Eclectic or Purist? Elementary Music Teachers’ Preferred Teaching Methods

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As an elementary school teacher, does one identify with a particular teaching method or approach, such as Orff, Kodály, or Dalcroze, or is one considered “eclectic,” combining or alternating desirable components of each system? This is a pertinent question, since every teacher is responsible for choosing what is to be taught, when it is to be presented, and in what manner it is most likely to be learned. Even the teacher striving to fulfill a mandated curriculum ultimately takes responsibility, on some level, for what, when, and how music will be taught (Madsen & Kuhn, 1978).

As Bennett has stated (1990), every music educator uses a method in teaching, meaning a “way in which students are led from one point to the next in their skill development and conceptual understanding” (p. 21); however, many teachers embrace a particular “Method” as well, the capital “M” implying a more specialized approach. Opinions vary regarding the extent to which any one method should be used. For example, Wheeler and Raebeck (1985) state that “there are many problems to using pure Orff or pure Kodály” and that “the musical concepts and activities developed by Orff and Kodály, when combined, complement each other” (pp. 15-16). Young (1990) combines Orff and Kodály with “traditional American” materials and techniques, while segmenting his book such that the teacher who is oriented toward one of the approaches may omit or limit use of the others (pp. ix-x).

At the other end of the continuum, Choksy, Abramson, Gillespie, and Woods (1986) disagree with the eclectic approach, stating that “no combination of methods can be as effective a teaching approach as a knowledgeable use of any one of them in the hands of a teacher with sufficient training” (p. 336). Although a few studies have been published demonstrating the effectiveness of these approaches (Atterbury, 1991), a review of the Journal of Research in Music Education and the Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education yields little, if any, recent evidence concerning the extent to which elementary music teachers embrace any one method or combinations of methods.

Choksy et al. (1986) point out that there is no conflict in the Jacques-Dalcroze, Kodály, Orff, and Comprehensive Musicianship methods’ overall goals, but that each represents a different route toward developing “the innate musicality that exists in every human being” (p. 336). But each method stresses certain behaviors in varying amounts and at different times, such as singing, instrument playing, music reading and writing, and movement. Because each method focuses on different priorities, it might be assumed that teachers identifying with a particular method would consider certain songs and activities either appropriate or inappropriate for particular developmental levels. For example, a Kodály purist might feel that presenting a song with the pitches “ti” and “fa” would be out of sequence for younger students.
Choksy et al. (1986) suggest that the skills required to work successfully in a particular method cannot be acquired quickly, and that the necessary training is generally available only at the graduate level. They assert, “the teacher who has had a smattering of conflicting methodologies in undergraduate training and, thus inadequately prepared, has had to try to build a music program in even one school situation, is in a position better to understand the need for training” (p. 343). Fairly recent data indicate that, among 100 undergraduate teacher training programs in the United States, the amount of curricular time spent on Jacques-Dalcroze, Kodály, Orff, and Comprehensive Musicianship averages between one and seven hours for each (Schmidt, 1989).

Choksy et al. (1986) maintain that the practice of constructing lessons with “a dash of Dalcroze” or “an ounce of Orff” is encouraged not only by college methods courses, but also by commercial school music series books (p. 336). If there is a commercial leaning toward eclecticism, eclectic teachers might rely more heavily on basal series texts, compared to teachers specializing in a particular method. Regarding university methods courses, there may be geographical differences in the allegiance toward particular methods, due to the fact that universities in different parts of the country devote varying amounts of time to specialized methodologies (Schmidt, 1989).

This study examined the extent to which elementary teachers from two geographically divergent states identify with various methods, and the possible relationships between teacher tenure, use of basal series, and selected method or methods. Teachers’ curricular choices also were examined in order to explore possible effects of preferred method, geographical region, and tenure on song selection.

Method

A survey was distributed to elementary music specialists in New York and Texas. These states were chosen because they represent different geographical regions, are large, have numerous state and private institutions preparing music teachers, and support active, well-organized professional music education associations. Surveys were distributed at each state’s annual music education conference before and after elementary division clinics. The total number of respondents was 123, with return rates of 58% in Texas and 41% in New York.

Respondents indicated the percentage of their teaching reflecting the following “schools of thought”: Jacques-Dalcroze, Orff, Kodály, Comprehensive Musicianship, Manhattanville Music Curriculum Program, and Other. These methods were chosen by reviewing a number of books addressing elementary methods and selecting those featured in at least two (Anderson & Lawrence, 1995; Choksy et al., 1986; Herrold, 1991; Nye & Nye, 1985; O’Brien, 1983; Young, 1990). Respondents also indicated the amount of time they use a basal series in planning and in the classroom.

To demonstrate curricular choices, respondents completed a song-selection task. Respondents indicated whether they were most likely to use each of six songs in a singing activity with first-, third-, or fifth-graders. Songs were selected from popular basal series in accordance with Wheeler and Raebeck’s (1985) ability level guidelines.

Respondents were asked to indicate why they had selected a particular ability level for each song. These responses were categorized as either “musical” reasons (detailing considerations such as pitch, rhythm, or form) or “extra-musical” reasons (such as “develops coordination,” “fun,” “good for learning numbers,” “ties into social studies unit”). For these categorizations, reliability was 0.89 between two independent readers.
Results

In this study, elementary music specialists indicated the percentage of their teaching that was influenced by Orff, Dalcroze, Kodály, Comprehensive Musicianship, Manhattanville Music Curriculum Program, and “Other” approaches. The extent to which teachers identified with each of these methods was unrelated to years of experience or use of basal series texts. Teachers most often using a basal series did not identify themselves with any particular method. Furthermore, there was no remarkable relationship between years of teaching and basal series use.

How eclectic were teachers? Only 6% of respondents reported identification with only one method, and only 29% indicated that as much as 80% of their teaching was related to any single approach. Did eclectic teachers use the basal series more frequently than specialists in a method? The extent to which teachers subscribed to more methods was virtually unrelated to time spent planning using basal series, \( r = 0.17 \).

There was a regional difference, however, in teacher identification with specific methods (see Table 1). Of those surveyed, teachers in Texas were significantly more influenced by Kodály than were teachers in New York, \( t(120) = 8.0, p < .001 \). Teachers in New York reported higher percentages of identification with all other methods than did Texas teachers. The reporting task required the total for all methods to equal 100%; therefore, extensive identification with one method would automatically signal less involvement with others. Nevertheless, the difference between samples is striking.

The states’ samples were not significantly different regarding years of experience. Also, there was no significant difference in the amount of time New Yorkers and Texans reported using the basal series.

Each teacher was asked to indicate when certain songs should be taught. There was a geographical difference in teachers’ responses regarding “The Old Gray Mare,” in which the majority (39%) of New Yorkers assigned the song to first grade and the majority of Texans (48%) assigned it to third grade. “My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean” was also assigned differently: 42% of New Yorkers felt it appropriate for third grade, 17% for fifth, and 14% for first, while no Texans felt it best suited for first grade. Teachers from New York and Texas assigned grade levels for “Old MacDonald Had a Farm,” “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” “There Were Ten in the Bed,” and “Scotland’s Burning” similarly.

Grade level assignments were compared for teachers identifying most with each of the methods. There was virtually no difference in how each group assigned songs to grade levels.
Table 1
*Mean Percentages of Teaching Influenced by Different Methodologies Among Teachers in New York and Texas (N = 123)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>New York</th>
<th>Texas</th>
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<td></td>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>(SD)</td>
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<td>--------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dalcroze</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>10.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orff</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>24.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kodály</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>14.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comprehensive Musicianship</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>24.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>MMCP</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>5.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>28.7</td>
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<td>--------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years Experience</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>8.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Basal Series Use in Planning</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>32.2</td>
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<td>Basal Series Use Class</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>27.9</td>
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<td>--------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Musical Comments Made</td>
<td>44.6</td>
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Respondents were invited to explain their reasons for assigning songs to particular grade levels, and these were categorized as either “musical” or “extra-musical” concerns. Only a weak, positive relationship was found for identification with Kodály and number of musical justifications given. Significantly more Texas teachers gave “musical” justifications for grade-level assignments compared to New York teachers, \(t(108) = 2.3, p = .02\).

Discussion

It appears that the majority of elementary music specialists were eclectic in their use of specialized methods. This seems to be true whether or not the teacher had been teaching for many years. More eclectic teaching did not seem strongly associated with use of the music basal series in either planning or classroom activities.

In this study, teachers from New York and Texas appeared to identify with various methods quite differently, despite the fact that they were equivalent in years of experience. Teachers in Texas leaned more toward Kodály, whereas those in New York expressed more interest in Orff, and to a lesser extent, Comprehensive Musicianship, Jacques-Dalcroze, and the Manhattanville Music Curriculum Program. These results, however, should be regarded with caution.
Respondents were surveyed at state conferences and so might represent a different set of priorities compared to teachers not in attendance. It should be noted that both state conferences held clinics highlighting Orff, Kodály, Dalcroze, and eclectic approaches, and that teachers from all sessions elected to participate.

If teachers surveyed were indeed representative of teachers in New York and Texas, there are a number of factors which might have led to these results. Eastern universities do not differentiate the curriculum for general music, instrumental, and choral majors as extensively as do institutions in the South (Schmidt, 1989); therefore, undergraduates in Texas may have more training time devoted to a specialized method. Why Kodály seems prevalent compared to other methods in Texas may depend on a number of factors, including who is teaching in the teacher preparation programs, how teacher development programs are structured, how teacher excellence is rewarded, the extent to which school districts value conformity, and perhaps whether education reform movements have emphasized a comparatively systematic approach.

In the end, however, one question remains: Did teachers identifying with particular methods behave differently when deciding which songs were appropriate for certain ability levels? Apparently not, as the pattern of responses was remarkably similar for those identifying most with Orff, Kodály, Comprehensive Musicianship, and Other methods. Perhaps this should not be surprising, since so few teachers actually labeled themselves as strictly aligned with a single method.

As Bennett suggests (1990), there are many advantages in subscribing to a given method, but there are disadvantages as well. Those involved in training, hiring, and mentoring music teachers should be aware of how teachers approach their students, both in name and in action. Teachers “in the field” have a corresponding responsibility to seek out what is most effective for their students. Certainly, much more study is needed to examine the many aspects of this issue.

References