



Trying to Do Too Much?

by Steve Peisch

One might hear an elementary school music teacher say something like, “So far this year we’ve completed a unit on the piano keyboard, a unit on the ukulele, and now we are moving onto a unit on the instruments of the orchestra, followed by a unit on the American musical and a unit on World Music. And each class just had to learn and perform a song for Veteran’s Day!” In my opinion, this music teacher, despite noble intentions, *is trying to do too much*.

Typically, elementary school music teachers see more than 200 students once a week for 40 minutes. It seems unfair to expect them to cover such a wide variety of topics. Why not prepare the students for the ensembles they might join in middle school by focusing on developing *musical skills*? If all (or most) elementary school students learned to sing competently and expressively, learned to play drums, recorders, and keyboards, and learned to decode musical notation, middle school choruses and instrumental ensembles would progress more quickly, a larger percentage of students would join these groups, and students who decided not to join would still benefit from a skills-based approach to music education.

Elementary music teachers could focus their teaching by answering the following questions:

1. What musical skills will my students develop in each lesson and how will the skill development of today’s lesson be continued in the lessons that follow?
2. How will I measure and assess my students’ musical skill development?
3. How will I identify and help the kids who can’t match pitch? Or the kids who can’t move steadily to a simple beat? How will I help these kids overcome these deficiencies so they can feel successful and secure in this class?

Elementary school music teachers should develop sequences of musical skills training that will help students succeed as singers and instrumentalists in middle school instead of providing superficial coverage of such a wide range of topics. Many of us have taught choral and instrumental music at the middle school level and can describe the skills that could help our singers and players, e.g., careful and informed listening, singing and playing in tune and at different volume levels, rhythm reading, etc. We should focus on developing those skills and *stop trying to do too much*.

Steve Peisch directed the Preparatory Theory Program at The New England Conservatory; helped develop the skills-based, interdisciplinary Ninth Grade Program and the Lawrence II Independent Studies Program at Lawrence Academy; directed the chamber music and orchestral program and taught AP Music Theory at Deerfield Academy; ran an integrated arts and sports camp called Summer Mix; and is currently developing a skill-based approach for K-5 music education after having taught at fifteen different elementary schools. His compositions and educational materials are available on <https://www.hundredsrecords.com>.