

Elizabeth Ojeda-Petito – E.d.D Candidate: Teachers College, Columbia University

Instrumental Music Education and its Intersection with General Music

A Wholistic Look at Elementary Music Instruction

Our degrees may all read “K-12 Music,” but as music educators, we know better. We specialize in college both by age and discipline – instrumental music (band or orchestra intensive), or choral/general music. We work hard, take our required classes, and (quicker than we know!) we are out in the real world, ready to educate the next generation of musical minds.

Except that for elementary educators especially, we learn that the instrumental-exclusive jobs of the past don’t exist like they used to. The reasons vary (program growth that accelerates beyond staffing, building or school restructuring, the time or resources allotted for music, etc.), but whatever the case may be, the elementary music world finds itself to be a smorgasbord of responsibility. More often than not, teachers looking for exclusively elementary instrumental jobs find themselves in the position of being asked to teach general music in some capacity.

In the roles I’ve held so far in my teaching career (almost a decade in two districts, four schools), this has proven true again and again. I specialized in instrumental music (orchestral) in my undergraduate study, but have taught general music in every position I’ve held. In fact, my current position is about two-thirds general music and about one-third instrumental. And here’s the thing: I love it.

Music education in the real world

If you had asked me, right out of college, whether I would ever consider a position like the one I hold now, I would have probably had a different answer for you. It was presented to me when I was in school as though instrumental education was the “serious” music education, and general music was a filler, a place to put everyone once a week while teachers took lunch. This was an easy sell at the

time; my pursuing a degree in music was owed to my devotion to the instrumental education I had received. In the past seven years as an educator, however, I have come to realize that this generally held attitude is actually the opposite of reality.

Here’s what they don’t tell you in college: elementary schools live and die by the schedule. Since elementary students operate at a building-level schedule, not an individual-level schedule, being a part of the building-level schedule is integral not only to your necessity as an educator, but also to your

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face time, relationship building time, and music-making experience with students.

You know what *is* part of the building schedule? General music. You know what *isn’t*? Instrumental music. If you’re lucky, there will be some kind of assigned “period” of instruction for instrumental music (sometimes before or after school), or even pull out lessons, but the act of designating schedules for an entire instrumental program’s worth of students *around* the building (i.e., lunches, recess, mandated gym times, resourcing like speech, OT, PT), is an incredible task. Even then, instrumental music at the elementary level (since it can only operate when students are removed from primary instruction), becomes *secondary* to instruction. General music, however, *is* primary instruction.

The silver lining

This might be sounding on the gloomy side by now, and like elementary instrumental instruction is doomed to the same kind of importance as three-legged desks and last year’s binder clips, but, here is my argument: the strength of your instrumental program is directly proportional to the strength of your general music program. And if you teach both, you control both. You are the culture creator, the interest maker, the touchstone and spark for the kid who doesn’t know he’s a violist/trombonist/insert -ist here yet; the more students you teach, the more students you reach.

That isn’t as easy as it sounds, I know. Especially when music education students receive such intensively specific training, the initial reaction to being asked to teach something you don’t feel like an expert at is, naturally, fear. Not one teacher alive, however, has ever gone it alone. There are so many incredible resources available online, and even more right in front of you, like your former cooperating teachers and professors. Asking them questions like, “What on earth do you teach the first week?,” “What are your favorite games?,” “Do you have a routine you feel successful in for classroom management?,” as well as scouring TeachersPayTeachers, Facebook groups, YouTube, etc., is a fantastic way to grow, and you begin to see how quickly those things meld with your personal styles and preferences of teaching.

The most common counterargument that I hear from instrumental music teachers to this philosophy, is that the time you spend as a general music instructor detracts from the amount of time you are capable of teaching instrumental lessons. I agree with the semantics of this argument, but not the intent, and I’ll use my own personal example as evidence.

I arrived at the instrumental program I teach now to 30 total students in

the fourth and fifth grades combined. With some restructuring, I now hold the primary responsibility for the building's general music and all of the orchestra program. In the two years I have been teaching in this combination and the students have learned to love my musical and educational presence, the program has more than tripled (almost quadrupled) to 110 students.

My lesson groups are still under 12 students and the concerts are a celebration of their excellence - not a showcase for what happens when you don't "have enough time." Time is what you make of it, and I take care to use every opportunity. I spend no lesson time convincing students to love music or the foundational elements of musicianship. I've done that already in general music. Instead, we pick up our instruments and we play.

As a conclusion to my argument, I say may our worst problem be that we have so many students to educate that we are bursting at the seams with instrumentalists. I can't think of a world in which that isn't the problem we deserve to have. The energy, dedication, and passion that it takes to do both general and instrumental music well, to become an expert in your areas of non-expertise, is hard, but that isn't in question. I tell my students as often as I tell myself: you can do hard things. ||

Elizabeth Ojeda-Petito is a devoted instrumental and general music elementary educator of almost a decade. Her focus is on music education that is pedagogically playful, engaging, and accessible for all learners. She has held elementary and early childhood positions in both Rochester, NY, and Westchester County, NY, where she currently serves as a 4th and 5th grade elementary orchestra and general music teacher.

In addition, Elizabeth Ojeda-Petito is an internationally recognized, award-winning harpist. She received advanced degrees in Harp Performance and Literature from the Eastman School of Music with honors and accolades, including a Performer's Certificate for "Outstanding Performance Ability." She is an Ed.D candidate in Music Education at Columbia University, Teachers College. Elizabeth has held professorships and faculty appointed positions in Harp at the Eastman School of Music, Syracuse University, Roberts Wesleyan University, and Columbia University.

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