

Blues & Youths: Self-Determination Theory in the General Music Classroom

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Abstract

This action research project investigates the efficacy of utilizing blues music as a vehicle for incorporating elements of Self-Determination Theory and Social Emotional Learning in the general music classroom. The study explores how musical composition, improvisation, and group work can be leveraged to both reinforce core SEL competencies as well as improve student motivation and engagement. This study is grounded in the theoretical work of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, as well as music educators Edward L. Varner and Rachel D. Sanguinetti. Teacher reflections, student self-assessments, Cooperating Teacher observations, and video footage were analyzed using qualitative research methods. Three main themes emerged: Student choice leading to unpredictable results, inconsistent correlation between engagement and proficiency, and individuals connecting to their lived experience. The research suggests that Self-Determination Theory has the potential to increase student motivation and engagement.

Keywords: Self-Determination Theory, Social Emotional Learning, blues, improvisation, composition, student engagement, student motivation, music education, general music, elementary music.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

“The blues are the roots and the other musics are the fruits. It's better keeping the roots alive, because it means better fruits from now on. The blues are the roots of all American music. As long as American music survives, so will the blues.”

- Willie Dixon

Dixon is often called “the poet laureate of the blues”, and here he makes a convincing case for preserving blues music in the American musical landscape. The blues are still important because they are the origin point of so many musical styles and conventions that we now take for granted. Additionally, the blues are important because they are a unique vehicle for communicating our collective hardships, frustrations, desires, and dreams. Another blues legend by the name of Etta James once said, “When I’m singing blues, I’m singing life.” which reinforces the idea that this is more than simply a genre of music, but an honest reflection of the human condition. It’s an expression of all that makes our lives beautiful, difficult, euphoric, terrible, and generally worth singing about. This idea lies at the very heart of my action research project, which endeavored to bring this music to the youth, and to help them realize its power to channel our shared struggles into art. The blues are one of three significant pillars of this project, the other two being Social Emotional Learning, and Self-Determination Theory. These three pillars support the central thesis, which is that the blues can be utilized to increase student motivation and engagement in the general music classroom, while also reinforcing crucial SEL competencies.

This research is significant to me because of my personal and educational history. I had a turbulent childhood that was precipitated by a death in the family. The school system failed me not by discriminating against me, not by denying me opportunities, but by failing to recognize

that I needed significant social and emotional support. This experience from my childhood has established itself as an important part of my educational philosophy: That schools are not just a place for academic learning, but for social and emotional learning. Our students don't just need to learn how to read, write, and do arithmetic, they also need to learn how to name and process their emotions, how to play a game with their peers, and how to treat each other with kindness and care. In my case, I needed to find meaning in my chaotic and temperamental life, I needed to be taught fundamental social skills, I needed to be inspired to learn and succeed for my own sake, and most importantly of all, I needed to be shown that I was a valuable member of my community. What happened instead was that I was made to feel like a reject. Unfortunately, I came to internalize that feeling and continued to exhibit antisocial behavior for many years afterward. The good news is that I did eventually receive the social and emotional support that I needed, but it did not come from the place that I had expected.

I started my musical journey during those turbulent elementary years when I picked up the clarinet. The so-called "King of the Woodwinds" was not my first choice—I would have preferred drums or the saxophone—but I have no regrets for walking the path that has led me to this moment. During middle school I picked up the saxophone and started learning about jazz and blues, which would quickly become my life's greatest passion. During high school I picked up the guitar, started singing in choirs, and slowly began to evolve into the professional musician that I am today. In my post-high school years I started playing piano and composing music, which culminated in me receiving a BA in Music Composition from Humboldt State University in 2016. After my undergraduate years I started teaching, both in academic and private settings, and developed basic proficiency with an even larger array of instruments. Throughout it all, I

took advantage of every opportunity that I could find to travel and perform with more and more diverse communities of musicians.

Thus my path to emotional growth, self-confidence, and self-sufficiency was carved through decades of relentlessly applying myself to countless musical endeavors. Indeed, it is extremely difficult for me to conceptualize the ways I show up in the world in terms that do not directly relate to my background as a professional musician. Most, if not all of the important social skills and qualities that I have now were developed in my many years of being an ensemble member. Qualities such as reliability, responsibility, punctuality, leadership, the ability to work well on a team, the ability to be an effective communicator, to self-reflect, to motivate myself to achieve my own goals, all of these characteristics were painstakingly sharpened by working with a multitude of instrumental and vocal ensembles.

What was unfortunate about my situation was that I was left to figure out so much on my own. My family was present, but not able to help me grieve. We were fortunate to have had a support network of other adults that helped us survive, but even with that extra support it seemed to be a miracle that my brothers and I made it to high school graduation. I am extremely lucky that I ended up where I am now. I am privileged to have reached a place where I am solid, stable, and able to pursue a career in education. However, my arrival at this point was not at all a guarantee, and there were several points in my life and educational tenure where my path could have easily veered off into darker territory. I was fortunate that I didn't fall through the cracks, and I was even more fortunate to have been able to find refuge, community, happiness, purpose, and meaning in my musical life. However, I have to wonder how the trajectory of my life could have been made less chaotic had I been given the social and emotional support that I needed

during those crucial elementary years. What would have happened if I had been provided the tools to process and express my grief in a safe and healthy way?

The educational issues I wanted to explore and address in this action research project were student disengagement, lack of motivation, and lack of social emotional skills. I empathized deeply with my own elementary students who have experienced trauma in their young lives. I wanted to help them find a creative outlet that can offer them joy and fulfillment, and allow them to process their inner emotional worlds. Music is a powerful force, some call it the wordless language of emotion, and my hope was for that powerful force to be harnessed to help my students gain a sense of agency for themselves. The specific musical vehicle that I wanted to utilize is the blues. The origin of this style of music goes back over a hundred years and has always had roots in deeply human emotional expressions of grief, loss, joy, and triumph. The blues has significant historical and cultural relevance, as it forms the basis for nearly all modern styles of American popular music, from jazz and ragtime to funk and hip-hop. Both jazz and blues feature improvisation as a central stylistic element, and in my perspective this element also connects directly to SEL and Self-Determination Theory. Two of the three psychological needs highlighted in SDT are autonomy and relatedness. Musical improvisation is purely an exercise in utilizing one's autonomy to express that which is personally relevant, whether that be musical syntax or emotional depth. I hypothesized that incorporating elements such as improvisation would not only give students more agency in the general music classroom, but a greater sense of self-motivation.

Guiding Pedagogical Theory

The primary pedagogical theory that has informed my research is Self-Determination Theory, or SDT. Self-Determination Theory is primarily concerned with addressing student

motivation, and comes from the work of psychologists Edward L. Deci and Richard Ryan.

Another framework I utilized is Social-Emotional Learning, or SEL. Social-Emotional Learning is an educational method first developed in the 1960s by the Child Study Center at the Yale School of Medicine, but since has been expanded to a much wider audience and adopted into a variety of curricula at all different grade levels.

Self-Determination Theory has many components, but the following six mini-theories are formally recognized as its foundational elements:

1. Cognitive Evaluation Theory, or CET: This component is concerned with intrinsic motivation, the kind of motivation that provides the satisfaction of behaving “for its own sake”. (Deci & Ryan, 2017)
2. Organismic Integration Theory, or OIT: This component is concerned with extrinsic motivation. In contrast with the previous theory, extrinsic motivators come from outside the self, and take the form of tangible rewards and impactful consequences. Furthermore, the subtypes of instrumental motivations fall along a continuum of internalization. The more internalized that the motivation becomes, the more autonomy the person will have when enacting the behaviors. (Deci & Ryan, 2017)
3. Causality Orientations Theory, or COT: This mini-theory illustrates the ways in which individuals’ tendencies to prefer different environments can affect how they regulate their behavior. There are three subtypes of causality orientations, the autonomy orientation, the control orientation, and the impersonal orientation related to the anxiety concerning competence. (Deci & Ryan, 2017)
4. Basic Psychological Needs Theory, or BPNT: This component elaborates on the concept of evolved psychological needs and how they relate to overall psychological health and

well-being. This mini-theory argues that well-being is contingent on autonomy, competence, and relatedness. (Delci & Ryan, 2017)

5. Goal Contents Theory, or GCT: This component comes from the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic goals and their effect on motivation and wellness. Intrinsic and extrinsic goals are seen as meeting basic need satisfactions in different ways, and therefore are associated with well-being in different ways. (Delci & Ryan, 2017)
6. Relationships Motivation Theory, or RMT: As the name implies, this component is concerned with relationships and how they impact our sense of relatedness, which as stated before is a core psychological need. (Delci & Ryan, 2017)

These six mini-theories come together to form a more complete picture of what drives us to accomplish our goals and achieve great things for ourselves and others. I used many elements of this framework to design the unit, but more specifically I focused on autonomy, competence, and relatedness as they related to Basic Psychological Needs Theory. My intent with this unit was to encourage my students to set goals for themselves and move towards achieving them. The work my students completed in this project helped them find agency in making creative decisions and allowed them to build a sense of intrinsic motivation.

One of the major leading SEL organizations in the country, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines the following as the five main components of SEL as follows:

1. Self-awareness: The skill of having knowledge of one's own emotions and developing a positive self-concept. (CASEL, 2020)
2. Self-management: The ability to regulate one's own emotions and monitor one's own behaviors, as well as intrinsic motivation and setting personal goals. (CASEL, 2020)

3. Social awareness, the ability to have awareness of the emotions and social situations of others. (CASEL, 2020)

4. Relationship skills, the skill to foster relationships and communicate within them.

5. Responsible decision making, the ability to solve problems and hold oneself accountable. (CASEL, 2020)

For the purposes of this research project, all components of Social-Emotional Learning were incorporated, but I focused specifically on the implementation of the first three: self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness. The collaborative element of this project incorporated these SEL competencies through self-reflection and emotional awareness.

Connection to InTASC Standards

In 2011, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), through its Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) released a set of Model Core Teaching Standards that outline what teachers should know and be able to do to ensure every PreK-12 student gains the skills they need in order to enter college or the workforce in today's world. This project is aligned with InTASC standards, specifically standards 1, 2, and 3.

1. Learner Development: "The teacher understands how learners grow and develop, recognizing that patterns of learning and development vary individually within and across the cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and physical areas, and designs and implements developmentally appropriate and challenging learning experiences."
(CCSSO, 2013) This standard is supported by the fact that this research cuts across several domains of learning, such as linguistic, social, and emotional.
2. Learning Differences: "The teacher uses understanding of individual differences and diverse cultures and communities to ensure inclusive learning environments that enable

each learner to meet high standards.” (CCSSO, 2013) This standard is supported by the diverse representation of musical perspectives and marginalized cultures in the unit.

3. Learning Environments: “The teacher works with others to create environments that support individual and collaborative learning, and that encourage positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self motivation.” (CCSSO, 2013) This standard is supported by the fact that several elements of the unit were designed to address self-motivation.

Summary

As a young student I performed well academically, but struggled in my social and emotional life for many years. As I grew and started on my journey into a musical career, I found that the music itself, as well as the process of working in musical ensembles, helped me develop the social and emotional skills that I needed to become a mature and well-rounded member of society. My goal was to find a way to bring that same impactful experience of growth to my students in their elementary classroom. This project used blues music as a framework for incorporating Social-Emotional Learning standards and Self-Determination Theory into a composition-based unit. Specifically, the students collaborated to create a piece called “The 5th Grade Blues”, with each student given the freedom to decide for themselves how they wished to contribute to the final musical product. Musical composition lessons over the course of the unit were scaffolded in such a way as to build confidence and agency in my students and to give them the tools they needed to express themselves as well as meet expectations set by the 2014 National Core Arts Standards (MU:Pr6.1.5a, MU:Cr1.1.5b). The project is aligned with InTASC standards 1, 2, and 3, and those standards were supported by different elements of the unit, as well as the other standards and frameworks within.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The purpose of this Action Research Project was to utilize blues music as well as Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a framework for empowering and motivating students to express themselves musically and to be more engaged and motivated in the general music classroom. Through this process, I learned more about Self-Determination Theory as a theoretical framework, as well as methods for implementing improvisation into the general music classroom, and different ways in which people have conceptualized and talked about the blues as a genre in both music and literature.

The literature I have reviewed falls into three broad categories: Articles reviewing the blues as both a musical genre and larger cultural movement, articles describing Self-Determination Theory, and articles about Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in action. The inclusion of SEL was intended to support both the themes found in blues music and lyrics, as well as the emotional competencies required in the practical application of SDT. The articles were found in three places: Western Oregon University's Hamersly Library, JSTOR, and the various journals hosted on the website for the National Association for Music Education. I will divide the articles into the three broad categories as mentioned above.

Annotated Bibliography - Blues

Buttram, J. B. (1993). The Blues: Roots of a Musical Legacy. *Soundings (Reston, VA)*, 6(2), 5-10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104837139300600203> (Original work published 1993)

This article provides a thoughtful overview of the characteristics of the blues as a musical genre, as well as a brief exposition on the origin of the genre. Buttram's treatment is interdisciplinary in nature. He examines the characteristics from a wide variety of angles in order to find their common threads. His writing on the subject is done from the perspective of a general

music educator. In the article, he analyzes the style from many different angles, first detailing its history and the way in which other scholars have studied it. Then, he continues in explaining the different elements of the style in detail, including form and harmony, rhythm, melody, timbre, improvisation, and lyrics. The author concludes that the blues is a most versatile and accommodating medium for musical expression and learning. The various characteristics of the style discussed in the article such as harmony, rhythm, and melody should be explored by students in the context of common musical experiences, and teachers may need to gain new expertise in order to effectively deliver instruction on the subject. This article helped me frame my understanding of the blues in simple and relatable musical terms. It helped me decide which elements of the blues to focus on, and which elements were ultimately not relevant in this action research project. The strength of this article was in providing concrete examples of how one would teach a particular characteristic of the blues in the context of a general music classroom. I would have benefited from more examples of blues lyrics.

Gussow, A. (2018). W. C. Handy and the “Birth” of the Blues. *Southern Cultures*, 24(4), 42–68. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26554512>

This article examines the murky early history of the blues as a genre, and explores other possibilities for the “birth” of the art form. Gussow runs through a variety of names all significant to the blues and then explains that there were decades of history that came before them that influenced their art, such that the often cited ‘father of the blues’ W.C. Handy may only have that title on account of a good story. Gussow’s findings were analyzed through a historiographical lens, and covered a lot of ground regarding the many documented “firsts” in the history of the blues, including the first documented sightings and hearings of the music, first

sheet music, and first recordings. The author concludes that W.C. Handy, while he was not at all the first musician to play the music we now know as the blues, played an important role in its development and popularization in the first half of the 20th century. The author details a commonly told tale regarded to be an origin story for the blues, in which Handy was dozing at a train station in a small Delta town named Tutwiler, and was awoken by a haunting, powerfully soulful music played by someone on a guitar. The mythical Tutwiler story serves as a compelling enough story for the origin of the blues, and positions Handy as its eager ambassador. In ways, Handy is a Gershwin in his own right: A classically trained musician who appropriated Black music for white audiences, and in doing so set the genre on a path it otherwise would not have taken. For instance, he is credited with inventing the ‘blue note’, when in reality he merely found the profitable compromise that would allow it to be printed on sheet music. I believe this article was even-handed in its approach, especially in regards to the racial issues very much present in the blues of the early 20th century (Or as it was called then, ‘race music’). The appropriation of the blues for white audiences is not assigned a value judgement; rather it is acknowledged that the music has always had a powerful effect on white and Black audiences alike. The fact that the music was appropriated for financial purposes has more to do with the economic realities of the past—and of the present—than it has to do with the music itself. The true strength of this article is the amount of quotes from primary sources, as well as its unvarnished depiction of Handy as an opportunistic, young, and ambitious Black composer who would spend years spinning blues into gold.

Heil, L. (2017). Teaching Improvisation through Melody and Blues-Based Harmony: A Comprehensive and Sequential Approach. *Music Educators Journal*, 104(1), 40-46.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432117711484> (Original work published 2017)

This article provides a comprehensive, scalable framework for teaching beginning improvisers using the blues. Heil developed a five-part structured sequence that builds off of the fundamentals of music, starting with melody, harmony, and rhythm. The gradual release of responsibility is built into the sequence as the students work strictly within the group to start, but then work individually within the group later in the sequence. The method developed by Heil is aligned closely with the 2014 National Core Arts Standards. They argue that improvisation is embedded into every step of the three core artistic processes: creating, performing, and responding. The author concludes that their method provides affective outcomes such as self-expression, personal meaning, and self-confidence. Additionally, it encourages students to ‘think like a musician’, in that the method encourages students to engage in the behaviors of a musician while embedded in an authentic learning environment. Furthermore, the method can be a growth experience for both students and educators, especially given that Heil insists this strategy can be employed at any age level or regardless of any previous level of improvisation experience. This article was very helpful in allowing me to see another way to structure and sequence my own blues-based curriculum. While the author introduces too much complexity for my specific purposes in many respects, especially in introducing semitones and guide tone lines, the structure of the curriculum is sound and their approach to incorporating syncopated rhythms is particularly well-scaffolded. The article could benefit from more examples of differentiations, as the way it is written currently is dense and may not be accessible to many students.

Lumm, G. (1994). Introducing Jazz Improvisation in General Music. *General Music Today*, 8(1), 13-17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104837139400800104> (Original work published 1994)

This article provides simple, actionable strategies for teaching jazz improvisation to young students. Lumm starts with lyrics, stressing that it is important for students to personalize the music in order to attach meaning to it. Then, he provides ways for those lyrics to be translated into song, adding articulations, and then finally a way to use Orff instruments to play the blues. The strategies in this article were developed through the lens of general music education. First, the author suggests playing a standard blues bassline and asking students to speak improvised lyrics over it. After finding appropriate lyrics, one can add jazz influenced articulation such as swung eighth notes, then add pitch on top of that. After all these individual elements are in place, Lumm recommends bringing in the Orff instruments to flesh out the rest of the arrangement.. The author concludes that this method of teaching improvisation is versatile, personal, and musically fulfilling. In their words, “the sky’s the limit”. Music educators will talk eagerly about the varied cognitive benefits of playing music, but improvising takes those benefits to the next level, combining the knowledge of musical gestures with harmonic comprehension and real time analysis of one’s musical choices. This article was important for me because it showcased another method for teaching the twelve bar blues, as well as stressing the importance of personalizing the blues. Furthermore, it provides precedent for my research project both in its overall concept, as well as the concept for an Orff jazz band. The article is sound in its structure and sequence, but I believe there are plenty of edits to be made in order to make the method work for my own purposes. First of all the color codes he suggests for notes will need to be

changed to align with Boomwhacker colors. Furthermore, the Orff jazz band has too many parts and will prove unwieldy in my classroom, a simpler 2 or 3 part texture will suffice.

Miller, S. D. (1984). Lessons in the Blues. *Music Educators Journal*, 70(6), 39-40.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/3400791> (Original work published 1984)

This article is another description of the blues as a style, and possible applications of that style in the music classroom. Miller explains the fundamentals of the style, including the AAB rhyming scheme, the twelve bar chord progression, as well as the way in which singers would “worry” their notes, which later would be properly codified into the term “blue notes”. Further into the article, Miller gives several options for incorporating blues stylings into the music classroom, including specific repertoire. Miller writes from the perspective of an experienced music educator. In the article, they make several recommendations for what elements would make for a robust unit on blues music. These recommendations include singing blues songs, playing accompaniments, listening to and analyzing recordings, as well as composing original works based on the insights gained from these analyses. The author concludes that the study of the blues is important for young students as it represents so much of our country’s cultural and musical heritage. It allows us to transcend time and space and better understand the struggles of those who lived before us. Furthermore, the blues are a vehicle for self-expression, and its visceral nature allows students to engage with the music in a deeply personal way. This article was important because it provided even more perspectives and insights on how to approach this subject with young students. It is often difficult to wrestle with the notion that you can’t force your students to care for something about which you are so personally passionate. Miller makes good arguments for including blues in the curriculum, particularly that the study of the blues

allows us to have a better understanding of our country's cultural and musical heritage. It also gives students the opportunity to feel empathy for the marginalized people who made the music.

Williams, S. (2023). Easing Into Jazz Improvisation With the Blues. *Journal of General Music Education*, 36(3), 19-25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/27527646231154542> (Original work published 2023)

This article provides another method for teaching beginning musicians the basics of jazz improvisation. After first making their case for the importance of teaching jazz, Williams explains that their method involves starting with the D blues scale, worried notes and all. After that, they teach how to swing eighth notes, and only after that do they cover the twelve bar blues form. Williams' writing is from the perspective of a classical musician and music educator. Their strategies listed in this article are framed in a way to make them accessible to teachers who do not already have a background in jazz and blues. The author recommends that students start with the D blues scale, learn the twelve bar form, start improvising, have time to explore the music freely, and then finish their journey with a final performance. The author concludes that jazz improvisation provides students with many opportunities to grow in all aspects of musicianship, such as melodic and rhythmic skills, rhythmic integrity, self-assessment, and other less mechanical aspects like confidence, artistry, and curiosity. This article was a solid case for teaching improvisation, and provided many strategies and sequences for teaching it all sensibly. I appreciated most of all the author's emphasis on the development of many "soft skills" such as leadership, teamwork, and independence.

Annotated Bibliography - Self-Determination Theory

Ahmadi, A., Noetel, M., Parker, P., Ryan, R. M., Ntoumanis, N., Reeve, J., Beauchamp, M., Dicke, T., Yeung, A., Ahmadi, M., Bartholomew, K., Chiu, T. K. F., Curran, T., Erturan, G., Flunger, B., Frederick, C., Froiland, J. M., González-Cutre, D., Haerens, L., ... Lonsdale, C. (2023). A Classification System for Teachers' Motivational Behaviors Recommended in Self-Determination Theory Interventions. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 115(8), 1158–1176. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000783>

This article turns the self-determination magnifying glass on the teachers instead of the students and examines the ways in which behavioral variance has a direct impact on educational outcomes. Ahmadi et al. gathered a large, international panel of experts in Self-Determination Theory and put them through a three-round Delphi procedure to narrow down an initial list of teacher behaviors to the most important ones. Their findings were analyzed through a lens of Self-Determination Theory. The authors concluded that there are 57 teacher-motivated behaviors that are the most relevant and impactful in enacting self-determination strategies. These 57 behaviors are classified and categorized in such a way to make them accessible to educators. Furthermore, these behaviors are accompanied by clear definitions of the intervention component, as well as estimates of how effective each component is for promoting motivation. The authors noted that where the panel disagreed on behaviors, more research can and should be done. This article is an excellent addition to this project as it is specifically designed to provide actionable implementations for self-determination strategies. There are no less than three and a half pages of “do’s and don’ts” to help educators check their own behaviors in the classroom. Many of the behaviors listed reached a wide consensus among the panel of experts, even ones that were not considered to be common practice. This article is absolutely meticulous in its

methodology and overall manner in which it shows the work, even going so far as to provide an analysis on the Delphi procedure divorced from its implementation in the study.

Denney, S. C., & Daviso, A. W. (2012). Self-Determination: A Critical Component of Education. *American Secondary Education*, 40(2), 43–51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43694129>

This article is an informed commentary on Self-Determination Theory, including its definition and components, as well as its applications for students with and without disabilities. Denny and Daviso have provided a helpful overview of Self-Determination Theory, starting with policies, and then its developments from the world of special education outward into general education. Their commentary on Self-Determination Theory was created from the perspective of educators interested in curricular development. The authors begin the article examining Self-Determination as policy, then describe the development of SDT through the 80s and 90s, then finish the article by detailing more modern applications of SDT in special education and general education classrooms, as well as providing actionable self-determination strategies and activities for students. The authors concluded that although the research invariably shows that increased self-determination skills were correlated with better educational outcomes, a lack of training and understanding on the subject has caused significant gaps between the research and implementation of self-determination strategies. In the case of parents as well as educators, everyone claims to want these better educational outcomes, but few are willing to spend the time and energy to implement them in an actionable way. As such, the authors advocate for a school-wide approach in the implementation of these strategies. This article was informative to my understanding of this theoretical framework. Overall, I found it helpful to have a broad definition of the theory, as well as a listing of its components in concrete terms. Learning more

about its development from the world of special education was relevant to me, now working in an environment with many special education students. What I appreciated most from the article was the section providing actionable activities for students in order to develop these self-determination strategies.

Sanguinetti, R. D. (2023). Applications of Self-Determination Theory in the General Music Classroom. *Journal of General Music Education*, 37(2), 11-15.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/27527646231188083> (Original work published 2024)

This article is an effective summation of Self-Determination Theory and its possible applications to the general music classroom. Sanguinetti states in the introduction the basic concept behind SDT, as well as pokes holes in long-standing theories around motivation. For instance, the Skinnerian method of handing out or consequently withholding paper vouchers to incentivize good behavior may work in the short term, but over a long enough period of time, students come to not feel any intrinsic motivation for their work. The author is writing from the perspective of Self-Determination Theory. The author concludes that motivation continues to be a challenging but important topic for music educators. Instead of asking how to increase a student's motivation, educators should be asking themselves how they can create a need-supportive environment in their classroom to encourage students' continued enjoyment in the music classroom. By adequately addressing the three fundamental psychological needs outlined in SDT, music educators can provide better educational outcomes for their students. This article was very impactful on me in that it provided a solid foundation on which to build my theoretical framework into my action research project. Building on the three pillars of SDT is the way to ensure that every aspect of the project has the best chance to reach the students as it was

intended to. In particular, I appreciate the strategies outlined in the section under “Competence”, as focusing on growth over ability and process over final product are all incredibly important mindsets for a musician.

Annotated Bibliography - Social Emotional Learning

Jones, S. M., Barnes, S. P., Bailey, R., & Doolittle, E. J. (2017). Promoting Social and Emotional Competencies in Elementary School. *The Future of Children*, 27(1), 49–72.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44219021>

This article examines Social Emotional Learning in the context of elementary school, and provides methods for promoting SEL competencies. Jones et al. discuss how theories of change behind 11 Social Emotional Learning interventions align with the way in which those interventions measure outcomes. The authors stress that SEL is not a monolith, and neither are elementary-aged students. Children in middle childhood (roughly ages 5-11) pass through a wide range of biological, social, cognitive, and emotional changes, and the quality of Social Emotional Learning interventions that are employed should reflect that. The research conducted in this article is viewed through the lens of Social Emotional Learning. The authors examined these interventions and documented four key elements present, including setting, program targets, program components, and program outcomes. The authors conclude that the wide variance seen in the effectiveness of SEL interventions may be a result of imprecise targets being misaligned with too-broad outcomes. In other words, when a variety of programs featuring different theories or methods are all brought under the same umbrella, and assessed using the same general outcomes, it is unlikely to see any measurable effects. By contrast, when there is a close alignment between theory, evaluation plan, and measurement, it is likely to see measurable results. This article was informative in that it helped me understand my students even better. I

have quickly learned the distinct differences between my 1st graders and 5th graders for instance, but learning the differences between the emotional challenges they face has been more arduous. Reading this article has helped me figure out which SEL interventions are more effective, and therefore which interventions I should seek to employ. The most important takeaway for me is their recommendation regarding assessment. The authors believe that we should “...choose measures that are more specific and guided by knowledge of development and skill trajectories”.

Jones, S. M., & Doolittle, E. J. (2017). Social and Emotional Learning: Introducing the Issue. *The Future of Children*, 27(1), 3–11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44219018>

This article introduces Social Emotional Learning in an informative and comprehensive manner, and convincingly makes the case for SEL competencies to be more widely addressed in schools. Jones and Doolittle spend the first few pages defining SEL, explaining where it came from, and sharing what current SEL research tells us. Then they transition to speaking more broadly about the possible effects of policy and theory, and project what we may see in terms of SEL implementation in the schools of our future. The authors are writing very much through the lens of Social Emotional Learning. After an introductory section, the authors narrow the focus of the article to specifically making the case for the introduction of SEL interventions in public school settings. The authors make many important points in the course of the article, including the need for professional development, the importance of competent, compassionate adults in the system, the necessity of equitable, sensible policy, and the need for aligning the targets to the outcomes. The main concern of the authors is that there is not yet a consensus on how core SEL competencies are defined, used in research, and translated into educational practice, and until that point there will be continual issues that need to be addressed. This article was helpful to me in providing a broad overview of the research that had been done in the field, and what still

needs to be done in order to standardize SEL interventions in schools. It provided me with a more nuanced understanding of what Social Emotional Learning looks like for students at different ages, and helped me focus on what truly is important in enacting SEL forward policies.

Varner, E. (2022). SEL, Mindfulness, and the Art of General Music Education. *Journal of General Music Education*, 36(2), 34-37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/27527646221130320> (Original work published 2023)

This article examines the way in which SEL competencies can start with the teacher, and then serve as an appropriate model for the students. Varner explains that starting with self-reflection and intentionality allows educators to bring their humanity with them into the classroom every day. Furthermore, he illustrates that there is a natural alignment between Social Emotional Learning and practices in the general music classroom. If one takes a moment to think about it, there are many parallels and many ways to connect the two. Varner's writing is through the lens of Social Emotional Learning. Specifically, the author lists the SEL competencies, (Self-Awareness, Social-Awareness, Responsible Decision-Making, Self-Management, and Relationship Skills) and explains how the general music teacher can both embody and model these competencies for their students. The author concludes that SEL in the general music classroom can be meaningful, mindful, manageable, and fun. Playfulness in particular is an important aspect of this application of SEL. Children learn so many important skills through play, there is no reason why that should not extend to the general music classroom as well. This article, while more teacher-focused in its approach, was still an informative read. If anything, it was a helpful reminder that everything in the elementary classroom is modeling. In the same way

that you need to model singing in your head voice, or bouncing a mallet off a marimba bar, so too do you need to model healthy behaviors and emotional regulation.

Summary

The three pillars of my action research project are Self-Determination Theory, Social Emotional Learning, and the musical language of jazz and blues. The more that I delved into my research, the more that I saw the threads connecting all three of these pillars and the way in which they feed into each other. The self-expression inherent to blues improvisation provides the autonomy necessitated by SDT, which in turn helps to foster self-motivation and other SEL competencies. They are all connected, and my goal was to align these three pillars in my project.

Chapter 3 - Research Methods

Introduction

Action Research is defined in this way by Richard Sagor in his book “Guiding School Improvement with Action Research”: “[It] is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the ‘actor’ in improving and/or refining his or her actions” (Sagor 2000). An important point to clarify here is that action research is concerned with the actions and methods employed by the teacher, (the ‘actor’ in this case) not their students.

Sagor outlines the following as the seven steps of action research (Sagor 2000).

- 1) Selecting a Focus: The process begins with the actor reflecting seriously on a topic that is worth spending their time researching. Given the ever increasing demands on the time of a modern educator, the subject of their action research should be chosen with intention.
- 2) Clarifying Theories: The second step requires the actor to review relevant literature in order to clarify their focus, and identify the values, beliefs, and theories related to that focus. This is a crucial part of the process as it forces the actor to be narrow in on the specifics that will inform the rest of their research.
- 3) Identifying Research Questions: The next step is to take the information gathered so far and to synthesize it into one or more research questions that will be the foundational aspect of the research project. Care must be taken to align the question(s) properly with the theoretical framework and relevant research.
- 4) Collecting Data: Now the actor must collect the data that will allow them to make conclusions relevant to their research question(s). It is essential that the data collected is both valid (meaning

the information accurately represents what the actor claims it does) and reliable (meaning the actor is confident about the accuracy of the data).

5) Analyzing Data: During this step, the actor sorts through the data that they have collected in order to identify trends, gain an understanding of their research question(s), and help to formulate conclusions that will allow them to take informed action.

6) Reporting Results: This step can take a variety of forms. It can be anything from publishing the research in a scholarly journal to presenting the research to colleagues at a weekly staff meeting. The point is that sharing the results in this way contributes to the collective knowledge base of pedagogy, as well as provides points of connection and community between educators.

7) Taking Informed Action: Also called “action planning”, this final step is already a familiar process for educators. We are always in the process of making informed decisions in planning for lessons, units, and academic programs.

Action Research is the proper method for my study because my learning environment is the general music classroom. Working with such young students requires that concepts be related more often with action and less with words. Following the example set by Sagor, I started my process by selecting an area of focus, which is related to utilizing blues music and SEL competencies to address a lack of student motivation and engagement. Next, I delved into relevant research related to my focus area and content area, then selected a theoretical framework, specifically Deci & Ryan’s Self-Determination Theory. With these first two steps completed, I formulated my research question which is this: “Does utilizing blues music as a vehicle for Self-Determination Theory in the general music classroom increase student engagement?” After designing a unit of instruction with data collection methods embedded into the lesson plans, I taught the unit over the course of six lessons over four weeks and collected the

relevant data. The sixth step, ‘Reporting Results’, has been completed by the writing and sharing of this very research paper. Finally, I have already taken informed action by using what I learned over the course of the research project to modify and adjust my methods for planning and instruction.

Participants and Setting

The setting for my research is an elementary school situated on the east side of Portland, Oregon, in the vibrant urban neighborhood of Hazelwood. Hazelwood is the second most populated neighborhood in Portland, with 26,653 residents recorded in the 2020 Census. In addition to featuring several parks, shopping centers, and restaurants, Hazelwood also is home to a culturally and linguistically diverse immigrant population, and the student population reflects the diversity of its community. My focus class for this research was the only 5th grade class in the school. There are a total of 22 students in the class, with two additional academic inclusion students from one of the school’s Structured Learning Centers. The class is 50% male, 50% female. 42% of the students speak English at home, the other languages present in the class are Spanish, (38%) Russian, (8%) Dari, (4%) Chuukese, (4%) and Vietnamese (4%).

My students brought with them a variety of academic and cultural funds of knowledge, ranging from interest in the annual ScanFair celebrating their Scandinavian heritage, cultural holidays such as Dia De Los Muertos, and their love of other scholastic subjects like science, math, and English language arts. My students also brought with them a love of various styles of music, including jazz, orchestral, KPop, as well as individual artists like SZA, Billie Eilish, and Bruno Mars. Additionally, my students brought their fundamental musical knowledge developed over previous years: Their ability to sing, to keep a steady beat, and to read musical notation.

I worked with these students from September of 2025 to March of 2026. In that time, I had the fortune of leading them through a number of units that focused on playing instruments, namely boomwhackers, ukuleles, and diatonic marimbas. My strengths in working with them lie in my rapport with individual students, and the way in which I am able to gently correct their technique, and encourage them to play more confidently and successfully. The main area in which I can improve in my work with them is managing their behavior as a class, and harnessing their energy in order to more effectively facilitate their learning.

Data Collection & Analysis

The unit was taught over the course of four weeks, from late February to mid March, and in that time I collected a variety of data from at least three sources in order to properly triangulate my data. In addition to my lesson and unit plans, I collected data regarding student engagement via self-assessment, written observations from my cooperating teacher, and multiple post-lesson teacher candidate audio reflections.

The engagement self-assessment was administered first via Google form to serve as a preassessment, and then administered again during every lesson with the exception of the fourth and the sixth. To complete the engagement self-assessment, students would report their “level of focus and participation in music class” on a scale from 1 (least focused) to 4 (most focused). These data are valid in accordance with Sagor’s (2000) definition, as there is no more authentic reporter on a student’s level of engagement than the student themselves.

The cooperating teacher observations were conducted in written form in response to questions that I had formulated, all of which related to the research question. In reference to the engagement self-assessment, I asked the observer to rate the engagement of the entire class according to the same four point scale. These data are valid in accordance with Sagor’s (2000)

definition, as the cooperating teacher has spent thousands of hours with these students, having taught many of them since they were in kindergarten.

The teacher candidate audio reflections were each recorded in a private setting within 3-4 hours of the conclusion of each lesson, and they range in length from 20 to 30 minutes. Each recording starts with general thoughts, impressions, and notes of circumstances unique to that lesson, and then proceeds to more specific reflections individualized for each student. The audio reflections were transcribed into a single master document for the purposes of coding and data analysis. These data are reliable in accordance with Sagor's (2000) definition, as I reported my experiences and impressions of the lesson as quickly as possible, and reported specific details on each student in order to chart their progression over the course of the unit.

In order to analyze the data I had collected, I followed the traditional qualitative analysis procedure which started with coding. I chose to utilize deductive coding instead of inductive coding because I felt it was most sensible to categorize my data according to the three psychological needs outlined in the Basic Psychological Needs Theory: Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness. Using a system of color coding, I combed through the data and sorted relevant pieces into these three categories in order to more easily see patterns that could be formed into themes. I cross-referenced the three sources of data against each other to ensure that the themes were supported by different types of observations. I asked my reading committee to review my data analysis, and their feedback helped me to focus my writing and delivery of the findings in order to make its presentation more impactful.

Researcher Positionality

I am a 37 year old, cisgendered, heterosexual white male from a family of modest means. While I do empathize deeply with my students given my own chaotic background and unstable

childhood, I recognize that I cannot truly know or understand the challenges faced by many of them. I have never been homeless; I have never experienced food insecurity; I have never experienced discrimination on the basis of my gender or race; I was never taken from my family and placed in foster care. While my youth left much to be desired, I had the benefit of a support network. Friends, family, teachers, and community members all pulled together to help myself and my family survive, if just barely. My positionality in respect to my students means that I am the privileged party, and that means I have an even greater responsibility to be a positive, supportive force in their lives. Children are the most vulnerable members of our society, and children of marginalized communities are all the more vulnerable as a consequence of the inequities endemic to these United States. In the words of my late teacher Jerry Schreuder, it is my duty to “pay it forward”.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Over the course of teaching the unit to my fifth graders, three themes began to take shape. These themes became even more clear in the process of analyzing my data using deductive coding and thematic analysis, taking cues from Sagor's (2000) text, *Guiding School Improvement with Action Research*. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes from raw data. Thematic analysis enables qualitative researchers to code and organize data in such a way that allows patterns, similarities, and differences to be more easily seen and understood. Coding is the practice of combing through data and sorting it into separate areas in order to aid in its analysis. There are two varieties of coding, inductive and deductive. Inductive coding is a "bottom-up" approach in which the researcher creates codes in the process of analyzing their data, while deductive coding is the opposite, a "top-down" approach that creates the codes first and then sorts pieces of data into those preexisting codes.

My main three sources of data were transcripts of my post-lesson audio reflections, written observations from my Cooperating Teacher, (CT) and numbers from the engagement self-assessment, which required the students to self-report their level of focus and participation in music class on a scale from one to four, where one is "least focused" and four is "most focused". However, I also analyzed lesson plans, samples of students' written work and written reflections, and over two hundred minutes of video recorded footage of the six lessons. I used a system of color highlighting to code the data according to the deductive process, using three codes that align with the three central psychological needs outlined in Self-Determination Theory: Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness. I analyzed the data compiled into these three codes, and derived the following as the three overarching themes of the research:

1. **Student Choice Leading to Unpredictable Results** - In which periods of instructional time designed to allow students the opportunity to practice and collaborate with each other yielded moments that simultaneously were detrimental to their overall engagement, and unique expressions of their personal musical joy. This theme emerged from anecdotal experiences recorded in my post-lesson audio reflections, and corroborated by the Cooperating Teacher's written reflections as well as the numerical engagement self-assessment data, all categorized under the deductive code "Autonomy".
2. **Inconsistent Correlation Between Engagement and Proficiency** - In which the Teacher Candidate (TC) often observed a disconnect between the students' self-reported engagement scores and their overall performance relating to the instructional material, and particularly the skills associated with the rubric that was utilized to determine their final grade for the unit. The lack of correlation often trended toward a positive direction. This theme emerged from analyzing the numbers reported for the engagement self-assessment from the preassessment to lesson five, as well as the teacher directed assessments according to the rubric, and was corroborated by my post-lesson audio reflections, all categorized under the deductive code "Competence".
3. **Individuals Connecting to Their Lived Experience** - In which students took advantage of the extensions provided by the teacher and composed personally meaningful lyrics that aligned with the AAB blues form, the expressive intent, and the rhyme scheme shown in the teacher provided lyric models. This theme emerged from the student work samples archived by the teacher, as well as the supplementary audio reflections, and corroborated by the data related to the engagement self-assessment, all categorized under the deductive code "Relatedness".

Student Choice Leading to Unpredictable Results

Over the course of the six lessons in the unit, there were several periods of instructional time intended to allow students to work independently and in collaboration with one another in order to practice the performance skills associated with the rubric, (Figure 1) to assess each other using the same rubric, or to engage in the teacher directed assessment of their performance skills. These unstructured periods of time ranged in length from five to twenty minutes depending on the lesson, but all of them required the students to exercise a degree of self-motivation to achieve the stated goal or objective, whether that was for assessment or to practice the skills for the assessment. In addition to being a pragmatic addition to the lessons that allowed for more flexibility in lesson planning and assessment, they also were intended to reinforce student autonomy as it relates to Self-Determination Theory. However, in many cases the unstructured periods of practice time yielded unpredictable results, both positive and negative.

Figure 1

The Blues Buddy Checklist and Associated Rubric

Blues Buddy Checklist Rate your buddy on a scale from 1 to 4, and give them feedback! Swing: 1 = Not Swinging 2 = Sometimes Swinging 3 = Often Swinging 4 = Always Swinging Numbers: 1 = Not Playing ADE 2 = Playing One Note 3 = Playing Two Notes 4 = Playing Three Notes		
Name: _____		Name: _____
☐	Swing 	☐
☐	Numbers 1=A 4=D 5=E	☐

One such case was a recurring instance in which a student took advantage of the unstructured time to perform their rendition of Scott Joplin's *The Entertainer*, often on repeat. While this was not the intended purpose of the scheduled practice time, I did appreciate the extent to which the student was experiencing their own musical joy. Students who brought musical funds of knowledge with them into the classroom felt free to express those funds of knowledge in these moments, and in doing so were simply exercising their autonomy.

Another unpredictable case had occurred during the third lesson that ended up being my favorite memory of the unit. The learning target for that day was concerned with writing blues lyrics, and so I had prepared handouts for the students to utilize for the purpose of writing said lyrics. During the scheduled time to complete the handout, I checked on a student that I had assumed may have needed some guidance. I found that they had not written full words as expected, but had written individual letters in a pattern that was difficult to discern at first glance. Excitedly, they gestured for me to put on the pair of headphones that were connected to their keyboard, and started playing the letter names that they had written on their handout. I was floored when I realized that while they had not completed the assignment as directed, they were exercising their autonomy in order to compose music, with no prompting or leading them to do so. Given that music composition is such a personally significant artistic expression for me, this experience remains in my mind as one of the most special and most memorable outcomes of the unit.

On several occasions, another student had taken advantage of the autonomy afforded to them during the individual practice times to ignore their keyboard entirely and instead socialize with their classmates. Several reminders were issued throughout the course of the unit, but still

this behavior persisted. I had noted in my post-lesson reflections that this student seemed to have “other priorities” in music class. However, it was this very same student, along with two others who had visited the music room during student arrival the morning after one of the lessons. They told me that they had been enjoying the lessons, that they had been having fun, and that they felt positively about my capabilities as a teacher.

The fourth lesson of six featured a significant amount of individual practice time, and also was observed by the Cooperating Teacher, who took notes in accordance with questions relating to student engagement that I had formulated. The CT’s observations noted a negative correlation between student engagement and autonomous student action. A transcription of the document is listed below.

1. Was the class consistently engaged in the lesson?

It fluctuated - at times engagement was under 50%, but when kids knew what to do it was much higher.

2. Was there a change in the level of engagement over the course of the lesson?

Yes, I noticed a decrease in engagement as the lesson went on, specifically in the practice time section.

3. How would you rate the level of engagement of the class on a scale from one to four, where one is the least engaged, and four is the most engaged?

At the start a three, by the end a two.

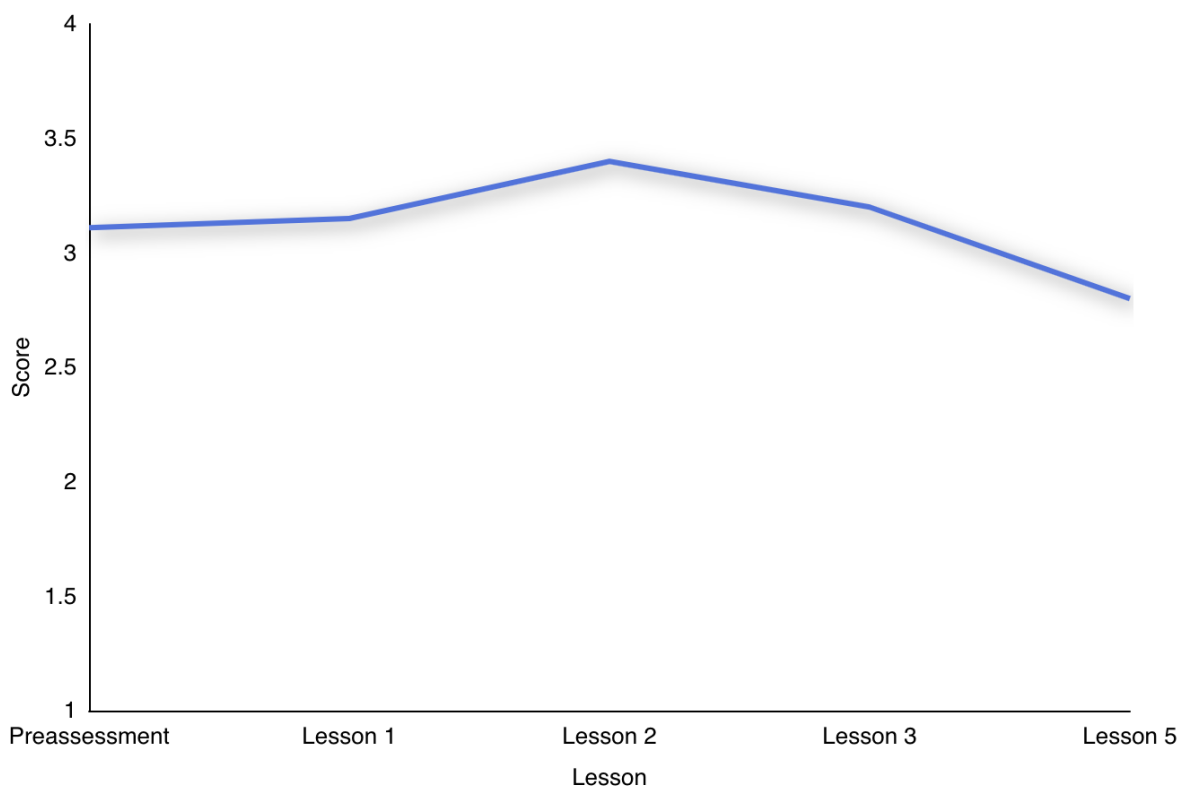
4. How could the TC modify their instruction to increase engagement?

Your wait time has improved and that is helping. Try fewer words on slides and very simple clear directions and expectations for “less structured” practice time. Be really specific about what you want them to be doing to practice.

The data from the engagement self-assessment (see Figure 2) corroborated the observations from the Cooperating Teacher.

Figure 2

Class Average Engagement Score by Lesson



Lesson five of six, similarly to the fourth lesson, featured a significant amount of individual practice time, and consequently yielded the lowest average engagement score of 2.8, lower even than the 3.11 average preassessment engagement score. During the second and fourth lessons, students were instructed to use their free time to work with their “Blues Buddies” in order to complete peer assessments according to the rubric seen in Figure 1. The performance skills listed on the rubric were labeled “Swing” and “Numbers”. Swing refers to the practice of performing eighth notes in an uneven manner (Long-Short) as opposed to the even manner of performing them that is implied in the standard notation. In teaching them how to swing, I

instructed the students to say and think “Doo-bah”, instead of the commonly used “Ti-Ti” rhythm syllables popularized by practitioners of the Kodály music education method, and used a customized variation of the standard notation to differentiate the swing eighth notes. Numbers refers to the number/note associations that were essential for the execution of the standard twelve bar blues form that would be featured in the summative performance assessment, and were represented by color coded circles clearly equating a number with its note (See Figure 3).

Figure 3

Electronic Keyboard with Note Names and Color Coding



This instance of student autonomy similarly generated mixed results. Despite the clearly defined rubric printed on the checklist itself, as well as multiple clarifications provided by the Teacher Candidate, there were a number of assessments that were either not completed properly, or not completed at all. Instead of the expected numerical values from one to four, there were

results such as checkmarks, zeros, numerical values greater than four, boxes crossed out, or left blank (See Figure 4). These peer assessments had been devised as a method for collecting data that would then be paired with data from the teacher-directed assessments in order to track student growth over time. The wide variance in the results of these peer assessments rendered all of the peer assessment data inadmissible for the purpose of this research project.

Figure 4

Example of an Incompleted Peer Assessment

Blues Buddy Checklist Day 2

Rate your buddy on a scale from 1 to 4, and give them feedback!

Swing: 1 = Not Swinging 2 = Sometimes Swinging 3 = Often Swinging 4 = Always Swinging

Numbers: 1 = Not Playing ADE 2 = Playing One Note 3 = Playing Two Notes 4 = Playing Three Notes

Name: _____ **Name:** _____

Swing

Numbers

Certainly in these cases my students were simply completing the assessments as they understood them—for instance, perhaps my student who wrote “100” on their peer assessment were of the opinion that their peer had completely mastered that particular performance skill—and all of them were exercising their sense of personal agency and autonomy as had been afforded to them. There were more examples of non-academic autonomous student action that helped paint a more complete picture of my students’ attitudes, such as my students who volunteered to help me

pass out clipboards, or students who freely and willingly changed seats to help complete peer assessments or group assignments in the event of student absences. These autonomous acts showed that my students were altruistic, generous, kind, flexible, and capable, all qualities that cannot be so easily quantified on a half-page rubric.

Inconsistent Correlation Between Engagement and Proficiency

As I was in the process of designing the unit, one of my hypotheses was that there would be a significant and observable positive correlation between student engagement and proficiency in the performance skills listed on the rubric. This hypothesis made intuitive sense to me, and I had implemented a series of data collection points for measuring both student engagement via self-assessment, as well as performance skills via peer assessment and teacher-directed assessment in order to support this hypothesis. However, during instruction of the unit, I was forced to collect less data than originally planned due to lack of instructional time. Putting aside that initial disclaimer, there is enough data to suggest that my original assertion has not been supported. While there are specific cases in which student engagement and performance proficiency goes hand in hand, there are enough cases of inconsistency between these two variables to suggest that there is much more to the story than I originally had thought. Take for instance this series of cases mentioned in my post-lesson audio reflections.

Student #1

Self-engagement score of one, swing score of four, numbers score of four. Really very much the same story as another student. However, I'm interested... I mean, I'm curious because they were one of the ones referenced in my supplemental reflection. They are one of the ones who reached out to me on a more personal level and said that they were enjoying what they were doing here.

So maybe just having a bad day I suppose? But they are proficient in these skills. They are passing.

Student #2

Self-engagement score of one, swing score of four; numbers score of four. I think I am seeing this pattern a lot, where they are self-reporting to be not at all engaged in the lesson, but as far as what I am asking them to do, they're passing with flying colors. It's awesome. It's really, it's awesome to see that. I guess I would rather have that than the other way around, you know? Like, I guess I would rather have that. I just... The engagement self-assessment thing, it's been tricky this whole time anyway, you know. The question is, how do you even measure this in the first place? How do you even get data about self-determination theory?

Student #3

Again, it's an interesting story where we got a self-engagement score of one, but a swing score of four, and a numbers score of four. They're proficient, but they're not engaged. I think the story with this one, more often than not, when I see numbers like this, these are the kids that are bored. These are the kids that are thinking to themselves "This is so easy", and they want a challenge, but I have been really struggling with figuring out how to offer them their extra challenge while also not losing the rest of the kids. Also, just trying to do that with whole group instruction is rough. Like, how do you sort them into small groups accurately, and then be able to provide different lessons for the different groups to engage them on different levels?

Student #4

Higher engagement than I expected. Engagement score was three, swing score was four; numbers score was four. I used to think that they didn't care, but now they are showing that they care enough to demonstrate that they can do it, you know? There is something that I find so

interesting about this student, because they go so quickly between being totally shut down, totally disengaged, to then smiling, talking, and showing me that they know how to play the swing and the numbers. They are capable. They are entirely capable. They're proficient.

These excerpts were drawn from lesson five of six, during which I conducted the teacher-directed assessments of the students' performance skills that I would then later utilize to calculate their final grades for the unit. By this time in the teaching of the unit, I had witnessed enough of the students' behavior, and had collected enough data related to the engagement self-assessment that I was able to see these patterns and make some conjectures about those patterns.

In comparing and contrasting the data related to the engagement self-assessment to the data related to the students' final grades, some interesting patterns can be seen. Consider the following table seen in Figure 5 (Three students have been omitted from the table on account of a lack of relevant data).

Figure 5

Comparison of Engagement Self-Assessment Averages to Final Grades

Student #	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Average Engagement Score	2.6	3.6	3.75	4	3.4	3	3.4
Final Grade	4	4	4	4	4	3	4

Student #	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Average Engagement Score	2.8	3.4	3.4	2.25	4	3.75	3.2
Final	4	4	4	3	4	4	3

Grade							
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Student #	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Average Engagement Score	2.2	3	2.4	2.8	2.4	3.66	3.4
Final Grade	3	3	4	4	4	3	4

By analyzing this data further, we can more clearly see the pattern that I had recounted via anecdotal recollection in my post-lesson audio reflections. Four out of twenty-one students, or approximately 19%, had engagement self-assessment averages that were equal to their final grades. Two out of twenty-one students, or approximately 10%, had engagement self-assessment averages that were greater than their final grades. Fifteen out of twenty-one students, or approximately 71%, had engagement self-assessment averages that were less than their final grades. Of the students who had engagement self-assessment averages that were greater than their final grade, the largest disparity (Student #20) was .6, or 15% greater than their final grade. Of the students who had engagement self-assessment averages that were less than their final grade, the largest disparity (Student #19) was 1.6, or 40% less than their final grade. These data corroborate the pattern I had observed.

At the culmination of lesson six of six, I had provided each student with the opportunity to reflect upon what they had learned over the course of the unit. These reflections can give more insight into what engagement looked like for each of these categories of student. I have chosen Student #4 to represent the students whose engagement self-assessment averages were equal to their final grade, Student #20 to represent the students whose engagement self-assessment

averages were greater than their final grade, and Student #19 to represent the students whose engagement self-assessment averages were less than their final grade (See Figures 6, 7, and 8).

Figure 6

Final Reflection from Student #4

What did you learn? What was your favorite part?

I learned that playing
together is teamwork
my favorite part was
the B.S.

This reflection is thoughtful, and I find it to be an honest evaluation of the SEL competencies that were embedded into the unit. “Playing together is teamwork”, this quote shows that the peer assessment and group work portions of the unit had an impact on the student’s internalization of the instructional material.

Figure 7

Final Reflection from Student #20

What did you learn? What was your favorite part?

to stop and write when we were
on part 5.

This student may have been referring to lesson three of six, in which students were tasked with writing their own original blues lyrics. Both this and the reflection seen in Figure 6 reference the number 5 in some way, but I have not been able to ascertain exactly what it means in this context.

Figure 8

Final Reflection from Student #19

What did you learn? What was your favorite part?

Nothing I know kind out

This reflection is typical of the student's demeanor and affect during the course of the unit, however I will restate that their lack of engagement did not seem to have any impact on their ability to demonstrate proficiency in the performance skills listed on the rubric seen in Figure 1. Furthermore, this particular student did participate in the extension provided by the teacher and wrote original lyrics, suggesting that their low engagement scores do not tell the entire story.

The last thing to note in this section is that much in the same way that proficiency in the performance skills listed on the rubric did not consistently correlate with student engagement, proficiency did not correlate with success during the summative performance assessment. Upon

reviewing the video footage, it would appear that a very small minority of the class were able to apply their competence with the performance skills in a live setting.

Individuals Connecting to Their Lived Experience

The unit was designed in such a way that all the core aspects of performing a piece of blues music would be taught in sequence, starting with the standard twelve bar blues chord progression, then the swing feel given by playing uneven eighth notes, then finally the AAB form most often utilized in blues lyrics. The classwork related to the first two aspects of blues music did not afford many opportunities for students to connect the instructional material to their own lived experience, however the third aspect was entirely dependent on that kind of relatedness. In this section, I will show that the students' process of composing original lyrics was not only a successful endeavor, but the lesson during which the lyrics were written, the third of six, had observably higher numbers relating to the engagement self-assessment.

Blues lyrics are most often written in an AAB form, meaning that the first two lines are either completely the same text, or feature only slight differences, and the last line is a concluding resolution to the situation described in the first two lines. The way that I framed this relationship to the students was that the A section was a "problem", and the B section was a "solution", with the caveat provided that this "problem" need not be serious, and in fact many a blues song has featured subject matter that was humorous or lighthearted. Regardless of the form used, what is common to all blues lyrics is that they are genuine and heartfelt expressions of the human condition, whether they relate specifically to the lived experience of the author themselves or more generally related to humanity at large. In order to demonstrate the AAB form, as well as the rhyme scheme, and the expressive intent, I showed the class two lyric models that I had created, one of which can be seen in Figure 9.

Figure 9*The Fifth Grade Blues*

The 5th Grade Blues	
A	Problem woke up this morning and I couldn't even find my shoes
A	Problem woke up this morning and I couldn't even find my shoes
B	Solution I'm going to stay in bed, and sing the 5th grade blues

In this lyric model, we see subject matter that is humorous, lighthearted, and developmentally appropriate. The expressive intent is clear. The AAB form is followed exactly, as well as the rhyme scheme (shoes & blues). In order to put these lyrics into even more appropriate context, I performed them for the class both with and without instrumental accompaniment. The same scaffolded process was followed with the other lyric model titled “Mr. Kyle’s Blues”, and referred to my daily frustration of being awoken every day in the early AM by one of my cats and her incessant yowling. I provided the class with the opportunity to write their own lyrics if they wished, and handed out a sheet titled “What’s Your Blues?” which featured sentence frames as a differentiated support that aligned with both of the lyric models that I presented to the class. This assignment was offered as an optional extension with a flexible due date. This particular lesson fell on a Wednesday, if they had not completed the assignment by

the end of class, they could turn it in to their homeroom teacher by the end of day on Thursday, or by the end of day on Friday at the very latest. By my estimation just over half of the class participated in the extension, but only nine of twenty-four, or approximately 38% finished their lyrics by the end of class and handed them back to me. Of the students who took their lyric sheets back to class and could have turned them in by the end of the week, zero students returned their work. A majority of the nine lyric sheets that were returned feature lyrics that are both developmentally appropriate, match the expressive intent laid out in the lyric model, and most importantly connect to the respective author's lived experience. The rhyme scheme by comparison was rarely emulated with accuracy, and there were a few cases of the AAB form not being followed exactly. I will highlight a few of these examples in the following figures, starting with Figure 10.

Figure 10

Blues Lyrics Written by Student #7

What's your Blues?	
A	Problem woke up this morning... and my brother is driving me insane
A	Problem woke up this morning... and my brother is driving me insane
B	Solution I'm going to... just go back into my room.

In these lyrics we see a wholly understandable problem with a responsible and emotionally mature solution. This student was able to connect to their own lived experience in order to emotionally process the daily frustration of having an annoying brother (Something with which I am sure many of us can relate).

Figure 11

Blues Lyrics Written by Student #14

What's your Blues?	
A	Problem woke up this morning... I play Robox and it kick me out
A	Problem woke up this morning... I play Robox and it kick me out
B	Solution I'm going to... restart my ipad.

In these lyrics we see a more humorous take, but still very much aligned with the expressive intent laid out in the lyric models. This student was able to connect to their lived experience in a personal way, and show a level of problem solving oriented thinking that very much is supported by the SEL competencies embedded within the unit.

Figure 12

Blues Lyrics Written by Student #2

What's your Blues?

A	Problem woke up this morning... C O U L D even find my back pack
A	Problem woke up this morning... C O U L D even find my back pack
B	Solution I'm going to... go to school without a back pack

In this example we can see another humorous take on the blues lyrics that references *The 5th Grade Blues* in passing. In their own way this student exemplifies a core aspect of the creative process that involves being influenced by, and building upon the work of others.

Each of these sets of lyrics are unique expressions of their author's perspectives and their daily lives, and show that they are capable of thinking through problems they face in their lives and devising actionable solutions for themselves. In addition to the themes seen in these three examples, common themes in the rest of the lyrics include a general malaise toward school and having to be in attendance, worrying about not having an outfit for the day, sleeping in, as well as enjoying the outdoors and unstructured play time. In general I would consider this assignment to be the greatest success in the unit, and the area in which the students showed the most exemplary work. My only regret in executing this section of the unit is that I did not make "What's Your Blues?" a mandatory assignment, as I believe based on these very positive results that more students would have delivered exemplary lyrics had they been gently compelled to do

so. An additional piece of data that corroborates the overall success of this section of the unit can be seen in Figure 13.

Figure 13

Individual Engagement Scores by Lesson and “Favorites”

	Lesson 1	Lesson 2	Lesson 3	Lesson 5
Student #1	3	3	1	3
Student #2	3	4	4	4
Student #3	3	4	4	4
Student #4		4	4	4
Student #5	3	4	4	3
Student #6	3	3	3	3
Student #7	3	3	4	3
Student #8	3	4	3	1
Student #9	4	4	4	4
Student #10	2	4	4	4
Student #11	1	1	3	4
Student #12	4		4	4
Student #13	4	4	4	3
Student #14	3	3	3	3
Student #15	3	3	1	1
Student #16	3	3	3	3
Student #17	3	3	3	1
Student #18	4	4	2	1
Student #19	4	2	2	2
Student #20	3	4		
Student #21	4	4	4	1
# of "Favorites"	11	16	13	10

This chart shows individual student engagement scores throughout the lesson, highlighting in orange the lessons during which the student self-reported the highest engagement, categorized by the TC as their “Favorites” (Black cells representing absences). Lesson three of six which featured the lyrics scored second highest in this category, only beaten by lesson two of six, which featured the TC playing the alto saxophone in order to demonstrate how to perform blue notes. One can suppose that hearing live music is positively correlated with engagement.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Limitations, and Conclusion

Discussion

Self-Determination Theory is still a relatively new theory of human motivation, with its history in the literature only stretching back fifty years or so, and its implementation in the arena of education and more precisely in the general music classroom more recent still. In such a new field, there is simultaneously the benefit and the drawback of not having many models from which to draw inspiration. I was at times feeling liberated, free to blaze my own path in teaching the unit, and at other times I was frustrated and more than a bit lost in figuring out how to design assessments or data collection methods that aligned with the theory.

Of all the people I researched, the one from whom I took the most influence was Rachel D. Sanguinetti, and specifically her article *Applications of Self-Determination Theory in the General Music Classroom*. In the article she details several approaches to implementing SDT that are organized according to the main three psychological needs and tenets of the theory: Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness. In this section I will go through these specific applications and highlight the ways in which I did or not apply them in my teaching.

Autonomy - Sharing the Outcome - This was intended to be fulfilled both by the peer assessments and the summative performance assessment, but the students didn't take to it as well as I had hoped.

Autonomy - Providing Choice Activities - Student choice was implemented in the unit, most notably in the ability for students to write their own lyrics, which I have mentioned before was the most successful aspect of the research.

Autonomy - Improvisation and Composition - With everything else packed into the unit, there wasn't much room for improvisation and composition. My intent was for students to do a bit of arranging once they were organized into their own bands, but given the lack of time and scaffolding for those separate skills, these opportunities sadly fell by the wayside.

Competence - Emphasizing Effort Over Outcome - I frequently tell my students "do your best!", often just as I am counting them into another blues chorus. I make an effort to incorporate this idea into my teaching regardless of context.

Competence - Growth Over Ability - I had intended to chart student growth over time using multiple data points, but this effort was frustrated by a lack of participation.

Competence - Growth Mindset - This is similarly something that I wish to incorporate into my practice regardless of the context, but I do not believe I was successful in communicating this idea to my students.

Competence - Process Over Final Product - My worry is that having such an emphasis on a summative performance assessment added undue pressure into having a polished final product, and perhaps that is why the final performances were largely not successful.

Relatedness - Encourage Peer Interactions in Learning - The 'Blues Buddy' system was specifically designed with this in mind, but positive results were inconsistent.

Relatedness - Teacher Relationships With Students - Many lessons featured unstructured time which I used to develop relationships with students while conducting assessments.

Relatedness - Supporting Connections With Families and Communities - I invited the students' homeroom teacher, as well as the principal and their assistant to the final performance.

Limitations

Despite the multitude of limitations that seemed to dominate my experience of conducting this research, I did find that I was able to design aspects of the unit to align with all three psychological needs outlined in Self-Determination Theory, and gained some insight into how effective each of these tenets can be in the specific context of the general music classroom.

The theoretical limitations of this project were related to implementing student choice and autonomous student action. I struggled to implement these aspects in a way that did not result in a lessening of student engagement. I often found that after providing students with a framework for spending their unstructured time, that they often ignored the guidance and it was difficult, if not impossible to get certain students back on track. The implication for future researchers is to be very careful and judicious in these periods of unstructured time, and to design strict systems for accountability, as well as provide very simple and very clear expectations for what it is the students are to accomplish with their time.

The methodological limitations of this study were related to a lack of data due to a low level of participation. In many cases it was difficult to encourage students to engage in the process of completing assessments, which left holes in the data that rendered entire swaths of it unusable for the purposes of this study. My efforts were further complicated by the fact that my students were not at all accustomed to needing to write anything down on paper during music class. The implication for future researchers is to get even more creative in their efforts to collect data, and find ways that they can conduct assessments and collect data without requiring too much written input from the students themselves.

The practical limitations of the research were related to a lack of instructional time allotted, just a scant 220 minutes over the course of six lessons. While this seemed a workable amount at first, I very quickly found that what I had planned to accomplish in terms of teacher-directed assessments to gather additional points of data simply was not possible due to a lack of time. In order to teach and scaffold all the different performance skills listed on the rubric in addition to allowing students unstructured time to practice and assess each other, 220 minutes was simply not enough. The implication for future researchers is to either scale down the scope of the unit, perhaps by cutting the summative assessment, or to increase the amount of instructional time and stretch the unit out over more days of instruction.

Conclusion

I can say with certainty that the process of conducting this research, and subsequently writing this paper, has been an incredibly humbling but altogether rewarding experience. I have learned that good teaching requires both the discipline and forethought to create detailed plans ahead of time, as well as the flexibility and presence of mind to adjust those plans at a moment's notice as they will inevitably fall apart. Regarding my research question, "Does utilizing blues music as a vehicle for Self-Determination Theory in the general music classroom increase student engagement?" my answer is that more research is still needed. There are aspects of SDT that are more effective than others, or perhaps my implementation of the less successful aspects were simply lacking. As I have stated, autonomy and student choice actually decrease engagement when they are not implemented with intention. Competence seems not to be correlated to engagement in the way that I had first assumed. However, relatedness seems to be the most powerful and most impactful aspect of SDT in the general music classroom. This is the finding that I will take with me and incorporate into my own practice moving forward.

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