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Music Teachers' Perceptions of General Music as a Required Middle Level Course

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Abstract

In most middle level schools, the curriculum includes a range of elective courses, often called exploratory courses. General music is one of the many exploratory courses commonly offered in middle level schools across the United States. Educators who teach exploratory courses face numerous challenges related to enrollment, scheduling, budget, curricular content, and more. Exploratory courses are designed to enable middle level students to explore an area of interest or an unfamiliar subject, and the question of whether they are required is often a school- or district-level decision. Using an emergent, qualitative approach to content analysis, I investigated the perceptions of 1,316 middle school music teacher respondents regarding whether general music should be required for all middle grades students. While the music educator respondents were divided on this issue, their reasons revealed interesting perspectives on the purpose of music education

and the functioning of middle level schools. Implications of this study include suggestions for school-level discussions about scheduling, budget, and the purposes of general music within the interdisciplinary middle level curriculum.

Keywords: general music, middle level, exploratory courses, teacher perceptions, music education

The transition from elementary to middle level learning brings many changes to students' daily experience with school. Schedule changes, new classmates, increased homework, and a new school community are just some of the many changes that typically occur when students transition to a middle level learning community. For many students, one of the most significant changes in this transition is the ability to select curricular choices from a range of options offered by the school. According to Haverback and Mee (2016) the middle level curriculum includes those courses considered "core,"¹ such as language arts,

math, science, and social studies, and a range of electives, including the arts, often called “exploratory” courses. According to Haverback and Mee, “while both core and exploratory courses are important for young adolescent development, the exploratory courses allow for students to expand upon their knowledge and skills within an academic area that motivates them” (p. 162). Thus, exploratory courses, particularly those that are electives, satisfy an important young adolescent need: the autonomy to choose academic areas of study based on personal interest or curiosity.

When schools provide young adolescents with the ability to make individual choices about one course over another, they are supporting young adolescents’ developing autonomy and individual identity (Cushman & Rogers, 2008; Lounsbury, 1992; Mee & Haverback, 2016; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). While a relatively benign assertion of autonomy by adult standards, this is an important developmental step for a young adolescent. Choosing electives of interest also allows students to take risks and “try-on” the identities of musician, artist, computer programmer, linguist, and others. Thus, exploratory elective courses provide young adolescents with “opportunities to ascertain their special interests and aptitudes to engage in activities that will broaden their views of the world and themselves” (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010, p. 20). Exploratory courses enable young adolescents who have identified some, but not all, of their talents and interests to consider whether a particular subject area suits their academic and personal interests.

While exploratory courses provide an important opportunity for young adolescent identity development, they also present some challenges for young adolescents and their teachers. First, those schools that separate courses into the categories of “core” and “exploratory,” as described by Haverback and Mee (2016), may implicitly indicate to students that certain courses are more important than others. Music, for example, is often labeled an “exploratory” course, despite being specifically named in the 2015

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) as one of the many “core” subjects that comprise a well-rounded education (GovTrack.us, 2015). Second, exploratory courses often receive less time in the overall curriculum of the school and are sometimes scheduled during common planning time, preventing teachers who teach these courses from participating in team meetings (Duffield, 2013; Erb & Doda, 1989; Haverback & Mee, 2016; Ruggiero, 2014). Third, scheduling of exploratory courses varies by state, district, and the grade level of the student. Some middle level schools provide or require an exploratory “wheel” of short-term courses through which students rotate during the school year while other schools offer semester- or year-long elective courses (Hinckley, 1992; Lounsbury, 1992; Manning, 2003). Finally, depending on school expectations, exploratory courses may not be graded or graded non-consequentially for privileges such as athletic participation (Haverback & Mee, 2016).

Exploratory courses may be required or elective choices, depending on the school community. In designating certain courses as electives, a school community is choosing which courses students must take and which courses they may possibly take based on their interests. Organizational structures, such as scheduling, guide many of these school-level curricular decisions, while other decisions are guided by state mandated curricula. Whether a course is offered, how it is offered, to whom it is offered, whether it is required or optional, and how the course is labeled create a tangle of competing demands within a middle level school community. Although often made at the administrative level, curricular decisions directly affect the experience of both the students and the teachers. This paper investigates one of these tangles from the perspective of teachers: whether music teachers think middle level general music should be a required course.

Middle Level Exploratory Courses and Music Education

In K-12 music education, courses are most commonly divided into categories based on the genre of music studied. In fact, there are separate National Core Arts Standards (State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education [SEADAE], 2014) documents for these divisions. In the United States, there is a strong emphasis on performing ensemble participation serving as music learning once a student reaches the upper elementary grades. Although course offerings

¹ As a music educator, I disagree with the use of the term “core” to refer to only language arts, math, science, and social studies. However, in this paper it is important to make the distinction between those courses commonly considered “core” by school communities and the reality that music is typically considered “non-core,” elective, and/or exploratory. My hope is that better language emerges from the field in the future, particularly given the recognition of both music and the arts as “core” in recent legislation (GovTrack.us, 2015).

vary widely by state and district, most middle level schools and high schools offer band, choir, and/or orchestra. Some schools may also offer niche performing ensembles such as mariachi bands, iPad ensembles, gospel choirs, or steel drum ensembles. These courses are collectively called “performing ensemble” courses because the students learn to perform on their instrument (including voice) and give regular concerts.

The term “general music” is used in the field of music education to broadly describe comprehensive and inclusive musical learning, typically not associated with a specific performance genre (Abril, 2016). General music courses cover a wide variety of musical knowledge and skills and are thus considered comprehensive in their introductory musical learning. Moreover, general music is inclusive because all students are welcomed and encouraged to participate at their own ability level. At the elementary level, all students typically attend music class or general music beginning in kindergarten or first grade and continue throughout their elementary experience. At the middle or high school level, the term general music is used broadly to encompass any music class not focused on public musical performance. Schools and districts call middle level general music by many labels—music enrichment, guitar class, music explorations, class piano, music encore, music technology, and music appreciation are just some of the many labels I have heard in my research. While defining general music by the absence of public performance is simplistic, it does help to categorize the kinds of music classes commonly offered by a school.

The data regarding music education at the middle level are limited. Four studies conducted within the last fifteen years provide some insight into music education at the middle level, including both performing ensembles and general music courses (Abril & Gault, 2008; Give A Note Foundation, 2017; McEwin & Greene, 2011; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016). It is important to note that each study addressed music learning differently, so in some cases the researchers simply provided data demonstrating music course offerings, while in other cases the researchers provided a distinction between required and elective course offerings. I was unable to locate a national study published since 2000 that focused exclusively on middle level music education and provided demographic details regarding music learning experiences available to fifth through eighth grade students in the United States.

Recent data demonstrate that performing ensemble courses predominate the music course offerings in middle level schools. According to the Give A Note Foundation (2017) survey of music teachers, more than 80% of middle level schools offer performing ensembles while 56% offer general music. In an earlier survey of secondary principals, drawn from the membership of a national school administrator organization, Abril and Gault (2008) found that 98% of middle level and high schools surveyed offered some form of music, most commonly band, choir, jazz/rock, and general music. Abril and Gault (2008) also reported that 58% of responding middle/junior high schools specifically *required* students to enroll in some form of music education.

In 2016, a nationally representative sample of 8,800 eighth graders taking the music and visual art portions of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) were asked if they participated in one of the following five musical activities in school: (a) play in a band, (b) play in an orchestra, (c) sing in a chorus or choir, (d) take private singing lessons, (e) take private lessons on an instrument (NCES, 2016). Thirty-eight percent (38%) reported participation in an ensemble—including band (17%), choir (16%), and orchestra (5%)—and 12% reported taking private instrument or vocal lessons. According to data from principals collected as part of the NAEP, only 8% of schools did not offer any form of music; however, 37% of students reported that they did not take a music class. Notably, this survey did not ask these eighth grade students about enrollment in general music despite the identification of general music as one of the most common middle level music course offerings identified by both Abril and Gault (2008) and the Give A Note Foundation (2017).

Outside of music, a 2009 national survey study of randomly selected middle level schools provided some insight into elective and required music courses offered at the middle level (McEwin & Greene, 2011). According to McEwin and Greene (2011), at each grade level five through eight, band and choir were the top two electives offered by schools in 2009. Sixty-eight percent of middle level schools surveyed offered a band elective at fifth grade, increasing to 99% of schools by eighth grade. Similarly, 50% percent of schools offered a choral elective at fifth grade, increasing to 80% of schools by eighth grade. Although orchestra and general music were offered as electives less frequently, these courses were offered by more than a quarter of schools at sixth, seventh, and eighth grade.

One distinction McEwin and Greene (2011) made was between required and elective courses in so-called “non-core subjects.” While band, choir, orchestra, and general music were all listed as elective courses offered by surveyed middle level schools, only general music was listed as a required “non-core subject” course. According to McEwin and Greene’s data, whether general music is required or an elective option for students appears to vary by grade level. At the fifth grade level, general music was required by 81% of the schools surveyed, while the percentage of schools requiring general music thereafter decreased to 23% by eighth grade. In contrast, only 19% of schools offered general music as an elective in fifth grade, but 29% offered this elective in eighth grade. This finding suggests that general music decreases as a required component of the curriculum as students age, but that it remains an elective option alongside other music courses throughout the middle level years at approximately a quarter of middle level schools (McEwin & Greene, 2011).

One issue with the data from each of these recent studies providing insight into music education course offerings at the middle level is that only the Give A Note Foundation (2017) study involved music teachers as participants. All other studies drew primarily from the responses of school principals. While principals are a valuable source of information about the school community, those who teach music education at the middle level possess unique insight into the implications of course electives and requirements.

Middle Level Teachers’ Perceptions

Research in middle level education regarding teacher perceptions focuses either on curricular concerns specific to a particular discipline or disciplines (see Moreau, 2014; Reed, 2015) or on school-wide aspects of middle level implementation. Responding to the latter, researchers have investigated teachers’ perceptions of aspects such as scheduling (Brown, 2001), grading (Carson, 2017; Coats, 2013; Dyb, 2011), advisory (Horn, 2010), ability grouping (Spear, 1994), interdisciplinary teaming (Miller, 2008; Ruggiero, 2014; Stewart, 1997), and common planning time (Anfara & Caskey, 2013; Franz, Thompson, & Miller, 2013; Haverback & Mee, 2013). While all middle level teachers are affected by these school-level issues, existing studies most commonly involve teachers who teach one or more of the “core” subjects: language arts, math, science, and social studies. For example, Akos, Charles, Orthner,

and Cooley (2011) investigated middle level teachers’ perceptions of career-focused curriculum at the sixth and seventh grade level, and only studied teachers of language arts, math, science, or social studies. Similarly, in Brown’s (2001) study on block scheduling, none of the interviewed teachers were teachers from elective courses such as art, music, foreign languages, or physical education. As a consequence, only the perceptions of *some* of the teachers impacted by school-wide aspects of middle level implementation have been addressed in the middle level research literature.

Of the studies reviewed for this project, only two—both investigating teacher perceptions of the interdisciplinary team—explicitly sought to include elective teachers as participants. Ruggiero’s (2014) dissertation investigated the perceptions of core teachers assigned to participate on grade-level teams and compared them to elective teachers at the same school who were not included on any team. Ruggiero found that “non-participation in the interdisciplinary core teams left some of the non-core teachers feeling that they were less important to the middle school educational program” (p. 264). The lack of a shared meeting time or inclusion on the grade level team inculcated the perception in some “non-core” teachers that their chosen subject area marked them as outsiders within the school community. Stewart’s earlier (1997) dissertation, a single case study of a visual art teacher’s inclusion on an interdisciplinary team, found that time for meetings, time management during meetings, and classroom assignments play an important role in the integration of elective teachers into an interdisciplinary team. Although music and other elective teachers are impacted by the school-wide implementation of various middle level structures, their perspectives have rarely been investigated.

Music education researchers have similarly investigated music teachers’ perceptions on a wide range of topics including curriculum integration (Gerber & Gerrity, 2007; Lee-Holms, 2008; May & Robinson, 2016), elementary general music (Abril & Gault, 2006; Kellermeier, 2009; Shouldice, 2013), multicultural music (Petersen, 2005), and the National Standards (Barkley, 2006; Louk, 2002). Despite this variety, only a limited number of studies focus specifically on the perspectives of middle level music teachers (Barrett, 2015; Cronenberg, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2020; Hopkins, 2013; O’Donnell, 2010; Rapp, 2009; Young, 2002). In particular, Young (2002) sought to understand what music teachers (in band, choir, and general music) believed about music

education at the middle level. Young (2002) found love of music and the importance of music education took precedence over age appropriate teaching of young adolescents as the driving motivator for the music teacher participants. In contrast, Barrett (2015) found that a fifth and sixth grade general music teacher grounded her teaching philosophy on the developmental needs of students, or what she described as the ability “to think in the perspective of each child” (p. 153). While the music teachers in Young’s (2002) and Barrett’s (2015) studies present opposite perspectives on the importance of young adolescent development when teaching middle level music, Cronenberg (2016, 2018) found that those music teachers with awareness of *This We Believe* were statistically more likely to be confident in their understanding of young adolescent development. As Young’s (2002) and Barrett’s (2015) findings illustrate, music teachers are not necessarily in agreement about middle level music education, an issue raised by Cronenberg (2017) in a study of two middle level general music teachers with contrasting philosophies of music education.

The present study extends the existing literature on teacher perceptions in middle level education by specifically engaging middle level music teachers on a topic related to the exploratory curriculum. The purpose of this study is to investigate middle level music teachers’ perceptions about requiring students to enroll in one specific middle level music class: general music. Using two items from a larger survey, I sought to answer two questions:

- RQ1: Do middle level music teachers think general music should be required for all middle level students?
- RQ2: What reasons do middle level music teachers give for whether general music should be required, and are there any relationships between this reasoning and a respondent’s answer to RQ1?

Methods

This paper presents the results of two survey items from a larger survey study of middle school music teachers (Cronenberg, 2016, 2018). The two survey items focused on music teachers’ perceptions of middle level general music as a course requirement. The first survey item was a closed-ended question: “Should general music be a required course in middle school?” with three answer choices:

- a. Yes, required for ALL students.

- b. Only required for SOME students.
- c. Not required for ANY students.

Survey respondents were then asked an optional open-ended question: “Would you like to share your reason for your answer choice above?” This open-ended question was added to the survey following pilot testing because numerous pilot respondents used the feedback response area to specifically elaborate on their response to the closed-ended question. These comments suggested that music teachers desired an outlet for further clarifying their reasoning when choosing one of the three answer choices.

Population and Data Collection

In fall 2014, music teacher members of the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) who self-identified as middle school teachers on their membership were invited to participate in a survey about middle school general music (Cronenberg, 2016, 2018). The survey was distributed through an e-mail survey research distribution service offered by NAfME. The overall survey had 1,369 music teacher respondents, a response rate of 8.5% according to the total number of survey invitations ($N = 15,926$) specified by NAfME. While NAfME provides researchers with the ability to send research study requests to members, it does not allow researchers access to the list of recipients, and direct follow-up with non-respondents is prohibited. Thus, accounting for the overall low response rate, these findings cannot be generalized to the total population of middle level music teachers belonging to NAfME nor to music educators nationwide. However, the 1,369 responses provide adequate data for the analyses conducted.

Of the 1,369 respondents to the survey, 1,316 (96%) answered the closed-ended question. For the purposes of this paper, the population will be described as the 1,316 respondents who answered the closed-ended question. These 1,316 respondents have an average of 10.10 years ($SD = 9.39$) of teaching experience. Eighty-five percent of respondents earned a music bachelor’s degree leading to certification and 63% percent of respondents reported specifically teaching middle level general music at some point during their career. Seventy-six percent ($n = 995$) of the closed-ended respondents chose to respond to the open-ended question. Table 1 provides additional demographic details and compares closed-ended respondents to those who answered the open-ended question.

Table 1
 Comparison of Closed-ended and Open-ended Respondent Populations on Closed-ended Question and Demographic Variables

Survey Item	All Respondents to Closed-ended Question <i>N</i> = 1,316		Respondents to Open-ended Question <i>N</i> = 995	
	N	%	N	%
Closed-Ended Question				
Not required for ANY students	252	19.15	204	20.50
Only required for SOME students	349	26.52	301	30.25
Yes, required for ALL students	715	54.33	490	49.25
<i>Total</i>	<i>1,316</i>	<i>100.00</i>	<i>995</i>	<i>100.00</i>
US Geographic Location				
MidAtlantic	94	7.14	68	6.83
Midwest	412	31.31	312	31.36
North East	293	22.26	209	21.01
North West	128	9.73	102	10.25
South	246	18.69	192	19.30
South West	111	8.43	90	9.05
Non Contiguous	17	1.29	15	1.51
No response	15	1.14	7	0.70
<i>Total</i>	<i>1,316</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>995</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Years of Teaching Experience				
0–5	561	42.63	383	38.49
6–10	304	23.10	238	23.92
11–20	243	18.47	198	19.90
21–30	149	11.32	127	12.76
30–50	55	4.18	47	4.72
No Response	4	0.30	2	0.20
<i>Total</i>	<i>1,316</i>	<i>100.00</i>	<i>995</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Music Bachelor’s Degree Leading to Teacher Certification				
Yes	1,122	85.26	849	85.33
No	186	14.13	141	14.17

(Continued)

Table 1
(Continued)

		All Respondents to Closed-ended Question <i>N</i> = 1,316		Respondents to Open-ended Question <i>N</i> = 995	
	No Response	8	0.61	5	0.50
	<i>Total</i>	<i>1,316</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>995</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Experience Teaching Middle School General Music					
	Yes	830	63.07	640	64.32
	No	481	36.55	353	35.48
	No Response	5	0.38	2	0.20
	<i>Total</i>	<i>1,316</i>	<i>100.00</i>	<i>995</i>	<i>100.00</i>

Analysis

The open-ended question responses (*n* = 995) were analyzed using an emergent coding approach to qualitative content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2015; Neuendorf, 2001). Content analysis began with the goal of creating themes that could ultimately be analyzed and presented statistically. First, all open-ended responses were organized alphabetically beginning with the first letter of the response. These alphabetized responses were then used to create a document for initial labeling and note-taking. I read each response, marked details, and notated important ideas, topics, and comments. During initial coding, I kept a record of topics that recurred as I read the responses. After reading and notating all 995 responses, I sorted the notes into categories and a codebook of 15 initial codes was defined (see Table 2). Each open-ended survey response was then reread and coded for one or more of the 15 initial codes. The number of codes for a given response ranged from 1 to 6 (*M* = 1.61, *SD* = 0.75). Fifty-two percent of responses were coded for only one code. Using a spreadsheet, each response was then coded for each of the 15 initial codes using 1 to indicate “yes” the code applied or 0 to indicate “no.” This spreadsheet was then uploaded to STATA16 for further analysis.

Initial descriptive statistics for the 15 codes were generated and reviewed. Nine codes with small counts were then combined into four larger encompassing variables to be used for further analysis (see notes Table 2). For example, the “middle school general music curriculum content” code was combined with the “middle school general

music pedagogical concerns” code to create the variable “Curriculum & Pedagogy.” Responses coded for both of the combined codes were only counted once in the descriptive analysis, such that the seven responses coded for both “middle school general music curriculum content” and “middle school general music pedagogical concerns” were only counted once in the variable “Curriculum & Pedagogy,” thus reducing the combined count from 152 to 145. In addition, one code, “Research Claims,” was initially developed because several respondents couched their response by stating “the research says . . .” without any supporting evidence. This code was ultimately dropped from further analysis due to the low number of applicable responses. The resulting nine variables were used for all subsequent analysis.

Using STATA16, descriptive statistics for each variable were generated. Then, three groups of respondents were created based on the survey respondent’s answer to the closed-ended question. Analysis primarily focused on frequencies and percentages, although t-tests and chi-squared tests were conducted to compare subgroups of the total respondent population.

Results

RQ1: Requiring Middle School General Music

The first research question, “Do middle level music teachers think general music should be required for all middle level students?” was addressed by the music teacher respondents’ (*N* = 1,316) answers to the closed-ended question (see Cronenberg, 2016). More than half (54%, *n* = 715) responded “yes,”

Table 2
Fifteen Initial Codes as a Percentage of the 995 Open-ended Respondents

Code	Description	N	%
Middle School General Music Curriculum Content ¹	Responses focused on the curricular content of a middle school general music course.	128	12.86
Middle School General Music Pedagogical Concerns ¹	Responses focused on pedagogical aspects of teaching middle school general music.	24	2.41
General Music and Elementary School ²	Responses discussed the differences between elementary and middle level learners regarding general music.	73	7.34
Middle School Grade Level Matters ²	Responses discussed how the grade level (5 th –8 th) of the student matters regarding the relevance of general music.	75	7.54
Student Choice	Responses identified student choice as an important characteristic of middle school learning.	146	14.67
Developmental Characteristics of Young Adolescents	Responses identified developmental characteristics as relevant to their reasoning.	130	13.07
General Music and Middle School Students	Responses specifically discussed the importance (or lack thereof) of general music to students in middle level grades.	188	18.89
Holistic Learning ³	Responses focused on the importance of holistic or well-rounded education of which music is a part.	62	6.23
Interdisciplinary Learning ³	Responses focused on the interdisciplinary nature of general music.	70	7.04
Research Claims	Responses stated that “research says . . .”	12	1.21
Administrative Concerns	Responses identified administrative concerns within their school communities.	114	11.46
Priority on Performance Ensembles	Responses emphasized how performance ensembles are more important in the music curriculum.	320	32.16
Arts Learning for All ⁴	Responses identified the importance of all students receiving an arts education (in all arts disciplines).	50	5.03
Music Learning for All ⁴	Responses identified the importance of all students receiving a music education.	171	17.19
Music is Core ⁴	Responses identified music as one of the core subject areas.	35	3.52

Note: Percentages do not add to 100 because individual responses may be coded for multiple codes.

¹Codes combined to create variable “Curriculum & Pedagogy”.

²Codes combined to create variable “Grade Level Matters for General Music”.

³Codes combined create variable “Interdisciplinary and Holistic Learning”.

⁴Codes combined to create variable “Music and Arts are Core for All”.

general music should be required for all middle school students. Twenty-seven percent responded that general music should be required of only some

students, and 19% responded that general music should not be required for any middle grades student.

The demographic differences between the 1,316 respondents to the closed-ended question and the 995 who wrote a response to the open-ended question are presented in Table 1. Independent group t-tests were conducted to compare the 995 open-ended respondents to the 321 non-respondents using the variables presented in Table 3.² There was a statistically significant difference between the two groups and their answers to the closed-ended question: open-ended respondents ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 0.78$) and non-respondents ($M = 2.55$; $SD = 0.74$); $t(569.767) = -5.47$, $p = .0000$. This statistically significant finding suggests those who answered the open-ended question were more likely to possess perceptions that qualify the circumstances under which middle grades students should be required to take middle level general music, whereas those who did not respond to the open-ended question were more likely to have selected the “Yes, required for ALL students” option. Due to this statistically significant finding, the content analysis results presented in this paper may be skewed toward music teachers who did *not* think general music should be required for *all* middle grades students. These results may, in turn, not fully represent the voices of those who supported general music as a requirement for all middle grades students.

There is a statistically significant difference in the number of years teaching between those who responded to the open-ended question ($M = 10.86$, $SD = 9.59$) and those who did not respond ($M = 7.74$, $SD = 8.30$); $t(613.594) = 5.62$, $p = .0000$.³ Respondents to the open-ended question possessed an average of 3.12 more years of teaching experience than non-respondents. To consider whether this difference in number of years teaching impacted music teachers’ responses to the open-ended question, the 995 open-ended respondents were divided into two groups: those with less than eight years teaching experience ($n = 492$, 49.45%) and

² There was a small statistically significant difference on the geography composite variable (see Table 3). Thus, independent group t-tests were conducted on each individual geographic region. There was a statistically significant difference when comparing respondents ($M = 0.21$, $SD = 0.41$) and non-respondents ($M = 0.27$, $SD = 0.44$); $t(490.867) = -2.0114$, $p = 0.04$ on the northeast geography variable. The means overlap at the 95% confidence interval, thus suggesting a small difference. Because this survey can make no claims to national representation and because no statistically significant differences were found on the other geographic variables, this statistically significant finding was not considered an important distinction between the two groups of respondents.

³ Unequal variances assumed, Satterthwaite’s approximation was calculated on all t-tests.

those with eight or more years teaching experience ($n = 501$, 50.45%).⁴ Eight years was chosen as the closest marker to the average of 7.74 years of experience of the non-responders. Chi-squared analyses were conducted using each of the nine content analysis variables and the only statistically significant finding was related to the variable labeled “administrative concerns,” $\chi^2(1, N = 993) = 11.53$, $p = .001$. This finding suggests that, of the respondents to the open-ended question, music teachers with eight or more years of teaching experience were more likely to express reasoning related to administrative concerns than were those with fewer than eight years of teaching experience. Thus, those who did not respond to the open-ended question might have been less likely to express administrative concerns than those who did respond.

RQ2: Music Teachers’ Reasoning for Requiring (Or Not Requiring) Middle School General Music

The second research question asked: “What reasons do middle level music teachers give for whether general music should be required, and are there any relationships between this reasoning and a respondent’s answer to RQ1?” This portion of the analysis focused on the content analysis of the 995 responses to the open-ended question: “Would you like to share your reason for your answer choice above?”

Music teachers provided a variety of reasons for choosing a particular response to the closed-ended question, ranging from specific grade level curricular concerns to broader philosophical or administrative concerns. As described above, all responses were coded for one of nine variables defined through the content analysis process. Each variable represented more than 11% of the total (see Table 4). The variable coded most often was “priority on ensembles” ($n = 320$, 32.16%) while the variable coded least frequently was “administrative concerns” ($n = 114$, 11.46%).

The remainder of this analysis focuses on the relationships between the variable coding on the open-ended responses and the respondents’ choice on the closed-ended question. Variable descriptions and open-ended example responses for each of the nine variables are displayed by the respondent’s answer to the closed-ended question in Table 5. Figure 1 presents a graphical representation of the distribution

⁴ Two respondents did not provide a response to the demographic question about their years of teaching experience and thus this analysis used 993 respondents.

Table 3
Independent Group T-tests for Open-ended Question Respondents and Non-Respondents

Variable	Open-ended Response	N	M	SD	t	df	Pr(T > t)																																												
Response to Closed-Ended Question	Yes	995	2.29	0.78	-5.4730	569.767	0.0000																																												
	No	321	2.55	0.74				US Geographic Location (Composite Variable Created)	Yes	988	4.37	1.89	-1.9578	546.868	0.0508	No	313	4.60	1.80	Years of Teaching Experience	Yes	993	10.86	9.59	5.6177	613.594	0.0000	No	319	7.74	8.30	Music Bachelor’s Degree Leading to Teacher Certification	Yes	990	0.86	0.35	-0.4331	536.375	0.9676	No	318	0.86	0.35	Experience Teaching Middle School General Music	Yes	993	0.64	0.48	1.4949	523.876	0.1355
US Geographic Location (Composite Variable Created)	Yes	988	4.37	1.89	-1.9578	546.868	0.0508																																												
	No	313	4.60	1.80				Years of Teaching Experience	Yes	993	10.86	9.59	5.6177	613.594	0.0000	No	319	7.74	8.30	Music Bachelor’s Degree Leading to Teacher Certification	Yes	990	0.86	0.35	-0.4331	536.375	0.9676	No	318	0.86	0.35	Experience Teaching Middle School General Music	Yes	993	0.64	0.48	1.4949	523.876	0.1355	No	318	0.60	0.49								
Years of Teaching Experience	Yes	993	10.86	9.59	5.6177	613.594	0.0000																																												
	No	319	7.74	8.30				Music Bachelor’s Degree Leading to Teacher Certification	Yes	990	0.86	0.35	-0.4331	536.375	0.9676	No	318	0.86	0.35	Experience Teaching Middle School General Music	Yes	993	0.64	0.48	1.4949	523.876	0.1355	No	318	0.60	0.49																				
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	No	318	0.86	0.35				Experience Teaching Middle School General Music	Yes	993	0.64	0.48	1.4949	523.876	0.1355	No	318	0.60	0.49																																
Experience Teaching Middle School General Music	Yes	993	0.64	0.48	1.4949	523.876	0.1355																																												
	No	318	0.60	0.49																																															

Note: Unequal variances assumed, Satterthwaite’s approximation calculated. Totals vary slightly due to missing data.

of the three closed-ended responses across each of the nine variables.

Music Learning for All or Priority on Ensembles? The two variables with the highest number of responses coded were “priority on ensembles” (*n* = 320) and “music and arts are core for all” (*n* = 252). Fifty-one percent of respondents (*n* = 510) wrote a response coded for one of these two variables (62 responses were coded for both variables). Responses coded for “priority on ensembles” focused on the importance of band, choir, or orchestra participation over general music, as shown in the following example.

If they are getting music via performing ensembles then I don’t think general music should be required. (1176)⁵

Responses coded for “music and arts are core for all” focused on the importance of music and arts learning being available to students as part of essential core learning for middle grades students. For example, one respondent said:

⁵Numbers in parentheticals following quotes indicate the survey respondent’s randomly assigned numerical identifier.

I think that music should be required for all students grades K–12. If students are not participating in a performing ensemble in middle school, then they should take general music. That said, I would support a general music class for all students, regardless of performing ensemble enrollment. I think that general music teachers have a unique opportunity to address the history and appreciation of music and make a variety of music styles more relevant and accessible to students as compared to an ensemble director, where so much time is spent on learning technique (also important, of course). In an ideal world, music would be a required, meets-everyday subject like math. (256)

The “priority on ensembles” and “music and arts are core for all” variables represented more than half of the total open-ended responses and represent two contrasting perspectives on the issue of requiring general music for all students. For the “priority on ensembles” variable, the majority of respondents (60%) selected the “only required for some students” option on the closed-ended question. In contrast, the majority of responses (59%) coded for the “music and arts are core for all” variable were from respondents who selected the “required for all students” option on the closed-ended question. Those who perceived general music as important for all students

Table 4
Variable Coding Totals and Percentages by Response to Closed-ended Question

	Total (N = 995)			Significance of crosstabs between Variable and Closed-ended Question ^a (N = 995)			Breakdown by Response to Closed-Ended Question(percentage based on row total)					
	Total (N = 995)		χ^2	p	Φ_V	Not Required for Any Students (n = 204)		Only Required for Some Students (n = 301)		Required for All Students (n = 490)		
	n	%				n	%	n	%	n	%	
Curriculum & Pedagogy	145	14.57	24.98	0.000	0.16	21	14.48	25	17.24	99	68.28	
Grade Level Matters for General Music	142	14.27	18.11	0.000	0.13	45	31.69	48	33.80	49	34.51	
Student Choice	146	14.67	157.63	0.000	0.40	83	56.85	45	30.82	18	12.33	
Developmental Characteristics	130	13.07	71.79	0.000	0.27	10	7.69	11	8.46	109	83.85	
General Music & MS Students	188	18.89	19.90	0.000	0.14	42	22.34	32	17.02	114	60.64	
Interdisciplinary and Holistic Learning	127	12.76	107.78	0.000	0.33	1	0.79	9	7.09	117	92.13	
Administrative Concerns	114	11.46	14.52	0.001	0.12	31	27.19	46	40.35	37	32.46	
Priority on Ensembles	320	32.16	247.18	0.000	0.50	75	23.44	193	60.31	52	16.25	
Music & Arts are Core for All	252	25.33	21.23	0.000	0.15	28	11.11	75	29.76	149	59.13	

Note: $df = 2$ on all χ^2 tests

^aUsing the Holm-Bonferroni correction to account for familywise error rates, all tests $p \leq 0.001$ remained statistically significant.

Table 5
Sample Open-ended Responses for Each Variable Presented by Response to the Closed-ended Question

Variable	Variable Description	Sample Responses		
		Not Required for Any Student	Only Required for Some Students	Required for All Students
Curriculum & Pedagogy	Responses focused on the curricular content or pedagogical approach used in a middle school general music course.	<p>I feel that when you just teach principles of music and don't have the students involved in the music everything you say is falling [on] deaf ears. They need to experience the principles you are teaching so it is a part of them not just something to memorize. Experiencing the music is the only way to teach. (1139)</p> <p>Until more specific curriculum for students and more support for teachers can be established, general music should not be a requirement. (185)</p>	<p>I think there should be elective courses that have different ways of teaching musical concepts depending on the level of expertise/interests of the student. (1374)</p> <p>A lot depends on the curriculum and how the subject is delivered to the student, since the middle school age is very complex. (1389)</p>	<p>General music courses have a different emphasis than performance ensembles. They teach broad musical skills, and can introduce students to a broad range of musical styles and repertoire that are not limited to the specific genre of their performance medium (band, orchestra, chorus). A basic understanding of this wide range of music is important for all students to be culturally proficient. (428)</p> <p>I think if it is done correctly and focuses on the appreciation of music in a way that students can relate to, then yes. It should be done in a way that teaches skills students will utilize for the rest of their lives, regardless of their musical talent or ability or the desire to be a musician. However, if it turns into a class that forces note and rhythm reading, then students will not relate to it. (248)</p>

<p>Grade Level Matters for General Music</p>	<p>Responses identified particular grades over others as appropriate for general music.</p>	<p>I think “General Music” class should end after the 5th grade. Then, I think the students need to decide on an ensemble to participate in . . . such as orchestra, band or chorus. Students need to have that ensemble experience and focus on a specific instrument, so they do not get bored with a class they have already had for 7+ years! (984)</p>	<p>All students in certain grade levels (5th/6th Grade - dependent upon what your middle school grade levels are) and optional for 7th & 8th Grade students interested in music should be offered different general music courses (guitar, music technology, etc.) (779)</p>	<p>General music is an important continuation of the Elementary School music class. By 5th grade the children should have a good understanding, and facility using, musical elements, musical concepts (i.e. solfege, rhythm), and use of their singing voice. Middle School provides an opportunity for the children to work on and apply these skills in more complex situations including more popular music, extended world music experiences in comparison with the traditional western canon, study of modes, and greater ensemble experiences (both instrumental and vocal). I believe general music should be provided to 6th and 7th grade students as a requirement in addition to being able to select to sing in a choir or participate in band. This can only strengthen the 2 ensemble experiences mentioned. In 8th grade, students should be allowed to select from a list of music courses that would reflect directly to their interest level. If a student does not self-identify as “musical” by the 8th grade, a general music appreciation course should be offered. (454)</p>
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(Continued)

Table 5
(Continued)

		Sample Responses		
Variable	Variable Description	Not Required for Any Student	Only Required for Some Students	Required for All Students
Student Choice	Responses identified student choice as an important characteristic of middle school learning.	I believe that by middle school, students who have had foundational general music education in the elementary grades are old enough to make the choice to continue their study or music or to pursue other interests. (615)	I feel the middle school is a time to start making choices about what they want to do, and I think that a general music class might be the hook for those not already committed to band or choir. However, I feel like students should only have to take one general music class, not every year of middle school. (417)	At the middle school age students are not usually sure exactly what they like or what they want to do. I believe that doing a rotation during the 6 th grade year of the electives (choir/music, Art, PE, etc.) allows students to get a taste for the electives and then have a better formulated opinion of what elective they would like to pursue. I wish my school had this rotation, as I constantly have 6 th graders either trying to get out of my class or joining my class. (191)
Developmental Characteristics	Responses identified developmental characteristics as relevant to their reasoning.	At that age students are becoming aware of their strengths and weaknesses and should be allowed to experience a variety of arts to discover things they enjoy, succeed at and might want to pursue in the future. (75)	I think middle school is a time to explore many interests. Some students have no interest in music, are not talented in that area, and never will be. For those students coming to music class is torture, and then it is difficult for them to focus and participate as expected. (1175)	Middle school students should have general music because their brains are being molded, and they are figuring out who they are. These students should have as many opportunities as they can so that when they are [having] to choose in high school they already have ideas of what they want to do and who they are. Teenagers need to have teachers that they can reach out to, and music teachers are usually that person. Music teachers hold this role because students feel like they can be vulnerable with them as they perform in front of them almost daily. (534)

<p>General Music and Middle School Students</p>	<p>Responses specifically discussed the importance (or lack thereof) of general music to students in middle level grades.</p>	<p>At the middle school age level, students are curious and searching for artistic outlets for self-expression; a general music course would be boring and pointless to a majority of this particular age. (1435)</p>	<p>General Music is very valuable as a musical outlet for students who are interested in a nonperformance musical experience. It is also valuable as a place to offer specific musical projects, such as African Drumming, World Music Study, or Composition. However, districts often use it as a schedule-filler or a dumping ground for students with high behavioral issues who make it harder for others to have quality music experiences. (736)</p>	<p>I believe general music in middle school should provide all students with an opportunity to create, perform and respond to music, regardless of whether or not they chose to learn an instrument or join chorus. General music gives those non-music students the opportunity to create something they can be proud of, the challenge of thinking “outside the box,” of learning a second language, and to express themselves in ways they do not get to in other subjects. Even the instrumental/choral students gain from general music, because they have an opportunity to perform in different ways than they are used to. All students benefit from taking general music, whether or not they maintain the skill they acquired past that year. The act of participating in music will strengthen synapses in the brain, leading to a stronger academic performance. (220)</p>
<p>Interdisciplinary and Holistic Learning</p>	<p>Responses focused on the importance of general music to the interdisciplinary, cross-curricular, holistic, and well-rounded aspects of middle level education.</p>	<p>General music should be integrated into a performance class, as an enhancer for a performance class, or integrated into math/social studies. (837)*</p>	<p>For ensemble students, General music is highly recommended for a well-rounded music experience, particularly students who express interest in possibly pursuing music as a career; however, it shouldn't be a requirement. (426)</p>	<p>In order for us [music educators] to be part of the discussion for interdisciplinary education and the whole child we need to be a required subject. What other subject allows students to learn about history, art, culture, and literature all at once which allows students to have deeper understandings of the past. (1003)</p>

(Continued)

Table 5
(Continued)

Variable	Variable Description	Sample Responses		
		Not Required for Any Student	Only Required for Some Students	Required for All Students
Administrative Concerns	Responses identified administrative concerns within their school communities.	<p>In my experience, General Music turns out to be a place for counselors and administrators to put students who have nowhere else to be. For the teacher, it becomes a laboratory for creative discipline management. I would rather see students in an organization like band, choir, orchestra, or similar skill-based organizations. In such settings, even potentially difficult students find a niche. Another issue is scheduling. If General Music were to be required, limited elective hours would likely be affected, which would mean an adverse effect on performing organizations in many places. (260)</p>	<p>Ideally, it should be taught in middle school. Realistically, at the school I teach, there is hardly time for the arts. It would be difficult to add another course to their already busy schedule. (1221)</p>	<p>I do believe general music should be a required course in middle school. I think that, if the resources are available, middle school general music can be a time where students get to dive further into the music technology side of music education. Students can use the technology to create and perform music, as well as learn more about the music producing/arranging side of things. I think that a lot of [the] time middle school general music classes are seen as a dumping ground for the students who do not continue on into music through band, orchestra, or choir. Teachers, administration, and the students should work together to correct this thought and make the classes meaningful and exciting for the students. (1344)</p>

<p>Priority on Ensembles</p>	<p>Responses emphasized how performance ensembles are more important in the music curriculum.</p>	<p>There's a limited amount of time devoted to music in their schedule. I think by the middle school years this time is best spent learning an instrument. (169)</p>	<p>Band and Choir students should not be required to take general music in MS because it causes scheduling conflicts not allowing some kids to be able to participate in performance groups. (1238)</p>	<p>It helps strengthen the students who are involved in music ensembles and educates the students who are not. (831) I feel general music should be available for all students. However, if schedules conflict like mine, then it should be for students not involved in a performance group (band, choir, orchestra). (767)</p>
<p>Music & Arts are Core for All</p>	<p>Responses identified the importance of all students receiving music and/or arts as part of the core curriculum.</p>	<p>I believe that some form of music education SHOULD be required, but not necessarily general music. (1103)</p>	<p>If we place the same importance on music that we do on the other subjects that are required, some form of music education is essential at every grade. Students not participating in choir, band or orchestra should have access to another form of music education. (1118)</p>	<p>Music should be treated like a core subject and not an elective. General music should be required for all students. However, participation in ensembles (i.e., band, choir, orchestra) could be optional. (1453)</p>

*Only response coded from a respondent in this group

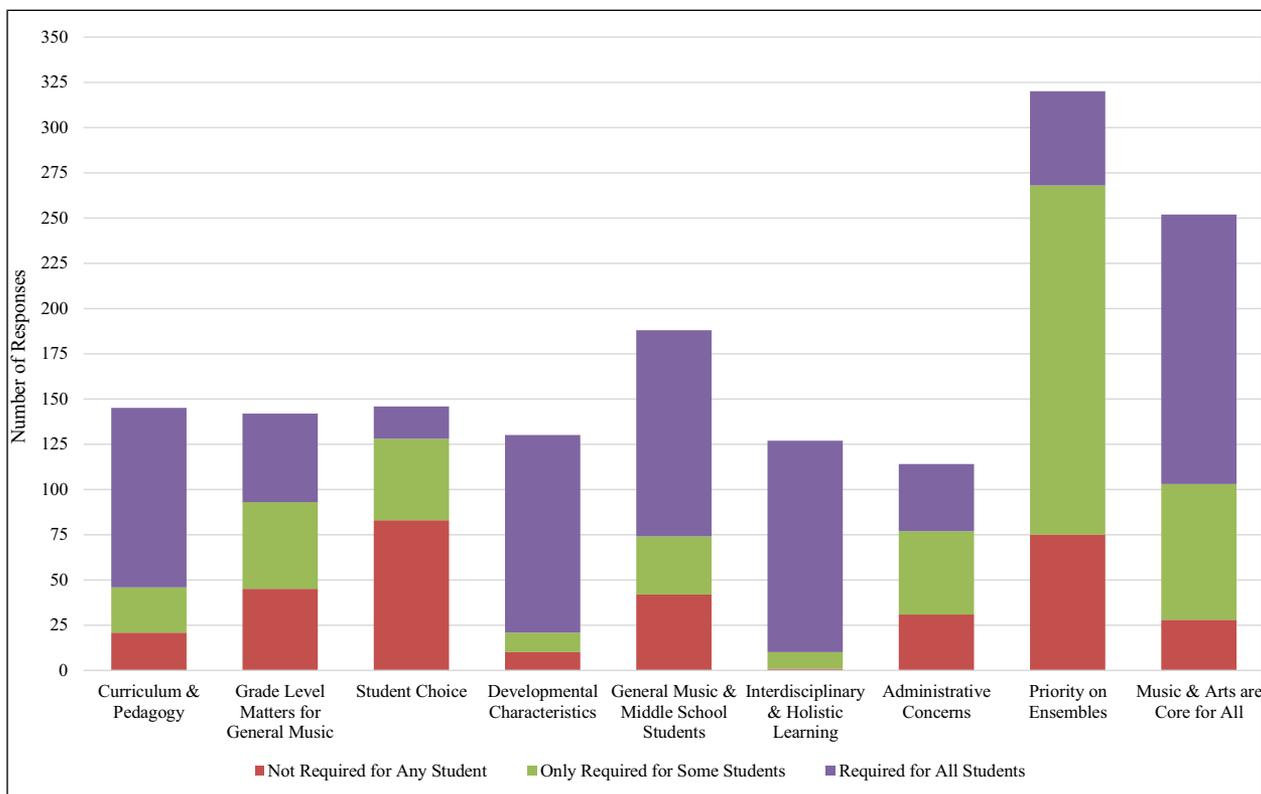


Figure 1. Nine Variables by Group. This figure shows the number of responses coded for each of the nine variables broken down by the response to the closed-ended question

emphasized that all students deserve music education and thought general music should be required for all students. In contrast, those who thought general music should be required only for some focused on the importance of allowing students who participate in ensembles to be excused from a general music requirement. While they value music learning, those music teacher respondents who prioritize ensembles think that only those students not enrolled in band, choir, or orchestra should be required to take general music.

Interdisciplinary and Holistic Learning. An overwhelming percentage of responses (92%, $n = 117$) coded for the “interdisciplinary and holistic learning” variable were provided by respondents who believed that middle grades general music should be required for all students. These responses emphasized cross-curricular connections made in general music and the important role general music plays in developing a well-rounded young adolescent, as indicated by the following examples:

Music is a fantastic resource for students to understand the commonalities in different cultures

and can serve as an outstanding format of understanding American and World history through music. (368)

For students to be well rounded, it is essential for them to participate in a music course. (246)

This finding suggests that these music teachers perceived general music as helping all young adolescents develop as individuals, particularly in their ability to think across the disciplines, regardless of students’ participation in another music course offered by the school.

Middle Level Specific Concerns. Two variables, “grade level matters for general music” and “administrative concerns,” were approximately evenly distributed across the three groups of respondents. Respondents to the “grade level matters for general music” variable felt that whether or not general music should be required for middle level students depended on the middle level grade under consideration. For example, a number of respondents identified fifth and sixth grade as important for requiring general music, but not seventh or eighth.

The other variable with nearly even distribution across the three groups of respondents was the variable representing respondents' concerns about the administrative aspects of requiring (or not) general music in the middle grades. These responses often related to the limitations of scheduling or students uninterested in the course. Other administrative concerns included lack of curricular or grading support, as the following response noted:

Unless the district values [general music] and administration supports it by requiring student music assessments to count towards privileges like sports participation or passing a grade level, general music in middle school will not be taken seriously by students, parents, or academic colleagues. (240)

In particular, several of those with administrative concerns also referred to a required general music class as a “dumping ground” or place where students are “dumped” by administrators.

Districts often use [general music] as a schedule-filler or a dumping ground for students with high behavioral issues who make it harder for others to have quality music experiences. (736)

I think that a lot of time middle school general music classes are seen as a dumping ground for the students who do not continue on into music through band, orchestra, or choir. Teachers, administration, and the students should work together to correct this thought and make the classes meaningful and exciting for the students. (1344)

Based on the even distribution of responses, both administrative and grade level specific issues were concerns for music educators regardless of their perspective on whether general music should be required for all middle grades students.

Developmentally Appropriate Learning for Young Adolescents. Although providing students with choices is a developmentally appropriate strategy for young adolescents, student choice was separated from other young adolescent developmental characteristics because initial qualitative coding suggested that respondents specifically used the word “choice” frequently in their responses. The quantitative results supported this separation because 146 responses were coded for the “student choice” variable and 130 were coded for “developmental characteristics.” Only eight responses (0.8%) were coded for both variables, X^2

(1, $N = 995$) = 8.67, $p = .003$. Together, these two variables that focused on young adolescent development represented 27% ($n = 268$) of the total responses. When these two codes were combined into a single theme, the responses were fairly evenly distributed across the three response groups: Not Required for Any Student, $n = 93$ (33.70%), Only Required for Some Students, $n = 56$ (20.29%), Required for All Students, $n = 127$ (46.01%). In contrast, when these two codes were separated, they revealed a difference in reasoning across the three respondent groups (see Table 4). Those who specified reasoning related to developmental characteristics of young adolescents overwhelmingly selected the “required for all students” response (84%), while 82% of those who identified student choice as their reasoning selected one of the two options that enabled student flexibility in curricular requirements.

Discussion

In this study, I sought to understand middle level music teachers' perceptions regarding general music as a requirement in the middle level curriculum. The results suggest that music educators are divided—nearly in half—regarding their perceptions on this issue. While just over half of the respondents chose the response requiring general music for all students, nearly as many music educators felt that general music should be required only for those students not participating in ensembles or not required of any student and only offered as an elective offering. This finding alone suggests a division in the field of music education at the middle level regarding a general music requirement. But it does not provide middle level administrators with a firm, consensual voice from music educators on this issue. The reasons middle level educators provided for their answer choice illuminate some important factors impacting the work of music educators in middle level schools, but also point to additional research that needs to be done in this arena.

Music Teacher Alignment with Middle Level Philosophy

Those survey respondents who supported including general music as a required course at the middle level emphasized aspects of general music that align with middle level philosophy. These respondents were attuned to the comprehensive and inclusive nature of general music (Abril, 2016) as well as the importance of music as a core subject (GovTrack.us, 2015). Many of these educators argued that music education is part of a holistic education that will enable young

adolescents to develop into well-rounded adults. In articulating responses related to the interdisciplinary and holistic nature of general music learning, these teachers aligned their views not only with important principles in general music but also with the integrative and relevant aspects of middle level curriculum as stated in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010). Music educators who support general music as a requirement for all students align their reasoning with some aspects of middle level philosophy.

Future research might build on this study to further examine the connection between music teachers' perceptions of general music curriculum and their alignment with middle level philosophy. Although few music teachers report awareness of *This We Believe*, Cronenberg (2016, 2018) found a statistically significant relationship between awareness of *This We Believe* and a music teacher respondent's alignment to middle level principles when teaching general music. Some research questions suggested by the present study include: Why do teachers support general music as part of a holistic education, and do these reasons connect to the emphasis on young adolescent development in middle level philosophy? How and to what extent does music teacher knowledge of young adolescent developmental characteristics influence curricular and pedagogical choices in general music? Are those middle level general music teachers considered high quality by administrators or peers more attuned to middle level philosophical principles than other middle level general music teachers?

Importance of Performance Ensembles

The content analysis results revealed one major concern of music teacher respondents who did not want general music required for all: enrollment in their ensemble courses. These teachers indicated that they value music education, but they emphasized a music education experienced through participation in a performing ensemble. Participation in a performance ensemble is certainly valuable music education, but it is a different form of music education than a general music class. The prominence of ensemble courses, particularly band and choir in middle and high schools (Abril & Gault, 2008; Give A Note Foundation, 2017; McEwin & Greene, 2011), was likely a factor influencing these respondents' perceptions. Many respondents were concerned that a general music requirement would prevent students from enrolling in ensembles, while others were concerned that general music did not provide students with a quality, age-appropriate music education.

These responses reveal some of the complexities within U.S. music education related to the dominant role of performance ensembles in the music curriculum. These complexities merit future investigations into music teacher preparation, teaching experience, attitudes toward general music, and other aspects of music education, both at the middle level and beyond. For example, do both middle level administrators and music teachers view ensemble courses differently than general music courses? What do middle level administrators hope young adolescents learn when enrolled in a general music class, and are these perceptions of the class the same as the music educators' perceptions? Is there a difference in teacher preparation between those music educators who believe general music is age appropriate for young adolescents and those who do not?

There was a statistically significant relationship between respondents who prioritized their ensembles and those who argued for student choice, $\chi^2(1, N = 995) = 21.11, p = .000$. Many of the responses coded for student choice were couched in language suggesting that students should be able to decide to participate in ensembles, general music, or an elective in another subject. As one respondent noted:

If they are able to select [music] from several options (art, music, dance, fine arts history) then they will have a positive view of it because they chose it. (1413)

Future research might investigate this relationship between music elective selection and student choice more fully. Are music educators concerned that general music classes decrease ensemble enrollments or concerned about student buy-in to the course they choose? Do middle level administrators and music educators value individualized choice-making by young adolescents in the same way? Are music educators actually considering the developmental importance of autonomous choice or simply concerned about their ensemble enrollments? What do music educators and middle level administrators believe about requiring a broad music or fine arts requirement at the middle level as opposed to specifically requiring general music?

Issues of Administration

Regardless of their perspective on requiring middle level general music, middle level music educators identified a number of related administrative issues.

Administrative decisions such as schedule, enrollment, and budget are typically the responsibility of administrators and beyond a music teacher's control. Yet respondents to this survey identified these administrative-level issues as relevant to whether middle level general music should be required for all middle grades students. The concerns expressed by the music teacher respondents to this survey are echoed in surveys of elementary and secondary (middle school and high school) principals who identified scheduling, budget, and standardized testing as having an impact on music programs (Abril & Gault, 2006, 2008). Abril and Gault (2008) found that, in particular, scheduling and budget have either a positive or negative impact on a school's music education program; these two administrative aspects are not neutral.

While it appears that administrators and music educators share concerns regarding the administrative impact on music education programs, it is unclear from this study whether administrators and music teachers have expressed their concerns to one another. Middle level administrators are encouraged to approach music teachers within their school to ask them whether they feel that students are enrolled in general music simply as a schedule-filler for either the teacher or the students. Administrators might also begin a discussion of the difference between student behavior issues in general music and performance ensemble classes. Middle school music teachers are encouraged to advocate for changes to the grading system that include music courses in a student's GPA, eligibility for sports and other activities, and promotion to the next grade. While music teachers have a responsibility to advocate for the needs of music learning within their school community, it is equally important for administrators to cultivate an openness to dialogue that music educators may or may not feel exists. Future research should examine whether music educators at the middle level feel comfortable approaching their administrators with concerns that impact the music program.

In particular, local discussions need to address the issues related to music teachers' use of the term "dumping ground" to describe general music, the students enrolled, and/or the administrative procedures imposed upon music teachers. None of the 18 respondents who explicitly used this term in their response defined it. The lack of definition implies that an understanding of this term already exists within the field of music education, an understanding that implies deficit thinking (Delpit, 1995; Valencia, 1997)

about students enrolled in a general music course before it even begins. Middle level administrators might take the opportunity to discuss with their music teachers their approaches to scheduling, particularly how schedules are created for those students with specific academic or social-emotional needs. Administrators might also ask music teachers whether they perceive general music as a "dumping ground" and what school-specific administrative issues might be resolved to alleviate this perception. Future research might seek to investigate whether different schedule formats used at middle level schools alleviate or compound the administrative issues identified by the respondents in this study.

Conclusion

Findings from this study indicate that the music education field is divided on the question of whether middle level schools should require general music for all students, but views on this issue are nuanced. Scheduling, budget, grade level, student choice, music learning for all, and ensemble prioritization are just some of the factors influencing a music teacher's perception of a general music requirement. While exploratory courses like general music potentially offer significant benefits for young adolescents, this success depends, in part, on how both the music teacher and the school value this course. Middle level administrators are encouraged to consider the perspectives of practicing middle level music educators presented herein and to specifically discuss these findings with the music teachers within their school community. An open dialogue between music educators and middle level administrators might help to eliminate any negative feelings about administrative decisions that impact the music curriculum.

In this study, I investigated middle level music teachers' perceptions about requiring students to enroll in general music, a course typically categorized by middle level schools as an exploratory course. Exploratory courses, whether required or elective, play an important role in a developmentally appropriate middle level curriculum. As such, the music teachers who offer some of the most commonly offered middle level elective courses play an important role in this aspect of the middle level curriculum. Music educator respondents were divided about whether middle level general music should be required, and the reasoning these teachers used to support their perception illuminates many important

issues music educators face when teaching in middle level schools.

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