

Choosing Music for Life: Skills, Pedagogy, and Psychological Development in a Vertically Aligned Songwriting Curriculum

Why should songwriting be implemented in early music education classrooms?

Jason Adams – MUSIC 295A – Penn State University School of Music

Introduction

- I wonder how solo and collaborative songwriting, composition, and performance engages students in developing, creativity, confidence, and communication skills?
- In what ways is fostered creativity and confidence applied by students in non-musical contexts throughout their lives?
- How does the development of musical and non-musical skills through songwriting empower students to choose music through their high school education and beyond?
- What might a creativity-based music education curriculum look like at a glance?



Personality

As a student of music for life I found joy in a multitude of music activities in my early and secondary music classes and ensembles. My pre-college and college music education was almost completely traditional. It wasn't until college that I learned guitar and began my songwriting journey. Now with almost 20 years of songwriting and composing experience I can imagine the impact songwriting and all of its lessons and skills could have made on a younger me. I seek to bring that to today's students and encourage more to choose music for life.

Implications

1: Early implementation of creativity and songwriting develops long-term Musical Identity.

- Students who engage in **self-directed music-making** in childhood are more likely to continue music as adults... "the earlier the exposure to active music participation and the greater the length of participation, the greater the impact." (Hallam, 2010)

2: Improved Middle School Music Retention Rates

(Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) shows that students remain engaged in activities where they feel personal autonomy and identity connection.

Early development of student voice in the classroom; confident deep-thinking students.

3: Music after Highschool: A Lifelong Endeavor

Highschool students possess songwriting skills; strong creative abilities able to harmonize music into their college endeavors, future careers, and personal creative aspirations.

Csikszentmihalyi's **Flow Theory (1990)** suggests that creative activities with autonomy and skill progression lead to lifelong engagement.

Methodology: Qualitative Interviews

Interviews of two Doctors of Music Education **Dr. Sarah Watts** and **Dr. Luiz Barcellos** and a PhD Candidate in Music Education **Eva George-Bundy** were conducted asking the following initial questions as a starting point:

- What experience do you have with songwriting and music education?
- Why songwriting?
- How often was student songwriting collaborative vs. individual?
- How early in education could songwriting be implemented?
- What non-musical skills do students develop through songwriting?
- What are the long-term benefits of integrating songwriting into music education?

The interview transcripts were analyzed as qualitative data using **Semantic Topic Modeler**, an AI qualitative analysis tool based on Latent Dirichlet Allocation. Transcripts were **coded for emerging themes** to produce the infographics detailing "**key areas**" and "**common themes**" discussed. The AI provided relevant academic research with supporting evidence and utilizing the interviewee's expertise modeled a simplified curriculum framework.

Results

| Key Area | PhD Candidate Eva George | Dr. Sarah Watts | Dr. Luiz Barcellos | Common Themes |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|--|---|
| View on Songwriting | Essential for K-12 music education, should be embedded in the curriculum. | Not traditional songwriting, but structured composition and improvisation. | A tool for student expression and cultural identity, best introduced in middle school. | Songwriting fosters creativity and self-expression. |
| Creativity vs. Performance | Students should see themselves as creative musicians, not just performers. | Creativity starts with structured choices and exploration of sound. | Students should have agency over their creative process. | Creativity is essential for student engagement. |
| Collaboration vs. Individual Work | Collaboration in early years, individual work in later years. | Uses both; structured collaboration with room for individual expression. | Encourages collaboration and peer feedback throughout. | Collaboration fosters creative growth. |
| Developmental Progression | Early music education should prepare students for high school songwriting. | Starts with structured creativity and gradually builds independence. | Middle school is the ideal stage for songwriting due to cognitive development. | Songwriting should be scaffolded across age groups. |
| Student Agency | Students should develop confidence in their creative decisions. | Provides structured choice-making to empower students. | Students should be risk-takers and own their creative process. | Encouraging student agency enhances engagement. |
| Connection to Other Disciplines | Connects songwriting with literacy and language arts. | Integrates music with movement, storytelling, and visual arts. | Uses songwriting to explore identity, culture, and social issues. | Songwriting connects to multiple academic and personal areas. |
| Non-Musical Benefits | Enhances socio-emotional growth, confidence, and creative thinking. | Develops communication skills and problem-solving abilities. | Strengthens self-expression, abstract thinking, and summarization. | Songwriting builds transferable life skills. |

K-12 Curriculum

| Grade Level | Learning Objectives | Core Activities | Assessment Methods |
|------------------------|--|--|---|
| K-2 (Early Elementary) | - Explore sound & rhythm - Make creative choices - Engage in musical storytelling | - Orff-based improvisation (Watts) - Lyric-building using word walls (George) - Sound exploration with movement (Barcellos) | - Observation of student engagement - Student reflections on musical choices |
| 3-5 (Upper Elementary) | - Develop simple melodies & lyrics - Connect words & music - Collaborate in small groups | - Boomwhacker & Orff compositions (Watts) - Simple loop-based digital composition (Barcellos) - Group songwriting projects (George) | - Student-composed song performance - Peer feedback reflections |
| 6-8 (Middle School) | - Use harmony & structure in songwriting - Develop personal themes in lyrics - Experiment with digital music tools | - Songwriting based on real-world topics (Barcellos) - Peer feedback & revision process (George) - GarageBand/DAW integration (Barcellos) | - Digital portfolio of student work - Self-assessment on creative choices |
| 9-12 (High School) | - Master song form & structure - Apply music theory to songwriting - Record & produce original works | - Genre exploration & harmonic complexity (George) - Student-driven songwriting projects (Watts) - Professional production & recording (Barcellos) | - Final capstone songwriting portfolio - Public performance or industry showcase |

Conclusion

Curriculum Goals:

- ✓ Develop **creative confidence** in music-making.
- ✓ Support **self-expression and identity formation** through songwriting.
- ✓ Teach **foundational music literacy** while prioritizing creativity.
- ✓ **Integrate technology** to make songwriting accessible to all students.
- ✓ Encourage **collaboration and peer learning**.
- ✓ Prepare students for **lifelong engagement with music**.

| Broad Category | Specific Categories | Representative Quotes |
|---|---|---|
| Creativity as a Core Component of Music Education | Structured vs. unstructured creativity, Building blocks for songwriting, Integration with other art forms | "Starting with structured choices and gradually working toward more open-ended creativity." (Watts) |
| Student Identity and Self-Expression | Songwriting as personal storytelling, Using music to process emotions, Building confidence in creative choices | "At first, I was really worried... but taking the risk paid off." (Barcellos) |
| Collaboration & Social Learning | Group songwriting dynamics, Peer-to-peer feedback, Problem-solving through co-creation | "They can problem-solve their compositions together... they can share and learn from each other." (Barcellos) |
| Technology as a Tool for Accessibility & Creativity | Digital platforms as scaffolding, Using DAWs in the classroom, Technology for non-instrumentalists | "Technology is turning into a tool for scaffolding." (Barcellos) |
| Developmental Appropriateness of Songwriting | Early elementary structured creativity, Middle school as a critical period, Adolescent cognitive development | "Middle school is the best time... because that's when abstract thinking starts to develop." (Barcellos) |
| Music Education vs. Traditional Performance Model | The limitations of performance-based curriculum, Expanding definitions of musicianship, Student agency in musical choices | "They've never been told that they're a creative being in music. They've been told they're a performative being in music." (George) |
| Transferable Skills Beyond Music | Emotional literacy, Verbal communication, Innovation through risk-taking | "You have to be able to communicate an idea. People don't have a lot of time for you. Be direct." (Barcellos) |



This research serves as an exploration or early pilot study of a k-12, vertically aligned music education curriculum. A curriculum designed with songwriting as a cornerstone to student voice, creativity, performance, composition, and technology use.