

Creative Musical Activities in Ensemble Rehearsals

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Creative musical activities (CMAs), specifically composition and improvisation, are rarely included in public school music curricula (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). Inclusion of CMAs in music instruction falls short of recommendations outlined in the National Core Arts Standards, written to encourage all students to “conceive and develop new artistic ideas and work” (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2016, p. 13). Researchers indicate that while music teachers – particularly teachers of performing ensembles – generally perceive CMAs to be important to the curriculum (Fairfield, 2010; Koops, 2009; Snell, 2013), few music teachers regularly include CMAs in their instruction (Schopp, 2006; Strand, 2006), “citing lack of time, resources, and physical teaching space as significant challenges” (Fairfield, 2010, pp. v-vi). Researchers and philosophers often call for increased creative opportunities in music education, but more research is needed to explore various practices of teaching CMAs among performing ensemble teachers.

The purpose of this study was to examine creative instructional practices of New York State school music teachers. I distributed an online survey to all New York State School Music Association (NYSSMA) members ($n = 4,299$), then analyzed data from 252 respondents. Three research questions guided this inquiry: 1) For teachers who include CMAs, what perceived obstacles might exist that inhibit creative musical instruction? 2) What motivates these teachers to include CMAs in the curriculum? 3) What resources may exist that help facilitate the instruction of CMAs despite the presence of perceived obstacles?

Consistent with extant research, teachers identified lack of class time as the most common obstacle to including CMAs. Reasons stated for including CMAs in the curriculum were to increase engagement and motivation, deepen knowledge of content, and develop musical independence and autonomy. Teachers indicated that if they needed support for including CMAs in their curriculum, they were most likely to consult other teachers, and least likely to look to college material.

Secondary analysis indicated a modest relationship ($r = .56, p < .002$) between teacher-expressed level of importance of CMAs and their inclusion in the classroom, and a small positive relationship ($r = .263, p < .01$) between the amount of time teachers spend discussing CMAs and the frequency with which they are integrated into the classroom. However, a negative correlation existed between small group lesson time and composing or improvising activities ($r = -.202, p = .022$). Further studies may help ascertain the relationship between class time in a variety of settings and inclusion of CMAs. This research suggests that promoting discourse among teachers and increasing pre-service music teacher creative experiences may increase the inclusion of creative musical activities in the classroom.



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