

Gender, identity and the sixth grade band classroom

Adria R. Hoffman
University of Maryland, College Park

Introduction

Secondary school students in the United States often enroll in elective courses, or make curricular choices, beginning at the middle school level. These choices provide students the first opportunity to define themselves in terms of academic pursuits. As a former middle school band student once told me, “In middle school, electives are, kind of, like, who you are.” In addition to choosing to enroll in band, these students further identify themselves through musical choices. For instance, a sixth grader may come to self-identify as a flutist, saxophonist, or percussionist. As math enrollment is required of all students, math performance, for example, may not be used as a means of identification in the same way as music performance. The purpose of this study was to explore sixth grade band students’ emerging identities within the layered social contexts of their middle school communities. This exploration serves to inform our understandings of how students make meaning of music learning within social contexts and how the classroom as a social context may influence music learning.

Gender, as one piece of identity formation, has been noted as an influential factor in prior research on instrument choice (Conway, 2000; Delzell & Leppla, 1992; McKeage, 2004; O’Neill & Boulton, 1996). Simply by entering any band classroom or attending a master class, one may observe larger numbers of female flutists than male flutists. Conversely, one may notice more male than female low brass section members. McKeage (2004) found instrument choice, associated with gender, influenced ensemble participation. Beyond instrument preferences, Zhukov (2006) noted differing behaviors of instrumental music students based on gender as well.

Many studies, including those noted above, inform our understandings of music learning, but rest on adult interpretation. While each student interacts with the musical content and social context in uniquely individual ways, instrumental music educators may

base pedagogical decisions on assumptions about what band students find meaningful in instrumental music learning contexts. In order to understand what middle school band students find meaningful while they form an identity, educators must invite students to voice their perceptions and perspectives. Giroux (2005) defines *voice* as “the principles of dialogue as they are enunciated and enacted within particular social settings” (p. 199). Student voices, therefore, may be reported through qualitative research methods such as narrative inquiry and interviewing. The present study addresses the question, How does the band classroom as a social context influence students’ sense of self? Through this study, I explore sixth grade band students’ experiences as a participant-observer in their world, the sixth grade band classroom. I report student voices in order to gain understanding of the student experience in students’ words.

Theoretical Framework

Identity theories

The perception of self is related to perceptions of individuals situated in various social contexts. Social identity theory (SIT) and identity theory (IT) serve as two theoretical frameworks on which scholars study identity as a social construct. Both theories examine the concept of identity, defined as the “socially constructed self” (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995, p. 262). However, SIT informs our understanding of intergroup processes known as social identities while IT provides a framework for researchers to analyze interpersonal relationships, or role identities.

Social identity theory.

Social identity theory (coined by Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides the basis for a great deal of recent scholarship in the social psychology of music. Researchers interested in SIT examine perceptions of ingroups and outgroups. Ingroups are comprised of an individual’s peer group with whom they regularly interact. People situated outside of this peer group comprise outgroups. Scholars who utilize SIT premise their inquiry on the theory that individuals tend to positively view ingroups while simultaneously devaluing outgroups (Bakagiannis & Tarrant, 2006).

Identity theory

As previously stated, IT researchers focus on social roles, or role identities. Role identities connect social structures to individual actions in order to predict social behavior. Hogg, Terry, and White (1995) assert, “role identities are self-concepts, self-referent cognitions, or self-definitions that people apply to themselves as a consequence of the structural role positions they occupy, and through a process of labeling or self-definition as a member of a particular social category” (p. 256). Silvey (2004) refers to the various roles played out by secondary students as *multiple selves* through which we may know students “on a deeper level” (p. 121). For instance, understanding the roles in which a student function (clarinet section leader, student council member, boy, girl, or younger sibling) may inform our understanding of an individual’s complexity.

Integrated identity theory

While IT and SIT serve distinct research goals, there exists a relationship between the role identity and social group. The roles that adolescents adopt depend on the context in which they socialize. Adolescents form groups that serve both to self-identify through peer association as well as disassociation. These social groupings include gender. For instance, girls typically identify with other girls, while boys often identify with other boys.

Due to the relationship between individual role identities and group identity, Stets and Burke (2000) argue for a more integrated definition of the self through the joining of IT and SIT.

The group and role bases of identity correspond to the organic and mechanical forms of societal integration analyzed by Durkheim ([1893] 1984), which formed the basis of much discussion and theory in sociology. People are tied organically to their groups through social identities; they are tied mechanically through their role identities within groups. A full understanding of society must incorporate both the organic/ group and mechanical/ role form because each is only one aspect of society that links to individual identities in separate but related ways (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 228).

As such, identity formation must be examined on two levels: the interpersonal level that is the primary focus of IT, and the intergroup level that is the focus of SIT. In this study, the participants are members of the band, their ingroup with SIT. However, their perceptions of belonging in the band may be partially based on prior knowledge or experience in music ensembles, older middle school or high school bands in the community, as well as their interpersonal network(s) formed within their band class. Thus, I believe SIT and IT overlap one another, as social groups and interpersonal relationships do not exist as distinct entities. Both levels influence an individual's social identity.

Methods and Data Collection

Six primary participants contributed to this study over the first semester of their middle school experiences. All six are sixth grade students enrolled in the same band class in a public middle school located in a large, metropolitan area on the east coast. Michelle, a flutist, Mya, a saxophonist, Ellie, a percussionist, and Via, a clarinetist, all performed on their primary instruments in their elementary band programs. David, who plays the tuba, and Mei-ling, an oboist, both switched from other instruments to these instruments when they enrolled in their middle school band program. These six participants', examined as a group, comprise the six collective cases in this study. Secondary participants included parents, teachers, school counselors, and activities coordinators who provided contextual data necessary for understanding each case within the layered social contexts of the school community.

I selected this research site due to colleagues' descriptions of the band as a strong musical program in which students often choose to enroll through their entire middle school careers. I also chose this site due to the ethnically, racially, and socio-economically diverse school population that is well represented in the band program. I believed a school with many different social groups that interact within the band classroom served as an intriguing context in which to explore identity as a social construct. Additionally, the band teacher agreed to provide me open access to his classroom and band activities, including performances, and the school administration also supported the research study.

I collected data over a four-month period from November through the end of the first semester, when students auditioned for bands and made seventh grade course enrollment decisions. I conducted three open-ended, in-depth interviews with each participant, wrote bi-weekly classroom observation reports, traveled with the band to off-site performances, and attended school performances. The participants also wrote weekly journals (narratives) about their band and school experiences.

Using qualitative analysis software, I systematically coded emergent themes at the node after importing field notes, participant narratives, and interview transcripts. After analyzing the data on a case-by-case basis, I sorted and grouped the data by themes, employing a cross-case analysis. This cross-case analysis allowed for an examination of contradictions and comparisons between and across cases.

I designed a collective case study comprised of six cases (participants) because this design allowed me to focus on the individual cases and the sociological contexts that surrounded them (Stake, 2005). In order to inform my understanding of social group interactions, I drew upon ethnography, the “practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one's own experience in the world of these others” (Van Maanen, 1988, p. ix). As the phenomenon under examination, identity, encompasses perceptions and experiences unique to each individual, narrative inquiry served as a means of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20).

Findings That Inform Our Understanding Of Instrumental Music Education and Gender

Early in the data collection process, gender emerged as a salient theme across cases. The participants regularly raised the topic without prompting. When describing her instrument section, Mei-ling wrote “i like my section, all of them are girls. and all of them are very nice” (Journal, November 16, 2007). One would expect Mei-ling to describe her fellow woodwind players positively, based on prior findings in SIT studies (Bakagiannis & Tarrant, 2006). Additionally, Lucy Green (1997) has written that female music students simultaneously take part in school music performance and identity

formation. Mei-ling's naming of gender when describing her ingroup supports this theory. In an interview, I asked her to tell me more about the people in her section and if they were different from her previous section (the clarinets):

ARH: What are the flute players like?

Mei-ling: They're nice.

ARH: Are they different from the clarinet players at all?

Mei-ling: Well, there are no boys. (Interview, December 19, 2007).

When I asked David what the primary difference was between his new low brass section and his previous saxophone section, he also said that the sections were “a little” different “‘cause I mean there's girls and boys” in the saxophone section. David and Mei-ling believed gender to be of import to their decisions regarding instrument choice. Both participants indicated the physical placement of themselves in relation to others of the same gender as an obvious distinction between sections. Based on this data, I posit that musical learning and gender identity formation may be interconnected for both boys and girls at the middle school level.

Gender and behavior

When I asked Michelle to contrast her flute section with the low brass section, she said, “they’re boys, so they’re more like playful. Not always serious people all the time, I guess.” I asked David, a member of the all-male low brass section, to describe what it was like to be part of that section. He told me, “It’s pretty good. I mean, you can pretty much say whatever you want. You don’t have to be careful what you say” (Interview, December 3, 2007). These statements speak to our understanding of gender relations within this sixth grade class. David found peer support and comfort in a section comprised of all boys. Though they shared other characteristics (playing like instruments), David named gender as a primary source of camaraderie among his classmates.

Michelle elaborated on these relationships and perceptions of male versus female classroom behavior during a discussion about the gender distributions among instrument sections. Based on my classroom observations, she accurately described the social interaction within the percussion section, saying that the only two female students in the

section spent most of their time standing near each other. She perceived the basis for their decision on the boys' behavior, saying that the girls would not want to "sit around those boys 'cause they're not always serious paying attention a lot ...I guess." I asked her to elaborate:

I think that, uh, the girls pay attention more than the boys because the boys, I guess, um, are more playful. Like they're not always concentrating and focusing on the work. And the girls are always, like, together and hanging out while they play their instrument. (Interview, December 13, 2007).

Michelle defined a "serious band student" as someone who practices "a lot. Like, for an instrument. And they focus and listen to the directions the teacher says to do. (Interview, December 13, 2007). Michelle perceives girls as more "serious" students, both inside and outside of the band classroom. However, the behavior she describes is not necessarily indicative of focus, concentration, or higher academic achievement, but rather compliance. David's description of joking around with other boys in the low brass section would support Michelle's term "playful," but during my classroom observations, David never seemed off-task. He performed his tuba parts as, or more, successfully than Michelle performed her flute parts, though his social interactions were more easily heard and seen than Michelle's. These findings support Green's (1997) assertion that "girls are constructed as conforming to teachers' expectations, standards of behaviour, and musical values" (p. 163). Though David's musical achievement did not appear diminished by his more audible social classroom behavior, his band teacher and female classmates perceived his musical skill level to be lower than his female classmates.

Gender and instrument timbre

Michelle also noted the fact that the flute section was comprised of all girls. She then contrasted her flute section with the all-boys low brass section. I asked her why she thought the sections were comprised of all girls and all boys, respectively. She responded:

Well, the brass has more of the lower sounding. And it's more, you know, with the loud and everything. And girls, you know, mostly chose by the sound. Like how high it is. And the brass is low. It's more manly. Well, that's what they think I guess. Like I'm sure the people who take trombone wouldn't want to take flute. Yeah, I don't think that would happen. They wouldn't want to. (Interview, December 13, 2007).

I then asked Michelle if the flute seemed more feminine (as opposed to the “manly” low brass instruments). She said yes, because the sound of the flute is more feminine.

“Cause, like, the most flute players that I've met are girls. Like hardly any guys I've met play the flute. They play, like, brass or trumpet. And clarinet, sometimes. Percussion” (Interview, December 13, 2007). These findings corroborate Conway's (2000) assertion that perceptions regarding instrumental choice (particularly the flute) and gender may continue to serve as barriers to musical learning opportunities in school. Michelle also told me that although she loves playing the flute, she has always been interested in the trumpet as well. She told me that this interest is partially based on her older sister's prior trumpet playing experience. Michelle explained that while she found both the trumpet and trombone to be interesting, “I like the higher pitch better than the low trombone thing” (Interview, December 13, 2007). The varying ranges of different instruments were perceived by participants in this study to correspond to male or female speaking ranges. Students appeared to choose instruments with a range similar to their gender-specific speaking voice.

Timbre and Perceived Personality

All six participants referenced the timbre of their preferred instruments. Michelle told me, “I like, uh, the sound... how high the flute can be and everything. It's all sweet tone and so I like that better than trombones. Yeah, so I like the sound the flute makes” (Interview, December 13, 2007). Mei-ling, the only oboist who considers herself a member of the flute section, described her perceptions regarding her friends' choice of instrument, saying, “Well, like, I guess for flutes, you would think like you like the soft melody part. You like quiet things” (Interview, December 19, 2007). These sixth grade students also perceived instrument timbres as similar to personality traits associated with girls or boys. Michelle compared the characteristics of her fellow flutists with girls,

broadly speaking, “The flutes, they just are like more sweet, ya’ know, playing and everything. But they’re mostly girls, though” (Interview, December 13, 2007). These responses indicate associations between instruments, gender, and specific behaviors. As previously stated, these behaviors may be associated with compliance, supporting Zhukov’s (2006) assertion that compliance in music learning contexts is often associated with female students.

Via told me that if she could take up another instrument, she would like to begin playing the flute because of the tone quality and the tactile qualities of the instrument. “I like the way the soft sounds and the way you move your fingering without kind of looking at it.” She explained that the tone and the metal mechanism were both characteristics of the clarinet that she enjoys, saying, “I liked all the keys and the way it sounds” (Interview, December 21, 2007). These responses indicate an association between timbre and the role of instrumental parts within larger works. Further exploration during interviews revealed specific associations between instrument preference and musical genres.

Mya spoke of an association she made between her primary instrument, the alto saxophone, and jazz music. She told me that she was initially drawn to the instrument because she associated it with non-classical genres of music, specifically jazz. I followed up on her thoughts, asking her why she didn’t choose the violin, another instrument often associated with non-classical music. She explained that while the violin can be heard in rock music and country, she wouldn’t necessarily think of it as a jazz instrument.

During another point in an interview, Mya described band music as “cool” and “fun to play.” When I asked her if she would describe the orchestra music using the same words, she told me “The music they play isn’t really good.” She then immediately corrected herself as she consciously attempts to avoid speaking negatively about her peers. “Um, it is really good. But, um, I guess...you can play a lot of different stuff with violin, too. Like, like classical or country or yeah” (Interview, December 11, 2007). In other words, Margot views the band genre as encompassing a larger variety of styles than school orchestra music. Via told me that she likes band music more than orchestra music because “like it’s a more excitement.” In a journal entry, Via described band music using

words like “hard” and “fast,” a stark contrast to the “slow and peaceful music” she said that the orchestra played (Journal, December 11, 2007).

While these participants’ perceptions do not neatly fit the model of “compliance” outlined earlier, they provide alternative explanations for instrument choice. Neither Mya or Via expressed a desire to behave appropriately or inappropriately. Instead, their descriptions of experiences in the band classroom revolved around the content. Via spoke about her interest in the “discovery” of the clarinet. Mya described her extra-curricular musical activities as learning to play “not regular music.” During the course of this study, she began teaching herself to play the electric guitar in order to perform Led Zeppelin riffs she had heard on her father’s albums. Both participants enjoyed musical learning for the sake of learning, rather than conformity, as their peers expressed. While their peers conformed to perceived gender roles within the music environment, Mya and Via found a free space in which they could discover their chosen instruments.

Summary and Implications for Music Education

Through an exploration of emerging identity within the specific social context of the sixth grade band classroom, students noted and reported the import of gender. Gender preceded other descriptive characteristics of peer perceptions, instrument choices, and musical associations in participant narratives and interviews. This salient theme emerged as a notable filter through which sixth grade band students viewed their social world.

The findings presented in this article raise more questions than they answer. From where do young musicians learn to associate musical genres with gender roles? Why do some students aim to conform to assumed gender roles within the music classroom while others view the learning space as an invitation to explore or “discover?” In what ways might the band teacher propagate perceived gender roles within the classroom? Conversely, how might a band teacher create a learning environment in which students do not feel pressure to conform? Future studies may specifically explore these questions in more depth. I propose longitudinal studies that follow students from the beginning stages of instrumental school music study through their adolescent years for the purpose of exploring decisions regarding music course enrollment, instrument preference, and (as in the case of Mei-ling and David) instrumental preference change.

Based on these findings, I assert that gender may influence student perceptions regarding musical achievement, social behaviors, and musical identity. As such, music educators should carefully examine the social interactions that occur within classrooms. It is important to note the learning that occurs in classrooms beyond content knowledge. Music educators may provide emotionally and intellectually safe learning environments in which deeper musical learning may occur by understanding student perceptions of the learning context. Without such understandings, music educators may inadvertently discourage future musical learning or overlook possibilities for deeper engagement with musical content and performance.

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