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"Modern Band" as school music: A case study

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Abstract
This purpose of this study was to uncover the nature and value associated with involvement in "Modern Band" (rock band), the primary, not supplemental, means to music education in one US school. The values that emerged—music, community, identity, teacher, and classroom management—overlap considerably with the benefits and values identified by adolescents in traditional concert band, orchestra, and choir. These results provide data worthy of consideration as readers ponder the viability of rock band as a medium of school-based music education and a way to connect meaningfully with more secondary-school students. Evidence suggests that if there are reasons to reject the rock band, the source for the skepticism should not be the values accrued and identified by its participants. This case is an example of meaningful, authentic, and valuable music education that is positioned between the extremes of formal and informal learning, process and product orientation, and teacher- and student-centered pedagogy.

Keywords
alternative approaches in music education, informal learning in music, Modern Band, music teacher effectiveness, popular music in music education

The curriculum of school-based music education in the US is pestered by a tension in the divide between learners' in-school and out-of-school music experiences. A major hot button is a broadly defined popular music and its general exclusion from school music despite its ubiquity in life.

The tension is rooted historically in the nearly five-decades-old Tanglewood Symposium, which called for a broader curriculum inclusive of meaningful experiences in music of the vernacular (Choate, 1968). Recent interest in popular music as a viable medium for school music education is evident both in research (Abramo, 2011; Allsup, 2003; Green, 2006, 2008; Jaffurs, 2004) and in practice (e.g., Clements, 2010; Williams, 2011). However, discourse analysis covering the content of music education research journals reveals US concerns that are "stuck" on popular music's

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legitimacy as a means of music education, because some consider the music to be aesthetically inferior (Mantie, 2013). In the UK, Australia, and Sweden, by comparison, discourse is dominated by concern for optimal pedagogy for an already accepted popular music in schools (e.g., Green, 2008; Lindgren & Ericsson, 2010). It is unclear how much of this tension derives from practical challenges such as teacher training (Dunbar-Hall & Wemyss, 2000; Green, 2008; Rodriguez, 2004) and time in the school schedule (Abril & Gault, 2008) versus music teacher philosophy (Allsup & Benedict, 2008; Bowman, 2002).

A US survey of secondary-school principals (Abril & Gault, 2008) shows the prevalence of traditional music offerings: concert band (in 93% of schools), choir (88%), general music (45%), string ensemble (42%), and music theory (40%). Concerning popular music, 55% of principals indicated the presence of a jazz/rock ensemble at their schools. Given the likelihood that many of these ensembles are jazz bands, Abril and Gault see this figure as somewhat of an aberration relative to rock or popular music ensembles. This assertion is supported by university music education position descriptions (Sims, Jeffs, & Barrow, 2010), professed professional development needs (Fung, 2009), and university curricular content (Wang & Humphreys, 2009), which are uniformly inattentive to popular music.

The discourse in popular music and the schools includes the question: To what extent should student interest drive the curriculum? Given the goal in American music education of involving more, not fewer, students (Music Educators National Conference, 1994a), attrition data present a telling reality. Between 1998 and 2005, the Public Education Information Management System tracked the Texas public school sixth-grade music student cohort each year through the senior year, revealing an overall 85% dropout rate among concert band and orchestra musicians, and an 81% rate for choir musicians. In band, 98,833 sixth graders dwindled to 14,293 seniors by the end of the seven-year period. A one-year snap shot (2007–2008) of Louisiana school musicians, sixth grade through senior year, showed almost identical attrition percentages (Louisiana Department of Education, personal communication, November 18, 2008). Of course, some attrition is inevitable. There are many reasons that students leave elective music courses, but, to reduce attrition, the US music education community might be well served by opening the curriculum to experiences that extend beyond the traditional large concert band, orchestra, and choir.

The present study resides in this context. Its purpose is to contribute to the body of research literature centered on performance-based popular music as a primary, not supplemental, means of school music education. The aim was to uncover in one US school the nature and value associated with involvement in "Modern Band" (rock band) as an approach to music education. I used standard ethnographic procedures to address three questions: (a) What are the contexts and processes of Modern Band? (b) What do participants and stakeholders consider to be the nature and value of the program? (c) How do professed nature and value present themselves during class/rehearsal? As the inquiry developed I was drawn to the framework of informal learning in music (Green, 2006, 2008) as a fitting point of reference for Modern Band as school music.

Method

This section describes elements of the setting—school, teacher, approach to pedagogy, schedule, and curricular matters. As such it provides context for the study and answers to the research question: What are the contexts and processes of Modern Band? Other answers to this question are found in the Results and Discussion sections below.

Lower Manhattan Community School (LMCS) is located in downtown Manhattan in New York City on the sixth floor of a building that formerly housed the offices of the John D. Rockefeller Standard Oil Company. It is a roughly 350-student, public middle school. At the

time of the study, the student population was 40% Asian, 21% Hispanic, 13% Black (non-Hispanic), and 22% White (non-Hispanic) (New York City Department of Education, n.d.). Fifty-eight percent of students were eligible for free and reduced lunch. In the academic year prior to this study, LMCS was a Title 1 school, meaning it received federal funds for serving low-income families. Eleven percent of students spoke English as a second language. Twenty-eight percent exhibited mild learning disabilities. The principal reported that "resources, except for space, are not a problem".

A casual knowledge of the 2014–2015 setting revealed three circumstances that make this site compelling—perhaps an intrinsic case (Stake, 2000), one that is "unusual and [of] merit in and of itself" (Creswell, 2015, p. 469). (a) At LMCS, there are three Modern Band ensembles, sixth grade, seventh grade, and eighth grade. Modern Band is large-group rock band. It is the only form of music education at the school. (b) The music teacher holds undergraduate degrees in composition and percussion performance and a graduate degree in contemporary performance. During his teenage years he was heavily involved in the garage band culture. He is an active performing musician in both classical and popular music. He does not hold teacher certification, so he is hired as a vendor who provides a service to the New York City Public Schools. At the time of the study, he had taught for five years, and all of that teaching had taken place at LMCS. (c) The school principal is a professed advocate for music education and the rock band form of music education. He reports having been a school musician.

The approach to Modern Band at LMCS derives from the pedagogy of the Little Kids Rock initiative, which in 2002 formalized the Modern Band moniker and the guitar teaching of David Wish (n.d.). Wish's teaching, whether intended or not, takes from the pedagogy of Suzuki, Kodaly, Whitehead, Mursell, and Bruner, musicians and intellectuals who embraced the ideas of "the thing before the sign" and getting to real music-making quickly.

Students at LMCS have Modern Band class four days each week. Sixth graders in 30-student groups are organized in nine-week rotations. Class meets for five hours/wk. The 30 seventh graders and 26 eighth graders who elected to take year-round Modern Band meet in separate classes for 4.3 hours/wk. Students play lead guitar, rhythm guitar, bass guitar, drum set, piano, and xylophone. There is ample opportunity for solo singers to take the microphone as they feel the calling. Several times during each semester, the large groups break into multiple five- or six-member rock bands, disperse to separate rooms, and take part in teacher-designed, curricular-based performance activities. During the four lunch periods observed, each 41 minutes long, there were from 12–15 students voluntarily populating the music room busily working on their music independently or with peers or with help from the teacher. The students perform publically, the seventh and eighth graders twice per year.

The teacher chooses songs that his students know. He also chooses songs that he "can live with". He arranges the music. During this observer's residency, *Love Me Do* (the Beatles), *My Hero* (Foo Fighters), *Chasing Cars* (Snow Patrol), and *The Middle* (Jimmy Eat World) were rehearsed. Arrangements, although simplified, sound authentic. The single page of sheet music he distributes includes tablature, chord charts, piano part (melody or triads in right hand, root of chord in left), and drum set part (e.g., a basic pattern of bass drum, snare drum, high hat). A separate lyrics page is organized by song structure. Students are expected to stay true to the written page as a starting point. Music reading is not prioritized this way in typical popular music learning, a point that is developed in discussion below. In time, as appropriate, students are free to improvise on a basic level, for example, by arpeggiating the piano triads; embellishing cymbals or bass drum or snare drum pattern; or moving to a more complex strumming pattern on guitar. Most students play school-owned instruments. The school owns 65 guitars, two drum sets, five keyboards, and sufficient sound equipment to make a big noise.

I combined the three classes into one case for extensive study based on the common factors of school, rehearsal space, principal, teacher, and curriculum. As one case, this is a bounded system of activities, events, and processes (Creswell, 2013) or a culture-sharing group whose beliefs and values are worthy of study as one unit. Exemption from institutional oversight was requested and granted. All Institutional Review Board policies were followed. This investigation of the perceived nature and value of participation in a school rock band involved the use of standard ethnographic data collection techniques, much of it concentrated in a one-week period during mid-October 2014 and all of it, including follow-up questioning and member checking, completed within a five-month timespan. Every rehearsal during one week of Modern Band was observed and video-recorded for repeat viewing. This covered a span of nearly 14 hours of rehearsal and three hours of lunch-period musical activity resulting in 16 single-spaced pages of field notes. I spent one class period as a participant observer playing bass guitar in a five-member, seventh grade band. It was a jingle composition session.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 student members of Modern Band, the music teacher, and the school principal. Interview protocols were adapted from Bartolome's (2013) ethnographic study of perceived values and benefits in a community choir setting. Questions engaged students in describing their experiences in Modern Band, why they participated in it, and what they found important, special, difficult, and beneficial about it. Interviews with students were single, one-on-one sessions of 10–15 minutes occurring after the mid-point of my residency. The students who were interviewed did so voluntarily and represented a music-teacher-determined cross-section of sixth graders ($n = 6$), seventh graders ($n = 7$), and eighth graders ($n = 6$). Interviews with teacher and principal were double sessions, covering two hours and spanning two days. Questions engaged both in describing their goals for Modern Band and their perceptions of the student experience, including its nature and value. To parents, I distributed open-ended interview questions via email. Six were returned. I recorded all student, teacher, and principal interviews and subsequently transcribed each, resulting in 29 pages of single-spaced text including parent email responses.

Additionally, the teacher and principal completed two surveys—one asking them to indicate on a 1–5 agreement scale the degree to which the Modern Band experience met the nine National Standards for Music Education (Music Educators National Conference, 1994b) and the other, adapted from Abril and Gault (2008), asking the same for 10 broad educational goals. Last, I examined relevant documents (e.g., teacher-developed sheet music, class handouts, Website information).

In data analysis, I applied Creswell's (2013) six-step process to all text sources. As such, I identified codes and aggregated similar or redundant codes into themes, while operating within the framework of the research questions. This required repeated readings of text sources. To establish trustworthiness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) I examined multiple data sources—field notes from observations, interview transcripts (student, teacher, principal), parents' email responses to open-ended interview questions, two teacher surveys, two principal surveys, and documents—for evidence to support themes. The teacher and principal responded to follow-up questioning and member checking, which functioned to both clarify information and extend thinking. The teacher and principal read their interview transcripts and my draft account of the study. In several instances they contributed important nuance and perspective to my account. No doubt, my history as an experienced musician and music teacher centered in the Western art music tradition shaped my interpretation of the data. In the end, a wide range of data had been compiled to illustrate in detail the Modern Band experience as viewed through insiders' perceptions of its nature and value.

At the request of the principal and with the approval of the music teacher, I use real names to describe the school and these adult participants. This enables the principal to use this scholarly account of the music program's nature and value to the school for recruitment, grant writing, and as an historical record. Pseudonyms represent band members and parents.

Results and discussion

Five themes emerged to provide answers to the research question: What do participants and stakeholders consider to be the nature and value of Modern Band? Each theme is presented as a value. Since themes are central or dominant phenomena, it can be argued that they represent fundamental or essential characteristics and thus the nature of the Modern Band program. Each theme is supported by evidence that answers the research question: How do professed nature and value present themselves during class/rehearsal and in the perceptions of the stakeholders?

Music is valued

Music was the primary focus for the principal, the teacher, and the students. The catalyst was principal Kelly's prioritization of music in the school schedule and in public performance, and his desire for students to have a rigorous experience that teaches them to read music. As he said with conviction: "LMCS students will read music because reading gives them something to build on when they leave here."

Music permeated teacher Jude's (Mr. T to the students) nose-to-the-grindstone intensity that was centered on developing skill and increasing knowledge. He remarked:

> Phrase and steady beat are crucial. I want to operate according to the conservatory tradition of depth. I want the kids to know how music is constructed. I want them to retain the things of pop—rote, repetitive chord changes, phrasal memory.

Band members described the experience according to:

- Music reading: "It's still hard for me." "Yes, we do FACE." "It's pretty easy once you learn the lines."
- Listening: "I listen to the beats." "I listen to the singer to get the chord changes." "I love the power in the guitar sound."
- Things: They learn "instruments," "songs," "music types," "chords," "bands," "beats," and "music words."
- Performance: "I try not to mess up." "I learned how to tune it." "We have to get to the next chord on time!" "I think about where my fingers go." "I know how to play different instruments."

Band members articulated the importance of Mr. T's oft-repeated values of intelligent practice and the ability to read music. They talked with respect about the model of rock musician their turquoise-haired teacher represented. They were challenged by the small-group opportunity to write and perform an original jingle. No matter their novice status, many considered themselves musicians and saw themselves "doing music" into their futures. Celeste referred to her friend Heather in a statement the gist of which was echoed by other students: "I became friends with her. She wants to sing. I want to play piano. We are both musicians. I was going to be a chef, but now I want to play music."

It may come as no surprise that music is valued in a music class; the result is corroborated in previous research where music reading, listening, knowledge, and skill are valued (Adderly, Kennedy, & Berz, 2003; Bartolome, 2013; Campbell, Connell, & Beegle, 2007; Green, 2008; Kennedy, 2002). But music as a value is not a given in traditional large ensembles (Scheib, 2006) where competition or achievement or discipline dominate the experience in the minds of students.

A sense of community is valued

The principal and teacher "strongly agreed" with community (i.e., cooperation and teamwork) as a broad learning outcome for Modern Band. In class, the teacher frequently advocated for it. Students expressed it: "It's about teamwork." "We are only as strong as the weakest link." "I'm usually one who needs someone to help me." In these statements, self-awareness and personal accountability in rehearsal emerge as values. The behaviors: A guitar player showing a classmate a hand shape; a singer encouraging another singer to take the microphone; a drummer demonstrating a pattern during free practice, and small-group interactions during an activity in which students created all parts of a jingle based on the school motto.

This sense of community was one indicator among others that Modern Band at LMCS is a culture all its own, a group of people united and guided by common interest and shared values, as is evident in other school music settings (Adderly et al., 2003; Bartolome, 2013; Morrison, 2001) and in active popular music bands (Confredo & Brittin, 2014).

To identify oneself as a member of Modern Band is valued

Student identity was influenced by the sources that make Modern Band what it is. This began with the principal's preference for rock band as the means for middle-school music education and his employment of a teacher who is an accomplished performer of vernacular music. Students viewed Modern Band as "special," "cool," "fun," and "chill." These sentiments were supported by the principal's contention that:

> kids love the days on which they have music and look forward to them (thankfully we have music 4 days per week). When middle schoolers are happy in school I believe they do better in all courses and they have a better relationship with the school staff. It is a happier place to be.

Cachet came with being a member of Modern Band. Students compared their experience in school music to what they knew of friends' and relatives' experiences at other schools, and the Modern Band members sensed that they were part of something that was both personally relevant and special. Mariah and Steven noted: "I like saying that I play in a rock band at school." Every day during the lunch period 12–15 band members chose to populate the room for more Modern Band with Mr. T and their peers. High musical self-concept, a factor that predicts future music participation (Demorest, Kelley, & Pfordresher, 2017), was prominent in the commentary of many students. Valuing one's identity as a member of Modern Band is corroborated by previous research that shows a propensity for young people under the right conditions to show extraordinary commitment to a school performance ensemble and take ownership of the experience (Adderly et al., 2003; Bartolome, 2013; Morrison, 2001).

The teacher is valued

Students without exception praised their music teacher. Their comments: "Mr. T. is a great teacher." "He gives us lots of attention." "He is energetic, not like other teachers; he tells stories." "I like the way he teaches." Monique, a parent of an eighth grader commented: "My son enjoys the enthusiasm of his teacher." Renee, a parent of a seventh grader offered: "My daughter really enjoys working with the band instructor, Mr. T., and I believe her final decision [about choosing band] was strongly influenced by his teaching style."

Principal Kelly recognized Mr. T.'s enthusiasm, "withitness", and consummate musicianship. Kelly believes he has a special music teacher in Jude. He respects Jude's musical accomplishments

as a classically trained and active performer and composer with roots in the garage band culture. Kelly commented:

> There are many pieces to the teacher pie. There is something special about Jude. He has withitness. Very few teachers can be truly successful without it. He is a true musician-teacher. Don't know how we could do better than that.

In class/rehearsal, teacher Jude was a "one-man swarm," in almost constant motion, in and out of the set-up, making individual and small-group contacts, alternately looking and sounding like a rock musician and a teacher. He pivoted "on a dime" from instruction and feedback to dancing to the beat of the music, air playing the drums and guitar, and singing while the students performed. These in-character moments were both appealing and instructive. Jude appeared "married" to the music. The richness of context that describes Jude's classroom persona made apparent his potential influence on young people as a culture bearer. He is that, not because he is the oldest and wisest person in the room but because he lives the culture (Campbell, 2002). As Green (2008) writes about novice rock musicians' responses to an "informal" classroom pedagogy:

> [The rock instruments] carried cultural associations, or delineations of authenticity in relation to the images of chosen musicians which are visible on stage, screen and in photographs. These images include not only bodily looks, hair, clothing, gait and so on, but also the kinds of postures and gestures involved in playing certain instruments. (Green, 2008, p. 99)

I speculate that LMCS students are, in large part, responding to Jude as a "cultural association" and an authentic rock musician, an image he accesses easily because he has been enculturated in rock musicianship. Most certainly, this is not a situation in which popular music, once it enters the contexts of school, is compromised such that "pop ceases to be pop" as young people know it (Green, 2006). For the teacher of Modern Band who, who unlike Jude, has no popular music background, the questions may be: what do I have to do and who do I have to be in order to be culturally relevant in the Modern Band setting? Adoption of some or all of the informal learning pedagogy might lend an assist in this regard (e.g., Green, 2006, 2008).

A well-managed classroom is valued

In this value, students wanted something they do not have in Modern Band. Classroom observations revealed stretches of incessant talk and noodling among students in all class sections. In the following comments, students lay the blame on their peers, not Jude. "I enjoy the times when the kids are focused." "A lot of people talk, don't take class seriously." "The talking is annoying. It gets in the way, frustrating." When asked in an interview, "What do you see going on socially among your students?", Jude quipped: "You mean other than all the talking?"

Jude addressed it by trying to appeal to the students' sense of reason. Jude's take: "It's a respect thing. It's rude. The medium doesn't matter. Play when you are supposed to, not before, not after." He was adamant about teaching adolescents how to "curb their behavior" and "get things done," because in the Jude version of authentic rock band musicianship, these same challenges often manifest themselves in adult and professional musicians as well.

Experienced music teachers rank teacher enthusiasm/energy, the ability to motivate students, and skill in classroom management highest on lists of important teacher characteristics (e.g., Miksza, Roeder, & Biggs, 2010). Music education pre-service teachers report concern about their ability to adequately manage the classroom (e.g., Killian, Dye, & Wayman, 2013; Madsen & Kaiser, 1999). That band members at LMCS valued music, community, their identity, and their

teacher did not make a well-managed classroom. Principal Kelly saw Jude's lack of a music education degree as a contributing factor. In the member checking process, Kelly reported being comfortable with and committed to "the management thing being a focus of the present study because management in middle school is such an important factor to a teacher's success." Then, he added provocatively: "Frankly it is both what makes Jude so effective and what holds him back from being as effective as he could be."

As the inquiry developed I was drawn to informal learning in music (Green, 2006) as a useful frame of reference for Modern Band at LMCS. The LMCS rock band experience cannot be described accurately in sharp-edged binaries like formal or informal, process or product-focused, teacher-centered or student-centered. It is instead a softer-edged amalgam that is its own reality, its own authentic school-based rock band experience. On a continuum anchored by formal and informal learning processes, Modern Band at LMCS occupies various points in between. In repertoire, LMCS students have some choice as to what they rehearse, but the teacher retains control over the quality and appropriateness of the repertoire. In learning music for performance, students learn to read notation, but the process is not without important play-by-ear and rote experiences. On the teacher's role—sage or guide—students are primarily taught by a teacher, but intermittent small-group projects remove the teacher from an overt lead role and provide opportunities for students to collaborate, problem-solve, and create independently. On the integration versus separation of musical activities, small-group projects embody the integration of listening, performing, improvising, and composing, while large-group experiences separate composing as something that follows a simple to complex curriculum and involves primarily the eighth-grade class.

I speculate that the model of informal learning may be useful also in informing teacher decision-making leading to curricular adjustments in either direction on the formal/informal continuum—adjustments that will create different and perhaps desirable experiences in music education. Two examples, one in classroom management and the other in music literacy, derive from the present study. The classroom management "void" of LMCS is aptly represented in Green's (2006) words about the early phase of five 13–14-year-old boys rehearsing with rock instruments: There is "mucking around. It sounds like chaos. Someone is playing something on the piano that has nothing to do with the chosen song. … There is random drumming and talking" (p. 108). In the large-group rock bands of LMCS, principal, teacher, and students identified the talking and noodling as problematic. Viewed from Green's perspective, the talking and noodling are *not* about mismanagement; they are about natural learning, an inevitable phase of informal learning in popular music performance.

This perspective begs the question: Might there be benefit in structuring more experiences in Modern Band at LMCS to include permissible "mucking around"? The teacher observes, then guides or demonstrates after students have attempted to problem-solve on their own. More globally, might the perceived problem of management be less about management and more about what school "is supposed to be" and the rock band culture resisting school expectations? Abramo (2011), similar to Jaffurs (2004), suggested setting broad parameters for rehearsal processes thus allowing student-generated pedagogy to evolve naturally. In the present study, on the other hand, Jude's sense that his students need help with order and discipline *before* being granted autonomy in music-making is a concern echoed by Rodriguez (2009) and Lindgren and Ericsson (2010).

Music literacy at LMCS is dominated by music reading and playing by sight. In the informal learning of the garage band, by contrast, the focus is on music listening and playing by ear. Might this focus on the ear be a missed opportunity for the students at LMCS? How they listen to music or how they are affected by its sounds were subjects that were conspicuous by their relative absence in student interview responses. Admittedly, the sonic experience may be a less "tangible" outcome than learning an instrument or a new chord or a new song, and as such it may have escaped mention.

This is perhaps a good place to argue in favor of a more complete way to be musically literate—to convert symbols to sounds *and* possess an ear that is both highly sensitive to sounds (Byo, 2014; Duke & Byo, 2012) and able to create the mental sound images to be realized in the motor behaviors that constitute ear playing. According to Woody and Lehmann (2010), "ear playing is an important, even foundational, music skill that deserves greater research attention, as well as greater curricular consideration in school music" (p. 113). Green (2006) sees an underserved aural acuity as a problem for music education. She couches the primacy of the aural experience in the following thinking.

> [When learners are] engaged with music's material themselves, especially through aural, informal learning practices [re: in copying recordings by ear], pupils are touching on an aspect of inherent meaning that is virtually freed for a moment from social context. They are bringing inherent meanings into being and are able to imbue the music with a new *delineated* content of their own. … The potential freedom, or autonomy, of such content from previously taken for granted assumptions and definitions is thus exposed. (Green, 2006, pp. 113–114)

Conclusions

This investigation documents the practice of performance-based popular music as music education in one US school. It answers a need expressed in previous research (e.g., Mantie, 2013) that "the actual extent and forms of engagement with popular musics" be presented in context (p. 347). The values that emerged in this study—music, community, identity, teacher, and classroom management—overlap considerably with the benefits and values identified by adolescents in traditional concert band, orchestra, and choir (Adderly et al., 2003; Bartolome, 2013; Kennedy, 2002), novice rock band (Green, 2008), and justification-for-music-education statements (Campbell et al., 2007). These results provide data worthy of consideration as readers ponder the viability of rock band as a medium of school-based music education and a way to connect meaningfully with more secondary-school students and thus reduce attrition (Demorest et al., 2017). Evidence suggests that if there are reasons to reject the rock band (Hebert & Campbell, 2000; Mantie, 2013), the source for the skepticism should not be the values accrued and identified by its participants. Modern Band at LMCS is an example of meaningful, authentic, and valuable music education that is positioned between the extremes of formal and informal learning, process and product orientation, and teacher- and student-centered pedagogy. Defining and thus better understanding the range of curricular middle ground is a service to music education that should remain the purpose of future case studies.

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