

Socioeconomic Status and Instrumental Music: What Does the Research Say about the Relationship and Its Implications?

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Socioeconomic status (SES), as defined by Bornstein and Bradley (2003), is “the relative position of individuals, families, or groups in stratified social systems where some societal values (e.g., occupational prestige, education) are not uniformly distributed” (p. 2). Kozol (1991) argued that SES is a factor that influences teaching and substantiated his thoughts by describing the dismal conditions and equipment of low-SES schools he visited. In those schools, teachers often had low expectations and standards for minority students, a finding supported by Ogbu (1974). Kozol concluded that the public often does not acknowledge the inequalities in education that so many students suffer and stated that “none of the national reports I saw made even passing reference to inequality or segregation. Low reading scores, high dropout rates, poor motivation—symptomatic matters seem to dominate the discussion” (p. 3).

Kozol’s findings could have implications for instrumental music. Monetary investments necessary to participate in an instrumental music program include obtaining and maintaining an instrument and purchasing supplies such as reeds, oil, strings, and sheet music. Low-SES parents may value school activities such as instrumental music programs, but the associated costs may prohibit their children from participating.

If SES influences one’s choice to participate in a school activity, then the quality of

teaching for that activity may be influenced by SES as well, as Kozol (1991) and Ogbu (1974) suggest. However, does this influence also extend to instrumental music instruction? A review of the published literature can assist practitioners in becoming more aware of the possible influences of SES on instrumental music programs. The purpose of this article is to review the published literature addressing recruitment, retention, and participation in instrumental music; student attitudes toward music; and school support for instrumental music. At the end, the article offers recommendations for teaching practice and future research in these areas.

SES Research in Instrumental Music

Recruitment, Retention, and Participation

McCarthy (1980) studied student performance achievement and retention by examining the influence of individualized and group ensemble instruction and student demographic characteristics on two measures of music reading and dropout for one school year. Participants were urban fifth- and sixth-grade beginning instrumental music students ($N = 1,199$) in a northern U.S. industrial city. Teachers ($N = 10$) met with their students once a week for small-group or individual practice. Subjects were classified as low-SES students if, according to a map, they lived in a low-SES neighborhood. Forty-three percent of the subjects

were classified as low-SES students.

McCarthy found that SES was a significant predictor of retention; those students with higher SES tended to participate in instrumental programs longer than those having lower SES.

Klinedinst (1991) examined the ability of selected factors, including SES, academic competency, and musical aptitude, to predict retention of beginning instrumentalists ($N = 205$) in an upper-middle-class district. In September 1988, all classroom music teachers ($N = 4$) rated their students' potential for success in instrumental music by considering musical achievement and nonperformance indicators such as interest in music. In April 1989, student achievement was measured using three researcher-composed études based on material covered during the year. Three anonymous adjudicators independently rated each student's performance. SES was found to be a valid and significant predictor of student retention and a better predictor of retention than measures of academic competency or musical aptitude. Still playing instruments in April were 155 students (76%), while 50 students (24%) had discontinued study. Klinedinst acknowledged that other factors besides SES might have affected retention, including teacher personality and teaching style, student attitude toward music, self-concept in music, and family musical background.

Brandstrom and Wiklund (1996) examined the influence of SES on Swedish municipal music school (MMS) students' choices of musical activities. The basic principles of the MMS¹ were democracy and equality; parental social status did not determine whether a child would receive a music education. This study was conducted in a city of 40,000, where the music school had 1,000 pupils and 25 teachers. Sixth graders ($N = 384$) who were currently studying, who had studied instrumental music, or who never studied music at all in the municipal music

school system were interviewed. They were asked questions regarding music preferences, music performance in leisure, the educational background of the parents, instrument choices, group music studies, parents' playing, and their future plans. A child's SES was determined by SES of his or her family. The researchers found that the educational background of the parents seemed to exert an important influence on a child's participation in the municipal music school system; the more educated the parents, the more their children attended.

In addition, Brandstrom and Wiklund noticed that it was twice as common for children of higher-level employees and university graduates (of higher SES) to study music than children of parents with a working-class background (of lower SES). It was noted that low-SES students from rural areas commonly studied music at the MMS, possibly due to the influence of music in parish activities, implying that religious institutions may influence rural students to seek formal music instruction.

One of the purposes of Corenblum and Marshall's study (1998) was to predict students' intentions to participate in instrumental music based on their family's SES. Ninth-grade students ($N = 253$) from seven schools in Winnipeg, Canada, completed a questionnaire about their perception of their parents' and band directors' attitudes toward their band program. The questionnaire was developed to assess student attitudes toward the band program and their perceptions of the attitudes of their parents, band teachers, and school toward the band program. Students also indicated whether they intended to take band the following year. Responses were submitted to a principal-component factor analysis. A family's SES was assessed using answers to questions about each parent's occupation and number of musical instruments owned or rented by the family. More than 40% of participants, however,

failed or refused to answer questions about parental occupation. Using the answers to the instrument questions as measures of SES level, Corenblum and Marshall found that SES predicted perceived parental support. Students then perceived this support as being either positive (and they participated in band the following school year) or negative (and they did not participate in band the following school year). Thus, perceived parental support predicted by SES also predicted student participation in the instrumental music program.

Phillips (2003) explored instrumental music participation in sixth through eighth graders ($N = 2,180$) in relation to home musical environment and SES. SES was determined using federal free and reduced-price lunch records. Results indicated that high-SES students reported significantly richer musical home environments than low-SES students. Phillips stated that “students of high SES may have greater exposure to musical activities in the home because it is likely that families of these students can better afford them” (p. 92). Phillips went on to comment that “lower SES students may not be able to afford registration fees, instrument rentals, private lessons, and other costs associated with participation in a school music ensemble” (p. 115). Phillips acknowledged that minimal differences in music attitude exist among SES levels.

The research discussed above suggests that SES affects recruitment and retention of instrumental music students. SES possibly influences length of participation in an instrumental music program. An instrumental music program’s participation rate and overall quality may be negatively influenced if located in a low-SES area. Conversely, a high-SES area may be more likely to contain a high-quality instrumental music program with a high participation rate. Research also suggests that parents’ SES may influence household musical exposure and the child’s

participation in an instrumental music program. A relationship may exist between parental occupation, parental attitude toward participation in instrumental music, and child participation in instrumental music. This research suggests that parents may be consciously or unconsciously influencing their child’s decision to participate in instrumental music.

Student Attitudes toward Music

A pair of researchers endeavored to determine if music aptitude, self-esteem, and SES had any significant relationship to student attitudes toward music. As part of their study, Bowman and VanderArk (1982) administered a battery of tests to randomly selected fourth- through sixth-grade students ($N = 132$) in two midwestern elementary schools during regularly scheduled general music classes. These general music classes contained both students who participated in elementary band and students who did not participate. To assess music attitude, the researchers administered Nolin’s (1973) Musical Attitude Inventory. Results determined that a significant relationship existed between self-esteem, SES, and student attitudes toward music. Band students had higher music attitude, aptitude, and SES than nonband students. This suggests that students with more positive attitudes toward music are from high-SES households and are more likely to participate in instrumental music ensembles. Students who participated in band also had significantly higher music aptitude than nonband students. Self-esteem scores were the same for both groups.

Nierman and Veak (1997) designed an experimental study to examine the effect of aptitude, instrumental method, and SES on fourth-grade students’ ($N = 531$) attitudes toward playing an instrument. SES for an entire school was based on the percentage of students of that particular school who qualified for free or reduced-price lunches. With-

in each of the three SES groupings—high-SES, middle-SES, and low-SES—three schools were selected at random to participate in the study. Of the three schools in each SES grouping, one school was assigned to the experimental group that was to receive recorder instruction, one school received a demonstration program of instruction using videotapes and live student demonstrations, and one school received no instruction in instrumental music. Many of the high-SES students who played recorder for the duration of the study expressed an interest in playing an instrument the following year.

The authors concluded that high-SES students may benefit from hands-on recruiting strategies, such as playing recorder, based upon their possible exposure to video games and craft experiences. Many high-SES and middle-SES students, however, decided not to join band, perhaps due to a lengthy time gap between recruiting and actual study. The relationship between aptitude and attitude was nonsignificant. There were no significant differences among treatment groups in the lower-SES schools. The middle-SES schools' control group had a more positive musical attitude score, suggesting that factors outside the school, such as the influence of parents, friends, and siblings, may influence students' attitudes toward music.

In the study mentioned earlier, Phillips (2003) examined attitudes toward music in sixth through eighth graders ($N = 2,180$) in relation to SES and home musical environment. SES was determined using federal free and reduced-price lunch records. Results suggested that a positive correlation may exist between a family's SES level and its home musical environment that may affect children's attitudes toward music. Low-SES families with poor home musical environments may experience "a lack of comfort with musical activities, a lack of familiarity with musical genres, and a lack of interest in musical experiences" (p. 110), possibly creat-

ing less positive attitudes toward music in children. Phillips acknowledged that although differences in music attitude by SES level exist, the differences are quite small and inconsistent across grade levels, implying that "socioeconomic status may not be strongly related to music attitudes" (p. 106).

These studies suggest that socioeconomic status may not be as strongly related to music attitude as it is to recruitment and retention. Bowman and VanderArk (1982), as well as Nierman and Veak (1997), believed that a relationship exists between SES, attitude toward music, and participation in instrumental music. Phillips (2003) acknowledged that minimal differences in music attitude exist among SES levels. Nierman and Veak noted that kinesthetic experiences, such as playing video games or participating in craft activities, may positively influence the effectiveness of hands-on recruiting strategies. This information may support those who believe that using recorder or "instrument petting zoos" (assemblies that allow students to touch and play instruments) are effective recruiting strategies. Nierman and Veak's study also supports the belief that recruitment efforts and commencement of instrument study should be closely sequenced to prevent attrition. Further research in this area could be helpful in designing recruitment strategies for instrumental music educators.

School Support for Instrumental Music

Although instrumental music teachers direct learning activities, administrators and school districts create school support for instrumental music programs by deciding what resources will be allocated for them. School support may be a factor in determining an instrumental music program's quality and accessibility. Two studies address the possible influences of SES on school support for instrumental music.

Smith (1997) endeavored to determine a

relationship between access to string instruction and SES of school districts. String program data was collected for all 50 states from state departments of education and state music education associations. School-district socioeconomic rankings and size were obtained from the Market Data Retrieval School Directories, 1994–1995 (Market Data Retrieval, 1995), using the percentage of school-age children in families falling below the U.S. Census poverty line to determine the socioeconomic ranking of each district. Out of the total sample of 14,183 districts that offered string instruction, approximately 64% had average SES, 32% had high SES, and 4% had low SES. In Smith's opinion, these results show that "inequity of access exists among the socioeconomic levels" (p. 661). SES of a district was identified as the most important predictor of existence of string programs at the elementary school level and among the most important predictor variables of existence of string programs at the middle and high school levels. Possible causes of this relationship were not discussed.

An additional purpose of Corenblum and Marshall's (1998) study was to determine if the relationship between SES and perceived school support of the band program predicted instrumental teachers' attitudes toward the band program. In turn, these attitudes may influence student attitudes and intentions about participation in instrumental music. Results indicated that SES predicted perceived school support, which influenced student attitudes and intention of participation. A decrease in participation can affect the instrumental music program and its status in the community, affecting school support.

These studies suggest that SES may influence the establishment and perception of an instrumental music program. Smith's (1997) study demonstrated the inequality possibly caused by the influences of SES. Students living in a low-SES area may have

less access to an instrumental music program than students living in high-SES areas. SES also influenced perceived school support and student intention of participation, thus affecting school support. These findings further demonstrate that SES may possibly influence a child's opportunity to participate in instrumental music.

Recommendations for Teaching Practice

In light of these findings, here are some suggestions for addressing the inequities of different SES areas. Phillips (2003) commented that "lower SES students may not be able to afford registration fees, instrument rentals, private lessons, and other costs associated with participation in a school music ensemble" (p. 115). To address this concern, a district may lend instruments to those families who cannot afford to rent or buy them. A district may also hold an "instrument roundup night" for community members to make tax-deductible donations of instruments.

Music education organizations may sponsor regional or all-state ensemble programs to enrich school music programs. Often, these organizations charge audition and participation fees that could be waived for financially needy students to encourage their participation. Additionally, a school district's music booster organization can make student financial support one of its main objectives and help pay students' participation fees with funds from concerts or fund-raisers.

Corenblum and Marshall (1998) suggested that SES might influence the establishment of a music program and the school system's perception of an instrumental music program, possibly affecting program funding and administrative support. Without proper funding and administrative support, the probability of creating a musically rich environment is unlikely. Parents, as taxpayers

and major stakeholders in their children's education, can be very influential in deciding what activities their tax dollars should fund. School support continues to be an important area for music educators, who must enlist parental assistance in communicating the need for music education to administrators.

Research also suggests that SES is a significant predictor of retention—those students with higher SES tended to participate in instrumental programs longer than those with lower SES. Districts and music teachers must think of creative strategies to increase the retention rate of low-SES students. These strategies could include creating a parent support group that carools students to rehearsals and holds fund drives throughout the year to support financially needy students.

Music educators do not have direct control of a family's SES. We do have control over our classrooms and we have a role in helping students realize their potential. Imaginative thinking and partnership formation may be crucial to overcoming possible SES influences on instrumental music.

Recommendations for Future Research

A relationship may exist between parental occupation, parental attitude toward instrumental music participation, and child participation in instrumental music. Additional study could determine whether a correlation exists between occupation and music study of those who graduated from low- and middle-SES districts. Other research might determine if a correlation exists between the environment in which a parent was raised and the parent's attitude toward instrumental music participation. Admittedly, however, data-collection restrictions—such as restricted access to student records, school district confidentiality agreements, and institutional review board guidelines—make these studies difficult to execute.

Action research, also known as practi-

tioner research (Zeichner and Noffke, 2001), may facilitate data collection and be beneficial for educators to undertake, since its main purpose is improving a professional's own practice (Gall, Gall, and Borg, 2003). Educators may use various data-collection techniques, including interviews and surveys. Conclusions that are grounded in the collected data may help practitioners understand possible SES influences on their teaching context and help make informed decisions that best serve their programs.

Conclusion

Taebel and Coker (1980) stated that “the problem with low SES pupils does not seem to be that they fail to learn at about the same rate as others, but that they start so much further back than others” (p. 261). Factors that influence this conclusion include societal prejudices, educational inequalities, and pupils' inability to access resources (Taebel & Coker, p. 261). With improved awareness and understanding of possible implications of these influences on instrumental music, music educators have a better chance to make an instrumental music education possible for all children.

Notes

1. The municipal music school (MMS), a major part of the Swedish welfare system, was created in the 1930s. Starting in the third grade, students are offered the opportunity to enroll in instrumental and/or singing lessons at the MMS. There is a nominal fee for each child who participates, and instruction may continue up to graduation from “gymnasium”—the Swedish version of high school. Major expansion took place in the 1960s and 1970s. By 1976, almost every municipality had a school of voluntary music education. In 1993–94, only two out of Sweden's 286 cities and towns did not have a music school.

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