MIDDLE SCHOOL JAZZ BAND STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES COMPOSING AND IMPROVISING

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this action research was to document the musical achievement of students learning to compose and improvise in a middle school jazz band. Research questions guiding this study were: (1) What effect does learning to compose a blues melody have on students’ improvisation achievement? (2) In what ways do learning to compose a blues melody influence student perspective of improvising? and (3) What is the relationship between students’ compositional and improvisational achievement in a middle school jazz band? I obtained quantitative and qualitative data to gain a detailed understanding of students’ experiences and my teaching practice in a natural rehearsal setting. Using a teacher-researcher created learning plan, students recorded pre- and post-test improvisations over the standard 12-bar blues form, wrote original blues melodies, and completed an exit survey detailing their perspective of the learning process over 15 regularly scheduled rehearsals. My field notes and in-depth review of three rehearsal videos provided a basis for me to richly describe my practices, as well as students’ experiences improvising, composing, collaborating, and being creative together. Conclusions drawn from this study included: (a) students made meaningful musical connections when improvising and composing in the same musical context; (b) composing and revising an original blues melody encouraged students to compare the processes of composing and improvising, which may have improved students’ improvisation achievement; and (c) composition and improvisation are mutually beneficial processes that may help students develop stronger overall musicianship skills.
Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

Twenty-first century music education researchers and practitioners emphasize musical creativity as part of a comprehensive music education. In 2014, the State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education [SEADAE] published the National Core Arts Standards; these standards are based on artistic processes of creating, performing, responding, and connecting. Shuler (2011) described these artistic processes as a powerful model for standards-based, student-centered music education (p. 9). Specific to music creativity, researchers and pedagogues call for inclusion of improvisation and composition as pillars of a comprehensive music education (Azzara, 1993, 2015; Kratus, 1994, 2007; Palmer & Hibbard, 2015; Shuler 2011; Snell, 2012; Strand, 2006; Stringham, 2010; Stoltzfus, 2005).

Despite this call for creativity, composition and improvisation continue not to be prioritized in many instrumental music curriculums in the United States (Azzara, 1993, 2015; Strand, 2006; Stringham, 2010). Instrumental music teachers generally associate improvisation instruction only with jazz education and general music classes (Azzara, 2015). However, many jazz education curricula deprive students of improvisation instruction (Mantie, 2007). School jazz ensembles perform arrangements where instead of improvising extemporaneously, students perform pre-written solos (Grunow, 2005; Stringham, 2010). Further, Grunow (2005) noted that
common improvisation instruction is based on pentatonic and blues scales, which while minimizing student mistakes, is not grounded in audiation. According to Gordon (2012), minimizing student mistakes is problematic because, “There is only a blues sound, and it is best acquired through audiation, not practicing a theoretical scale that becomes a boring, incessant melody” (p. 321). Ultimately, the current state of jazz education prioritizes reading notation over learning how to improvise, compromising an authentic jazz culture (Mantie, 2007).

When jazz pedagogy aligns with authentic jazz practice, students can experience and understand the context of jazz culture within the music (Berliner, 1994; Mantie, 2007). History, repertoire, and performance practices (i.e., improvisation) are salient to this musical genre and integral to creating jazz culture in an ensemble (Berliner, 1994; Mantie, 2007). Ake (2002) questioned curriculum content of a typical jazz education program in the United States, speculating that directors often treat jazz band as they would a concert band, neglecting historically-informed practices of jazz culture. Ake (2002) stated, “Jazz band directors generally stressed the same musical concepts valued in their other ensembles—centered and stable intonation, correct note reading, section balance—while improvisation often went overlooked” (p. 114). Improvisation is a fundamental component of many music-making practices throughout history, including jazz. Researchers agree it should remain a foundational aspect of authentic jazz music-making and part of a comprehensive music education.
Research in jazz education has often been directed toward professional or collegiate jazz ensembles, with minimal transferability to middle school (West, 2011). Goodrich (2005) advocated for studies of beginning jazz ensembles because the feeder program was a contributing factor of success for the high school jazz band that Goodrich studied. While many middle school jazz bands are regarded as feeder programs to high school jazz ensembles, these intermediate groups also have the potential to function as a legitimate musical ensemble. Legitimacy for a middle school jazz band can occur through incorporation of traditional jazz practices, repertoire, and focus on improvisation (Ake, 2002; Berliner, 1994; Faulker & Becker, 2009). For example, when considering repertoire for the middle school group, experts in the jazz field consider the blues as a historically entrenched pillar of the repertoire (Ake, 2002; Berliner, 1994; Faulker & Becker, 2009). Ake (2002) stated, “Compositions based on the 12-bar blues form, for instance, have remained favorites of musicians since the earliest days of jazz and are likely heard, in one style or another, at least once during any given performance” (p. 149). For these reasons, the blues form is an important part of the jazz genre that middle school jazz band students should study.

With only a small number of extant studies about middle school jazz band (Coy, 1989; Knight, 1993; Leavell 1996; West, 2011), many scholars call for future research in this topic (Azzara, 1993, 2015; Coy, 1989; Goodrich, 2005; Knight, 1993; Leavell 1996; Stringham, 2010; Szwed, 2002; West, 2011). West (2011) stated, “While the field of middle school jazz education remains a relatively blank slate, a case study that explores the complex and multidimensional process of middle school
jazz education could serve as a springboard for future researchers” (p. 5). Stringham (2010) recommended future research on students improvising and composing in different musical settings and age levels.

**Purpose of Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this action research was to document the musical achievement of students learning to compose and improvise in a middle school jazz band. The following research questions framed this study:

1. What effect does learning to compose a blues melody have on students’ improvisation achievement?
2. In what ways do learning to compose a blues melody influence student perspective of improvising?
3. What is the relationship between students’ compositional and improvisational achievement in a middle school jazz band?

**Significance of the Study**

As a teacher-researcher, this study informed my teaching practice. Findings from this research affected change in my middle school jazz band’s curriculum. This study also added to the body of literature relating to composition and improvisation, as called for in the National Core Arts Standards (SEADAE, 2014).
Definitions of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions were used:

- **Audiation** – “The ability to assimilate and comprehend in our minds music that may or may not be physically present. Audiation is to music what thought is to language” (Gordon, 2007, p. 399).

- **Blues** – “[a form that] is characterized by the the I-IV-I-V-I chord progression or some variation of it in a twelve-measure package with many lowered third, fifth, or seventh intervals. It has been and continues to be an influence on jazz and rock” (Gridley, 2009, p. 292).

- **Changes** – the “accompanying harmonic progression” of a composed piece of music (Berliner, 1994, p. 63).

- **Composition** - “the process of creating music and its resultant product over an extended period of time” (Palmer & Hibbard, 2015, p. 215).

- **Form**: “The structure and design of a composition” (Oxford Dictionary of Music).

- **Head** - “the melody or theme” of a composed piece of music (Berliner, 1994, p. 63).

- **Improvisation** – “an ability to make music spontaneously within specified musical parameters” (Azzara, 2002, p. 171).

- **Musical Achievement** – “the music learning that one can demonstrate as having been acquired” (Walters, 2010, p. 198).
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In this study, I investigated students’ musical achievement as composers and improvisers in a middle school jazz band setting. In support of these purposes, I reviewed literature related to: (a) traditions of jazz, (b) jazz pedagogy, and (b) the creative artistic processes of improvisation and composition.

Traditions of Jazz

For over one hundred years, jazz has evolved into so many forms, styles, and identities that it is near impossible to define jazz and its traditions in one concise way (Ake, Garrett, & Goldmark, 2012). DeVeaux (1991) remarked,

The essence of jazz, in other words, lies not in any one style, or any one cultural or historical context, but in that which links all these things together into a seamless continuum. Jazz is what it is because it is a culmination of all that has come before. (p. 530)

Social traditions of jazz culture and jazz music are fluid and ever-progressing (Berliner, 1994). Despite the inability to reach a consensus on a definition of jazz, scholars and pedagogues agree that jazz music encompasses a rich history and vast repertoire (Ake, 2002; Azzara, 2015; Berliner, 1994; DeVeaux, 1991; Faulker & Becker, 2009; Ake, Garrett, & Goldmark, 2012).
Under the guise of jazz, musicians have altered, mixed, and developed sub-genres influenced by geographic and cultural situations (Berliner, 1994). From the turn of the 20th century through mid-century, jazz musicians performed, collaborated, improvised, and composed new ideas that progressed the genre in multiple directions. By the late 1940s, the 12-bar blues form, the chord progression to “I Got Rhythm”, and American Songbook ballads were considered three necessities to every jazz musician’s core repertoire (Berliner, 1994). Ake (2002) stated, “Virtually every jazz musician plays the 12-bar blues form at one time or another” (p. 50). To manage the vastness of jazz repertory, mid-20th century jazz groups tended to “strike balances between the proportion of material that they compose and arrange in rehearsals and that which they improvise during performances” (Berliner, 1994, p. 64).

Musicians traditionally learned to play jazz and improvise by interacting with others in jazz community, not in a formal music education setting (Berliner, 1994). Within this social learning structure, composers would share their compositions by singing or playing them for the musicians during rehearsals (Szwed, 2002). Tangible evidence such as a recording or written score were two additional strategies to document compositions. Regarding musical content, Szwed (2002) explained it was desirable for a composition to sound improvisational. Some of jazz’s most dedicated composers, such as Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington, Tadd Dameron, Gil Evans, George Russell, and Anthony Braxton achieved improvisational sounding jazz compositions throughout their careers (Szwed, 2002, p. 67).
With a fundamental knowledge of repertoire, musicians can audiate, improvise, and compose melodies (Azzara, 2015, p. 195). Jazz pedagogy can embrace principles of audiation, improvisation, and composition. For example, Azzara (2015) recommended learning a large repertoire of tunes, both standard repertoire and original compositions, for a richer vocabulary from which to engage with music. It is important to know familiar forms, or song structure, because “someone who knows the basic forms can play thousands of songs in the great reservoir without much work” (Faulker & Becker, 2009, p. 24). Scholars, historians, and musicians agree that knowing the blues is a crucial part of a wider knowledge of jazz repertoire (Ake, 2002; Berliner, 1994; Faulker & Becker, 2009).

**Jazz Pedagogy**

In the last 60 years, the primary method to learn jazz shifted from the social jazz community to academia. With this change, European-based standards of ensemble performance transferred over to in-school jazz education. Traditionally, formal instructional practices stress musical qualities such as intonation, note reading, and balance above improvisation (Ake, 2002). Mantie (2007) discussed problems with the big band model in academic jazz. First, the model contradicts typical historic practices of small-group jazz. For example, when notation is prioritized, a large ensemble inevitably emphasizes reading the score over a sense of groove or feel. Yet, “reading notation should reflect an understanding of the creative process” (Azzara, 1999, p. 24). Mantie also noted, “it is significant that the professional musicians who
played in Big Bands likely did not receive their primary musical training there” (para. 10).

West (2011) conducted a study to explore experiences, thoughts, and actions of middle school music teachers’ perceived ability to teach middle school jazz. West collected and analyzed both qualitative and quantitative data to obtain a complete description of teacher’s perceived abilities. Current practices were correlated with teachers’ perceived abilities to create a list of what may be considered effective teaching practices. These practices include:

(a) requiring students to play a ‘traditional’ jazz instrument in order to join jazz ensemble, (b) using major scales and pentatonic scales to teach improvisation, (c) modeling, (d) have students listen to jazz by watching jazz videos, (e) bringing in jazz clinicians to work with the group, and (f) engaging students in call-and-response activities. (p. 280)

Suggestions were made for teacher preparation programs to equip pre-service music educators with experiences and skills to teach jazz.

In an effort to further understand best practices of in-school jazz instruction, Goodrich (2005) and Dyas (2006) both studied exemplar high school jazz ensembles in depth. These researchers examined why these ensembles excel, and how the course content, instructional methodologies, and participant perspectives interact in the classroom.

Dyas (2006) studied two exemplary high school jazz ensembles in a descriptive comparative case study. The researcher recommended a student-centered
approach to instruction based in the findings that peer interaction and social climate is a key facet when learning to improvise and perform. In this study, Dyas revealed that students feel they learn best in the jazz combo setting as opposed to the large jazz ensemble that is typical in school jazz settings.

Using ethnographic techniques to collect data from all stakeholders, Goodrich (2005) conducted a year long case study of a single high school jazz ensemble. Stakeholders included students, director, assistant director, alumni, school administrators and personnel, a parent, and private teachers. Active listening of live and recorded music, and peer mentoring were two authentic jazz practices that Goodrich found particularly effective in the school setting. Goodrich (2005) suggested that incorporating historic elements of the traditional jazz learning community school will strengthen school jazz programs.

Leavell (1996), another proponent of student-centered instruction in jazz pedagogy, investigated middle school students’ perceptions of jazz education, including playing individual parts, improvising, and interpreting swing rhythms. The researcher found that students most often struggle with style concepts and feeling comfortable improvising. Suggestions for the jazz educator included incorporating student-centered approaches, scaffolding material, and maintaining context within instruction. To summarize, researchers stressed the value of developing a jazz culture and authentic creative practices within the school jazz ensemble (Dyas, 2006; Goodrich, 2005; Leavell, 1996; Mantie, 2007).
Creativity

The Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21) recommended a Framework for 21st Century Learning for educators to involve the four Cs (critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, communication, and creativity and innovation) with traditional academic content (P21, 2015, p. 1). P21 defined creativity and innovation outcomes, including “Think Creatively” to prepare students to, “Use a wide range of idea creation techniques; create new and worthwhile ideas; and elaborate, refine, analyze and evaluate their own ideas in order to improve and maximize creative efforts” (p. 3). Snell (2012) stated, “Students develop creative thinking skills when engaged in creative activities” (p. 4). Creative activities and participation in the creative process begins with an idea or intention and finishes with a creative product (Webster, 1990). The revised Bloom’s Taxonomy places creativity at the top of higher order thinking skills over remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, and evaluating (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

Research regarding creativity in music education reveals a lack of a common definition. Webster (1979) identified composition, improvisation, and analysis as three modes of creative behavior in music. Lehmann, Sloboda, & Woody (2007) suggested the term “generative” rather than “creative” to describe the processes of creating new material. Snell (2012) defined creativity as “a generative process, involving manipulation of primary music elements. It can be taught sequentially, and students find it meaningful” (p. 9). Both improvisation and composition are considered generative processes (Elliott, 2005; Lehmann, Sloboda, & Woody, 2007; Snell, 2012).
Palmer & Hibbard (2015) indicated that creativity in a curriculum encourages students to “explore divergent and convergent thinking” (p. 216).

Part of the generative process is also organizing and developing artistic ideas, as well as making revisions toward a final product. Creating, performing, and responding are three creative processes highlighted in the National Core Arts Standards (State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education [SEADAE], 2014).

Creativity in music education can also be a valuable way to assess student understanding (Grunow, 2005). Azzara (2015) stated, “Through creativity, students express meaningful musical ideas...students will gain deeper understanding of the literature they play and develop independence and musicianship skills to last throughout their lives” (p. 197). Creative practices support and develop vocabulary that may create increased readiness for improvisation.

**Improvisation**

Not only is audiation-based improvisation absent in many school jazz ensembles (Mantie, 2007), but improvisation is neglected in school band and orchestra settings. To examine benefits of improvisation in an instrumental curriculum, Azzara (1993) developed an improvisation curriculum and investigated the effect of improvisation instruction and music aptitude on music achievement for fifth grade wind and percussion students. Participants of the study (N=66) were randomly divided into an experimental and control group; *Musical Aptitude Profile* (Gordon, 1965, 1995), was administered to both groups. Azzara (1993) found that students who
received improvisation instruction as part of their lessons scored significantly higher on composite etude performances than students in the control group.

Snell (2006) also studied improvisation achievement in band students, examining achievement among instrumental students in the seventh- and eighth-grades. After eight small-group lessons incorporating audiation-based improvisation instruction, students performed two melodies by ear and an improvisation based on each tune. Rating scales measuring melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and expressive elements of the improvisation were used to assess student achievement. Snell (2006) recommended incorporating improvisation in the middle school instrumental music curriculum to help improve music pedagogy and student musicianship skills.

More specific to jazz pedagogy, Coy (1989) examined improvisation achievement of students in a middle school jazz band. Over the span of six weeks, Coy employed a researcher-designed improvisation curriculum on an experimental group (N=30). Using multisensory instruction techniques such as aural perception, eurhythmics, verbal association, symbolic association, and synthesis, the instruction intended to develop improvisation skills, rhythmic accuracy, and attitudes. All instruction utilized the 12-bar blues form. Coy (1989) found that students in the experimental group scored significantly higher in improvisation achievement and rhythm accuracy than the control group. The researcher concluded that middle school students can “successfully learn fundamental skills of jazz improvisation in six weeks of instruction” (Coy, 1989, p. 82).
In all types of music, including school jazz band and wind band settings, improvisation is pivotal to improving students’ musical understanding. Improvisation is a pillar of the creative artistic process and fundamental in a comprehensive music education (Azzara, 1993; Coy, 1989; Mantie, 2007; Snell, 2006).

**Composition**

Consistent with the value of improvisation, researchers indicate the benefit of composition to students’ musical development (Shewan, 2002; Stoltzfus, 2005; Stringham, 2010; Webster, 1979). Kratus (1994) contended composition requires both divergent and convergent thinking skills. Composition “allows opportunity for reflection, experimentation, and revision before ideas are finalized” (Stringham, 2010, p. 27).

To examine the extent to which music educators incorporate composition, Strand (2006) surveyed public music educators in Indiana. Strand asked teachers about their compositional practices and justifications for using composition in the classroom. The researcher reported that general music teachers used composition as part of their instruction more often than ensemble directors who did not teach any general music classes (Strand, 2006). From the results of the survey, Strand concluded there was not an agreed upon definition of composition among practitioners, nor a consensus on how to teach composition.

Kratus (1994) investigated the relationship between music audiation and the compositional process among nine-year olds. Correlation coefficients suggested that tonal and rhythm audiation functioned together in the composition process, rather than
as separate entities (Kratus, 1994, p. 126-127). Kratus suggested that it may be more effective for teachers to model how to develop and vary a melodic line rather than have students compose a song in C major in ABA form (Kratus, 1994, p. 128). This aligns with Strand’s (2006) claim that there are varying approaches and strategies for composition instruction. According to Kratus (1994), however, some approaches are more effective than others.

Shewan (2002) stated that music composition is a crucial part of every student’s music education. The purpose of Shewan’s study was to examine students’ composing processes and products in high school instrumental music instruction (p. 15). Shewan employed a range of compositional readiness techniques during rehearsal including singing, movement, playing by ear, aural analysis, improvisation, and reading notation. The researcher contended, “If students were engaged in active listening, followed by improvisation, they would ultimately read with more comprehension, and composition would be the obvious next step in the development of a comprehensive musician” (p. 1). The composition process for the study began with a teacher-led class composition. Over fourteen rehearsals, students engaged in group composition that was ultimately performed in a concert. Students then composed chamber works in lesson groups and progressed to composing for large ensembles such as jazz ensemble, wind ensemble, or orchestra.

Also interested in composition in band, Stoltzfus (2005) investigated audiation-based composition effect on music achievement with beginner wind and percussion students. Stoltzfus also questioned how this may have affected student
perception of music reading. The students who engaged in audiation-based composition found that “the process of converting musical thoughts (i.e., sounds) into symbols facilitated a more meaningful connection between non-visual and visual information” (p. 98). Stoltzfus concluded there is evidence to suggest that audiation-based composition can improve music achievement (p. 103).


Scholars suggest pedagogical advantages when including composition in an instrumental music curriculum from elementary through secondary school (Kratus, 1994; Palmer & Hibbard, 2015; Randles & Stringham, 2013; Shewan, 2002; Stoltzfus, 2005; Strand, 2006). When considering composition and improvisation as two related creative processes, Lehmann, Sloboda, & Woody (2007) stated, “The distinction between improvisation and composition is not as clear as one would think” (p. 129).

**Improvisation and Composition**

As Stringham (2010) indicated, there are multiple views regarding the interaction between improvisation and composition; this relationship is of interest to many researchers (Azzara, 2015; Palmer & Hibbard, 2015; Sarath, 1996; Stringham, 2010; Szwed, 2002; Wig, 1980;). Sarath (1996) argued that improvisation and
composition are different, but related temporal processes involving structure of musical ideas (p. 3). Palmer & Hibbard (2015) asserted that the only defining difference between improvisation and composition is the “amount of time spent creating original musical ideas and the ability to edit those ideas” (p. 216). Szwed (2002) noted that one of the great virtues of jazz is its denial of Western conventions such as the distinction between composer, performer, composer, arranger, and soloist (p. 69). Szwed suggested that improviser and composer are one in the same.

Wig (1980) studied how music composition instruction affects middle school band students’ improvisation achievement. Wig examined relationships between improvisation achievement, academic achievement, performance achievement, and composition instruction. A researcher-designed pre-test was administered followed by a seven-week instructional unit. After the seven weeks, a post-test was administered. Students learned music composition strategies to manipulate pitch, intensity, duration, form, and theme and variations. Learning sequence included exploration, improvise and compose musical themes, compositional techniques such as retrograde variation, embellishments on the theme, and peer-collaboration. Wig found significant improvement in ability to improvise among these middle school students. Also noteworthy, Wig reported that neither performing ability nor academic achievement are factors related to ability to improvise music (p. 80).

Using a mixed methods study design, Stringham (2010) examined music achievement and student perspectives of an eight-week high school instrumental music curriculum incorporating improvisation and composition based on Developing
Musicianship through Improvisation (Azzara & Grunow, 2006). The curriculum emphasized readiness skills for improvisation and composition such as singing, moving, playing by ear, tonal patterns, rhythms patterns, and voice leading (p. vi). Stringham indicated that music aptitude scores were predictive of performance and improvisation achievement. Mean scores were highest for singing. In the findings, there was a somewhat weak relationship between improvisation and composition. The researcher interpreted the low composition scores versus singing or playing scores as a result of students spending more time performing creative ideas on their instruments than notating them. The researcher commented, “This may explain the relatively low level of composition achievement for students in this study (Stringham, 2010, p. 113). Stringham recommended future researchers investigate the relationship between improvisation and composition (p. 113).

Summary

Within this literature review, I highlighted jazz traditions, instrumental music pedagogy, and the creative artistic processes of improvisation and composition. Traditions of jazz culture are not as evident in jazz pedagogy as scholars may recommend. Researchers documented the social tradition of jazz culture and jazz music as fluid and ever progressing. (Ake, 2002; Berliner, 1994). Within the last 60 years, researchers agree that facets of jazz culture, such as authentic improvisation and aural tradition, have been replaced with European-based traditions in institutionalized jazz (Azzara, 1999; Mantie, 2007). Dyas (2006), Goodrich (2005), Mantie (2007), and Leavell (1996) emphasized incorporating jazz culture and authentic practices in jazz
education. Researchers recommended the creative processes of improvisation and composition as part of any comprehensive instrumental music curriculum (Azzara, 1993, 2015; Kratus, 1994, 2007; Palmer & Hibbard, 2015; Shuler 2011; Snell, 2012; Stoltzfus, 2005; Strand, 2006; Stringham, 2010). Despite this importance, little research has been conducted in middle school, and more specifically, middle school jazz band. Multiple researchers identify a need for literature relating to middle school jazz bands (Azzara, 1993, 2015; Coy, 1989; Goodrich, 2005; Leavell 1996; Stringham, 2010; Szwed, 2002; West, 2011). Research is necessary to connect jazz culture to the middle school jazz band curriculum through improvisation, composition, and a comprehensive music education perspective.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this action research study was to document the musical achievement of students learning to compose and improvise in a middle school jazz band. With the intent to gain a detailed view of my teaching practices in the context of a middle school jazz band and to contribute to the body of literature on this topic, research questions guiding this study were: (1) What effect does learning to compose a blues melody have on students’ improvisation achievement? (2) In what ways do learning to compose a blues melody influence student perspective of improvising? and (3) What is the relationship between students’ compositional and improvisational achievement in a middle school jazz band?

Theoretical Framework

Gordon’s (2012) music learning theory combined with constructivism (Webster, 2011) served as the guiding perspectives for this study. Gordon (2012) theorized that people learn music in a similar process to how they learn language. Just as language uses speech and thought to communicate, music is communicated through performance and audiation. Knowledge and skill acquisition occurs during both discrimination and inference learning. Discrimination learning occurs when students are taught through imitation. Students learn to identify something by what it is not.
Inference learning is more advanced and occurs when the teacher encourages the students to apply their understanding of the familiar to the unfamiliar. In inference learning, students make self-discoveries. Consistent with the language parallel, Gordon identified five vocabularies in discrimination learning that develop music literacy: listening, performing, audiating, reading, and writing (Gordon, 2012). If students are audiating, they can engage in all five vocabularies with understanding. Once students improvise, Azzara (2015) suggested that students should “compose in the context of what they are audiating” (p. 195). Audiation-based improvisation and composition are essential components of music acquisition and literacy.

By writing and composing music, students learn to read music notation and participate in the creative process. Writing directly relates to reading when students learn to notate when they are already audiating, singing, and playing (Azzara, 2015). When composing music, students learn how to engage in the creative process of singing, improvising, writing, and revising. Azzara (2015) advised, “Your students will learn from the reflection necessary to develop a composition” (p. 195).

Constructivism is a learning theory to help understand the process through which people acquire knowledge and skill. Webster (2011) stated that learning is an active process, not passive. Students learn by generating their own musical understanding, actively engaging with authentic musical activities, exploring student-centered approaches to improvising and composing. These musical actions must be situated in a context to create musical understanding (Elliott, 1995). Palmer & Hibbard (2015) stated, “Composition, improvisation, and creative interpretive performance and
listening are inherently constructivist practices because the learner is creating the music based on his/her musical understanding and experience” (p. 217).

Fosnot (1996) discussed how constructivism is an approach to teaching that enables students to experience something in context and encourages them to raise their own questions, create strategies, and make connections while learning. In an active learning setting, students construct their own knowledge by making meaning within the context they are engaging. Elliot (1995) asserted that musicianship skills develop through interactions with “musically significant ‘others’” (p. 161), including teachers and the larger community of practitioners.

**Conceptual Lens**

Creswell (2014) maintained, “When qualitative researchers use a theoretical lens, they can form interpretations that call for action agendas for reform and change” (p. 200). In this study, I used Gordon’s (2012) music learning theory and the National Core Arts Standards’ (State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education [SEADAE], 2014) artistic processes to guide instruction.

The 2014 National Core Arts Standards prioritize the creative artistic processes of creating, performing, and responding as the primary outcomes for a comprehensive music education. Within the Creating strand, there are three Anchor Standards detailing the process (SEADAE, 2014). First, musicians “generate and conceptualize artistic work.” Second, musicians “organize and develop artistic ideas and work.” Third, musicians “refine and complete artistic work” (SEADAE, 2014). These three concepts correspond with three of Gordon’s (2012) musical vocabularies: audiation,
improvisation, and composition. Therefore, I combined the National Core Arts Standards’ artistic processes and Gordon’s musical vocabularies to create the conceptual lens for my study. Through this lens, audiation relates to generating and conceptualizing artistic work, improvisation refers to organizing and developing artistic ideas and work, and composition is conceptualized as refining and completing artistic work. The pairings were a guideline for this study, but each vocabulary also has the potential to relate to each Anchor Standard. The visual in Figure 3.1 depicts this relationship to form the conceptual lens.

![Conceptual lens diagram](image)

**Figure 3.1. Conceptual lens.**

**Rationale for Case Study Design**

According to Merriam (1998), “A case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation” (p. 19). As data is collected and information is gathered,
case studies allow for shifts in the process and design. With an emergent design, a case study allowed me “to learn about the problem or issue from participants and address the research to obtain that information” (Creswell, 2014, p. 186). In this study, the class itself was the unit of analysis, and necessitated a detailed view of the rehearsal practices and participant perspectives. An emergent case study design was fitting for the nature of this research. Goodrich (2005) recommended a case study design for studies of jazz ensembles of differing levels and contextual settings. The design allowed data collection to take place during the natural rehearsal setting so there was a realistic representation of the students’ experiences. I collected and analyzed both quantitative and qualitative data to develop a rich narrative about this middle school jazz band.

According to Merriam (1998), case studies are most commonly categorized as descriptive, interpretive, or evaluative. The unit of analysis in a descriptive case study is documented through rich detail. Embedded within interpretive case studies is the intent to analyze and interpret the findings. These case study distinctions are useful, but are not definite. Merriam (1998) explained, “While some case studies are purely descriptive, many more are a combination of description and interpretation or description and evaluation” (p. 40). To analyze findings from a thick description and answer my research questions, the case study contains facets of both descriptive and interpretive case studies. This is consistent with West (2011) who also merged these two types of case studies for research regarding a middle school jazz band.
**Action Research**

Using an action research perspective within the case study design, I was able to obtain tangible data to inform and change my teaching practices. Action research is an empowering process for teachers to “test our ideas about education” and “develop a critical reflection of practice” (Mertler, 2006, p. 12). Elliott (1991) stated,

From an action-research perspective, the improvement of teaching and the development of the teacher are integral dimensions of curriculum development…Educational action research implies the study of curriculum structures, not from a position of detachment, but from one of a commitment to effect worthwhile change. (p. 54-55)

The process of action research involves a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting upon your curriculum and teaching (Mertler, 2006). I present this cycle in Figure 3.2.

![Figure 3.2. Cycle of action research.](chart.png)
An action research perspective enabled me to connect theory to practice by better understanding, and therefore improving, the jazz band curriculum and my teaching practices for the sake of the students.

**Role of the Researcher**

As the Lower and Middle School music teacher at this school, I served as the participatory teacher-researcher and sole collector of data. With a background playing jazz, as well as an interest in how students learn to improvise and compose, the middle school jazz band was an opportunity for me to critically examine my teaching practices through action research. This study occurred during the 2015-2016 school year, which was my first year as a full-time faculty member.

**Setting and Duration of the Study**

Participants (N=16) in this study were in seventh and eighth grade at a private, co-educational, college preparatory day school, located in the Mid-Atlantic United States. The total enrollment of the school during the 2015-2016 school year was 583 students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. The students in the middle school jazz band had four to five years of previous instruction on their instruments. Most students received prior jazz instruction with their former music teacher, including some playing and improvising on the blues. Instrumentation of the jazz band included two flutes, three alto saxophones, six trumpets, one trombone, two pianists, a guitarist, and a percussionist. The Middle School Jazz Band meets to rehearse before school for 45 minutes on Mondays, Wednesdays, and alternating Fridays from September
through May. This study occurred during the first 15 to 20 minutes of 15 regularly scheduled jazz band rehearsals between November 2015 and January 2016.

**Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

The setting of this study was a private, co-educational, college preparatory day school. Both the setting and small population sample limits implications for other educational settings. Findings are therefore not generalizable, but ideally are transferable both for my future teaching practice, and for the existing body of literature on this topic.

**Ethical Concerns**

Part of conducting action research is addressing ethical concerns that may affect the integrity of the study. The middle school jazz band I taught is not a graded course, but rather a before school extracurricular activity. There were therefore no ethical concerns regarding interference with students’ grades. Additionally, all students in this ensemble participated in the instructional unit. As both the instructor and researcher, I continuously acknowledged the bias of my roles as teacher-researcher as well as one of the judges rating students’ data. Although I am not able to completely separate my roles, it was important to aware of this bias during collection and analysis of data.

**Data Collection**

Consistent with my action research methodology, I collected a variety of data to gain a detailed understanding of my instruction in this setting. A pre-test was administered at the beginning of the six-week instructional unit. The pre-test was a
performance-based assessment where students improvised over one chorus of a blues in the key of Concert Bb major following playing Duke Ellington’s “C Jam Blues”. Three judges rated the recorded performances and the scores measured achievement of improvisational skills prior to the instructional unit. Judges received 32 recordings in a randomized order to rate using four rating scales. Judges inputted the scores into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and returned to me, the teacher-researcher. Due to the small sample size, I did not share exemplars with the judges. I did, however, explain the rating scales to each judge, and requested they contact me if they needed further clarification. The four rating scales used in the pre-test include two continuous dimension rating scales and two additive dimension rating scales (Stringham, 2010). Continuous dimension rating scales using five criteria measured performance of harmonic progression and rhythm integrity. Additive dimension rating scales using five criteria measured expressivity and unity and variety of the improvisation (Stringham, 2010). The rating scales utilized for the improvisation pre- and post-test were taken from Stringham’s (2010) study. Stringham (2010) reported an acceptable interjudge reliability for each dimension, ranging from 0.70 to 0.97. The pre-test improvisation rating scales are presented in Appendix A.

Wiggins & McTighe (2005) described an approach to curriculum writing in Understanding by Design. This strategy utilized a three-stage backwards design to plan the desired results, assessment, and instruction of the curriculum. I adapted this model to create outcomes and learning plans for this study. As an action researcher, I
adjusted my instruction as necessary throughout data collection. In Appendix B, I present the plan and desired outcomes for the 15 rehearsal instructional unit.

At the conclusion of the study, I administered a post-test to participants. The post-test included both improvisation and composition components to measure achievement of each skill. In addition to using the pre-test rating scales to measure improvisation achievement in the post-test, the rating scales were also adapted from Stringham’s (2010) study to measure composition achievement in the post-test. The improvisation and composition rating scales used in the post-test are presented in Appendix C.

Using field notes, video recordings of rehearsals, and an exit survey, I documented the creative artistic process and student perceptions. Field notes totaling 15 typed pages documented my observations during class and provided a space for preliminary interpretations (Mertler, 2006). In addition to field notes, the rehearsals were also video recorded for my review. Upon completion of the 15 rehearsal instructional unit, I selected three videos to critically analyze my teaching. When selecting videos for analysis, I prioritized particularly informative and pivotal lessons consisting of diverse content for further review. More specifically, I selected one video that exemplified my mastery of the content, one video that demonstrated the detail of the composition and improvisation process, and one video that was a transition lesson between two major concepts. As an action researcher, I chose videos of successful rehearsals as well as rehearsals that required reflection and revision of the subsequent rehearsal plan. To better understand my students’ perspective of the
learning process, participants completed an exit survey. This survey contributed to data on student experiences improvising and composing the blues. The exit survey consisted of questions with a four-point Likert scale as well as two open-ended questions. I present the survey instruction in Appendix D.

By employing both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection, I gained a richer, and more holistic interpretation of my teaching practices and on student understanding and achievement in a middle school jazz ensemble setting.

**Data Analysis**

Merriam (1998) stated, “Conveying an understanding of the case is the paramount consideration in analyzing the data” (p. 193). In a case study design, data collection and analysis occur simultaneously as insights emerge.

To measure student achievement during the pre- and post-tests in this study, I utilized rating scales from Stringham’s (2010) study that were checked for content validity. The pre- and post-test can be found in Appendix A and C, respectively. Three judges rated the audio recordings of student improvisations and submitted blues melodies. The judges were a purposeful diversified population, including a graduate music education student, an in-service music teacher, and myself. I calculated correlation coefficients between each of the three judges to check for interjudge reliability.

When reviewing the video recordings of rehearsals, I selected three video recordings using pre-determined criteria and wrote extensive notes on my observations. I also transcribed small portions of the rehearsal that specifically
captured the desired outcomes of rehearsal or were of interest to me as an action researcher. These review notes cross referenced with my field notes ensured accuracy of interpretation from the teacher perspective of rehearsal efficacy. Upon collating data from field notes, video recordings, and the exit survey, I discerned overarching themes and interpreted meanings to organize a narrative structure for this case study. Data and emergent themes from the qualitative aspects of this study contributed to the creation of a rich narrative.

**Validity**

To check for accuracy and credibility of findings of this study, I employed multiple validity strategies common in qualitative research designs (Creswell, 2014). Creswell (2014) explained triangulation as a procedure to justify established themes from findings by converging and checking data sources and participant perspectives against one another. Using triangulation to validate the study, I examined evidence from pre- and post-test descriptive statistics, qualitative data from field notes and video recordings, and the results from the exit survey. A detailed narrative of the findings also ensures trustworthiness by providing the reader with a rich and realistic description of what happened during the study (Creswell, 2014). Finally, I added to the thick description by clarifying the bias I brought to the study, including my dual role of teacher-researcher. According to Creswell (2014), reflectivity is a core characteristic of qualitative research. By being self-reflective, I established credibility of the findings related to my specific teaching environment and improvement of my own instruction.
Chapter 4

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

The purpose of this study was to document the musical achievement of students learning to compose and improvise the blues in a middle school jazz band. In this chapter, I will present both quantitative and qualitative data to answer the following research questions:

(1) What effect does learning to compose a blues melody have on students’ improvisation achievement?

(2) In what ways do learning to compose a blues melody influence student perspective of improvising?

(3) What is the relationship between students’ compositional and improvisational achievement in a middle school jazz band?

During 15 rehearsals between November 2015 and January 2016, students learned blues repertoire, developed improvisation skills, and composed their own blues melodies. I taught sixteen seventh and eighth grade students an in-depth instructional unit about the 12-bar blues, students performed pre- and post-test improvisations, and submitted their own blues head composition.
Results

Interjudge Reliability

At the beginning and conclusion of the study, students performed an improvisation over one chorus of a concert Bb blues progression. Students also submitted a 12-bar blues composition. Three judges rated the pre- and post-test audio recordings and student compositions using rating scales adapted from previous research (Stringham, 2010); these rating scales are presented in Appendix A and Appendix C. To prevent bias when listening to improvisation recordings, I randomized the recordings and numbered the files from 1-32. After the judges rated the improvisations and compositions, I organized the data into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. In Table 4.1, I present interjudge reliability for each dimension. Of 45 correlation coefficients, seven were smaller than 0.4, 34 were between 0.4 and 0.7, and four exceeded 0.7. I calculated composite correlation coefficients between each pair of judges. The average reliability of composite scores between Judge 1 and Judge 2 was 0.59; Judge 1 and Judge 3 was 0.73; and 0.62 between Judge 2 and Judge 3.
Table 4.1

Interjudge Reliability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Judge 1 - Judge 2</th>
<th>Judge 1 - Judge 3</th>
<th>Judge 2 - Judge 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>Post</td>
<td>Comp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Har. Progr.</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhythm</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressive</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improv./Comp.</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composite</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Pre = pre-test improvisation, Post = post-test improvisation, Comp = post-test composition, Har. Progr. = harmonic progression, Improv./Comp. = improvisation or composition.

Improvisation and Composition Achievement

In Table 4.2, I present the composite of students’ pre- and post-test improvisation scores from the three judges. The pre- and post-test improvisation rating scales used by the judges are located in Appendix A and Appendix C respectively.

Table 4.2

Composite Judges’ Scores of Student Improvisations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Harmonic Progression</th>
<th>Rhythm</th>
<th>Expressive</th>
<th>Improvisation</th>
<th>Composite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>12.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>3.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>14.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>3.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Difference</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>1.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N=16
Overall, students’ composite improvisation scores improved by 9.2% from pre-test to post-test. Within individual dimensions, the students' scores for the “Improvisation” dimension increased by 15.8%. Only the “Harmonic Progression” average score decreased (1.6%).

I present the average combined judges’ scores of students’ blues compositions in Table 4.3. The rating scale used by the judges to score the compositions is presented in Appendix C. Students’ ability to notate rhythms received the highest mean score of 4.44, with the smallest standard deviation of any dimension. I include students’ compositions in Appendix E.

Table 4.3

*Composite Judges’ Scores of Student Compositions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composition</th>
<th>Harmonic Progression</th>
<th>Rhythm</th>
<th>Expressive</th>
<th>Composition</th>
<th>Composite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>12.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N=16*

The mean difference of composite pre-test improvisation scores and composite composition scores was 0.1. There was a mean difference of 0.23 between the pre-test “Improvisation” dimension and the composition “Composition” dimension. Generally, composition scores were similar to pre-test improvisation scores. The data from pre- and post-test improvisations measured changes in student improvisation achievement. Mean differences between pre-test improvisation scores and post-test improvisation
scores were more significant. The mean difference from pre- to post-test improvisation scores was 1.83. All but one dimension improved by greater than 0.5 mean points.

**Journal Results**

Following each rehearsal, I wrote field notes to document and reflect upon the lesson as teacher-researcher. Most journal entries consisted of approximately one page of text, some elicited three pages of prose, while several only necessitated a few of paragraphs. In total, I wrote approximately 15 pages of notes on Microsoft Word commenting on the students’ progress and my own thoughts on the rehearsals. This journal allowed me opportunity to document specific interactions I had with students, as well as overall reactions about my teaching.

My unit plan followed a 15 rehearsal sequence (see Appendix B). I spent about 15 to 20 minutes per rehearsal on this material. The first five rehearsals generally consisted of familiarizing students with blues repertoire through listening, performing, and improvising to five different blues heads. The next five rehearsals included a discussion of style and improvising concepts to gather ideas for a teacher-facilitated full class blues composition. Finally, the class spent the remaining rehearsals improvising, writing, and revising their own blues heads. I organized the journal results based on these three structural themes of the learning plan.

**Building a foundation of repertoire.** During the first five rehearsals, students listened to and read notation for the melodies of “St. Louis Blues”, “Three O’Clock Blues”, “Now’s the Time”, “Blue Monk”, and “All Blues”. These standard blues tunes enabled students to experience the twelve bar blues progressions in multiple keys and
styles. Students also had the opportunity to listen to many notable jazz musicians’ performances. For example, students listened to recordings by Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, and Miles Davis. Students’ facial reactions and verbal comments while listening to recordings suggested to me that they were actively listening. Students learned one blues head per rehearsal, often comparing the newest tune with the others they experienced prior in the unit even before my prompts. I made the following reflection after rehearsal six when students listen to, read, and improvised to “All Blues”:

“All Blues” has a much different style than the standard blues and this was jarring for students. Some students openly disliked this tune. Others said it was their favorite they played so far because it has such a ‘different sound’. For this reason, I think it was beneficial to expose students to this type of blues because they have a broader working understanding of blues composition that hopeful influences them as they compose their own blues.

Throughout the unit, I documented how I perceived students learned to improvise in context of the 12-bar blues. Using Developing Musicianship through Improvisation (Azzara & Grunow, 2006, 2010) as a model for learning to improvise, students learned repertoire, as well as specific content for improvisation. Singing was emphasized heavily throughout this process. Students sang and performed tonal and rhythmic patterns, and improvised different patterns before putting them into the context of the progression. I noted that students sang and identified patterns in tonic, subdominant, and dominant patterns, but struggled to play these by ear during class. In
my field notes, I wrote that students wished these patterns were written down so they could have a visual. I reflected upon this difficulty and adjusted my approach. After students performed the patterns by ear successfully, I allowed them to notate the tonal patterns and blue note patterns as a means of building readiness for the composition portion of the learning plan. For example, in Figure 4.1 I present tonal and blue note patterns students learned during this unit. I followed the same process with rhythm patterns and requested students notate certain improvised rhythms that they liked. I found that the students utilized the notated idea sheet as a self-created tool during subsequent rehearsals.

![Musical notation](image)

*Figure 4.1. Sample Blue Note Tonal Patterns.*

As I incorporated more improvisation concepts into instructional time, I recognized that students continued to work on improvising in the context of the 12-bar blues. This continued development is present in my comments such as the following: “as students take risks with new ideas, they may lose their place in the changes.” Students appeared to understand the progression and harmonic content, but processing multiple concepts simultaneously is a skill that takes practice to refine.
Throughout the unit, I referred to the rating scale criteria as concepts for effective audiation based improvisations (see Appendix A and C). I used rating scales adapted by Stringham (2010) from Developing Musicianship through Improvisation (Azzara & Grunow, 2006, 2010). I noted students experimenting with and attempting these skills, concepts, and vocabulary. During class, students took chances incorporating space into their improvisation to “demonstrate an effective use of silence”. As readiness for audiating and writing their own compositions, I encouraged students to perform and develop melodic motives and reuse the material to give unity to their improvisations and eventually, their compositions. This could occur through tonal sequences, rhythmic thematic development, or through creating a melody and embellishing it.

Of all these concepts, I noted students often varied themes from the blues heads in their improvisations, such as chromatic connections commonly found in “Blue Monk”. Throughout this portion of the field notes, I commented multiple times that students were engaged, challenged, and open to taking risks by trying out new ideas.

**Group composition.** The group composition was a teacher-facilitated open group activity to demonstrate the compositional process to students. I emphasized to students that improvisation is at the heart of composing. Over four rehearsals, we collaboratively composed the blues composition I present in Figure 4.2.
In my journal, I noted that the logistics of a group composition was more demanding than anticipated. Students who had not previously transposed were confused. I wrote,

The difficulty of writing a blues all together was figuring out how to write it. Students struggled with transposing and writing the part on their own copy as I wrote it in concert pitch on the board. The saxophones and trumpets were not always sure what to write. I often had to resort to confirming the note names because chromatic solfege was a new and confusing concept for them. For motives such as, “FI-SO-SI-LA” and “ME-DO-TE” I would tell the students the notes to ensure both accuracy and time’s sake.

However, the group composition gave an opportunity to review notation rules with students, such as score set-up and stem direction. The class compositional process began with students improvising themes. Then, students took turns offering ideas while other students would build upon those concepts. This collaboration was

Figure 4.2. Group Blues Composition.
powerful. I noted this process in my journal, because it effectively achieved the goals of this portion of the unit,

One of the saxophone players played a motive for the first measure, which we notated as a class. Then, a trumpet player chimed in and sang a retrograded version for the next measure. Another trumpet player said that it works except the last note of the retrograde should be one step higher.

This interaction was student-led and a direct example of collaborative composition. I observed students adapting ideas or concepts from the blues heads learned during the first part of the unit. For example, a student suggested a chromatic line in the ninth measure in a similar way that “Blue Monk” has chromatic figures. There were many musical improvisations discussed by the class. In my journal, I noted during the final rehearsal of group composing that the students seemed ready to create their own. It came to a point in the group composition that students did not know which idea to put onto the board for the group composition. Not everyone agreed with the class conscientious, and this indicated to me that students were ready to write their own blues heads.

**Individual compositions.** During part of the last four rehearsals of the instructional unit, each student wrote their own 12-bar blues head. First, students gathered ideas spreading out around the rehearsal room to begin brainstorming rhythms, notes, melodic patterns, themes, motives, and hooks for their blues. I noticed the students were receptive to this activity, a student even said, “I think it is really cool that we can get to write our own song.” As I milled about the room, students
experimented with ideas, then tried to notate them, and continuing in that cycle. In my notes, I commented that some students referred back to the standard repertoire for inspiration. During one rehearsal I wrote, “some students played tonal patterns or prior blues heads for initial ideas. One flutist was replaying “St. Louis Blues” just for inspiration and subsequently added a similar arpeggiated chord idea into her blues composition.”

I observed the process of revision during composition when I saw one student write down an E-natural, then played the phrase to confirm the notation, but changed it to an E-flat. After playing it again, the student switched it back to an E-natural. As I walked by, the student said to me, “I don’t know if I want that note to be an E-natural or an E-flat.” I replied, “We are just gathering ideas today, so I would circle it and write a natural/flat with a question mark and you can always decide later when you have a bigger picture of the tune. Changing your mind isn’t a bad thing.” The student accepted my suggestion and continued writing.

The biggest roadblock that I noticed was the students’ ability to accurately notate what they were audiating and improvising. For example, some of the students did not have enough macrobeats for the measure, or they were playing a rest in their interpretation that they did not notate. Actualizing musical ideas with notation proved to be challenging for students. I noted that there were a handful of students that asked me if they could record what the played rather than having to write it down. Other students had difficulty creating melodic material and simply wrote down tonal patterns. Hand notating their blues melody held some students back from actualizing
their intentions and improvised ideas. At the end of that particular class, I asked the students to fill out an index card as a way to assess how they were doing with the project. They were to write a comment about their progress as well as any questions they want to ask me. In my journal, I documented the following quotes from the informal check-in: “I like doing this but it’s harder than I thought”; “I like this project so far, but I am not sure if measures 1-4 fit into the chords”; “I am having a hard time fitting my ideas into the chords we have to use”; “I like the blues I am working on”; “I really like composing, especially after a while”; “Composing is really cool! I like composing”. Overall, students took ownership and pride in their songs, even brainstorming names for the song title.

**Video Results**

Based on my review of field notes, I selected three videos to further study to gain insight on my teaching. I chose one video that demonstrated my abilities as a knowledgeable musician and pedagogue, one video exhibiting the improvisation and composition process, as well as a video that pivoted between two major concepts in the unit plan. As an action researcher, I chose to review videos of successful rehearsals as well as rehearsals that required reflection and revision.

**Video review one: Instructional delivery.** The first video I selected for further study was from early on in the instructional unit that demonstrated my comprehensive understanding of repertoire and delivery of improvisation instruction. During this rehearsal, students first experienced a standard of the blues repertoire, “St.
Louis Blues” and introduced to basic concepts of improvising over the 12-bar blues progression.

After listening to a recording and sight-reading “St. Louis Blues”, I led the students in a discussion aurally analyzing the content of this standard tune. They commented on how the recording of the improvisation included variations on the melody, rests in between phrases, and chord arpeggiations. After review of the video, I noticed the students sight read with a strong sense of style after listening and analyzing the tune. Consistent with the DMTI model for improvisation, students first performed the roots notes of the blues chord progression and then had an opportunity to either sustain the root notes as whole notes or the option to improvise rhythms with the roots. I noted that giving students options was a key part of my improvisation instruction to differentiate instruction. Students then, maintained the power to create their own meaning of the objectives in their own time.

This transitioned well to rhythm patterns, which I had students chant and perform first the same patterns as me, then improvising different two and four measure rhythm patterns. Putting rhythm and chord roots into the challenged some students. They struggled at first to keep track of when to change notes within the progression. I modeled an example by singing improvised rhythms to the chord roots. Students improvised on the chord roots simultaneously to feel open to try it and experiment without being called out individually. This way, students feel a sense of security to openly make mistakes without feeling singled-out. This portion of class ended with creating a mini-arrangement of “St. Louis Blues” as a strategy to informally assess
student understanding of incorporating concepts from the improvisation instruction portion of the lesson. I noticed growth in the performance of the melody, as well as an improved conceptualization of improvising. Through this lesson, I modelled examples for the students and introduced new concepts in an approachable sequence for the students.

**Video review two: Group composition process.** The second video I selected to review demonstrated the detailed process as the instructional unit moves towards composition. The class began as a structured review class. Students looked at the five blues tunes previously studied and made comparisons and contrasts of each head. Students commented on variations in style, various keys, and the use of repetitive melodies. The students commented that melodies can outline the chord, such as in “St. Louis Blues” with the “MI-SO-MI-DO” motive on the tonic chord. The class also discussed how there is usually a catchy part of the melody that makes that blues recognizable from just listening. After getting their thought processes going, I asked the students to write a one measure melodic idea on the tonic chord of Concert Bb that could be repeated as a theme. I gave the example of the melodic idea in “Now’s the Time” as inspiration. I then asked students to experiment on their instrument, using the notes of tonic chord as well as blue note patterns, passing tones or chromatic notes. I noticed it was helpful to ground the students with inspiration from the foundation of repertoire coupled with theoretical tools before experimenting, or improvising, and writing it down. In the video, I said,
Think of this as if you had improvised one measure of a blues and wrote it down, because that is all composing really is, right? It’s just thinking of something, improvising or if you have it in your mind, audiating it, and then writing it down. The purpose then, for this is if you repeat this idea a few times in the 12-bar blues progression it could be like some of the repetitive blues heads we learned like “Now’s the Time” or “C Jam Blues”.

Students had the opportunity to share their ideas with the group at the end of the activity. Upon reviewing the video, I saw that many students were hesitant to share, saying things like, “what if it’s bad?” My response attempted to emphasize that nothing could be a bad idea, but “it is good to hear what your friends are thinking of, and perhaps that will help you on your improvisations and compositions.” One student volunteered to play theirs even though “it was not going to be very good” and it ended up being a musical and stylistic blues motive that could be incorporated into an improvisation or composition. Once the first person shared, five more students to volunteered to perform their written melodic idea. I observed students supporting one another and even clapped after volunteers performed their melodic motive for the class before any feedback. It was an effective use of time to end the lesson sharing their composed melodic motives with one another.

**Video review three: Pivot lesson.** The third video selected for further study was a lesson that did not go as smoothly as others in the opinion of me, the teacher-researcher. This lesson functioned as a pivot lesson to the next big theme of rehearsals, the individual compositions. I wanted to review this video to reflect upon my actions
as a teacher in directing the flow and objectives of the lesson. This rehearsal was intended to finalize the group composition. As a class, the students performed the content written in the previous class. In the notation process, there were additional transposition issues that we had to clarify, which took time and attention away from finalizing and revising the blues head. After reviewing what we wrote last class, I asked, “what’s next?” A student suggests,

Maybe we could like, sort of play it again but with not the same notes, like it goes up the scale more so instead of [students sings first 4 measures that we wrote], we make it go to [student sings the first melodic theme but raised to fit in the sub-dominant chord], and then instead of in the first part it’s [student sings the last measure of the first phrase], we could raise that to higher notes too, like [student sings the last note as a fifth higher] to match it going up.”

I proceeded to facilitate transcribing what the student sang by comparing with the students what the content of the tonic chord and adapting the idea in the subdominant chord. The pianist also chimed in with the note names of the phrase. The first student chords one note idea that the pianist suggests, and asks to raise a certain note “to make it fit” to what this student was audiating. Other students began writing down these suggestions on their staff paper and trying to transpose for their instrument. Another student then suggests a variation on the end of that phrase by going “SO SO-DO” to suggest the end of the phrase. This student commented that they were inspired by “C Jam Blues” for this motive. To keep the process moving forward I sang an improvised idea of the last four measures to get the ball rolling for
student ideas, then a student that has not yet given a suggestion offers up an idea for a chromatic run. One student suggests we start on the off-beat of one to sound “more jazzy”. Another student suggested we go up chromatically instead of down. The three students came to a compromise by starting on the off-beat of one, going up, and starting on SO.

At this point, there were so many ideas from students that they were beginning to have difficulty compromising and deciding which idea will go in the final draft of our group composition. Students began playing and experimenting parts so it got chaotic to continue a discussion as a group. Students that did not have their idea picked were frustrated and maybe even did not like the class composition. It was clear that students were ready to begin their own compositions. This was where I stepped in by playing a couple of options that students suggested and allowed the students to informally vote or have their say to what goes in the final class composition. The students were able to finish the class composition with a strong and definite ending. We performed it a couple of times to solidify our composition and moved on to other rehearsal objectives. Attention throughout class was inconsistent due to the chatty nature of the class evidenced frustrations with transpositions, too many suggestions, and a function of attention the day before winter break.

Exit Survey

After students performed their post-test improvisation during the final rehearsal, I invited students to complete a researcher created exit survey. The questions I wrote for this survey were based upon the objectives of the learning plan
and research questions. I present the exit survey in Appendix D. The survey consisted of ten four-point Likert-type questions as well as two open-ended questions.

In Table 4.4, I present students’ prior experiences improvising and composing. The majority of students reported some or no experience both improvising and composing prior to this instructional unit. Students reported less experience composing than improvising.

Table 4.4

*Students’ Prior Experiences Improvising and Composing*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
<th>n(1)</th>
<th>n(2)</th>
<th>n(3)</th>
<th>n(4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>improvising?</td>
<td>2.06 (0.77)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>composing?</td>
<td>1.63 (0.89)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I present student responses reflecting on the content of their improvisations and compositions and the process of improvising and composing in Table 4.5. The majority of students reported “moderately similar” content between their improvisations and compositions; they reported the process of improvising and composing as “slightly similar.” Most students felt they made “a lot of progress” in their ability to improvise and compose in jazz over the course of 15 rehearsals.
Table 4.5

*Comparing the Process of Improvising and Composing*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do you compare…</th>
<th>Not at all similar (1)</th>
<th>Slightly similar (2)</th>
<th>Moderately similar (3)</th>
<th>Very similar (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>content</em> of your improvisations to <em>content</em> of your composition?</td>
<td>2.5 (0.63)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>improvisation process</em> with <em>composition process</em>?</td>
<td>2.5 (0.89)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How much progress do you feel you made in your ability to improvise and compose in jazz?</th>
<th>Little to no progress (1)</th>
<th>Some progress (2)</th>
<th>Moderate progress (3)</th>
<th>A lot of progress (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>M (SD)</em></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.44 (0.89)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Table 4.6, I report students’ perspectives and responses to comments about improvising and composing. Ninety-four percent of students reported being more willing to improvise in a jazz performance setting. All but three students indicated that their improvised solos were better after composing a blues melody. All students “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that learning how to compose a blues melody was valuable for learning to improvise, and they are more willing to compose.
Table 4.6

*Students’ Perspectives of Improvising and Composing*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree (1)</th>
<th>Disagree (2)</th>
<th>Agree (3)</th>
<th>Strongly Agree (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am now more willing to improvise a solo in a jazz band performance.</td>
<td>M (SD) 3.13 (0.72)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My improvised solos over a blues progression are better after composing a blues melody.</td>
<td>M (SD) 3.19 (0.91)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that learning how to compose a blues melody is valuable in learning how to improvise.</td>
<td>M (SD) 3.56 (0.51)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am now more motivated to improvise.</td>
<td>M (SD) 3.06 (0.57)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am now more motivated to compose.</td>
<td>M (SD) 3.44 (0.51)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were two opportunities for comments in the exit survey. One question asked which part of the unit was most helpful, and the other asked what part of the unit was most challenging for the students and their musicianship. Some students expressed their confusion, while others responded with parts of the unit they liked.
There were both positive as well as constructive critical comments. Ten out of sixteen students wrote about how composing music was the most helpful for their musicianship. Nine out of sixteen students found that improvising was the most challenging for them. Table 4.7 lists students’ comments in both open-ended questions.

Table 4.7

Responses to Open-Ended Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What part of the unit did you feel was most helpful for you and your musicianship?</th>
<th>Which part of the unit did you find most challenging for you and your musicianship?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 1</td>
<td>Composing our own blues head because it helped me get a better sense of how to arrange my improvised notes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 2</td>
<td>Composing because that is what I'll have to do if I become a music artist in a band.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 3</td>
<td>For me I think learning to improvise was really important. Just because I was out of my comfort zone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
<td>I felt that just really learning the separate blues jazz pieces was good enough because some of them were extremely interesting. Although composing was very helpful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 5</td>
<td>The improvising part because I have composed before and improvising is very hard so I develop as a musician doing it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 6</td>
<td>To me, I think composing my own melody was helpful because you really had to think about the chords, and what you were going to put where.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 7</td>
<td>The part I thought most was the tonal patterns. I didn't really understand chords that much but now I do from the patterns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 8</td>
<td>I felt that learning the chords of the blues progression helped a lot with improvising and composing. Now, my compositions have much more direction and structure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 9</td>
<td>Learning how to improvise because it was something that I wanted to do and it was fun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>What part of the unit did you feel was most helpful for you and your musicianship?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I really think composing a blues head was the most helpful for me. Because it gave you the chance to experiment with different notes and rhythms that came from your head and other melodies. I also think that composing helped with my improvising capability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I feel like the composing was really helpful for me because I learned about all of the different notes you can use and also have it sound good. Also, when we played all of those different blues, it showed me there are a ton of ways you can play/make a blues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I think that compositioning a piece helped me understand how to better improvise and understand jazz.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>I thought composing our own blues piece was the most helpful because I learned how to create a melody using the chords given which helped with my improvisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Composing because it's really fun and now I get to know how to compose jazz.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Improvising on a classic blues tune was important and helpful. Improvisation is very different from composition. If I compose something, I tend to write it down and play the same thing each time, but when I improvise, I might play a completely different tune each time. However, I also came up with songs by playing random notes in the same musical key, and when I hear something I like, I'll write it down. Improvisation was a great new experience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interpretation of Results**

**Interjudge Reliability**

I calculated interjudge reliability by correlating ratings between each judge. The average reliability of composite scores ranged from 0.59 to 0.73. According to Walters (2010), reliability coefficients above 0.70 are considered acceptable (p. 98). In
studies using similar rating scales (e.g., Snell, 2006; Stringham, 2010), higher coefficients were reported. This difference may be due to (a) the smaller sample size in this study, (b) the diverse backgrounds of judges, and (c) potential discrepancies between judges in interpreting the rating scales.

Overall, the greatest difference between judges’ ratings appeared in the “Harmonic Progression” dimensions of the rating scales. This weaker correlation may be due to judges’ individual interpretation of tonal content within the blues chords. For example, Student 9 wrote a dominant seventh tone within the sub-dominant chord, and a sixth chord tone in the dominant chord of the blues melody (see Figure 4.3). Based on the rating scale and a judge’s individual interpretation, a student received scores ranging from 0 to 4. When reviewing the results, I noticed that while I gave this student a 4 for these notes, the other judges did not. Upon reflection, I realized that because I had blue notes patterns, similar to those in Developing Musicianship through Improvisation (Azzara & Grunow, 2010) into my instruction, I instinctively gave this student credit for correct harmonic content. To improve reliability in this rating scale dimension, it may have been beneficial to share examples of blue note patterns with the judges.

Figure 4.3. Student 9 composition.
Another inconsistency emerged in the judges’ ratings of the composition “Harmonic Progression” dimension. For example, Student 2 wrote harmonic content indicative of the keyality of C Major, but wrote one flat in the key signature, implying the key of F Major (see Figure 4.4). Perhaps this student wrote a B-flat in the key signature because the extended use of the dominant seventh in the jazz tonic chord (C7). One judge rated the harmonic progression a 0, most likely viewing the melodic content within the content of an F major blues, as implied by the key signature. Conversely, the other of the two judges and I rated the harmonic progression a 5, viewing the content from the perspective of what the student what most likely audiating, C major with a dominant 7 (B-flat) blues.

Figure 4.4. Student 2 composition

As one of the three judges, I remained conscientious of the halo effect throughout the rating process. Walters (2010) defines the halo effect as, “The effect that knowledge of a person’s previous achievement has in biasing one’s assessment of current achievement” (p. 196). After randomizing recordings, I did not rate right away,
but allowed time to pass to increase anonymity. I tried to focus on the achievement based on the rating scales rather than attempting to match a student to the recording and my perception of the students’ intentions. Naturally, it was impossible to completely avoid the halo effect. As the action researcher, I naturally judged with a more informed understanding of the instructional unit and students’ capabilities.

**Improvisation and Composition Achievement**

Improvisation achievement means in the pre-test “Improvisation” dimension were 0.43 points lower than the next highest mean of a dimension in the pre-test. Achievement in this dimension increased [add mean difference] in the post-test. This improvement is consistent with Snell’s (2006) findings where the mean score from the “Improvisation-Improvisation dimension of the rating scale was noticeably lower than the other dimensions” (p.36). Snell suggested that students need more experience and comfort improvising before this rating can improve. The mean post-test improvisation ratings in my study confirmed Snell’s interpretation. Following 15 rehearsals of improvisation instruction and opportunities to practice improvising, students scored 0.79 points higher in the post-test “Improvisation” dimension.

Overall, students’ composite improvisation scores improved from pre-test to post-test ($MD=1.83$). Individual dimensions not predicting overall improvisation achievement is also consistent with Snell’s (2006) findings. Therefore, a slight decrease (-0.08) in the “Harmonic Progression” while the mean of every other dimension increased suggests that students thought more broadly about their audiation and improvisations than only the chord tones. Perhaps, my students felt more
comfortable during the post-test than the pre-test improvisation, and subsequently took risks attempting to incorporate higher level improvisation techniques. For example, one student scored an average of 2.66 on the “Harmonic Progression” on the post-test improvisation, but a mean score of 3.33 or above on every other dimension. While melody is not a discrete dimension of the rating scales I used, this student performed a cohesive and thoughtful improvisation, by starting with a personalized melody and then embellishment of their melody. The student inserted space appropriately and stylistically, including development of a sequenced motivic idea. While the student lacked tonal and harmonic accuracy, the student’s sense of rhythm, feel, and motivic development suggested that the student may have been audiating a more complex and musical solo.

These higher level improvisational techniques, recommended by Azzara and Grunow (2006), include but are not limited to playing with space, repeating motives, performing stylistic syncopated rhythms, and playing variations on the melody. Sometimes, risk-taking benefited the student’s overall score. For other students, scores suggested that they needed more time to practice the harmonic progression before their improvisation achievement could improve.

Rhythm had the highest mean rating in both the post-test improvisation ratings and composition ratings. Students’ rhythms notation in the blues melodies received a 4.44 mean rating and the smallest standard deviation of any dimension in the composition scale. Consistent with Coy’s (1989) prioritization of rhythmic accuracy when improvising in the middle school jazz band, my findings suggest that students
were more comfortable with performing and notation rhythmic ideas from their improvisations. Rhythm achievement is a crucial aspect of improvisation and composition (Coy, 1989). However, Kratus (1994) suggested that tonal and rhythm audiation function together in the composition process. In my study, I found that students more accurately notated rhythms than harmonic content in the context of the 12-bar blues. The mean ratings of the post-test improvisation align with Kratus’ suggestion that tonal and rhythmic audiation function together, but more so in the improvisation process. Similar to Stringham (2010), students struggled to write music notation during the improvising and composing process. Perhaps the students’ ability to accurately notate what they audiated and improvised affected their overall compositional achievement.

The composition scores were similar to pre-test improvisation scores ($MD=0.1$). This similarity suggests to me, as the action researcher, that composition achievement may improve with further instruction, potentially paralleling the margin of improvement of improvisation achievement. This interpretation is consistent with Stringham (2010), who suggested, “students may be more successful performing creative ideas than notating them” due to more time spent on performing rather than notating music during a rehearsal (p. 106).

**Journal Analysis**

Comments and reflections in my journal suggested the efficacy of the sequential learning plan I used for my instruction. In similar studies, researchers reported benefits of an appropriately sequenced curriculum (Coy, 1989; Leavell, 2006;
Building a foundation of repertoire. Before performing new blues tunes or improvising, I found that listening to notable recordings was an effective strategy to improve my students’ performance of style. Listening activities were fundamental for my students to grasp the blues style and experience the improvisation practices of famous jazz musicians. The value I placed on listening to jazz recordings is consistent with other researchers’ suggestions that listening is a key part to any successful jazz education program (Goodrich, 2005; West, 2011).

Researchers agree jazz is a vast genre of rich and varied repertoire (Ake, 2002; Azzara, 2015; Berliner, 1994; DeVeaux, 1991; Faulker & Becker, 2009; Ake, Garrett, & Goldmark, 2012). Therefore, it was beneficial to expose students to many different blues tunes and styles through both listening and performing. Building this foundation broadened their understanding of the blues as a jazz genre and ultimately influenced their improvisations and compositions.

During improvisation instruction, I found that singing was an effective teaching strategy for my students. Singing same and different tonal and rhythm patterns provided students with a working vocabulary for audiation-based improvisations. This finding was consistent with Stringham’s (2010) suggestion that, “(a) singing in tonal, rhythmic, and stylistic contexts and (b) performing on a music instrument in those same contexts may be mutually beneficial” (p. 111). West (2011)
also recommended call and response improvisation activities as an effective teaching practice in middle school jazz ensembles.

My students found performing patterns by ear challenging at first. Aural-based instruction was new to them, particularly in the jazz ensemble setting. As a reflective practitioner, it was helpful to supplement material with notation while also engaging them in aural-based activities. This is consistent with Coy’s (1989) recommendation of multisensory instruction techniques, including both verbal and symbolic association, to teach young students how to improvise. Many researchers, including myself, agree that an aural foundation is key for improvisation (Azzara, 2015; Shewan, 2002; Snell, 2006; Stringham, 2010; West, 2011). I also found it effective for students to individually maintain an idea sheet of rhythmic and harmonic patterns as a reference tool during class. With an eye towards composition, the idea sheet also provided an opportunity for students to prepare for the notational aspect of composing.

**Group composition.** Composing a blues melody as a class provided a time for powerful collaboration for both the students and for me, their teacher. My reflection of this class activity echoes Koops (2013), when the researcher stated, “collaborating on a composition with a group of people is a very viable, educational, and productive activity” (p 153). The process of group composition exposed strengths and weaknesses in students’ understanding of composing that as an action researcher, was informative. This opportunity for informal assessment was scaffold students towards composing their own blues melodies (Wiggins & Medvinsky, 2013). For example, students’ confusion transposing the composition to their instrument’s key immediately let me
know that transposition was new to them, and therefore should be taught. It was not originally an objective in the learning plan, but I observed, reflected, and adjusted my instruction to benefit the students’ learning experience. I also was able to explain, model, and guide students in proper score set-up and remind students of various notation rules present in the composition rating scales (see Appendix C).

My observations of students composing a blues together revealed that composing as a group prior to individuals composing was an effective sequence to properly scaffold student learning. Consistent with my results, West (2011), recommended teacher modelling as an important facet of middle school jazz performance and improvisation. Additionally, I found that modelling the compositional process was equally significant for students. This interpretation aligns with the sequence Shewan (2002) utilized and recommended when composing with school ensembles. Consistent with Koops (2013), interactions and peer feedback exchanged among my students encouraged creative musical thoughts and musicianship growth among all participants. Dyas’ (2006) findings support my findings that highlight the benefit of a social climate and a student-centered approach to instruction in jazz education programs.

**Individual compositions.** My field notes documenting students’ individual composing processes reveal to me that with proper scaffolding of repertoire, improvisation instruction, and practicing composing as a class, students were ready to improvise and compose their own blues melodies. Students’ comments such as, “it is really cool that we can get to write our own song”, supports giving students
opportunities in the curriculum to express and refine their own creative ideas as defined in the 2014 National Core Arts Standards (State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education [SEADAE], 2014). By encouraging students to take ownership of their creativity both improvising and composing, the students, the ensemble, and me, their teacher, were inspired. My interpretation aligns with Randles & Stringham (2013): “Engaging in composition…is a form of empowerment for both teachers and students, and encourages a dynamic and responsive stance toward curriculum and instruction” (p.28).

From my observations, students gathered ideas for their blues melody by (a) experimenting ideas using their tonal and rhythmic vocabulary (Azzara & Grunow, 2006, 2010); (b) drawing from a foundation of standard jazz repertoire (Berliner, 1994); and (c) audiating and improvising (Azzara, 2015, Shewan, 2002; Snell, 2006; Stringham, 2010). Szwed (2002) described how jazz’s most dedicated composers, such as Duke Ellington, achieved improvisational sounding jazz compositions throughout their careers. In fact, Szwed explained it was desirable for a composition to sound improvisational. Therefore, I encouraged my students to create their blues melodies so they sound improvisational and true to the genre.

Concurrent with Stringham’s (2010) findings, I observed students having difficulty notating their audiated and improvised ideas. To an extent, the act of hand writing notation held students back from composing their musical intentions, as evidenced by the higher post-test improvisation scores than composition scores. These findings reveal that students need more experience notating and transcribing patterns
and improvisations to ultimately improve their music literacy skills. My interpretations correspond with Stoltzfus (2005) in that students may find more ease in the converting their musical thoughts into symbols of music notation with further experience in audiation-based composing. Ideally, the more students compose, the more they may thoughtfully connect their aural musicianship to the page.

Video Analysis

**Video one: Instructional delivery.** After reviewing rehearsal videos, I found that during this rehearsal, I demonstrated a strong sense of musicianship, an understanding of the content, and pedagogy. The focus of this rehearsal was exposure to new blues repertoire, and infusing improvisation instruction using strategies from *Developing Musicianship through Improvisation* (Azzara & Grunow, 2006, 2010).

Following Shewan’s (2002) recommendation for group aural analysis when learning a tune, I effectively led my students in a discussion based on the content of the melody, “St. Louis Blues”. After listening to a recording and discussing the melodic content of this melody, I observed that my students performed the tune with a stronger sense of style.

Upon moving on to teaching improvisation basics, the goal of this lesson was to solidify student understanding of the 12-bar blues chord progression. First, I modelled to the students how to perform the root notes of the blues chord progression by singing. Teacher modelling is crucial to develop student understanding. This is consistent with Kratus (1994) who suggested that it may be more effective for teachers to model how to develop and vary a melodic line rather than have students compose a
song in C major in ABA form (p. 128). By the end of the class, I established a safe environment for students to take risks, and therefore students comfortably modelled for their peers a performance of the root notes with improvised rhythms. Consistent with my interpretation, West (2011) recommended the efficacy of modelling and peer interaction in the middle school jazz classroom.

My review of this rehearsal demonstrated to me the importance of student-centered instruction. Consistent with Dyas’ (2006) recommendation for a student centered approach to jazz instruction, my students preferred when I gave them options during improvisation instruction. For example, in this class we practiced performing the root notes of the chords in time, then tried improvising rhythms on the root notes. Even as I incorporated different elements to build more complex improvisation skills and challenged more highly achieving students, other students that did not feel as comfortable. Students were welcome to perform any of this skills prior learned, allowing them to self-regulate their own pacing of new skills. I found that giving students choice and allowing them to take ownership over their learning was an effective motivational method for students to improvise improvisation achievement.

**Video two: Group composition process.** The second video I chose to review presented me an in-depth look at a productive, collaborative, and musical rehearsal in the middle of the learning plan sequence. Prior to composing as a group, the students and I compared and contrasted the five blues tunes previously studied. This discussion reviewed stylistic features of standard blues tunes through aural analysis, a technique Shewan (2002) also found effective. After standard blues tunes were in students’
audiation, we began improvising and experimenting to create a catchy theme to begin
our class composition. Consistent with researchers’ description of the traditional social
learning structure in jazz, my students took turns sharing musical ideas while other
students expanded and embellished those concepts (Ake, 2002; Szwed; 2002). This
teacher-facilitated collaboration enabled students to thoughtfully engage in both
improvisation and composing together, learn from each another, and ultimately
develop their musicianship. When students engaged in the composition process
together, I informally observed improvement of their improvisation achievement and
confidence. Wig (1980) also suggested composition instruction helped to improve
improvisation achievement.

**Video three: Pivot lesson.** The third video I reviewed documented a lesson
that acted as a pivot from one major learning plan objective to the next big idea. As a
class, we finalized our group composition so students could start composing their own
blues melody the next class.

Consistent with Azzara (2015), students demonstrated an improved sense of writing
music notation once they were audiating, singing, and playing. Students made
suggestions for the composition by singing or performing on their instrument to share
with the class. Then, the class and I worked together to notate the idea and the students
would reflect and revise accordingly “to make it fit” to what the students audiated. My
observations of this rehearsal are concurrent with Azzara’s (2015) advice, “your
students will learn from the reflection necessary to develop a composition” (p. 195).
Students were suggesting almost too many musical ideas, revisions, or changes to find
a common ground among students to finalize the group composition. Although I was pleased with the engagement and musicality, I chose to take on more of a teacher-led role by the end of class to help finalize the composition. The influx of student input from everyone in class suggested to me that they were ready to begin composing their own blues melodies. Stringham (2010) found that composition achievement among students was significantly lower than improvisation and performance achievement. Considering Stringham’s (2010) interpretation that students lacked experience notating music, I believe the addition of a group composition to model composition contributed to a higher level of composition achievement among my students.

**Exit Survey**

The exit survey allowed me to gain students’ perspectives of the instructional unit. The survey was anonymous, which allowed students to be honest while responding. Since the majority of students reported some or no experience both improvising and composing prior to this unit, it was clear I stretched students’ comfort zones by asking them to improvise throughout the 15 rehearsals. A student’s open-ended response confirmed, “For me I think learning to improvise was really important. Just because I was out of my comfort zone.” This is consistent with Leavell (1996), who suggested students struggle to feel comfortable improvising at first and require improvisation instruction to build confidence. A lack of experience improvising and composing requires the teacher to thoughtfully scaffold material and contextualize these concepts and skills in an approachable manner for students (Leavell, 2006). By the end of the instructional unit, 94% of students were more willing to improvise in a
jazz performance setting and 100% of students “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they were more willing to compose. Students’ perceptions of increased motivation to improvise and compose indicate that my method and sequence of instruction was effective in increasing their comfort level when engaging in these creative processes. Most students also felt they made “a lot of progress” in their ability to improvise and compose in jazz over the course of the 15 rehearsals, which further confirms the lesson sequence efficacy.

Responses from the open-ended questions such as, “Improvising [was] really hard just because there was no time to prepare and you had to follow the progression” suggest that some students thought of improvisation as a different process from composition. Improvisation challenged students to create in real time, while composition allowed students to revise their ideas. Students’ perceptions of their increased comfort level improvising is due in part to (a) developing a working harmonic and tonal vocabulary, (b) gaining more experience engaging in the processes (Snell, 2006), and (c) participating in a positive environment where mistakes are considered learning experiences (Azzara, 2002; Goodrich, 2005; Stringham, 2010). Additionally, all but three students indicated that their improvised solos were better after composing a blues melody. Some students perceived improvising and composing as similar and mutually beneficial. For instance, one student wrote,

I really think composing a blues head was the most helpful for me. Because it gave you the chance to experiment with different notes and rhythms that came
from your head and other melodies. I also think that composing helped with my improvising capability.

Stringham (2010) reported, “several [students] felt that composition was more challenging; it requires organizing and codifying ideas” (p. 92). My students were also challenged by composing, but some of my students preferred having the time to reflect and revise their work over improvising in the moment. For instance, this student wrote, “I feel like the composing was really helpful for me because I learned about all of the different notes you can use and also have it sound good.”

As their teacher, I regarded these responses as an indication that improvisation and composition instruction go together in the curriculum to effectively develop student musicianship and literacy. My interpretation aligns with many researchers who suggest the close connection between the process of improvisation and composition, as well as the benefits of incorporating these activities into the curriculum (Azzara, 2015; Lehmann, Sloboda, & Wood, 2007; Palmer & Hibbard, 2015; Szwed, 2002; Stringham, 2010; Wig, 1980).

It was my goal to encourage my students to realize the close connection between improvisation and composition. Similar to Stringham’s (2010) findings, the majority (75%) of my students slightly or moderately found similarities between improvising and composing according to the exit survey. Although students perceived improvising as the most challenging aspect of the unit, their improvisation scores indicated (+15.8%) the improvisation and composition lessons improved their improvisation achievement.
Within the context of a middle school jazz band, the standard 12-bar blues was an ideal progression for students to begin composing and improvising. This progression allowed my students and I to engage in traditional jazz practices using a form that (a) incorporates only three harmonic functions (tonic, sub-dominant, and dominant), (b) provides a vast repertoire of standard melodies, and (c) is deeply rooted foundation in jazz history (Ake, 2002; Berliner, 1994; Faulker & Becker, 2009; Goodrich, 2005; West, 2011). Using the blues, I focused on developing a legitimate jazz environment where young musicians improvised, composed, collaborated, and ultimately had the opportunity to be creative together. Dyas (2006), Goodrich (2005), Mantie (2007), and Leavell (1996) also emphasized the value of developing a jazz culture and authentic creative practices within the school jazz ensemble.
Chapter 5

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Summary

The purpose of this action research was to document the musical achievement of students learning to compose and improvise in a middle school jazz band. Research questions guiding this study were: (1) What effect does learning to compose a blues melody have on students’ improvisation achievement? (2) In what ways do learning to compose a blues melody influence student perspective of improvising? and (3) What is the relationship between students’ compositional and improvisational achievement in a middle school jazz band?

Design

Using an action research perspective within this case study, I obtained quantitative and qualitative data to gain a detailed understanding of my instruction in a natural rehearsal setting. Rehearsals for this middle school jazz band are before school for 45 minutes on Mondays, Wednesdays, and alternating Fridays. This study occurred during the first 15 to 20 minutes of 15 regularly scheduled jazz band rehearsals between November 2015 and January 2016.

At the beginning of the six-week instructional unit, I administered a pre-test documenting initial student achievement improvising over a Bb blues progression.
Throughout 15 rehearsals, I wrote field notes to document my reflections and reactions while implementing the teacher-researcher created learning plan. The unit included (a) building a foundational knowledge of blues repertoire, (b) improvisation instruction, and (c) composition instruction as a collaborative experience, and then as individuals. I video recorded every rehearsal for review and chose three to analyze. At the end of the six weeks, students recorded a post-test improvisation in the same context of a Bb blues progression and submitted an original blues composition. I invited students to complete an exit survey consisting of ten questions with a four-point Likert-type scale as well as two open-ended questions. I used the exit survey to gain their perspective of the process and detail their experiences improvising and composing a blues melody.

Analysis

Using field notes, video recordings of rehearsals, and an exit survey, I documented student perceptions of the creative artistic process. I analyzed this data, along with quantitative data from the pre- and post-test ratings to draw conclusions. This process has influenced and improved my teaching practice.

Three judges rated the recorded pre- and post-test improvisations and students’ compositions using four rating scales each, including two continuous dimension rating scales and two additive dimension rating scales (Stringham, 2010). Using scores from all three judges, I calculated mean, standard deviation, and mean difference for each rating scale dimension. Average composite score interjudge correlation coefficients ranged from 0.59 to 0.73.
I wrote 15 typed pages of field notes documenting my observations during class that provided a space for preliminary interpretations (Mertler, 2006). Additionally, I selected three particularly informative and pivotal lessons videos to critically analyze my teaching. One video exemplified my instructional delivery, one video demonstrated the student-guided composition and improvisation process, and one video was a transition lesson between two major concepts. I analyzed the data collected from the exit survey to gather themes of student perspective improvising and composing the blues.

**Results and Interpretation**

Studies using similar rating scales (e.g., Snell, 2006; Stringham, 2010), reported higher coefficients than this study, however, the lower coefficients may be due to (a) the smaller sample size in this study ($N=16$), (b) the diverse musical backgrounds of judges, and (c) potential discrepancies between judges interpreting the rating scales.

Students’ improvisation achievement improved by 9.2% from pre-test to post-test. All mean scores except in one dimension (“Harmonic Progression”) increased by $>0.50$ points. In the post-test composition, students scored highest in the “Rhythm” dimension with a mean score of 4.44 and the smallest standard deviation of any dimension. This is consistent with Coy’s (1989) findings indicating that rhythm achievement is an essential aspect of improvisation and composition achievement. The students’ composition scores more closely aligned with their pre-test improvisation
scores ($MD = 0.1$). Similar to Snell (2006), more experience improvising and composing may improve composition achievement.

Results from my journal include reflections of my teaching practices as well as comments about the efficacy of lesson activities. I noted the importance of scaffolding students’ understanding of the blues by listening to recordings and performing standard blues repertoire. In similar studies, researchers reported benefits of an appropriately sequenced curriculum (Coy, 1989; Leavell, 2006; Shewan, 2002; Snell, 2006; Stringham 2010). During improvisation instruction, students singing and chanting patterns to build vocabulary for audiation-based improvisations. Researchers, including myself, agree that an aural foundation is key for improvisation (Azzara, 2015; Shewan, 2002; Snell, 2006; Stringham, 2010; West, 2011). After students performed the patterns by ear successfully, students notated tonal, blue note, and rhythm patterns on an idea sheet as a strategy to build readiness for composition. Exposure to repertoire and building a music vocabulary was fundamental to students’ readiness to compose.

The group collaboration on a blues melody was powerful; a finding consistent with Shewan (2002). The group composition allowed for a rich social learning environment, and productive to the overarching goals of the learning plan. Dyas’ (2006) findings support my results that highlight the benefit of a social climate and a student-centered approach to instruction in jazz education programs. By the end of this portion of the unit, students improvised and shared many ideas, which indicated to me that students were ready to write their own blues heads.
Composing blues melodies individually was a challenging task for students. I noted students benefited from initially brainstorming and experimenting with rhythms, notes, melodic patterns, themes, motives, and hooks for their blues. Students struggled the most when trying to accurately document their audiated or improvised musical ideas; a finding Stringham (2010) also documented. Consistent with Azzara (2015), students demonstrated an improved sense of writing music notation once they were audiating, singing, and playing. Students were challenged by composing but overall, students took ownership in their work and willingly engaged in the process.

As an action researcher, I chose to review videos of successful rehearsals as well as rehearsals that necessitated reflection and revision. Whether the students learned from observations during listening activities, through teacher modelled examples, or from peer interactions, I noticed that learning by example was a powerful theme throughout the process. This finding is consistent with West (2011) who suggested the efficacy of modelling and peer interaction in the middle school jazz classroom. Giving students options for improvising effectively differentiated instruction and allowed students to create their own meaning of the objectives in their own time.

Students had the opportunity to share their ideas with the group, which I found to be an effective use of time to end the lesson sharing their composed melodic motives with one another. I reviewed the videos to reflect upon my actions as a teacher in directing the flow and objectives of the lesson. Rehearsals shifted from student-led to teacher-led as students navigated the composing process. There were
times I needed to facilitate transcribing, transposing, or organizing thoughts during the group composition. Other times, it was important that I stepped back and allowed students to experiment, revise, and share with one another without teacher interference. This allowed time to develop a more collaborative jazz culture in the classroom, which is emphasized by jazz educators (Dyas, 2006; Goodrich, 2005; Mantie, 2007; Leavell, 1996).

Upon completing the unit, I invited students to complete a researcher created exit survey to discover student perspective from the experience. Overall, most students reported some or no experience both improvising and composing prior to this unit. Most students felt they made “a lot of progress” in their ability to improvise and compose in jazz and 94% of students reported being more willing to improvise in a jazz performance setting. Student feedback was positive considering all but three students indicated that their improvised solos were better after composing a blues melody. Ten of sixteen of students wrote in the open-ended portion of the survey about how composing music was the most helpful for their musicianship while nine out of sixteen students found that improvising was the most challenging for them. Students’ perceptions of their increased comfort level improvising is due in part to (a) developing a harmonic and tonal vocabulary, (b) gaining more experience engaging in the processes (Snell, 2006), and (c) participating in a positive environment where mistakes are learning opportunities (Azzara, 2002; Goodrich, 2005; Stringham, 2010).
Conclusions

Conclusions drawn from this research are unique to my teaching practices in my current classroom setting; they are therefore not generalizable beyond this study. Some may find my conclusions transferrable to similar teaching and learning environments.

Participating in audiation-based group composition and individual composition activities, allowed students to improve their improvisation achievement. By establishing readiness and sequencing instruction, composing in this middle school jazz band was an effective means for these students to draw connections between the processes of composing and improvising. While composing a blues melody, students experimented with their musical vocabulary, actualized their musical thoughts, and revised accordingly. This revision process helped students critically reflect on and make changes to their original ideas while developing a musical product.

Learning to compose a blues melody also helped students improve their ability to improvise. They perceived that writing down their musical ideas was informative, allowing them to revise and transfer this knowledge to future improvisations. With more experience both improvising and composing, students may further develop more complex and musically rich products.

Composition and improvisation are mutually beneficial processes for developing musical literacy. Students benefit from improvisation and composition instruction separately, but they may make more meaningful connections when experiencing the processes together. By improvising, organizing, and refining their
creative work, students may improve their achievement in the closely related processes of improvisation and composition; this may then help develop stronger overall musicianship skills.

**Implications for Music Education**

By developing and enacting this action research study, I critically analyzed my teaching. These findings directly influenced my instruction in this unique educational setting. Conclusions from this research improved the curriculum for my middle school jazz band. Additionally, this study contributed to the body of literature relating to composition and improvisation, as called for in the National Core Arts Standards (SEADAE, 2014). The following implications may be transferable to other music educators.

Researchers agree that middle school jazz educators can develop a legitimate jazz culture by grounding the curriculum in historically-informed jazz practices, repertoire, and focus on improvisation (Ake, 2002; Berliner, 1994; Faulker & Becker, 2009; Mantie, 2007). One way to begin teaching students to improvise is to establish objectives for each repetition. During goal-oriented improvisation, students can focus on developing specific improvisation techniques. For example, students may improvise over the 12-bar blues changes purposefully trying to incorporate space within their improvisation. Other goals could include varying the melody, creating a personalized theme, or embellishing through sequences. The same scaffolding of concepts can be transferred to composition instruction in jazz because jazz compositions are traditionally intended to sound improvised (Szwed, 2002).
To better facilitate the creative process, it is important that teachers establish a positive environment where students feel safe to try new ideas, take risks, and make mistakes. A safe collaborative learning space is first based on positive teacher-student connections and mutual respect. When students make mistakes improvising and composing, the teacher can inspire students to treat these mistakes as an opportunity to learn and improve. The teacher may use positive and supportive feedback, as well as encourage students to ask clarifying questions. During lesson activities, the teacher may model risk-taking of a new concept and motivate students to model risk-taking for each other. Classrooms that incorporate these qualities create an environment essential for students to feel comfortable improvising, collaborating, and sharing their creative ideas.

Finally, teachers may consider incorporating improvising and composing instruction in the same contexts. Students in my study found that improvising and composing a blues melody were mutually beneficial practices to develop audiation and overall musicianship skills. Consistent with the National Core Arts Standards’ (SEADAE, 2014) artistic processes and Gordon’s (2012) musical vocabularies, generating and conceptualizing artistic works (audiation), organizing and developing artistic ideas and work (improvisation), and refining and completing artistic works (composing) were useful guidelines for incorporating improvisation, composition, and standards-based instruction into this study’s curriculum. Researchers reported that composition and improvisation continue to lack in instrumental music curriculums in the United States (Azzara, 1993, 2015; Strand, 2006; Stringham, 2010). However,
curriculums and instruction of composition and improvisation cultivate higher order thinking skills that are placed at the top of the revised Bloom’s Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Based on my findings and experiences, I encourage educators to prioritize improvisation and composition in their music education curriculum.

In context of a middle school jazz band, teachers may strengthen and legitimize their programs by incorporating elements of traditional jazz culture, standard repertoire, and improvisation practices (Ake, 2002; Berliner, 1994; Faulker & Becker, 2009; Goodrich, 2005). Many jazz education curricula deprive students of improvisation instruction by only performing pre-written solos (Grunow, 2005; Mantie, 2007; Stringham, 2010). With a focus on building a foundation of standard jazz repertoire in a collaborative and student-centered culture, students can experience and contextualize the genre and improvisational practices in a meaningful way (Berliner, 1994; Mantie, 2007). This study allowed me to consider my jazz curriculum and teaching practices in the middle school jazz band. Ultimately, I improved my instruction’s alignment with authentic jazz music making and putting concepts into the context of a jazz culture, particularly by connecting jazz improvisation and composition within the curriculum. Composing is an authentic practice that well-known jazz musicians participate in and one that is not limited to only composers, but rather active performing musicians (Szwed, 2002). By inviting students to compose their own blues heads, students were empowered to create their own jazz music, basing on the styles of standard blues repertoire, and then making it their own.
Suggestions for Future Research

Future researchers should consider judge selection criteria to ensure reliability when rating student achievement. Due to my small sample size, I decided not to share exemplars with the judges. However, with a larger sample size, I recommend establishing benchmarks for judges to ensure reliable ratings. Exemplars would have likely improved correlation coefficients among judges’ ratings. In addition to recording pre- and post-test improvisations, I recommend future researchers consider incorporating pre- and post-test composition measures to gain additional information on how the learning plan influenced composition achievement. Teachers and researchers may consider having students record an improvisation of one blues chorus and transcribe their improvisation as a starting point for composition. This process may provide a stronger foundation from which students can reflect and revise. To navigate student difficulties with writing notation, I recommend incorporating more notation-specific composition instruction into the learning plan to better prepare students to accurately notate their improvisations. If possible, I recommend that future researchers consider using notation software for students to notate and revise their compositions. By incorporating notational software into instruction, students also have more opportunities for peer sharing and feedback.

I encourage researchers to replicate and adjust this action research within the context of their middle school jazz bands. I suggest teacher-researchers create, teach, reflect on, and research improvisation and composition instructional units in middle and high school concert bands, high school and collegiate jazz bands, and jazz combo
settings. While my study focused on the standard blues progression, I recommend future researchers employ these teaching practices using progressions, such as “I Got Rhythm” changes or other circle of fifths progressions (Berliner, 1994, p.79).

More research is necessary to further support the conclusions I drew from this action research study. The goal of this study was to gain a detailed view of my teaching practices and therefore improve my instruction of jazz band. My instruction included, but was not limited to, repertoire, improvisation, and collaboration. By inviting students to compose their own blues melodies, students engaged with the jazz genre and its traditions. Not only are improvisation and composition important parts of authentic jazz music making, these two creative processes are emphasized in the 2014 National Core Arts Standards (SEADAE, 2014) and essential to a comprehensive music education. In conclusion, music educators and researchers should continue to consider composition and improvisation as essential components of standards-based, student-centered music instruction.
REFERENCES


http://hdl.handle.net/1802/14613.


Appendix A

PRE-TEST RATING SCALES: IMPROVISATION

**Harmonic Progression (continuous dimension, 0–5)**

The student:

1. performs first and/or last notes correctly.
2. performs all patterns in one function correctly (tonic reference).
3. performs all patterns in one function (tonic) correctly and some patterns in one other function correctly.
4. performs all patterns in two functions correctly.
5. performs patterns in tonic, dominant, and subdominant functions correctly.

**Rhythm (continuous dimension, 0–5)**

The student:

1. performs individual beats without a sense of the meter.
2. demonstrates a rhythmic feeling of the meter throughout.
3. employs various contrasting rhythm patterns without a sense of rhythmic motivic development.
4. begins to develop and relate rhythmic ideas in some phrases.
5. establishes a cohesive solo rhythmically – develops rhythmic motives in the context of the overall form.
Expressive (additive dimension, 0–5)

The student:

1 demonstrates a sense of musical interaction (e.g., melodic dialogue alone, or musical conversation among performers).

1 demonstrates an understanding of dynamics.

1 demonstrates an understanding of musical style and characteristic tone quality.

1 demonstrates a sense of appropriate articulation.

1 demonstrates an understanding of appropriate phrasing.

Improvisation (additive dimension, 0–5)

1 performs a variety of related ideas and reuses material in the context of the overall form (thus the performance contains elements of unity and variety).

1 demonstrates motivic development through tonal and rhythm sequences.

1 demonstrates effective use of silence.

1 demonstrates an understanding of tension and release through resolution of notes in the context of the harmonic progression.

1 embellishes notes and performs variations of themes.
Appendix B

ADAPTED UNDERSTANDING BY DESIGN CURRICULUM MODEL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Desired Results</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content Standards</td>
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</table>
| National Core Arts Standards  
Create: Traditional and Emerging Ensemble Strand  
Anchor Standard #1 – Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work  
· MU:Cr1.1.E.8a Compose and improvise ideas for melodies and rhythmic passages based on characteristic(s) of music or text(s) studied in rehearsal.  
Anchor Standard #2 – Organize and develop artistic ideas and work  
· MU:Cr2.1.E.8a Select and develop draft melodies and rhythmic passages that demonstrate understanding of characteristic(s) of music or text(s) studied in rehearsal.  
· MU:Cr2.1.E.8b Preserve draft compositions and improvisations through standard notation and audio recording.  
Anchor Standard #3 – Refine and complete artistic work  
· MU:Cr3.1.E.8a Evaluate and refine draft compositions and improvisations based on knowledge, skill, and collaboratively-developed criteria. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enduring Understandings</th>
<th>Essential Questions</th>
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| 1. The creative ideas, concepts, and feelings that influence musicians’ work emerge from a variety of sources. (AS#1)  
a. The 12-bar blues is a standard progression in jazz, rock, and pop.  
2. Musicians’ creative choices are influenced by their expertise, context, and expressive intent. (AS#2)  
a. Improvising and composing occurs within a context; it requires a knowledge of tunes, tonal and rhythm patterns, and style.  
3. Musicians evaluate, and refine their work through openness to new ideas, persistence, and the application of appropriate criteria. (AS#3)  
a. Jazz is a social music grounded in collaboration and mentoring. | 1. How do musicians generate creative ideas?  
2. How do musicians make creative decisions?  
a. How does tonal vocabulary of I7, IV7, & V7 harmonic structures influence your improvisations and composition?  
b. How does swung and straight rhythm styles and vocabulary influence your improvisations and composition?  
3. How do musicians improve the quality of their creative work?  
a. What makes an effective solo?  
b. What makes an effective composition?  
c. How can peer-feedback and self-reflection refine artistic ideas? |
Assessment Evidence

1. Pre-Test/Post-Test: Rating Scales (Stringham, 2010) measure improvisation on blues progression.

Learning Plan

1. Engaging in Five Vocabularies (Gordon, 2012)
   a. **Listen/Audiate/Perform**
      i. 10 noteworthy blues tunes (Ake, 2002; Berliner, 1994; Szwed, 2002; McDonel, 2015)
         - W.C. Handy: “St. Louis Blues” (1914, standard)
         - Duke Ellington: “C Jam Blues” (1942, standard)
         - Charlie Parker: “Now’s the Time” (1945, standard)
         - Lowell Fulson: “Three O’Clock Blues” (1946, rhythm & blues)
         - Bobby Troup: “Route 66” (1946, rhythm & blues)
         - Thelonious Monk: “Blue Monk” (1954, standard)
         - Clifford Brown: “Sandu” (1955, standard)
         - Sonny Rollins: “Tenor Madness” (1956, standard)
         - John Coltrane: “Mr. P.C.” (1959, minor blues)
         - Miles Davis: “All Blues” (1959, triple meter)
         Blues tunes extended:
         - “Things Ain’t What They Used to Be” (1942, standard)
         - “Straight No Chaser” (1951, standard)
         - “Sonnymoon for Two” (1957, standard)
         - “Freddie Freeloader” (1959, cool jazz)
         - “Bessie’s Blues” (1964, medium-up)
   b. **Improvise** (Azzara, 2015; Azzara & Grunow, 2010, Coy, 1989)
      - Tonal patterns (I7, IV7, V7), rhythm patterns (duple, swung)
      - Series of tonal patterns (4-bar phrases of blues)
      - Chord roots and voice leading in blues progression
      - Chord tones on macrobeat
      - Motivic theme/variation of tune based on harmonies in blues progression
   c. **Compose** (Azzara, 2015; Koops, 2013; Shewan, 2002; Stringham, 2010)
      - Tonal patterns (I7, IV7, V7), rhythm patterns (duple, swung)
      - Series of tonal patterns (4-bar phrases of blues)
      - Chord tones on macrobeat
      - Motivic theme/variation of tune

   i. Large group writing sequence: discuss, improvise, write, revise, rehearse, perform
   ii. Individual writing sequence: improvise, write, revise, share, revise, rehearse, perform
Rehearsal Plan Sequence

**Rehearsals 1 - 6: Building Knowledge of Repertoire and Improvisation Skills**

1. Pre-Test: Perform and record improvisations over a simple blues progression in Bb
2. Listen, audiate, perform, and improvise to “St. Louis Blues” following DMTI model
   a. Discuss and aurally analyze content of this standard tune (Shewan, 2002)
3. Listen, audiate, perform, and improvise to “Three O’Clock Blues”
   a. Examine traditional lyrical form (McDonel, 2015)
4. Listen, audiate, perform, and improvise to “Now’s the Time”
   a. Think-Pair-Share aural analysis of tune content: repetition of ideas
5. Listen, audiate, perform and improvise to “Blue Monk”
   a. Investigate use of chromatics and be-bop style
6. Listen, audiate, perform and improvise to “All Blues”
   a. Discuss use of triple meter with the bassline riff

**Rehearsals 7 - 11: Group Composition**

7. Gathering ideas/Exploration of themes (Coy, 1989)
   a. Discuss and decide on tonality and keyality, write tonal patterns (I, IV, V7)
   b. Discuss and decide on duple or triple meter, write series of rhythm patterns
   c. Discuss storytelling aspect of the blues
   d. Improvise, notate and share improvised motivic ideas
8. Organize and begin writing
   a. Class collaboration of blues head: style, feel, intro/outro
   b. Notate all ideas and progress of composition
9. Refine
   a. Discuss style differences within the blues genre
   b. Transition discussion to reflection on group composition
   c. Refine class blues head - include lyrics, if desired
10. Finalize
    a. Compare/contrast with class composition.
    b. Finale revisions of blues head
    c. Record class composition

**Rehearsals 12 – 15: Individual Compositions**

11. Gathering ideas/Exploration of themes (Coy, 1989)
    a. Discuss and decide on tonality and keyality, write tonal patterns (I, IV, V7)
    b. Discuss and decide on duple or triple meter, write series of rhythm patterns
    c. Improvise and notate motif ideas
12. Organize and begin writing
    a. Discuss composition tactics: repetition, silence, unity, etc.
    b. Write blues head ideas: think style, feel, intro/outro
    c. Notate progress
13. Refine
    a. Transition discussion to reflection on individual compositions
    b. Students share compositions in class and get peer-feedback
14. Finalize
    a. Finalize notation of blues head - individual reflection of process
15. Post-Test: Perform and record improvisations over a simple blues progression in Bb
    a. Complete Exit Survey
Appendix C

POST-TEST RATING SCALES: IMPROVISATION

Harmonic Progression (continuous dimension, 0–5)

The student:

1. performs first and/or last notes correctly.

2. performs all patterns in one function correctly (tonic reference).

3. performs all patterns in one function (tonic) correctly and some patterns in one other function correctly.

4. performs all patterns in two functions correctly.

5. performs patterns in tonic, dominant, and subdominant functions correctly.

Rhythm (continuous dimension, 0–5)

The student:

1. performs individual beats without a sense of the meter.

2. demonstrates a rhythmic feeling of the meter throughout.

3. employs various contrasting rhythm patterns without a sense of rhythmic motivic development.

4. begins to develop and relate rhythmic ideas in some phrases.

5. establishes a cohesive solo rhythmically – develops rhythmic motives in the context of the overall form.
Expressive (additive dimension, 0–5)

The student:

1. demonstrates a sense of musical interaction (e.g., melodic dialogue alone, or musical conversation among performers).
2. demonstrates an understanding of dynamics.
3. demonstrates an understanding of musical style and characteristic tone quality.
4. demonstrates a sense of appropriate articulation.
5. demonstrates an understanding of appropriate phrasing.

Improvisation (additive dimension, 0–5)

1. performs a variety of related ideas and reuses material in the context of the overall form (thus the performance contains elements of unity and variety).
2. demonstrates motivic development through tonal and rhythm sequences.
3. demonstrates effective use of silence.
4. demonstrates an understanding of tension and release through resolution of notes in the context of the harmonic progression.
5. embellishes notes and performs variations of themes.
POST-TEST RATING SCALES: COMPOSITION

Harmonic Progression (continuous dimension, 0–5)

The student:

1. notates first and/or last notes correctly.

2. notates all patterns in one function correctly (tonic reference).

3. notates all patterns in one function (tonic) correctly and some patterns in one other function correctly.

4. notates all patterns in two functions correctly.

5. notates patterns in tonic, dominant, and subdominant functions correctly.

Rhythm (continuous dimension, 0–5)

The student:

1. notates a variety of notes without a sense of meter.

2. notates macrobeats and other notes; often inconsistent with meter.

3. notates macrobeats; often inconsistent with meter.

4. notates macrobeats with a general sense of meter; occasional inconsistencies.

5. notates macrobeats with strong sense of meter.
Expressive (additive dimension, 0–5)

The student:

1 indicates an appropriate measure signature.

1 indicates the appropriate clef.

1 demonstrates an understanding of appropriate stem directions.

1 demonstrates understanding of notational conventions (e.g. beat spacing, articulations)

1 demonstrates an understanding of appropriate phrasing.

Composition (additive dimension, 0–5)

The student:

1 notates a variety of related ideas and reuses material in the context of the overall form (thus the composition contains elements of unity and variety).

1 demonstrates motivic development through tonal and rhythm sequences.

1 demonstrates effective use of silence.

1 demonstrates an understanding of tension and release through resolution of notes in the context of the harmonic progression.

1 embellishes notes and composes variations of themes.
Appendix D

EXIT SURVEY

1. What was your experience improvising before this Improvisation/Composition Unit?

   no experience --- some experience --- moderate experience --- a lot of experience

2. What was your experience composing before this Improvisation/Composition Unit?

   no experience --- some experience --- moderate experience --- a lot of experience

3. How much improvement do you feel you made in your ability to improvise and compose in jazz?

   little to no progress --- some progress --- moderate progress --- a lot of progress

4. How do you compare the content of your improvisations to the content of your composition?

   not at all similar -- slightly similar --- moderately similar --- very similar

5. How do you compare the improvisation process with the composition process?

   not at all similar -- slightly similar --- moderately similar --- very similar

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

6. I am now more willing to improvise a solo in a jazz band performance.

   Strongly disagree -- Disagree -- Agree -- Strongly agree

7. My improvised solos over a blues progression are better after composing a blues melody.
8. I believe that learning how to compose a blues melody is valuable in learning how to improvise.

Strongly disagree -- Disagree -- Agree -- Strongly agree

9. I am now more motivated to improvise.

Strongly disagree -- Disagree -- Agree -- Strongly agree

10. I am now more motivated to compose.

Strongly disagree -- Disagree -- Agree -- Strongly agree

Open-Ended Questions

What part of the unit did you feel was most helpful for you and your musicianship?
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

Which part of the unit did you find most challenging for you and your musicianship?
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
Appendix E

STUDENT BLUES COMPOSITIONS

Student 1

Student 2
Student 5

\[ I \quad I \quad I \quad I \]

\[ IV \quad IV \quad I \quad I \]

Student 6

\[ I \quad I \quad I \quad I \quad IV \]

\[ IV \quad I \quad I \quad IV \]

\[ IV \quad I \quad I \quad IV \]
Student 9

Student 10
Student 13
Appendix F

IRB EXEMPTION LETTER

DATE: November 3, 2015

TO: Jenna Knaster
FROM: University of Delaware IRB

STUDY TITLE: [818438-1] Middle School Jazz Band Students' Experiences in Composing and Improvising

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: November 3, 2015

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # (1)

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research study. The University of Delaware IRB has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

We will put a copy of this correspondence on file in our office. Please remember to notify us if you make any substantial changes to the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Nicole Farnese-McFarlane at (302) 831-1119 or nicolefm@udel.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.
APPENDIX G

VERBAL RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Hello everyone. I would like to talk to you about participating in my research study for my Master’s thesis. This is a study about composing and improvising in middle school jazz band. You're eligible to be a part of this study because you are all members of Sanford Middle School’s Seventh and Eighth grade Jazz Band.

Over the next six weeks, we will be improvising and composing melodies over a blues progression. If you choose to participate, I would like to video record rehearsals, audio record each participant improvising a melody, and collect an original composition of a blues head from each participant. I will use the information to document achievement in improvising and composing and the relationship between the two skill sets. This will take place over the next six weeks during rehearsal.

The study is completely voluntary; however, we are still doing this project as part of class regardless of your choice to participate in the study. If you'd like to participate, you have to sign a form saying you are willing to participate, and your parents have to sign a form to consent form also allowing your participation.

Do you have any questions for me at this time?

Thank you so much.
APPENDIX H

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Project: Middle School Jazz Band Students’ Experiences in Composing and Improvising

Principal Investigator: Jenna Knaster

Your child is being invited to participate in a research study. This consent form tells you about the study including its purpose, what you will be asked to do if you decide to take part, and the risks and benefits of being in the study. Please read the information below and ask me any questions you may have before you decide whether you agree to participate.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

The purpose of this study is to document the musical achievement of students learning to write and improvise music in a middle school jazz band. As a teacher-researcher, the study will inform my teaching practices and may also affect change in the middle school jazz band curriculum. The study’s findings will be reported in my Master’s thesis, as well as add to the body of literature relating to composition and improvisation as 21st Century music education research.

Your child will be one of approximately 16 participants in this study. Your child is being asked to participate because he or she is a member of the Seventh and Eighth Grade Jazz Band at Sanford School.

WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?

As participant of this study, your child will be asked to engage in jazz band rehearsals as they normally do. This study will take place over six weeks during regular rehearsal time. At the beginning of the six weeks, I will record your child improvising a melody over one chorus of a Bb blues progression during class. Following the six weeks, I will record your child to improvise a melody over one chorus of a Bb blues progression again, as well as ask him/her to turn in a final draft of a blues melody your child wrote during the study. Your child will take a short questionnaire about his/her experiences after the six week study is completed during class.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

The research team does not expect that participation in this study will expose your child to any risks different from those he/she would encounter in daily life.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS?

As a participant, your child will be more familiar with the process of writing and improvising music. I hope your child will learn new things during this study that will improve his/her overall musicianship and understanding of the jazz style.

The knowledge gained from this study may also contribute to our understanding of the relationship between writing and improvising music in instrumental music education.
APPENDIX I

STUDENT ASSENT FORM

ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Project: Middle School Jazz Band Students’ Experiences in Composing and Improvising

Investigator: Jenna Knaster

I am asking you to be part of a research study. This form tells you what the study is about, what you will be asked to do if you want to be in the study, and the possible bad and good things about this study. Please read this paper and ask us any questions you have.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

I am interested in learning more about how the process of writing music affects students’ ability to improvise in jazz band.

The purpose of the study is to document students’ musical improvisations and compositions, consider students’ thoughts about improvising, and investigate how writing and improvising music are related.

I am asking you if you want to be a part of the study because I want to learn more about how students your age participate in the process of writing and improvising music in a jazz setting.

WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?

If you choose to participate, I will ask you to engage in jazz band rehearsals as you normally do. This study will take place over six weeks during regular rehearsal time. At the beginning of the six weeks, I will record you improvising a melody over one chorus of a Bb blues progression. Following the six weeks, I will record you improvising a melody over one chorus of a Bb blues progression again, as well as ask you to turn in a final draft of a blues melody you wrote during the study. You will take a short questionnaire about your experiences after the six-week study is completed.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BAD THINGS ABOUT THIS RESEARCH?

Participating in this research should not make you uncomfortable or hurt you.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL GOOD THINGS ABOUT IT?

As a participant, you will be more familiar with the process of writing and improvising music. I hope you learn new things and reflect on their improvising of your overall musicianship and understanding of the jazz style.

WHO MAY KNOW THAT YOU PARTICIPATED IN THIS RESEARCH?

No one other than the investigator (Ms. Knaster) will know that you were in this study. If I tell other people about the research, I will not use your name.

Participant’s Initials ______________