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Abstract

This article constitutes the second stage in an ongoing investigation of alternative instrumental ensembles in schools. First, interview data from the previous stage, which documented cases in Massachusetts, Kentucky, Washington, and Nevada, where individual music teachers began and successfully sustained alternative ensembles for the past 5 to 10 years, summarize the genesis, growth, and sustenance of these ensembles. The current article presents data relating to the K-12 policy decisions made by these teachers and then examines these policy decisions with a focus on their implications for music teacher preparation. Implications for music teacher education are considered in light of enhancing music teachers' understanding of policy choices in the areas of (a) program design, (b) student participation, (c) conceptualizations of musicianship, and (d) cultural and aesthetic appropriateness. Finally, differences in inherent assumptions between alternative ensemble practice and traditional ensemble practice are set forth, ending with recommendations for specific teacher education reforms and action initiatives.

Keywords

alternative ensembles, instrumental ensembles, nontraditional ensembles, music teacher education reform

Context

Initial reactions among music teachers and arts administrators to the term *alternative* prefixed to *school ensembles* can range from enticing to threatening, depending on one's experience, situation, and point of view. Despite whether alternative ensembles enjoy support or face resistance at the local level, recent Music Educators National Conference (MENC) publications indicate that music programs in schools are expanding beyond the traditional band–orchestra–chorus trilogy to include, and

¹Boston University, Boston, MA

Corresponding Author:

Bernadette Colley, Boston University, School of Music, 855 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, MA 02215.

Email: colley4@juno.com

embrace, “other” music and “nontraditional” ensembles historically not heard in U.S. schools (Randall, 2008; Spray, 2008; Tanner, 2007). Authors’ definitions of *alternative* span a range and diversity of timbres, genres, and members. For purposes of this research, alternative ensembles are defined as those using an instrumentation or instrumental style not found in traditional bands and orchestras. Although alternative ensemble practices are gaining currency in the field, teacher education programs—still driven by the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) guidelines—are slow to respond to this growing trend among professionals in the field (NASM, 2007). This research project was undertaken as an initial attempt to address this trend.

Over the past 50 years, two overarching factors have led the movement toward new instrumental ensembles in schools, that is, major shifts in the cultural and demographic makeup of our country (Spring, 2002) and a broadening of research in ethnomusicology (Volk, 1998). One result of both factors has been the widespread emergence of world musics in the concert hall, at the music festival, on the air waves, and on the Internet, all of which have heightened public knowledge and interest in music outside of the European canon. Elsewhere, I have characterized the band, orchestra, and chorus trilogy pervasive in our schools as “music of the military, music of the aristocracy, and music of the church,” respectively (Colley, 2008). Although such generalizations admittedly oversimplify, there is more than a modicum of truth to this claim, in view of the large ensemble’s historical legacy in U.S. public school music programs (Mark & Gary, 2007). To focus music programs in schools on traditional large ensembles to the extent that we do is no longer—on aesthetic, educational, cultural, or artistic grounds—defensible. If music making is to thrive in learning environments and *music* itself is to be valued as a school subject, the music education community would do well to expand its definition of *music ensembles* in teacher education programs. Note that I recommend “expansion” and not “alteration” or “replacement,” even though the very word *alternative*, to some, might suggest it. (*Additional* is perhaps a workable substitute.)

Music teacher education programs have a responsibility to define and present our art form accurately, fairly, and wholly to our future teachers and, by extension, to our K-12 constituencies. One way to meet this responsibility is to offer representative spectra of musical ensemble opportunities—not necessarily inclusively and comprehensively within each school, district, university, or even one community, but at least *as a profession*. We cannot be all inclusive of all alternatives in any single program or institution. Rather, our overarching goal as a profession should be to ensure that the constellation of what we offer *nationally* is representative of our country’s varied and rich musical heritage. We cannot do this without significant paradigmatic change in how we define *music* at the undergraduate level in our preservice preparation of music teachers. We need to train teachers to respond locally and idiosyncratically to the communities in which they work, using their individual talents as musicians to design and create ensemble programs that are both diversified and of high musical quality.

Method

In 2006–2007, the author (Colley, 2008) sought individual cases of alternative instrumentation ensembles embedded as regular and ongoing components of school music programs and then interviewed the individuals who led them. Participant inclusion criteria were that (a) the ensemble had to have been begun and still taught by the resident, certified music teacher, (b) it had to be an outgrowth of the school's regular music program, that is, not an after-school club directed by a guest artist in residence or adjunct employee, and (c) the instrumentation or instrumental style had to be that not found in traditional band and orchestra programs. The sample of four ensembles and individuals was garnered by a combination of research, convenience, and serendipity and resulted in a diverse and interesting collection: a recorder consort Collegium of fifth and sixth graders in an urban school in central Massachusetts, a country and bluegrass ensemble embedded into a small high school chorus in rural Kentucky, an elementary school marimba ensemble in Washington State, and a secondary school mariachi program in Nevada. All four interviewees are graduates of standard music teacher certification programs in the United States. Three of the interviewees are the music teacher–founders of these groups; the fourth is a music administrator–founder (now retired). Three participants signed consent for both identity and information to be shared publicly for the purposes of this research. The teacher from Kentucky consented to have all statements used for the research but requested pseudonyms be used for identifying information.

The bulk of the data were collected via 60- to 90-minute individual telephone interviews with the teachers in spring 2007. During the interviews, teachers were all situated in their respective locations, and the author spoke to them from Boston. A semistructured interview protocol was used to guide interview topics, which investigated the genesis, maintenance, and future prospects for these ensembles. Where available, interview data were supplemented by artifacts, recordings, and concert programs. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Responses were coded according to salient themes and trends that emerged in each category, using a combination of predetermined and emerging coding, respectively, as a two-step data analysis strategy (Creswell, 2009, pp. 183–193). Transcript data were checked for internal consistency and reliability. Data reported by the interviewees were not corroborated by site visits nor interviews with students or other school personnel. Subsequent to the interviews, some informal conversations, observations, and anecdotes furnished additional supporting information where necessary.

Stage I Overview

The purpose of Stage 1 was to record how and why alternative ensembles come to be, what it takes to maintain them, and what future prospects exist for their sustainability. Music teachers reported how the ensembles had begun, what factors had been influential in their genesis, how they were currently being maintained, what reception they

had received from colleagues, parents, and administrators, what support systems exist for the ensembles' continuance, and, finally, the directors' views on prospects for their sustainability (Colley, 2008). Briefly sketched, the four case scenarios are as follows.

1. Dennis Ferguson, Collegium, Roosevelt Elementary School, Worcester, Massachusetts

Dennis Ferguson's fifth and sixth grade Collegium has existed for 7 years at the Roosevelt School in Worcester, Massachusetts, whose demographic makeup is approximately 30% Hispanic, 30% African American, and 60% "international mix." Approximately 30 students play soprano, alto, tenor, and bass recorders. Each year, 80% to 90% of 200 eligible fifth and sixth graders audition for 30 available slots, and the group performs three to four times per year in the school and community.

2. Patty Jo Lazarus, Redhook, Kentucky (pseudonyms)

Patty Jo Lazarus teaches vocal-choral music in the same middle and high schools she attended growing up and has done so for 29 years. Redhook's high school of 350 students has, for 30 years, offered band and chorus as the only music electives. There are no performance ensembles at the middle school of 400 students. In a high school chorus of 51, Patty Jo now has 21 boys, and the chorus performs classical, rock, jazz, country, gospel, and bluegrass using a core of "chorus instrumentalists" consisting of guitar, fiddle, banjo, mandolin, bass, and piano. The ensemble arranges for, and accompanies, the choir on two to three selections per three to four programs per year, including a local coal festival each September. Patty Jo reported that these students, once embraced and integrated into the choral program, excel in state choral contests and festivals because of a very well developed aural approach to music and musicality.

3. Walt Hampton, Rugare Marimba Ensemble, Sunset View Elementary, Kennewick, Washington

Founded in 1993, Rugare performs about 30 concerts a year, tours extensively through schools in the Pacific Northwest, has been invited to perform in South Africa, and appeared at music education conferences on the east coast. Each year, roughly 97% of the school's fourth graders try out for 12 coveted spots in the fourth grade ensemble, which leads to a second year of public performing with the group. Elementary school marimba ensembles are fast gaining popularity in the Northwest, perhaps largely because of Walt's extensive lectures and performances with the group, which number about 18 to 20 school assemblies in area schools each year. In addition, Rugare is now one of four marimba ensembles in Kennewick's 14 elementary schools.

4. Marcia Neel, Secondary Mariachi Program, Clark County School District, Las Vegas, Nevada

Though Marcia herself is not a teacher of and has no background in mariachi music, as supervisor of secondary music she was responsible for its initiation and development in the Clark County School District. Clark County is the fifth largest school district in the United States and has a population that is roughly 4% Asian or Pacific Islander, 14% African American, 35% Latino, and 47% Caucasian. In 2007–2008, the district's Music Mariachi program employed 15 mariachi music specialists, all having been certified as mariachi music teachers by the state of Nevada through the business and industry professional license track. These 15 specialists service 10 secondary schools, in which 50% of the students participate in the mariachi music program, which is a combined vocal–instrumental model. The Clark County program is a multi-instrument–vocal approach to developing musicianship in that all students follow a set sequence of applied instruction in voice *and* three to four instruments. The development of Clark County's secondary Music Mariachi program—a comprehensive, standards-based instrumental and vocal ensemble program—is chronicled in the April 2007 Newsletter of MENC Mariachi (MENC, 2007). For others interested in beginning mariachi programs, documents are now available online from MENC. On MENC's Web site mariachi link, one can access a complete set of standards-based curricular outlines, specific lesson plans, and numerous teaching resources from Clark County and elsewhere.

Summarized and analyzed by musical style, school type, and socioeconomic status, the characteristics of this pilot alternative ensemble sample are diverse. Musical roots span the European Renaissance, a modernized American Appalachian folk tradition, a Zimbabwean–Shona tribal tradition, and a European–Hispanic hybrid. The schools' locations encompass one suburban, one rural, and two urban school districts, which range in size from 700 to 300,000 students. Two of the programs are elementary and two are secondary, and the socioeconomic levels of the communities range from poor to affluent. Because a detailed analysis of the birth, maintenance, and future prospects of these ensembles is presented elsewhere (Colley, 2008), the present discussion focuses on questions concerning teacher education that these scenarios provoked.

Stage 2: Policy Implications in K-12 Music Programs

The foregoing research was undertaken to ascertain, record, and analyze how and why expansion beyond the trilogy *does*, in fact, occur in our profession *when music teachers themselves take action* to offer more varied and culturally representative opportunities for music making in schools. Although the results of Stage 1, documenting the genesis of these ensembles, are reported in detail elsewhere (Colley, 2008), they are discussed herein to the extent necessary for providing context for policy issue discussions.

Stage 2 of this research, which is the major focus of *this* report, has three purposes: to present and analyze four types of K-12 music program policy decisions brought to light by these cases, to consider related issues and implications for preservice music teacher education reform, and to offer action initiatives that music teacher training institutions might adopt. The contextual issues discerned from analyzing the interview data with a policy focus are discussed according to philosophical and practical policy decisions teachers made concerning program design, student participation, musician-ship, and cultural aesthetic. Depending on conditions specific to an individual teacher and locale and the extent to which such choices extended beyond local music learning environments, it is conceivable that such decisions will reach beyond the personal and school levels to the district, state, and national levels as well, as alternative ensembles in schools proliferate. Explanations as to how each of these situations involved such policy choices are offered with the intention that music teacher educators will encourage and prepare teachers (some of whom will become arts administrators) to meaningfully and effectively grapple with these issues in ways that expand musical opportunities for children.

Program Design: To What Extent Is the Ensemble Idiosyncratic and Situational, or Systemic and Sustainable?

Interviewee data describing feeder systems, ensemble entry, and opportunities for continued skill advancement in students' subsequent school years were used to analyze program design and sustainability. Also, I asked respondents how they thought their own program would develop over the next 5 or 10 years and whether the ensemble program they each had developed was replicable, or already replicated, elsewhere.

Dennis Ferguson's recorder Collegium and Walt Hampton's Rugare marimba ensemble are both outgrowths of their elementary general music class instrumental curricula and thus have considerable numbers from which to draw membership. However, no subsequent playing opportunities exist for these children once they leave their elementary schools and advance into middle school. Walt Hampton explained that, even if it is maintained, Rugare will change considerably as an ensemble once he leaves because he writes all the arrangements for it, and it is very much driven by his own personality. Patty Jo Lazarus, when asked what the program would be like in 5 or 10 years, said, "I don't know . . . depends on what kids I get." Whether her community's "alternative instrumentalists" will have a place in the school program once she retires, she says, depends on who replaces her. Music Mariachi in the Clark County School District, in its extensive breadth and depth as a curriculum-based program in a state that certifies the mariachi specialty, is very likely to remain established, but even there time will tell. If and when a new dominant ethnicity replaces Las Vegas's Hispanic population, it is interesting to speculate whether the music program offerings in the schools will change yet again.

Systemic adaptation of experimental models in education depends on the extent to which the model is replicable and sustainable in other settings with different management and teaching personnel. In the first three of these cases offering alternative instrumentation, the ensemble clearly could be replicated in terms of instrument availability, scheduling, access to students, and, to some extent, repertoire. The trickiest components, that is, teacher qualifications and skills, are more problematic and ensemble specific. In the fourth case, the mariachi program, the alternative was created *to be* systemic and replicable nationwide, and present indications are that that is indeed occurring (Spray, 2008). MENC is responsible for considerable reportage and dissemination of the secondary Music Mariachi program in Las Vegas. MENC now has an affiliate mariachi membership category which numbered more than 1,300 at the time of the interviews, with the heaviest geographic distributions in Pennsylvania, California, Illinois, New York, Connecticut, Florida, and Georgia and now numbers 695 (P. Beelendorf, personal communication, June 11, 2007 and June 19, 2009).

Participation: To What Extent Is Membership Opportunity Equitable or Competitive?

Historically, tensions between excellence and equity, made manifest by debates on the appropriateness of music ensemble auditions and competitions, are not new to our profession (Austin, 1988, 1990; Elmshaeuser, 1970; Keene, 1982, p. 293; Miller, 1994). The small pilot sample drawn for this research indicates similar conditions in regard to alternative ensembles.

In two of the cases, in fact, the impetus for beginning the ensemble was a quest for musical excellence, interestingly both of those residing at the elementary school level. Both Walt and Dennis began their marimba and recorder ensembles, respectively, to produce the highest level of playing possible in an instrumentation that, they emphasized, *grew out of* their elementary general music classes. Neither Walt nor Dennis conceive of their ensemble as a “preband” experience designed to prepare students for large ensembles that await them in secondary school, as is typically the case for elementary school instrumental programs. To the contrary, Walt Hampton set out to found an instrumental ensemble for children whose musical outcome was both good and interesting, or, as he put it, “that parents would *want* to listen to, instead of *having* to listen to.” Walt Hampton had, in the midst of a PhD program in applied percussion, been asked by Patricia Sheehan Campbell to arrange a piece from Zimbabwe for Orff instruments and teach it to his elementary school students. The children’s abilities far exceeded his expectations, which led to Walt’s own epiphany about how musically limited our requests of children in elementary music programs generally are.

Dennis Ferguson’s personal musical interests had led him to study early music abroad in Ireland, and he had established successful consorts in three other Massachusetts communities:

In Norwood, I started an elementary school SATB recorder ensemble in my first year. By my fifth and final year, I had added a *crumhorn* family, *cornamusen*, *sopranino rauschpfeife*, harpsichord, and bass *rackett*—which was the jewel of the school because everyone wanted to play it, of course. [In this school] most of my colleagues aren't aware of the Recorder Collegium because music teachers work in isolation. I would love to see teacher preparation programs include training in Early Music ensembles. They are very viable financially, too. If the same amount of effort that is expended on band was expended on recorder ensembles alone, it could take off far in excess of most string and wind programs, I believe. (Ferguson, personal communication, May 24, 2007)

Ensemble membership criteria among the four sites included both open enrollment and competitive audition philosophies and were either curricular based or extracurricular. All students in Dennis's and Walt's feeder grade levels study recorder and marimba, respectively, but only 12% to 15% are accepted into the performance ensemble. In contrast, Patty Jo invites any capable instrumentalist interested in playing with her chorus to do so. She then adapts the repertoire program to *their* skills and interests. Likewise, the secondary Music Mariachi program of the Clark County School District is open to any interested student. Roughly 50% of those eligible elect to participate, an ensemble participation rate far exceeding participation levels in traditional secondary music program nationwide.

Musicianship: To What Extent Is Skill Development Predominantly Physical and Kinesthetic, or Intellectual and Analytical?

It has long been recognized among music education professionals and scholars that music making involves kinesthetic, aural, oral, and symbol decoding dimensions (Greer, 1980; Keene, 1982; Landis & Carder, 1972). Increasing access to music from other parts of the world over the past few decades has necessitated examining and replicating the ways in which music teaching and learning occur naturally, that is, as they are culturally situated (Campbell & Lum, 2008; Volk, 1998). Broadly conceived, European-driven music making and musical training (especially in school environments) tends to emphasize analytical symbolic decoding of notation as its primary ultimate goal, whereas music traditions from other parts of the world allow for "aurality," "orality," and kinesthesia to predominate musical skill transmission (Wade, 2004).

Teachers' views on the importance of music literacy within this small sample of four run the gamut from "absolutely essential" to "not encouraged." Reading music is both essential and heavily stressed in Dennis Ferguson's Collegium and Marcia Neel's Music Mariachi program. Conversely, Patty Jo Lazarus does not require her chorus instrumentalists to read music to join chorus, and most of their playing and arranging are done by ear. She reports that many, however, do eventually read notation as a result of chorus participation. In Walt Hampton's case, his witnessing of children's success

with a music that he describes as “very physical” led to a firm philosophical commitment to design an elementary music program that was, as he expressed it, “experiential instead of theoretical and analytical.” Walt Hampton neither requires nor includes music literacy as part of his elementary school marimba program, in keeping with his philosophy that music be 100% “experiential” in the elementary years. Although he does sketch out some of the more complicated arrangements for his own benefit, he insists that students learn all music by rote.

Cultural Aesthetic: To What Extent Is the Musical Aesthetic Culturally Relevant, or Culturally Foreign to the Student and Community Population?

Patty Jo Lazarus in Kentucky and Marcia Neel in Las Vegas, though working in communities culturally quite “foreign” to one another, both began their programs because they observed that current music ensemble offerings were not satisfying the community’s need for culturally driven musical expressions. Marcia and Patty Jo both characterized their decisions to start these programs as “servicing the needs of their clientele.”

Patty Jo adapts her program to whatever musicians she has in her school community at any given time. Although, stylistically, the ensemble’s expertise is country music based, there are years, she reported, when the instrumental ensemble in her chorus leans more toward folk and rock. Marcia Neel’s program was founded in response to demographic changes in the Las Vegas school population, but she was also influenced by a successful curriculum-based single-school mariachi program in Arizona, which she used as a demonstration model in Clark County to “sell” the program to students, parents, and administrators. Mariachi programs are gaining popularity across the country and are often justified on the grounds of making a cultural fit between music program and the dominant ethnic background of the local population. Fine arts director Kerry Bryant, of Barrow County Schools, Georgia, for example, recently attended a MENC-sponsored mariachi workshop. He is beginning a mariachi program in his county to “reach out to the Hispanic community and offer an authentic cross-cultural opportunity to all students.” Quoted as characterizing music mariachi as an opportunity to include students “who no longer fit into the traditional high school band” and also as an innovative public relations tool for his school district, Bryant’s plan is to seek funding for instruments from “business owners in the Hispanic community” and to launch one middle and one high school ensemble (see Spray, 2008). Personally, I find suggestions that alternatives be targeted at students “who no longer fit into the traditional high school band” indicative of the profession’s ensemble myopia. Conversely, and more sensitively, one could suggest that our ensembles “no longer fit” our students, as Patty Jo Lazarus and Marcia Neel, indeed, concluded. (This dichotomy begs the larger fundamental question of *whose* music shall be codified and institutionalized as an “official” cultural language in schools, a discussion well worthy of our time but beyond the scope of this article.)

Music Teacher Education Reform

The four music teachers described above are examples of professionals who, though not setting out to do so per se, grappled with ensemble policy issues of design, musicianship, sustainability, and cultural aesthetic to successfully break timbre ranks with the status quo to expand music making opportunities for children. College level preservice programs can do the same.

It came as no surprise that to begin and run these ensembles required skills typically *not* acquired in most music teacher education institutions. As stated, all four teachers experienced typical music education trajectories. In three of the cases—Dennis, Walt, and Patty Jo, alternative instrumental skills were acquired at the teachers' own initiative and expense but derived from various individuals and outside influences. Marcia Neel, a former high school choral director, has no training whatsoever in mariachi music. All those she hired to teach in the mariachi program are working professional mariachi musicians who became certified mariachi music teachers through Nevada's business and industry alternative teacher certification track. Through intensive professional development at Marcia Neel's initiative, Clark County has developed these professional musicians into effective teachers (Colley, 2008).

The foregoing summary and analysis begs a comparison of these four individual histories to that of the typical preservice experience of music teachers. Given that music teacher education programs by and large still reside in (or operate in partnership with) schools of music modeled after the 19th-century European conservatory, it is instructive to recognize assumptions that these individuals, by their *actions*, refuted and rejected. Even if not articulated as so per se, they abandoned certain long-held and cherished assumptions that NASM-certified music education programs continue to promulgate. Listed below are seven of them. Each is followed by an action initiative that music teacher educators, working individually and institutionally, could adopt as a reform strategy.

Assumption 1: That the large ensemble, traditionally orchestra–band–chorus, defines and determines a quality school music program.

Focus teacher training on musicianship instead of ensemble membership. Embrace and encourage the concept that smaller, different, timbre-diverse ensembles foster musicianship equally as well as band and orchestra membership.

Assumption 2: That musicianship is best developed by specialized skill on a single “primary” instrument.

Value breadth of skills in music making over specialization. View the music school applicant who plays several instruments well in diverse genres as having as good, if not superior, music teacher potential as the all-state first chair oboist. Seek, accept, and cultivate such students as future music teachers.

Assumption 3: That access to music making is achieved solely through one's ability to decode written notation.

Cease regarding music literacy as superior to aurality in conceptions of musicianship. Recognize, value, require, and reward *both* skill sets as fundamental for music teaching, but do not insist on either as a precursor to the other.

Assumption 4: That the community's expectation and appetite for the traditional trilogy are assumed.

Posit music teachers as leaders and change agents in their schools and communities, whose function is to educate administrators and parents as well as students. This requires an ethnographic understanding of, and approach to, the culture and communities in which they work.

Assumption 5: That alternative certification paths by which professional musicians from other musical traditions become teachers are inappropriate, suspect, or a threat to school music program quality.

In conjunction with state departments of education, begin to sponsor alternative music certification paths for instruments, styles, and genres outside of the European or Western instrumentation and canon.

Assumption 6: That styles and instruments outside the traditional ensemble trilogy are acceptable and allowable only as enhancements, supplements, or enrichments to it.

Start accepting varied musical styles and instrumentations as legitimate entry points to music making, officially endorsed and integrated into the school music program instead of being relegated to after-school "clubs" or "community music" ensembles. Require every undergraduate music education student to develop facility in *an* alternative instrument and genre.

Assumption 7: That the music teacher is the possessor and exemplar of all valid musical skill and knowledge.

Enable and encourage music teachers to be willing and able to learn as much from their students as their students learn from them, in cases where students possess talent and skill in alternative instrumentations and styles of music. In urban and rural areas especially, require prospective music teachers to avail themselves of alternative music-making opportunities.

Even though most music teacher education programs operate in traditional conservatory-driven environments, these are a number of initiatives that we could undertake

in preservice undergraduate programs to enable future teachers to expand and diversify the sounds of music making in schools, as the four teachers interviewed are doing.

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