of music-making while playing multiple instruments and/or singing alone and/or in a variety of ensembles. Salient points include recognizing the ways music functions as a catalyst for personal self-discovery and growth. Another feature is appreciating formal and informal musical environments as indispensable learning settings. Implications for music education are to diversify the range of pedagogical experiences, both formally and informally, while honoring learners’ personal development through music.

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