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Drumming and Musical Agency among D/deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Students

Action research is conducted by educators to improve their own practice (Mertler, 2021). In this sense, teachers who reflect on their own practice in hopes of bettering their teaching align with the practice of action research.

The New York State School Music Association (NYSSMA[®]) Action Research Grant was instrumental in helping us formalize our informal collaborative action research efforts between the Eastman School of Music (Eastman) and the Rochester School for the Deaf (RSD) into a structured “action research project.”

The partnership between Eastman and RSD was established prior to this action research initiative. Sangmi Kang, an Assistant Professor of Music Teaching and Learning at Eastman, had been collaborating with Pamela McInerney since 2022. As the music teacher at RSD for more than 30 years, McInerney shared her knowledge and experience working with D/deaf and hard-of-hearing students with Prof. Kang’s general music methods students.

(Big ‘D’ Deaf refers to a person who identifies as being a member of the Deaf community. Small ‘d’ deaf refers to a person who does not identify as being a part of the Deaf community, and hearing loss is described primarily in medical terms.)

Seeking relevant help

The collaboration also helped McInerney refine her teaching practice. She recalled that conventional professional development opportunities often lacked applicability to her because of their aurally-focused music teaching approaches. McInerney’s teaching scenario is uncommon for most music teachers because she works exclusively with D/deaf or hard-of-hearing students in a self-contained classroom within Deaf culture (Darrow, 2006).

As the only music teacher in the building, covering Pre-K through 12th grade, she needed colleagues to talk to for inspiration and ideas about her specific teaching situation. Through the partnership, Prof. Kang regularly visited McInerney’s classroom and discussed McInerney’s teaching approaches

in this unique setting. In turn, McInerney helped Prof. Kang deepen her understanding of teaching children with diverse needs, specifically D/deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

McInerney’s classroom is well-equipped to engage her students in music classes as it contains a Multisensory Sound Lab (Oval Window Audio, 2015). The lab was specifically created for D/deaf and hard-of-hearing students to visually and kinesthetically experience and further comprehend the world of sound.

The Sound Lab features a 7-foot Luma-sound Light tower demonstrating pitch differences in music, a vibrating dance floor powered by four subwoofers with 18-inch drivers, microphones connected to screens displaying sound changes with visual graphic patterns, and an interactive Cleartouch Board. By engaging students with sound and these multimodal stimuli, McInerney’s lessons emphasized responding to music.

From passive to active

One day, Prof. Kang brought tubanos from Eastman for her collegiate general music methods students’ field teaching, and one preservice teacher tried drumming activities using a kinesthetic approach. We sensed that tubanos could be effective instruments for RSD music students, allowing them to unlock and share their creativity in new ways.

When Prof. Kang learned about the NYSSMA[®] Action Research Grant call for proposals, a potential collaboration with RSD incorporating performing-based music activities at RSD immediately came to mind. McInerney also agreed as she had been thinking about how to meaningfully elicit D/deaf and hard-of-hearing students’ sense of ownership and agency in music learning. Two Eastman doctoral students, Samantha Webber and Rachael Sanguinetti, who served as teaching assistants in the music methods courses, also joined the team.

We were awarded the NYSSMA[®] Action Research Grant and purchased six tubanos for RSD! Through this action research we thus aimed to identify ways to promote musical agency among D/deaf and hard-of-hearing students using performing-based drumming activities. The research question

was, “What are the instructional approaches to foster D/deaf and hard-of-hearing students’ musical agency using drums in a self-contained general music classroom?”

Method: Collaborative action research

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we recruited research participants among RSD 4th grade students. Seven out of 11 eligible students assented to participate in the study and we obtained parental consent. McInerney and Webber planned and taught 10 drumming sessions, while Prof. Kang and Sanguinetti observed the lessons.

Following the cyclic process of planning, acting, developing, and reflecting (Mertler, 2021), the two teachers customized their instructional approaches to foster students’ musical agency. Research participants also shared their thoughts on their learning experiences and musical agency (Karlsen, 2011) through three rounds of interviews. Our focus on musical agency led us to emphasize the creating aspects of drumming, culminating in the students’ performance of *The Three Little Pigs* story on the tubanos for the RSD community.

Findings: How we customized our instructional approaches to foster musical agency

During the qualitative data analysis (Saldana, 2021), four themes emerged that highlight the instructional approaches we tailored to foster students’ musical agency:

- (a) Nurturing a culture of communication.
- (b) Incorporating multimodal approaches.
- (c) Emphasizing creating over performing.
- (d) Integrating social learning.

First, we identified and employed the students’ preferred modes of communication and perspectives. Historically, D/deaf and hard-of-hearing people have been subjected to instructional approaches that prioritize hearing culture and spoken language, often to the detriment of their unique needs (Darrow, 1993). We dedicated ample instruction time to eliciting and honoring ideas from the students in whatever communication mode they were most comfort-

able: American Sign Language (ASL), spoken English, or other forms of signing/gesturing.

This emphasis on communication and understanding helped strengthen student-teacher relationships. Sometimes it seemed like basic communication was eclipsing musical content, but we realized that clear communication enhanced accessibility and allowed the students to be more musically expressive.

The emphasis on honoring diverse communication needs and styles led to our second theme: incorporating multi-modal approaches in both performing and creating. In response to students' expressed preferences, we chose to emphasize the multisensory nature of music rather than its aural qualities. This meant emphasizing emotions, their physical sensations, and their resultant movements. For example, students would discuss an emotion such as anger and show it physically, finally transferring it to the drum.

The exploration of the emotion resulted in a musical sound, which was contextualized within the entire expression. Through this process, the students began to use the drums as an extension of their expressive abilities. We also emphasized movement and body percussion as musical expression and students reveled in mastering a complex full-body percussion sequence. These explorations led to an emphasis on integrated arts. This holistic approach allowed students to find a mode of musical expression that worked best for them.

Third, our student-centered approach led us to prioritize creating over performing. From the beginning of the drumming unit, students expressed that they enjoyed

opportunities to improvise and create more than any structured performance activity. The teachers responded to this interest in creativity by providing more opportunities to create together. These opportunities included creating on the drums in response to visual art and call-and-response activities with the teachers.

The final performance for this unit was created entirely by students with the teachers providing the story structure. The teachers reviewed the story of *The Three Little Pigs*, which students were already familiar with, and invited students in small groups to create a version of the story on the tubanos.

Students created patterns and performance styles to represent the primary characters of the story, some of the major materials (e.g., brick, wood, straw), and the actions in the story (running, etc.). The two small group performances were very different but reflected the students' creative musical ideas and understanding of the story.

Finally, we noticed the importance of integrating social learning. From the beginning, students enjoyed working collaboratively, seeing others' ideas, and sharing their musical ideas. Opportunities for sharing and collaborative learning were incorporated into every lesson, in the entire class or in small groups. Students worked in pairs to create on the drums, lead the class, and model playing on the drums. Many students expressed in their interviews that they enjoyed these social learning experiences.

Implications: What we learned from this process

The biggest takeaway for McInerney at the conclusion of the research was how her

students approached music-making, specifically on the tubanos, through the physical lens of ASL. We observed that students often used the handshapes of ASL to express themselves on the drum, sometimes using the head of the tubanos more as a stage than as an instrument. By letting go of traditional beliefs about how drumming "should be taught" to what "could be guided," McInerney saw that her students' approach to exploration and creation appeared to be driven more by theatrical aspects than musical ones.

The theatrical aspects came from the organic facial expressions and body language her students used while drumming, which are key grammatical, syntactic, and affective components of ASL. This freedom from following aurally-focused traditional musical rules and expectations to allow a spirit of improvisation has transformed the way McInerney uses the tubanos with her students: encouraging the handshapes of ASL to express not only individual words but also emotions.

The perspective change has led to novel ways to play the drums (steady beat, tempo, dynamics, call and response, beginning and ending together, achieving different timbres, etc.). The complexity of communication that can occur when combining ASL, facial expressions, and body language on top of musical expression is powerful, especially if students use signs on the drums to "talk" back and forth!

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