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Assessing the Orff-Schulwerk Approach: A Content Analysis

Abstract

Introduction:

Both teachers and students benefit from a multi-faceted analysis of any pedagogical approach. Especially when competing approaches in the same discipline offer different presentations of similar knowledge and skills, an objective and in-depth analysis of the efficacy of each approach is valuable. Specifically in elementary music education, teachers use a variety of methods and approaches to instruct their students. Those most commonly used are: the Kodály method, Dalcroze Eurhythmics, Orff-Schulwerk, and Gordon's Music Learning Theory (Johnson & Rack, 2005). While philosophical differences among these approaches are relatively clear, their respective impact on students is less evident.

To develop a more complete understanding of one of these approaches, Orff-Schulwerk, the authors undertook a content analysis of the existing research literature. Assembled for online publication, the "Orff Research Webliography" (Wang, Abril, Johnson, & Sogin, 2006), was analyzed for research methodologies and variables to be used in designing an assessment plan. The authors investigated how the Orff approach has been studied with respect to its impact on student learning. They then designed a multi-faceted yet practical assessment plan to study the effect the Orff-Schulwerk approach for use in a future pilot project: The Cape Fear Orff Ensemble, funded by a Charles L. Cahill Award through UNC-Wilmington.

Methodology:

The authors based their assessment plan on published Orff-related research in the "Orff Research Webliography." Of particular interest to the authors were studies on improvisation, music listening, musical performance, and attitudes toward music instruction (McCoy, 1998; Parisi, 2004; Shank & Rashley, 2001; Wang & Sogin, 1995; Wolff, 1984; Zimmerman, 1983). After reviewing eighty-two published studies, the authors decided to base their assessment plan on six focus areas: listening skills, verbal descriptions of music, improvisation, attitude, performance skills, and knowledge and understanding of musical terms and concepts.

Results:

The authors developed a comprehensive assessment plan including process and outcome variables directly related to the Orff-Schulwerk approach. Specific measures and methodologies appropriate for each focus area include qualitative and quantitative data collection using audio and video tape recordings, written tests, and CD-ROM technology. Prior to the beginning of their pilot study with fourth-grade students, the authors will refine their assessment procedures with respect to replication and expansion of the measures used in the existing research literature.

While many music educators prefer one approach to elementary music education over another, few actually cite or are familiar with research literature on the topic. By investigating the efficacy of the Orff-Schulwerk approach using a variety of variables, the authors intend to provide some practical insights and an increased understanding of the Schulwerk's impact on students' learning. Implications of this analysis include course and instructional design for music educators from both objective and subjective perspectives. In the planned evaluation of student learning, quantitative and qualitative data will be collected from a small group of fourth-grade students constituting a pilot study. Based on these future data and analyses, a larger group of students may be studied to provide a broader assessment of the Orff-Schulwerk approach.

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