
Influences of Gender and Sex-Stereotyping of Middle School Students' Perception and Selection of Musical Instruments: A Review of the Literature

by
Mark J. Walker
Troy State University

Gender stereotypes continue to persist at all levels regarding male and female participation in music. Indeed, stereotypes are evident at the elementary and middle school levels when children choose a musical instrument for study in beginning band or orchestra. Research has shown sex-stereotyping of instruments to exist, often unconsciously, in both males and females. Usually, trombones, drums, tubas are viewed as being overtly masculine instruments while the flute, clarinet, and oboe are viewed as being overtly feminine instruments. These masculine and feminine characteristics that are placed on these instruments are often transferred to the individual who plays them. These stereotypes are created from a variety of sources, including popular media, parents, teachers, and other children. However, stereotypes can effectively be reduced by the manner of presentation of instruments to the students for the first time. For example, at a meeting of students and parents who are interested in beginning band, a female may demonstrate the trombone or tuba while a male may demonstrate the clarinet or oboe. This act alone does a great deal to break down sex-stereotypes of instruments and those who play them.

Gender issues have an effect on the musical education of children. For example, the sex-stereotyping of musical instruments can be a factor in reducing musical opportunities and experiences of children, as well as access to these experiences, and the possible profession of these individuals (Abeles & Porter, 1978; Griswold & Chroback, 1981). Indeed, instruments, as has been shown (Byo, 1991; Zervoudakes, & Tanur, 1994; Bruce & Kemp, 1993; Ho, 2001; MacKenzie, 1991; Hanley, 1998; O'Neill & Boulton, 1996; Griswold & Chroback, 1981; Abeles & Porter, 1978; Tarnowski, 1993; Porter & Abeles, 1979; Sinsel, Dixon, Blades-Zeller, 1997; Delzell & Leppla, 1992; Elliot & Yoder-White, 1997), are not necessarily perceived as gender-neutral. In addition to the sex-stereotyping of instruments, research has been conducted on issues of gender in technology as it relates to music education (Comber, Hargreaves & Colley, 1993; Pegley, 2000) as well as studies which seek to describe psychological sex types of children and their propensities for different musical instruments (Kemp, 1982; Sinsel, Dixon & Blades-Zeller, 1997).

Biological Considerations

Herndon (1990) writes that it is important to distinguish between sex and gender. Put another way, sex is biological while gender is a cultural or sociological construction. When a child is conceived in the womb, the initial sex is female. If the Y chromosome is to be activated by the already present male hormones, thereby creating a male embryo, it is not until the fifth week of gestation. Until then, the embryo is female (Herndon, 1990).

Cultural Considerations

Cultural or sociological gender construction begins immediately after a child is born. A

female child may be wrapped in pink blankets while a male child may be wrapped in blue blankets. Color-coded balloons, signs and other ephemera are displayed so that, even if the viewer cannot read the small print but can discern colors, he or she will know if the newborn is a male (blue balloons, etc.) or a female (pink balloons, etc.). It has been shown that while children are young, they tend to segregate themselves in groups according to sex. According to Archer (1992), same sex play preferences have been found to occur as early as 2 years of age. This phenomenon takes place across cultures, although to varying degrees of intensity and length of segregation. In fact, Bruce and Kemp (1993) found that one feature of children's instrument preferences is the identification of members of their own sex. This identification could be construed as a form of sex segregation.

There may be many reasons for this, both biological and cultural. It was also reported in Archer (1992) that the biological reasons for this segregation may be due to the fact males tend to use more space in their play, are more disorganized and are louder while females play quieter, more organized games that are cooperative in nature. In addition, males tend to show early hierarchical structures in their group play (Archer, 1992). However, it was found that sexes tended to think alike rather than differently (Maidlow, 1998). Female students chose female elements (Elements were 7 people significant to their developing musicianship) and males chose male elements.

Music and Gender

Music is oftentimes used as a point of departure for reflection in relation to gender performance and negotiations in sociohistorical and cultural contexts (Moisala, 1999). For example, to put gender issues into an historical context, Eaklor (1993/1994) found that

during the early years of the United States, music was problematic professionally for both men and women, for music was not masculine enough for men or feminine enough for women. Eaklor continues:

[B]y 1900 music itself was given the "female" role in American society as duties were divided severely along gender constructs. Music, like all the arts and like women themselves, was to contribute to the nation's survival and growth by reinforcing the social and moral precepts of the developing middle class. (Eaklor, 1993/1994, p. 41)

Music can either limit or expand the social, ritual, and political access and awareness of women, men and children (Robertson, 1989, p. 225). Many authors have presented theories of gender and music that take place in a variety of contexts, ethnic and otherwise, such as Cherokee (Herndon, 1990), Finnish and Nepalese (Moisala, 1999), and the Americas (Robertson, 1989),¹ among others.

Gender Stereotypes in Empirical Literature

For some authors (Green, 1993; Herndon, 1990; Koza, 1993, 1994; Moisala, 1999; Robertson, 1989), music serves a patriarchal society that seeks to keep women subjugated and in a position of subservience to men; women who become successful "in a man's world" do so by acting like men and taking on stereotypically male characteristics such as aggression, competition, and social motion through hierarchical structures such as those found in business, academe, and other areas of professional life. Indeed, Elliot (1995) has shown in a study of gender bias in judgments of musical performance, bias seemed to influence only those judgments made of performances by women. In her assessment of

female representation of middle school music textbooks, Koza (1994) found that the high number of young females depicted in illustrations rather than adult women reinforces the stereotypical assumption that music is appropriate for young females, but not for adult women. Furthermore, as far as women (or females) performing music in public, this meant that women "always appear delicate and decorative; to appear otherwise by playing a massive or seemingly awkward instrument challenged accepted notions of what was appropriately female" (Macleod, 2001p. 10).

Indeed, some of the empirical research seems to bear out claims of gender bias or sex-stereotyping of musical instruments. In the domain of American bands and music education, bands (concert and marching) have typically been populated by males (Koza, 1993/1994). However, during the past three decades, there has been a huge growth of females in band programs throughout the United States to the point that females make up more than half the instrumentalists in elementary and high school band programs, but less than half in college programs (Zervoudakes & Tanur, 1994). Gender stereotypes still remain strong in some areas, as reported by Hanley (1998) in whose study was found that, among the study's subjects, it was perceived that music is effeminate, the pursuit of music is unmanly, and therefore females, not males, should populate it.

Gender Stereotypes and Instrument Selection

Abeles & Porter undertook the first major study of sex stereotyping of musical instruments in 1978. They wrote that children found the drums to be the most masculine and the flute to be the most feminine.

Griswold and Chrobak (1981) found in their study that:

answers by adults to hypothetical selection suggest [of instruments for their children to play] that the sex of the child, rather than the sex of the adult or past musical experience, influenced the adult's preferences. Violin, flute and clarinet were considered feminine; drums, trombone, and trumpet were considered masculine; saxophone and cello were rated neutral. (p. 57)

Females tend to choose a wider variety of instruments than do males. However, the quality of sound was given as the primary reason for choosing a particular instrument more so than whether males or females should play it (Delzell & Leppla, 1992; Fortney, Malele, & DeCarbo, 1993; O'Neill & Boulton, 1996). The results of the Delzell and Leppla (1992) study have interesting implications since evidence was found that gender stereotypes might decrease as children grow older. For example, the drum, which is rated as the most masculine musical instrument, was still highly favored by males, but among females, it is the second most popular instrument. Likewise, while the flute was still rated as the most feminine of instruments, it ranked fourth in preference for males. These findings dovetail with Teachout's (1993) study that found that musical factors highly influenced junior high band students' preferences for performance literature much more so than environmental or referential factors. In addition, "no significant differences were found in any of the factors by gender" (Teachout, p. 25, 1993). However, LeBlanc, Young, Stamou and McCrary (1999) found that a person's age and gender may have some effect on their listening preferences.

MacKenzie (1991) found that females more so than males cited friendship considerations in their decisions to take up a musical instrument. Interestingly, none of the females cited parental involvement as a determining factor, although some of the males did.

In addition, males, more than females, cited their teachers as having some degree of influence.

O'Neill & Boulton (1996) sought to find what sex-stereotypes existed in children's perceptions of music instruments. This is a departure from many other studies, as they indicate sex-stereotypes based on adult views. Within this study, male and females were asked to state whether any of the six instruments (piano, flute, guitar, trumpet, violin, and drums) should not be played by females and which ones males should not play. They justified this question because, to them, "it enabled the children to select the instruments themselves and they wanted to ensure that the children had the opportunity to discount gender stereotyped associations if they believed that all the instruments were appropriate for members of each sex to play" (O'Neill & Boulton, 1996, p. 173).

Similar to Delzell and Leppla (1992) and Fortney, Malele, and DeCarbo (1993), both males and females indicated that the reason given most for playing an instrument was liking the sound. Females indicated that the biggest reason they did not want to play a particular instrument was that they did not like the sound, while males indicated that they did not want to play a particular instrument because it was deemed as being too difficult to play. This might give credence to Green's (1993) assertion that females are seen as harder working and more dependable than males, even though males may appear to reap more of the societal "awards" of playing a musical instrument than females. It also corroborates Crowther and Durkin (1982) who indicate that within the school, females are rated musically superior to males but in the artistic culture outside of school, the prominent roles are performed by

male musicians.

O'Neill and Boulton (1996) also report that, in regards to the question of whether males or females should not play a particular instrument, many more of the females than males said that males should not play the flute (48.6% versus 44.4%). However, the percentages were equal with respect to the guitar; 44.4% of both males and females said that females should not play the guitar. In addition, 61.1% females and 66.7% of males said that females should not play the drums. The biggest reason that males and females gave for saying that members of the opposite sex should not play a particular instrument such as the flute, guitar or drums, is that they have never observed a male or female play that instrument. Put another way, the males in this study indicated that females should not play the drums because they have never seen a female actually play the drums; females said that males should not play the flute because they have never seen a male play the flute.

In addition, males were not more inclined to gender stereotyping than were females. In fact, with this study, the only time more males than females indicated this would be in the selection of the violin. They also suggest that males and females have similar ideas about which instruments are more "appropriate" for members of the opposite sex to play.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Professional Practice

Every year, band directors around the country recruit new students to populate the beginning band classes using a variety of methods and materials. It would be a worthwhile goal for band directors, for the health of their instrumental music programs as well as to promote gender equity for their students, to promote instruments as "gender-neutrally" as

they can. The most effective way to do this, perhaps, is during the introduction phase of the recruiting efforts. Understanding that students identify with members of their own sex (Bruce & Kemp, 1993), a band director might have a female demonstrate the trombone and a male demonstrate the flute or oboe so that the students considering beginning band will see that, indeed, males do play flute and females do play trombone. In any event, care should always be taken in the introduction of instruments to students (Porter & Abeles, 1979) since the attitudes of children can be changed depending on the method that the instruments are first presented and demonstrated (Byo, 1991; Tarnowski, 1993).

Educators in today's pluralistic society need to be aware and have a tolerance and understanding for their students' gender, ability, race and cultural differences in order to be successful in the classroom (Standley, 2000). This holds true for band director who is training the next generation of wind and percussion musicians.

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Footnote

¹Three texts that contain interesting ethnographical studies by a variety of authors (and in a variety of research modes) regarding women and gender issues in a number of cultural contexts are *Music, Gender, and Culture* edited by the International Council for Traditional Music: ICTM Study Group of Music and Gender, *Music and Gender* edited by Beverley Diamond and Pirkko Moisala and *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, edited by Ellen Koskoff.