

A COMPARISON STUDY CONTRASTING AUDIATION-BASED AND MUSIC READING  
APPROACHES IN BEGINNING ELEMENTARY INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of two different approaches to teaching beginning instrumental music. The subjects ( $n = 60$ ) were fourth grade elementary beginning band students from two schools in the same rural NY school district. One group was taught by learning to audiate before being introduced to notation while the other group was taught using a visual method of learning to read musical notation. The audiation-based approach began instruction by teaching a series of tonal and rhythmic patterns along with solfege before learning rote songs by ear, while the traditional approach instructed note-reading and rhythms as presented in a method book. The research attempted to determine whether or not a significant difference existed in basic musical achievement between the two groups at the end of a 20-week instructional period as measured by comparing the test results of both groups of the Iowa Test of Music Literacy. A second question of whether a correlation existed between motivation and achievement was also explored.

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## Chapter One: Introduction and Identification of the Topic

### General Introduction of the Topic

Elementary school children learn in many ways. Some children respond to a more tactile approach, some connect with a more visual approach, while others learn best from an aural perspective. Educators are constantly analyzing data to interpret which methods are the most effective in teaching the greatest number of students. The focus of this study is to examine the effect of two different teaching approaches regarding elementary instrumental music. Two groups of students were taught beginning instrumental music with either an audiation-based aural approach that involves call and response techniques, or a traditional note reading approach that focuses on associating visual symbols with sound. Traditionally children are taught to read music from the beginning of instruction by the introduction of pitches, fingerings, and rhythms systematically presented in a visual layout via a method book. This approach has historically been the favorite among music teachers (Kendall, 1986), as children learn performance skills by learning how to transform the visual information to aural information (sound) during the process of learning how to read music. Children taught with this approach learn to connect abstract symbols with sound. The primary focus of this approach is to teach music reading skills as a means to accomplish performance objectives. The importance of reading skills using this approach can be summarized by a quote from Colwell and Goolsby in The Teaching of Instrumental Music (1992):

Reading skills are the key to pleasure in musical participation. When the player can understand the musical page by himself (herself) without direction from the teacher, he

(she) can learn to play on his (her) own, play in ensembles, enrich the family music circle, and in general enjoy musical freedom (p. 38).

In explaining the approach of teaching children to audiate before learning how to read music, Eric Bluestine (1995) compares learning music to the way children learn language skills: "they should learn to hear and perform before they learn to read and write". Second, children must develop two generic skills simultaneously: 1) performance ability and 2) "the sense of music that tells them when to sing what" (Bluestine, 1995, p. 9). This practice is commonly referred to as teaching sound before sight. Much of the research supporting the sound before sight approach comes from the work of Edwin Gordon. Gordon (1999) refers to the process of internal hearing as audiation. He states: "Audiation is to music what thought is to language" (Gordon, 1999, p. 42).

Though much of the theory for sound before sight today is attributed to the research of Edwin Gordon, Bluestine (1995) suggests that it actually was "rooted in the theories of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi" (p. 28). He further states that Lowell Mason wrote these curriculum guidelines for the Boston schools based on the following Pestalozzian ideas in 1838:

1. Teach sound before sign.
2. Lead the student to observe by hearing and imitating instead of explaining.
3. Teach but one thing at a time-rhythm, melody, and expression-before the child is called to attend to all at once.
4. Require mastery of one step before progressing to the next.
5. Give principles and theory after practice (p. 29).

Michael Kendall's (1988) study further defends the position that an aural approach to teaching beginning instrumental music is necessary to help students develop the musical vocabulary necessary for reading readiness. His position, based on the ideas of Suzuki and Gordon, is that an over-emphasis on teaching music reading activities through visual stimulation before reading readiness is achieved, inhibits aural retention and communication.

#### Rationale for Selecting the Topic

The importance of this topic is to help us further understand the relationship between developing aural skills and success in music. Both reading and listening skills are important aspects of musicianship. The traditionally taught music students rely on musical symbols to understand music and play their instruments. These students often are not comfortable playing without using written material as a guide. "Unfortunately, many students leave the public school system with seven or more years of instrumental music instruction but little ability to play without notation" (Dalby, 1999, p. 22). Many students never experience playing without music; some lose interest and drop out of music instruction without ever having the experience of creating music by audiation, or the process of learning to produce music heard in the mind.

One of the goals of music instruction is to foster creativity in all students, and the ability to improvise and play by ear is a goal articulated in the National Standards of Music (#3 Improvisation), (Music Educators National Conference [MENC], 1996, p. 71). It is possible that students who are taught to read music first may develop a dependency on the written page, and potentially lose creative incentive. They may also become disinterested in music performance if they do not connect with the style or genre of music that is presented to them. By learning to play by ear, and the technique to audiate music; that is to hear it first; students can experience music in

a more meaningful way, and develop a life-long love of artistic expression through creative musical improvisation because of their understanding of “when to sing what” (Bluestine, 1995, p. 9).

Music Educators are interested in discovering the most effective approach for reaching the greatest number of students, one that not only enables students to continue to learn outside the classroom, but to have the motivation to do so. Early success in music achievement could prove to be a means toward achievement of the goal of creative expression in music.

This study will attempt to determine the effects of learning by aural stimulation before connecting to written music notation. It was hypothesized that the aural learners (Group A) would not only be more capable of creating music and playing without written music, but would also demonstrate an ease in reading the notation, having first learned how it sounds.

#### Statement of the Problem

Much research has been published in support of the importance of a musical education as one of the core of curriculum to be taught to all students. Music is a unique way of knowing the world; it is “the education of human feeling through the development of responsiveness to the intrinsically expressive qualities of sound” (Reimer, 1989, p.53).

Despite the many expert opinions touting the benefits of music, the dropout rate of music students in performance groups is alarmingly high (Bluestine, 1995, p. 2). Children are intrinsically creative and respond best to interactive and experiential approaches to learning. The traditional approach rewards students who respond to drill and practice methods of teaching that is often void of expression and meaning. Do music educators ignore what other areas of education

know about how children learn best? Could we design an approach that helps children unlock their true potential as musicians and independent musical thinkers?

The traditional approach to music instruction revolves around written notation, and supports note-reading and theoretical knowledge as its primary foundation. Students taught this way infer musical characteristics through written direction of symbols. This approach does little to nurture music students who are creative, spontaneous, and able to play instruments for the sake of experiencing the artistic process of creating sound. By giving students an opportunity to learn a variety of aural patterns we may give them a foundation for creativity. A more balanced approach that combines note-reading with aural exercises may produce a more creative musical thinker.

So much of what we traditionally teach in beginning instrumental music classes is focused on teaching children to understand symbolic notation. Children are taught to read music before developing a sufficient aural vocabulary to make sense of it. Bruce Dalby (1999) relates this point in this way: "Nobody would advocate teaching children to read a language before they can think and speak, but often in music education we try to teach students to read notation they can not audiate" (Dalby, 1999, p. 22).

This quasi-experimental quantitative study was proposed to compare the musical achievement of 32 fourth grade beginning band students from one school who are taught using an audiation-based approach (Group A), to 32 fourth grade beginning band students who are taught using a traditional approach (Group B). Both schools are in the same rural NY school district. Both groups contained students that are similar in instrumentation, gender, socio-economic status, and age. Both groups studied the same material, the Standard of Excellence Band Method, book 1, by Bruce Pearson(1993). All the students in the study were first time instrumental music

participants with former musical experience limited to a four-week instructional period on the soprano recorder at the end of the third grade. The study took place over a twenty consecutive week period.

#### Potential Benefits of Research

By continuing research based on concepts of Music Learning Theory, and demonstrating that instructional approach can impact students after the first year of study, music educators can improve the quality of instruction at the elementary level and potentially help all students to achieve the higher standards of achievement in music education. An attempt can be made to determine if a non-traditional approach to music instruction results in a higher level of achievement in music students through audiation, and creates within the student a desire to continue music programs for the joy of experiencing music for its own sake. Music educators can help a greater population of students realize the benefits of an aesthetic education through expressive musical performance. This research can aid teachers in finding new methods of instruction that will benefit a greater number of students and strengthen the knowledge base of how children might best learn to play instruments.

#### Definition of Key Terms

1. Aesthetics is that which is beautiful or perceived as beautiful. “Aesthetics is the study of that about art which is the essence of art and that about people which has throughout history caused them to need art as an essential part of their lives” (Reimer, 1989, p. 2).

2. Audiation is a term that refers to the process of internally hearing music as related to pitch in a way that is similar to how thought relates to speech. Audiation is the ability to hear and

comprehend music when the sound is not physically present or may never have been physically present (Gordon, 2001 [online]).

3. Aural ability describes the ability to play a musical instrument by ear without the benefit of written music to produce melodies.

4. Embouchure is the term used to describe the position of the lips and mouth while playing a wind instrument.

5. Fingering is the term used to describe the combination of fingers used to sound a particular note on a musical instrument.

6. Improvisation is creating music or melody spontaneously as a creative form of expression.

7. Instrumentation refers to the specific combination of different musical instruments that make up the composition of a musical ensemble.

8. Music achievement is the term that refers to what children have learned, as measured by knowledge of music theory, knowledge of music history, music-reading skills, and music-performance skills (Gordon, 1998, p. 157).

9. Music Aptitude is the innate ability or potential to learn music that exists in all human beings (Gordon, 1999, p. 41).

10. Music Learning Theory is a term that describes the psychological theories associated with how children learn music (Gordon).

11. Pitch is the degree of highness or lowness of sound.

12. Timbre is the tone quality of sound.

13. The traditional approach, as related to musical instruction, is the practice of teaching students skills on musical instruments by reading music notation.

#### Research Questions

1. Is there a significant difference in basic music achievement between instrumental music students at the end of the first year of study who are taught to audiate before learning to read music (Group A), and those taught using a traditional method of learning music by following a sequence of reading musical notation (Group B)?

2. Is there a significant correlation between music achievement and students' motivation as measured by comparing the mean of their weekly practice record?

#### Null hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference in basic music achievement between instrumental music students at the end of the first year of study who are taught to audiate before learning to read music (Group A), and those using a traditional method of learning music by following a sequence of reading musical notation (Group B).

2. There is no significant correlation between music achievement and students' motivation as measured by comparing the mean of their weekly practice record.

#### Directional Hypotheses

1. The students taught using the audiation method (Group A) will score significantly higher in basic music achievement at the end of the first year of study than the students who were taught using the traditional method of learning music by following a sequence of reading musical notation (Group B).

2. A significant positive correlation will be shown by comparing students' motivation to music achievement, with the highest musical achievement belonging to those who have the highest average of minutes practiced per week.

## Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

### Chapter Overview

This chapter is designed to acquaint the reader some background information on the music learning theories employed in the study as well as to highlight some of the significant research studies that have been recently conducted in this field. The research of Edwin Gordon (Gordon, 1999, 1998, 1991, 1989, 1982, 1971) and his theories of audiation will be described along with others whose research supports these theories similarly. The traditional methodology for teaching instrumental music will be discussed as supported and represented in the book by Colwell & Goolsby (1992) along with others. This chapter will examine traditional practices, psychological considerations, audiation, tonal pattern training versus sight reading, audiation and visual treatment, and the effect of audiation on creativity, composition, and improvisation. Although much of the research described is current, some significant studies conducted prior to 1990 will be included because of relevancy.

### Traditional Practices

In the book The Teaching of Instrumental Music (Colwell & Goolsby, 1992), the authors state that “music performance objectives should involve more than obtaining excellent notational reading skills; that valid music programs need skill-oriented objectives such as mental skills, aural skills, instrumental physical dexterity, and musical understanding” (p.19). Colwell & Goolsby advocate for a properly implemented educational program that focuses on drill and musicianship through performance objectives, and the development of proper tone-quality, breathing, and instrumental technical facility. They describe means by which students are taught to be performing musicians; by using visual discrimination to learn musical concepts and theoretical information.