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Debating Assessment in Music Education

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Introduction

Music education organizations achieved a huge success in Texas several years ago when legislation declared music as a part of the core curriculum. Similarly, more recent national education legislation like No Child Left Behind has recognized music as a core curricular subject. Since that time, little has been done to assess music students to ensure a set of basic skills and knowledge is being achieved. While national and state music standards exist, these standards, in many cases, are not mandatory and merely serve as a guide or recommendations for music educators to follow. Other core subjects endure severe oversight and rigorous testing at the 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 schools. This article serves to discuss the current debate on national music assessment and to argue that music education's place in the core curriculum demands an increase in oversight through standardized music assessment of students in music education classes.

History of National Music Assessment (NAEP)

Before discussing the debate over national music assessment, it is important to review its history. To date, three national music assessments have been administered to students in the United States. In 1971, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) administered the first national music assessment. Three age groups were randomly sampled from schools for this test: 9-year-olds, 13-year-olds, and 17-year-olds. The purposes of the test were to determine what the music students knew, could do, and their attitudes toward music education ("A National Assessment," 1971). Results indicated that while students' attitudes towards music were positive, their performance on the exercises was, by and large, quite low (Rivas, 1974).

NAEP administered a second national music assessment in 1978 and recycled some of the exercises from the first test in order to detect changes over time. The same age population was measured and the results, similar to the first test, were not encouraging. Thirteen and 17-year-olds especially performed poorly in their responses to music history and style items ("Music 1971-79", 1981). On the items replicated from the first assessment, the 9-year-old and 17-year-old groups showed a slight decline from 1971 to 1978. Commenting on the utilization of the results from these national assessments, Mark (1996) wrote, "The information in the National Assessments reports was of great potential value to the music education profession, but actually had little influence on practices" (p. 280). Some criticisms of the second assessment in 1978 were that it did not include performance assessment like the first assessment due to lack of funding (Colwell, 1999a) and that the results were underreported (Oliver, 2007).

It would not be until 1997 when the next assessment would be administered. This great chasm between the second and third assessment was largely due to the lack of funding and an absence of focus and concern on arts education. The political efforts of national arts education

organizations were largely successful in the 1990s in regaining the awareness of policy makers through the creation of the national arts education standards as well as their strong advocacy initiatives. By means of funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Getty Education Institute, the assessment project was administered by the Council of Chief State School Officers (Lehman, 1999a). This assessment, unlike the others, was largely based on the National Standards for Arts Education and measured all of the arts disciplines (music, art, dance and theater). Because of funding deficiencies, only eighth-grade students were administered the test, which measured student's knowledge and ability in creating, performing, and responding (Lehman, 1999a). Overall results again indicated that while students who participated in music activities performed better than those who did not (Lehman, 1999b), a great deficit in students' music knowledge and skills existed (Circle, 2005). Many concerns have been raised regarding the third assessment, which include the validity of the results, contradictions within the report card, the overall usefulness of the reports, and the delay in reporting all of the results (Colwell, 1999a). A fourth national assessment is scheduled to be administered in 2008.

Supporters for National Music Assessment

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 (Asmus, 1999). According to Asmus (1999):

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 program. (p. 23)

Hoffer (2008) argued that the recent attention on assessment is not because teachers have become interested in improving performance, but because of the state testing movement and accountability established through legislation like No Child Left Behind. Based on this argument, without some form of assessment of music students, there can be no accountability. 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 reinforcement (Colwell, 2003; Lehman, 1999a). Without national assessment, it becomes quite difficult to evaluate the status of music education in the United States.

Proponents for national music assessment also contend that rigorous testing establishes music and the arts as an important academic subject (Edmund, Birkner, Burcham, and Heffner, 2008). The 1997 NAEP arts assessment was a strong indicator that the arts were considered a part of the basic curricular disciplines (Lehman, 1999a; Sims, 2000). As Sims wrote, The fact that the arts are valued enough to be included in the NAEP undertaking is a positive sign that they are viewed as a curricular discipline worthy of this considerable effort and expense. (p. 40)

Though the usage of the results from the NAEP arts assessment may have been underwhelming,

such a large-scaled assessment demonstrated that the arts could be effectively measured (Lehman, 1999a, 1999b).

With arts standards and music standards largely accepted nationally, the next progressive step would be assessment (Colwell, 1999b). As Colwell (1999b) wrote, “The use of standards increases the importance of assessment...” (p. 64). He added that the “national standards focus not on process but on products and outcomes” (p. 67). According to Colwell, these standards should be assessed and evaluated or they are essentially ineffectual. A simple evaluation of the 1997 NAEP arts assessment showed that “too many schools are not ensuring that their students gain the skills and knowledge essential for meaningful participation in the cultural life of the nation” (Sims, 2000, p. 43). Sims (2000) concluded that these results were an indication that more progress was needed to implement the national standards. Just as the standards are valuable in formulating assessment, assessment is an essential tool in reevaluating and heightening the national standards (Colwell, 2003).

National assessment, supporters maintain, also serves to inform professional development needs (Edmund et al., 2008). Results from the assessment can serve to identify areas in which music students have deficiencies and can be used by music education organizations and scholars to develop teacher-training programs and workshops that could equip music educators with ways to improve instruction and ultimately increase students’ music knowledge and skills. Without a national indicator of students’ musical knowledge, it would be difficult to gear music educational initiatives that would be most beneficial in improving student performance.

Academic credibility is another defense for the implementation of national music assessment. With responsibility of student achievement resting largely on the shoulders of educators, data from assessment results can be used to demonstrate to administrators the benefits and importance of music education in the schools (Edmund, et al., 2008). If the results are unsatisfactory, music educators can use them to argue the need for more resources and time in order to address the shortcomings. Lehman (1999a) wrote of a story in which a music supervisor of a large district used the musical exercises from the 1971 national music assessment and administered those exercises to students of his district. Students’ results were quite disappointing, but instead of covering up the poor results, he publicized them to parents and administrators. He argued that the students were underachieving and offered a solution, which included the addition of more music teachers and a devotion to more time and resources. According to Lehman, the music supervisor received everything he requested.

Opposition to National Music Assessment

While most music educators would largely promote informally assessing music students within the classroom, many remain strongly opposed to a national standardized music assessment. Circle (2005) raised various questions in an article published in *Music Educators Journal* regarding music testing and several music educators voiced their opinions in response. One of the main arguments posited by these music educators was that music is an artistic expression

and cannot and should not be academically tested (Wright, Humphrey, Larrick, Gifford, and Wardlaw, 2005). One contributor wrote,

I do not feel that testing students in music is productive, nor do I feel we need to fall into the trap of thinking that we need to 'prove' the value of what we do by following along in the testing trend. (Wright et al., 2005, p. 6)

Along those same lines, another educator adamantly added, "I would be embarrassed to admit I'm a music educator if we adopt testing as a means of achieving 'academic viability'. We should hold out with all our might as the antitestng faction in education" (Wright et al., 2005, p. 7). A strong concern seems to exist that national music testing would lead to the high-stakes testing trend present in other core curricular subjects like math and science.

To extend this argument against national testing, many music educators refute the claims that music is equivalent to math and science and should be tested in a similar fashion. Hoffa (1994) argued that the arts "defy the norms of objective measurement by which learning is assessed in other subjects" (p. 18). He also pointed out that the language that arts educators use to describe desired outcomes of students is quite different than that of math or science educators who see things largely from an objective viewpoint. Such words as creative, expressive, or musically are rarely heard in other disciplines besides the arts (Hoffa, 1994). Anxiety over the arts losing its subjective nature, which many music educators view as the special, distinctive quality of the arts disciplines, causes music educators to be skeptical and unsupportive of national assessment (Colwell, 2003).

Other concern lies in the perceived inequity of national music assessment. By example of the NAEP music assessments, all students are tested regardless of music participation in their schools. There seems to be a fear that music educators will be held accountable for test results of students they have not had the opportunity to teach. According to Circle (2005), "at the secondary level, 75 to 80% of students do not elect a music class" (p. 4). Other perceived inequities exist in the length and number of music classes offered from school to school. All students who would take the national assessment would be held responsible for the same standards and content despite disproportions in length of exposure to music training (Wright et al., 2005). Current movements within education reform promote tying teacher pay to student test results. This trend further threatens music educators and adds to the anxiety of being held accountable for the performance of students not in their classes or for standards not achievable due to time constraints.

Opponents to national assessment additionally argue that consideration must also be given to the performance pressure associated with secondary music ensembles. With marching band performances every week, holiday concerts, competitions and festivals, limited time remains in the rehearsal to prepare students for standardized testing. Orzolek (2006) described a conversation with school board members at a state conference in which he asked how they assessed their secondary music programs. According to Orzolek, they perceived success as good concerts, strong pep band performances at sports events, program numbers, awards, and limited parent complaints. Some music educators may argue that if these are the desired results

and measurement of success from our school officials, then what would be the purpose for national music assessment?

The Necessity of National Music Assessment

Though those in opposition to national music assessment have compelling arguments that deserve consideration, the benefits far outweigh the drawbacks. Music education must become progressive in order to survive in the quickly evolving educational reform movement. The following arguments outline the overwhelming necessity of national music assessment.

Accountability

Accountability has become the “catch phrase” for educators and politicians recently, and there is great logic behind this. For too long, educators have been complacent in improving the quality of instruction and unmotivated to increase effective practices. Mandatory standards and assessment have largely been effective in motivating teachers to enhance the condition of our schools. Music educators must also be held accountable for what is being taught in the music classroom. While many music educators are extremely effective at imparting music skills and knowledge to their students, too great a number are unsuccessful and negligent in providing these essential music competencies. Though it is uncomfortable to admit, the music education field must acknowledge this reality and begin to hold music teachers accountable for quality music instruction.

In *Toward Civilization*, a book touted by music education advocates for its strong endorsement of arts education within the core curriculum, Hodsoll (1988) articulated the lack of consensus within arts education on the level of emphasis “placed on teaching history, skills, and critical judgment” (p. 25). Hodsoll also wrote that there was a noticeable absence of systematic assessment of arts achievement to identify the effectiveness of school arts programs. Nearly twenty years have past since the release of this pivotal book and little has changed. Though Hodsoll’s work is championed by music advocates and was largely influential in promoting the significance of arts education, the full message of the book has yet to be accepted and understood within the field of music education.

By simply examining the results from the three national music assessments administered, the report card clearly shows a lack of proficiency in students’ music knowledge. The only progressive action to address this failure over the past few decades was the creation and adoption of the national standards. While these standards present clear and achievable goals and objectives for music educators, they remain optional in most states. As Colwell (1999b, 2008) has argued, established standards predicate assessment of those standards. The logical sequential step after imparting these standards would be to assess whether the desired competencies have been achieved. There is more to music education than learning and memorizing songs, or the technical aspects of playing an instrument. While these are important skills to develop, there is much more that must be imparted to our music students. As Hoffer (2008) wrote, “Objective assessment of what students have learned is an essential aspect of

effective teaching” (p. 35). A national assessment would hold music educators accountable for the content covered in their music programs and motivate them to address the tested standards so that students are receiving a foundation of music knowledge and skills.

Legislation at the state and national level has finally begun to consider arts education as part of the core curriculum. Arts organizations achieved a monumental success when No Child Left Behind officially recognized the arts as having equal importance of math, science, and other core disciplines. Music educators could finally defend their music programs to administration, parents, and staff by citing the legislative endorsement of the arts in our schools. Yet, when music educators are asked to assess their students through standardized testing, they quickly attempt to separate their discipline from the other core academic disciplines by arguing that music is unique and cannot be measured objectively. In essence, music educators want the benefits of being seen as equals to the other core subjects, but do not want to abide by the same rules. Music educators cannot have it both ways. Either music education should relinquish their status as a core curricular subject and focus solely on the artistic, subjective offerings of the arts, or be held accountable through standards and assessment just as other basic subjects.

Additionally, because many secondary music programs have become so heavily performance based, much of the music educational content has been sacrificed. Rather than focusing on each individual learner, music educators’ focus has concerned the overall development of the group or ensemble. A large number of secondary music educators arbitrarily assign grades to students at the end of a term because no systematic evaluation occurs within the music class. Hoffer (2008) wrote,

Secondary school performance ensembles should also have planned curricula. Just preparing for one performance after another usually results in haphazard learning. In addition, students in high school ensembles receive grades and credits, which imply courses with planned content. (pp. 34-35)

Competition has become the ultimate evaluator with ensembles receiving a rating after one performance. Much of the rehearsal time is directed towards this one, “snapshot” assessment, yet what does that final rating inform the director about individual student achievement? It is often the case that the rating received from the judges does little to even inform the director about the achievement of the ensemble much less the individual. If an ensemble receives a superior rating, and 50% of the students do not understand basic music notation concepts, have the director and the students achieved success? Unfortunately this happens all too frequently and, because no individual assessment of the students’ attained musical knowledge exists, many students leave the music program musically illiterate. National music assessment is necessary to hold each individual student accountable for obtaining musical knowledge. Rather than fading into the background of an ensemble, individual assessment would hold every student responsible for the same content. Group assessment cannot do this. Music educators must shift from solely focusing on the success of the overall group and begin to concentrate on each individual learner. With national assessment in place, music program directors would have to shift priority from group-focused instruction to individual-focused instruction.

Political Gain

Though many music educators cringe when the word “politics” creeps into discussion, it is a reality that the educational world is driven by a political force. Despite personal opinions regarding politicians, it is our legislators that create policy that directly affects our schools. Having said this, music education policy must be geared to fit the political agenda. State and national arts organizations have largely learned this lesson. Consider the 1980s following the release of *A Nation at Risk*. Schools and educators were under indictment and legislators were rushing to offer solutions for solving the American education crisis. Unfortunately during this time, arts education slipped from the agenda and became largely ignored and neglected in many of our nations’ schools. Fearing extinction, arts organizations united and began to lobby state and national legislatures by inundating them with advocacy on the importance of arts education. The tide began to turn when these arts organizations came to the realization that if the arts were to be considered as important as core curricular subjects, then they would have to model their policies and initiatives after those subjects (Colwell, 2008). From this sprang the national standards. Because of these efforts, legislation began to pay recognition to the importance of the arts.

But, simply because the arts have attained curricular recognition does not mean that they should grow content and complacent. This is especially true in light of today’s educational environment, which is heavily influenced and driven by assessment. Politicians are largely motivated by facts and figures (Edmund et al., 2008). Hard data is more influential to legislators than descriptive discussions of the influence and spiritual power of the arts. In order to maintain the support of politicians, we must speak their language, which can be done through results from national music assessment. This can be achieved by again emulating the practices of the other core curricular disciplines through the institution of national music assessment. As the field of music education institutes a more rigorous, systematic assessment program, legislators will have to give consideration to our profession and increase the respect and validity of our position within the curriculum.

It is important to also consider how certain disciplines within education receive more attention through additional resources and funding. Typically this is achieved only when deficiencies exist and are exposed. Current educational initiatives have renewed a focus on science education due to the decline in American science innovators. Nearly a decade ago, reading initiatives were instituted with goals to increase student literacy. If American students are largely musically illiterate and valid data exist to verify such claims, then perhaps music education can capture the attention of legislators and initiatives focused on improving and increasing students’ musical knowledge and skills can be established.

This, however, would be dependent on music educators fully exposing the realities of student achievement rather than spinning poor results into something positive. As Colwell (2003) argued, arts organizations have become quite proficient at covering up negative results and rationalizing them away. Music educators and organizations should face the reality of the past national music assessments and publicly declare the crisis within music education. Once this has been done, then the case can be made to legislators for the need to address the crisis through an

increase in arts funding, more protection of instructional time, and other greatly needed resources. The façade that has frequently been portrayed by music organizations only serves to weaken our position within education and will have little effect on increasing the attention given to the arts.

Protection of Instructional Time

Because of the high-stakes testing in subjects like math, science, and reading, administrators employ strategies to increase instructional time in order to better prepare students for those tests. This is especially the case for students with learning deficiencies or learning gaps. Classes that are deemed nonessential because they are not tested are often targeted for student pullout so that remedial or accelerated instruction can take place. One of the most heavily targeted classes for pullouts, especially at the elementary level, is music. Some students rarely are allowed the opportunity to attend music class because of the additionally accelerated instruction needed. Often times teachers will hold back several students during music class time in order for those students to finish homework or for tutorials.

The message sent by these actions is obvious: Music is not as important as math, science, or reading. Though music educators may argue that music is essential to students' education, administrators are under extreme pressure to improve student scores on standardized tests. The one thing that could end this trend would be standardized music assessment. If administrators know that music will be tested and students' results from that school will be reported and published, they would be more apt to protect music instruction time in order for students to perform well. Even without the high-stakes pressure, principals still want their students to perform well so that they can tout high achievement to the community and their superiors. Using the results from the music assessment, music educators can urge for an extension of music class time in order to improve results or request additional resources. Administrators are much more likely to acquiesce these requests based on hard data that can only be gathered from standardized music assessment.

National Gauge for Music Organizations

Over the past few decades, several states have taken the initiative to develop measures to assess music knowledge (Shuler & Connealy, 1998). Led largely by state music and arts organizations, these assessments have been tied to state standards. Though the purpose of this article is not to discuss state music assessment, music educators should inform themselves of these state-led initiatives, which could have real value in holding music educators and students accountable. 1 Some of these state assessments are considered high-stakes tests and administered in conjunction with the other core disciplines. South Carolina has recently unveiled an innovative testing strategy that involves web-based music assessment (Yap & Pearsall, 2008).

While there is great value to these state music assessments, they do not negate the need for national assessment. Many state departments of education do not have the resources or personnel to adequately create a valid and reliable test (Colwell, 2008). Also, the state political

climate is often more unstable than the national government which could derail or delay music assessment programs. National music assessment better allows a large-scale gauge of the progress of music students throughout the entire country. With state music assessments varying in scope and purpose and with some states lacking a music assessment program, it becomes impossible to measure the status of music education nationally.

National music organizations like MENC as well as educational organizations need a broad perspective on music students' progress in order to adjust national standards, establish initiatives, or increase lobbying efforts for political action. State music assessment coupled with national music assessment can present a clearer picture of what music students know and do not know. Also, these various assessment tools can improve upon each other's test designs and content. Ultimately, with state and national music assessment, legislators at both levels can visibly observe the commitment of music educators to improving music education and holding themselves and their students accountable for academic music content.

Some Final Thoughts

For national assessment to be effective, some of the concerns offered in opposition to music testing should be considered and reevaluated. For instance, it does not seem logical to test students in high school who are not currently enrolled in a music program as NAEP has done in past assessments. This issue must be addressed in the future. Also, a larger sample should be drawn in order to increase the generalizability of the results. 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. Music education must move beyond the rhetoric and begin to take active steps toward fully committing to large-scale assessment. 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.

Conclusion

National music assessment has been and continues to be a contentious subject. Within this article, both sides of the debate over music assessment have been weighed, and 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 name but not in action. With music being placed as a basic subject, more responsibility and accountability is required and greatly needed. To increase accountability, improve political influence, protect music instruction time, and gauge national progress of music students, national music assessment must be administered. With the forthcoming publication of the 2008 NAEP arts assessment results, hopefully a renewal of the discussion of the necessity of music assessment will occur and serious reflection and evaluation will be given to the results to better inform and improve the field.

¹ For detailed description of some state assessments, I refer the reader to the following: South Carolina (Yap & Pearsall, 2008); Kentucky (Swanson, Shepherd, & Wood, 2008); Florida

(Brophy, 2008); and Washington (Smith, 2008). Many states have collaborated to develop assessment through SCASS (Shuler & Connealy, 1998).

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