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GRADUATE RESEARCH FORUM REVIEW 2022

Who Are We? Equity, Access, and Representation in American Music Education

In early February, music educators from across the Buckeye state convened in Cleveland for the annual Ohio Music Education Association (OMEA) Professional Development Conference. This year's OMEA Graduate Research Forum featured Dr. Kenneth Elpus, renowned music education scholar, as the keynote speaker. Dr. Elpus is associate professor of music education and associate director at the University of Maryland School of Music. His research efforts have primarily focused on music education and educational policy, music student and teacher demographics, and access to arts education in the United States. Dr. Elpus' keynote address highlighted his past, present, and ongoing research analyzing nationally representative data sets. Attendees were fortunate to view his in-process work on music teacher demography and his recently published studies on the availability of high school arts courses and the demographic profile of middle school music students.

Keywords: music teachers, music students, music enrollment, high school, middle school, music achievement, arts course offerings, equity, access, representation, demographics

Introducing the Speaker and Opening Remarks

In early February, music educators from across the Buckeye state convened in Cleveland for the Ohio Music Education Association (OMEA) Professional Development Conference. The annual conference offers learning opportunities for all music educators, from pre-service music teachers to current practitioners and collegiate music educators. After a one-year hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the OMEA Graduate Research Forum featured Dr. Kenneth Elpus, a renowned music education scholar, as the keynote speaker.

Dr. Elpus is associate professor of music education and associate director at the University of Maryland School of Music. His research efforts have primarily focused on music education and educational policy, music student and teacher demographics, and access to arts education in the United States. A highly regarded quantitative researcher, his work has been published in numerous journals, including the *Journal of Research in Music Education*, the *Music Educators Journal*, *Arts Education Policy Review*, and *Music Education Research*.

In his opening remarks, Elpus stated he was delighted to be presenting in person for the first time since the onset of the pandemic and thanked OMEA for the invitation. He acknowledged that the National Endowment for the Arts funded portions of these studies; however, any opinions expressed were solely his. The studies presented are part of his ongoing demographic profile work on music students (see Elpus, 2015a, 2022a; Elpus & Abril, 2011, 2019) and music teachers (see Elpus, 2015b). As such, OMEA members in attendance were eager to hear Elpus' keynote titled, *Who Are We? Equity, Access, and Representation in American Music Education*.

Music Teacher Demographics

The session commenced with a brief review of extant studies on elementary and secondary teacher demographics. Elpus shared that teaching is one of the largest occupations in the United States, with approximately 3.8 million workers (Taie & Goldring, 2017). However, this sizeable workforce does not reflect the increasing diversity among students when considering teachers are predominately female (77%) and White (81.9%) (Beteille et al., 2009; Goldring et al., 2013). Elpus raised concern regarding this incongruence between teachers and students as research shows learners perform better academically when matched with teachers from similar backgrounds (Thomas et al., 2009). Studies have explored strategies and interventions for recruiting and retaining teachers from underrepresented races and ethnicities (Achinstein et al., 2010). Scholars have also investigated the unequal distribution of teachers with specific characteristics among schools (Lankford et al., 2002). This systematic phenomenon, known as "sorting," purports that schools with a high concentration of underserved students often end up with the least qualified teachers and vice versa.

These studies, among others, provided important insights into the teaching profession. Surprisingly, research specifically focused on music teachers remains unexplored. Elpus shared preliminary findings from his in-process study on developing a demographic profile of American music teachers. Published results are

anticipated sometime later this year. In the meantime, we can look forward to yet another landmark study from Elpus.

High School Arts Access & Middle School Music Student Demographics

After a short break, the keynote resumed and shifted attention towards students. Elpus opened the second segment of his address by exploring inconsistencies resulting from the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA is a federal law that enumerates music and the arts as components of a “well-rounded curriculum,” yet students are not afforded equal access to arts coursework. Elpus pointed out eleven states and the District of Columbia that do not require schools to offer arts classes at all secondary levels (Arts Education Partnership, 2021). Moreover, only 27 states have graduation requirements that include the arts (Arts Education Partnership, 2021).

According to national reports, music courses were offered in 91% of secondary schools in 2009–2010 (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012). Elpus acknowledged that this widespread availability of music classes is generally favorable. Still, upon further investigation, schools with no musical opportunities were shown to serve higher percentages of racialized students and those of lower socioeconomic families (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012). On a positive note, between 1982 and 2009, the percentage of students enrolled in high school music courses was sustained at approximately 33% (Elpus, 2014).

Elpus transitioned into some of his demographic work collaborating with colleague Carlos Abril. Together they examined participation in high school traditional large ensembles and found that 21% of students took part in band, orchestra, or choir during their senior year (Elpus & Abril, 2011). In a follow-up study, analyzing student transcripts with four years of course enrollment data, the percentage of students enrolled in high school ensembles for at least one year was 24% (Elpus & Abril, 2019). Both studies revealed the underrepresentation of students who identified as Hispanic or Latinx and students from low SES families in high school music programs (Elpus & Abril, 2011, 2019). Yet, upon analysis of student transcripts, the latter investigation illuminated the underrepresentation of Black students in instrumental ensembles (Elpus & Abril, 2019). Additionally, higher previous academic achievement predicted music enrollment for all racial and ethnic groups except Black students, suggesting students who participated in high school music classes excelled academically before enrolling, debunking “music makes you smarter” claims.

Elpus concluded the literature review by highlighting one of the few demographic studies on middle school music students. This work, examining sixth through eighth grade students in Miami-Dade County, replicated much of the findings from the established national profiles (Alegrado & Winsler, 2020). Elpus acknowledged the absence of national studies on middle school music student demographics, implying the need for investigation.

High School Arts Availability

Elpus (2022a) endeavored to establish a high school national profile of arts availability and examine school characteristics associated with music access. The study sample, drawn from the National Center of Educational Statistics High School Longitudinal Study of 2009, included approximately 21,000 ninth-grade students enrolled in one of 940 U.S. nationally representative public or private high schools in 2008-2009. The results showed that arts availability was significantly associated with school size, school control (public, private, charter), and the percentage of students who qualify for the federal Free and Reduced Lunch program. Larger schools had greater arts availability and offered more comprehensive arts programs than smaller schools. Another key finding is the restricted access to arts courses in public charter schools. Elpus suggested music and arts advocacy efforts give attention to public charter schools where curricular music opportunities for students are severely lacking. Those interested in viewing more detailed findings and comprehensive tables and graphs are encouraged to read the published study in the *Arts Education Policy Review* (Elpus, 2022a).

Middle School Music Uptake

Elpus informed attendees that they were the first to view the following study, which stirred some excitement. This work, published in the most recent *Journal of Research in Music Education*, undertook the development of a national middle school music student demographic profile and examined the degree of musical achievement among the nation's eighth-graders (Elpus, 2022b). The sample was drawn from students who took the 2016 National Assessment of Educational Progress in the Arts (NAEP) assessment, an estimated 4,400 nationally representative eighth-grade students who attended 270 U.S. public or private middle schools in 2015-2016.

Results showed that 64% of eighth-graders were enrolled in music courses. Of those, 34% of students participated in band, orchestra, or choir, and 27% took part in non-ensemble general music classes. In terms of musical achievement, as

measured by the NAEP, ensemble student scores were higher than general music students, whereas general music student scores were similar to non-music students. Among ensemble students, those identifying as Black or Latinx and students from lower SES families were underrepresented. Conversely, Black and Latinx students and students from lower SES families were overrepresented in general music courses.

Further analysis of student characteristics by ensemble type gave attention to race, ethnicity, and gender. Elpus reported that Black students were underrepresented in band and orchestra, adequately represented in choir, and overrepresented in general music. He suspected that some of the racial disparities among band and orchestra students are more likely due to matters of socioeconomic status than issues of race. Conversely, choir students were more representative of the student population, except for the drastic overrepresentation of females. Elpus speculated that changes in choir gender composition might occur over the next few decades as gender norms become less rigid.

Closing Thoughts

Elpus closed by stating he eagerly anticipates reading future studies when today's children grow up and become research participants. It is intriguing to think about how the landscape of music education may change due to current equity and inclusion efforts. Much of Elpus' research describes who we are and who we serve as a profession. Advancing equity, access, and representation in music education are of great importance when considering who we will become.

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