

Accessible Assessment in the Elementary Music Classroom

By Leigh Ann Garner

Elementary music educators have the unique opportunity to work with most, if not all, students within their school setting. While making music with such large and diverse groups is a joyful component of teaching elementary classroom music, it can pose many challenges when it comes to assessing student progress.

The first and most present obstacle lies within the logistics of effectively assessing student progress. Music teachers have limited student contact time and must balance this with the need to assess so many students. Besides logistical limitations, the goals for assessment set by school districts often do not align with the goals of music educators. “Assessment is a process of gathering information about what students can do, so that we can better understand their abilities and needs. This is often diametrically opposed to giving them a grade, which is often about ending the learning process and encapsulating student achievement at a specific point,” stated Marshall Haning, Associate Professor of Music Education at the University of Florida in Gainesville, in “A Call to Rethink Music Assessments,” published in the August 2024 issue of *Teaching Music*.

So, with the many challenges elementary music specialists encounter, how can assessment be a process where time, meeting the needs of all students, and the goals and outcomes of the process itself are maximized? The following is an overview of the types of assessments and their purposes, followed by practical strategies for implementation in the classroom.

FORMATIVE AND SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

There are two types of assessment that often appear within a curricular framework: *formative* and *summative*. Formative assessment provides a brief snapshot of student progress as it takes place

within the instructional process. It informs the learner of their progress and the teacher on when to move ahead in the instructional sequence. Formative assessment often measures only one or two musical concepts or skills at a time. For example, a teacher might assess students’ pitch-matching skills while echo-singing a song.

Summative assessment is a more comprehensive process that often encompasses multiple formative assessments over time, as well as measuring multiple concepts and skills. In the elementary music classroom, summative assessments are usually project- and performance-based and measure progress over an extended period. An example of this could be students composing and performing simple melodies for barred instruments, essentially assessing literacy (rhythmic and melodic), aural, and mallet playing skills.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR ASSESSMENT

Set Clear Goals: Setting goals for assessing students begins with identifying the Music TEKS or other curricular requirements that will guide instructional practice. When beginning this process, it is often more manageable to select one or two standards and set goals for meeting them at all grade levels. In addition, it is important that the established goals align with expectations and goals of the school district. Lack of alignment will only create more work for teachers.

Align Formative Assessments with Goals for Summative Assessment: When implementing a more comprehensive summative assessment, the documented progress should encompass multiple formative assessments that occur throughout the process. Expanding on the previous example of the barred instrument composition, teachers could assess students at various checkpoints throughout the compositional process. Some examples might be

assessing progress when writing rhythm and melody, singing the created melody, culminating in playing their melody on barred instruments. All of these inform the teacher and student of the overall progress of creating the composition. Scaffolding formative assessments within a summative process not only saves time but also provides a richer narrative for the outcomes.

Create Clear Rubrics: Most of the time, elementary music educators are informally assessing students through observation during instruction. When the use of formal rubrics is warranted, teachers often must create them from scratch. Whether creating one rubric for a formative assessment or multiple rubrics for the summative process, it is imperative that the procedures and the progress scale accompanied by descriptors are clear. Procedures should be succinct and consistent for all students as this consistency helps maintain the integrity of the results.

Progress scales for the assessment can be represented by multiple iterations. Will

the scale be a simple *yes* or *no* or a number scale, such as *1-4*? Will it list letter grades? Will descriptors such as *proficient* or *emerging* be utilized? Each progress indicator has a purpose, but the descriptors that define them must be succinct and clear and provide relevant feedback for the teacher and, most importantly, the student.

EFFICIENCY IS KEY

Elementary music teachers have the challenge of providing quality music instruction to large numbers of students with limited student contact time. Thus, balancing daily instruction with time for assessment can be tricky. If an assessment takes too long, student engagement will diminish, and many times the musicality of the experience diminishes as well.

Instead of assessing all students in the class in one class period, spread it out over multiple class periods. When assessing singing, for example, select repertoire that provides opportunities for solo singing and singing by the entire class. Limit the number of soloists to three or four per class period,

and then move onto other musical activities for the day. Assessing small groups of three or four students at a time also saves valuable instructional time.

How a teacher will efficiently record individual student progress also merits careful forethought and planning. An easy and accessible option would be to have a class seating chart on hand where the teacher can quickly record a score for each student, and then transfer data to individual student files. These charts can either be higher tech—set up on an iPad—or lower tech where the chart is in a plastic sleeve and scores are recorded with a dry-erase pen. To further maximize instruction time, record assessments with an iPad, allowing you the opportunity to view, evaluate, and record progress outside class time.

ASSESS THROUGH MUSICAL PLAY

The instructional process often follows a pattern where students are presented material, they experience and practice the material, and then time is set aside for a formal assessment or test. This *teach to the test* process is inefficient, lacks musical authenticity, and does not honor how young children develop as musicians. Thus, elementary music educators should create a setting where an assessment is threaded into musical play. For example, when teachers assess rhythm performance, this could be integrated within playing a singing game. As students are taking turns as leaders in the game, the leaders could create and tap four-beat rhythm patterns between each round. This formative process allows the teacher to assess multiple students while the entire class is engaged in active and authentic music-making.





Assessing so many students with so little time can seem daunting. However, tracking student progress is an integral and necessary part of the instructional process. When music teachers integrate assessment into daily lessons and do so maintaining musicality and student engagement, the narrative for progress is rich and informative for all involved.



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