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Alexandra Kertz-Welzel

*The Implementation of the National
Standards for Music Education in
American Schools*

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The Implementation of the National Standards for Music Education in American Schools

Since I visited the first American music education lesson in 2001, I have been asking American music teachers about the National Standards for music education and their meaning for their classrooms. The answer I heard quite often, was: “Which standards?” For me, being new in the United States, this was a quite puzzling question because I considered the National Standards which were published in 1994, to be a rather unique development. However, the music teachers I asked were right because there have been many different standards in American music education during the last 100 years, starting in 1892. Important standards were published in 1974, a revised version in 1986 and finally the “real” National Standards (which were not so different from their predecessors) in 1994 in the document “The School Music Program: A New Vision for music education.” These National Standards provided a model for what students “should know and be able to do in the arts.” The nine content standards were designed to reflect the best ways of teaching music¹, as a basis for developing a unified music curriculum and for a reformation of music teacher education. The nine voluntary content standards for music education are the following²:

1. Singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
2. Performing on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
3. Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments.
4. Composing and arranging music within specific guidelines.
5. Reading and notating music.
6. Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.
7. Evaluating music and music performances.
8. Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts.
9. Understanding music in relation to history and culture.

The overall purpose of the National Standards for music education is to provide a vision of what it means to be educated in music. Furthermore, they are supposed to be a foundation for building a comprehensive and sequential curriculum in music. This means that the National Standards are thought to be a guide for curriculum planning on the state and district level. They were originally not intended as an orientation for lesson plans, but rather as substitutes for curriculum guides which formerly helped developing state and district standards as well as curricula.

The purpose of my paper is to investigate how successful the implementation of the National Standards for music education in the United States has been so far and what could be done in the future to improve it. Despite the examination of the American National Standards, this paper will also help to understand what in general is necessary to make standards work in music education classrooms.

¹ Various achievement standards specify the skills and competencies American students are expected to have. In achievement standard 4, for instance, for grades 5-8, students are expected to compose short pieces within specific guidelines, in order to demonstrate how to use the elements of music to achieve unity or variety.

² <http://www.menc.org/publication/books/standards.htm>

What does “Implementation of the Standards“ mean?

The magical word in the world of educational reform and standards is implementation. *Implementation* means the realization of an application or the execution of an idea. A plan, a model, standards or a policy is put into practice. The idea of implementation always raises the issue of how it is possible to execute a model, e.g., to make the National Standards work, and what levels of the educational process are affected.

The implementation of the National Standards for music education in the United States leads to changes in various fields. First, this concerns changes in curricula in schools districts and schools where the standards should be used to guide planning the school music program. Second, this affects teacher education programs at universities and colleges where teachers are supposed to learn the skills and knowledge the standards ask for so that they might be able to teach them in schools. Third, this concerns teaching materials that are designed for music instruction according to the National Standards such as the *Benchmark Series* or *Strategies for Teaching*.

In order to facilitate the process of implementing the standards, the MENC (The National Association for Music Education) published various guidelines and teaching materials. These publications were supposed to inform the public and to help administrators, professors and music teachers to make the standards work and to implement them. The most important publications are the following:

Opportunity-to-Learn-Standards PreK-12:³ They specify the physical and educational conditions necessary in the schools to enable every student, with sufficient effort, to meet the voluntary national content and achievement standards in music. They also describe the learning environment in terms of curriculum and scheduling, staffing, material, equipment and facilities. There are also Opportunity-to-Learn-Standards for music technology.⁴

The School Music Program K-12, PreK (1994):⁵ This publication presents the National Standards for music education and explains what they mean to music educators. It also outlines effective music teaching and assessment according to these standards.

Strategies for Teaching Series (1995 ff):⁶ This series has been developed to help music teachers implement the National Standards. Each publication focuses on a specific curricular area and a particular level, e.g., general music education, high school chorus or middle school orchestra.

Teacher education for the Arts disciplines (1996):⁷ This publication proposes necessary changes in teacher education in order to implement the National Standards successfully.

A Research Agenda for Music Education (1998):⁸ This publication outlines important research questions for the music education profession, particularly concerning the implementation of the National Standards and music teaching and learning in a time of innovation and reform.

With these publications, the MENC tried to facilitate the implementation of the National Standards for music education in American schools. But do the National Standards really work, particularly in view of the American music education system?

³ <http://www.menc.org/publication/books/otl.html>

⁴ <http://www.menc.org/publication/books/techstan.htm>

⁵ <http://www.menc.org/publication/books/prek12st.html>

⁶ http://www.menc.org/publication/books/performance_standards/pubs.html

⁷ <http://www.menc.org/publication/books/tchred.htm>

⁸ <http://www.menc.org/information/research/agenda.html>

Music Education in American Schools and the National Standards

There are two main approaches of music education in American schools, general music education and performance-based music education. In elementary schools, music education means mostly general music education, particularly according to specific methods or approaches such as Orff, Kodály or Dalcroze: Students sing, play classroom (“Orff”) instruments, learn to read notation, listen to music, “analyze“ music and dance or improvise. This comprehensive approach of music education encompassing various musical activities is usually not taking place in secondary schools where the main emphasis is on performing in ensembles (e.g., choir, band, or orchestra). This also narrows the focus of music education in middle schools or high schools to playing an instrument or singing as good as possible, but musical knowledge and the ability to understand music are not important. The main goal of performance-based music education is a good recital, a good show or a successful competition, which proof the quality and the success of a music education program at a specific school (and therefore also the teacher’s performance).

This performance-based system is obviously in contrast to the National Standards for music education and the knowledge and skills they ask for and makes it almost impossible to implement the National Standards in American schools. It is only possible to implement certain standards in a specific type of school such as standard 2, 3, and 6 (singing, improvising, listening) in elementary school. The other standards are more difficult or sometimes even impossible to implement, especially if a classroom teacher and not a music specialist is teaching music. In secondary schools, all standards besides standard 2 and 5 (performing on instruments, reading music) are difficult to implement or almost impossible, if the teacher is strictly following the traditional American approach of performance-based music education.

It seems that there is a problem concerning the American music education system and the implementation of all National Standards.

Ways to Assess the Implementation of the National Standards

It is helpful to take a look at American music education classrooms in order to find out if the National Standards are being implemented and taught. Therefore, the NAEP, states’ or school districts’ standards, teacher education programs, teachers’ responses to the standards, observations in classrooms, teaching materials and standard-based assessment methods are important aspects that should be examined.

The NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) is a national representative and continuing assessment of what students in the United States know and can do in various subjects. The NAEP in the arts was conducted in 1971, 1978, and 1997 and will be undertaken again this school year 2008. Regarding the National Standards for music education, only the test in 1997 was at least a first attempt to assess the standards that were published in 1994. In the NAEP, 8th graders were tested concerning their knowledge and skill level in music, also their abilities to create and perform. In the NAEP in 1997, the results were rather disappointing: Students were moderately successful with knowledge tests, but students struggled with music activities such as clapping rhythms or singing songs correctly (such as the famous tune “America“). Although the NAEP was a first attempt to assess the impact of the National Standards for music education, it was maybe too early to examine their implementation, just three years after they were published.

However, ideally, the results of the NAEP should give answers to the success of the National Standards and help improve music education and research practices. Jane Cassidy states:

“Test results have the potential to be used to revise future assessment tools and procedures, aid in the development of curriculum and accountability efforts at the school level, advocate administrative policy with regard to funding and staffing arts programs at the state and local level, provide direction and focus for teacher preparation programs and in-service programs, and guide the continual evolution of content standards in music education“ (Cassidy 2000, 7).

If the test results are used in this way, they can really change music education. But it is important that the results are interpreted and disseminated in a way that reaches music teachers and gives them advice what to do with the results. If a music educator does not know how to react, the results of the NAEP are not very useful. There were many problems with explaining the results of the NAEP in 1997 and their meaning for music education practice and teachers’ everyday work in classrooms (Cassidy 2000, 7). Hopefully, the interpretation and dissemination of the NAEP results of 2008 will be better so that it will have a positive impact on music education practices in the United States.

Another way of examining the implementation of the National Standards is analyzing states’ or districts’ music education standards in order to compare them with the National Standards. Usually, it is easy to take a look at various websites such as the Music Standards for the State of Washington⁹: These standards are, according to the original intention of the National Standards, a combination of various content standards, general comments on the importance of music education for the society and the Opportunity-to-Learn-Standards. The state standards are supposed to be used as guidelines for districts and schools. Usually, only dissertations present a scholarly examination of states’ and school districts standards and the implementation of the National Standards, for instance Keith Wolfe’s examination of the music curricula of four school districts in Western Pennsylvania¹⁰ or McMurtrie’s¹¹ analysis of the factors influencing the teaching of the state and National Standards among high school band directors in the state of Ohio. Although these dissertations are very useful discussions of the implementation of the National Standards, only a few people are able to read the results, if they are not published in scholarly journals, because American dissertations are usually only in the library of the university where the author graduated. It takes a lot of time and effort to get them through interlibrary borrowing or *ProQuest*¹², where it can be purchased.

Another interesting field of investigation concerning the implementation of the National Standards is the training of teachers and teacher education programs. Standards make no sense if teachers themselves are not able to meet the standards (e.g., being able to improvise or compose). Therefore, music education programs at colleges and universities have to prepare future teachers to implement the standards in their classrooms. Survey results from 273 postsecondary schools awarding Bachelor’s degrees show that 98% of the general music professors were aware of the

⁹ <http://www.wmea.org/standards/StandardsBooklet.pdf>

¹⁰ Wolfe, Keith (1996): National Standards in the Arts: A Study of the Music Curricula of Four Schools Districts in Western Pennsylvania. (M.Ed. Thesis). Indiana, Pennsylvania (USA): Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

¹¹ McMurtrie, Benjamin M. (2005): Factors Influencing the Teaching of the State and National Standards Among High School Band Directors in the State of Ohio. (M.M. Thesis). Kent, Ohio (USA): Kent State University.

¹² <http://www.proquest.com/>

National Standards and over 90% included them in their classes, even though this research was conducted in 1998 (McCaskill 1998). Fonder and Eckrich (1999) found that 77% of the 267 National Association of Schools of Music member schools that responded to their survey had made significant changes in their programs as a result of the voluntary national standards, e.g., restructuring of course material, evaluations, changing required texts, restructuring lesson plan requirements. In addition, 35% of respondents had made significant changes in music history offerings, adding world music and improvisation. An interesting question is, if professors think that they prepare music students adequately for implementing the National Standards. Adderly (2000) conducted a research to determine whether music education faculty at higher education institutions in the State of South Carolina believe that relevant preparation for implementing the National Standards is being given to future K-4 music teachers. Generally professors believe that they train students well, but they think that the weakest preparation concerns the standards 3 (improvising melodies, variations, accompaniments) and 8 (understanding relationships between music, arts, and disciplines outside the arts). Research on teachers' opinions in recent years also indicates that teachers also do not feel that they are well prepared to implement the standards.

Teachers' responses to the National Standards are another interesting field concerning the impact of the National Standards. Bell (2003) investigated the role of National Standards in experienced music teachers' classrooms and the impact of a standards-based graduate level course on their teaching. Even after a special 16-week course on the standards exploring various teaching materials and resources concerning the implementation of the standards, experienced music teachers did not feel adequately prepared to teach all standards. This is their opinion concerning problems affecting the implementation of the National Standards (Bell 2003, 40):

- Applications and support systems within individual school districts are inconsistent.
- Higher Education institutions and school districts must play a stronger role in disseminating standards information.
- Professional development courses are necessary.
- There is a lack of basic supplies, space, and instruction time.

In Byo's research (1999), a significant observation was the lack of time with regard to the perceived ability of implementing the National Standards in elementary schools. Composing and improvisation were also identified as the most difficult standards to implement.

Other ways of examining the implementation of the National Standards are observations in classrooms and the evaluation of teachers. Orman (2002) compared the National Standards for music education and elementary music specialists' use of class time. She observed and videotaped 30 experienced music elementary specialists, mostly Orff teachers. Overall, results indicated that elementary music specialists spent class time on all 9 standards. However, less time was devoted to those standards that required creative or artistic decision-making skills from the students such as standards 3 (improvising), 4 (composing), 7 (evaluating), due to a lack of time or training. Orman points out a fact that questions all research on the implementation of the National Standards:

“Elementary music specialists in this study devoted class time to the nine voluntary National Standards in Music Education [...]. This finding is reassuring if one considers that all the teachers in this study began teaching before the national standards were written and published. Therefore, teachers either altered their instruction based upon knowledge they received through professional development and enrichment activities or the national standards have always been and continue to be an active part of their teaching“ (Orman 2002, 162).

Orman raises here an interesting issue: Are the skills and the knowledge National Standards ask for, not the most usual activities in good music education classes? Are music educators teaching the standards because they are anyway part of a good music education program or because they consciously rely on the National Standards?

Another way of assessing the implementation of the National Standards is the evaluation of teachers. Doerksen (2006) presents charts, which should facilitate evaluating teaching, in order to examine if music educators are teaching the standards and in which ways they can improve their performance. Doerksen's observation guide (Doerksen 2006, 69-70) specifies the various skills a music educator should have and how a successful music education lesson should look like concerning quality of classroom environment, teacher-student-interaction, quality of instruction and improvement of students' performance. This clearly emphasizes that not only the teachers' abilities, but also the Opportunity-to-Learn-Standards play a major role in successful music education practices and the implementation of standards.

One problem of the National Standards is the fact that they do not imply a specific teaching method. While many scholars and teachers appreciate this, it is actually a difference between the National Standards in music education and in other subjects (Benedict 2003, 53-76). This makes the implementation of the standards difficult, particularly for beginning teachers. It is now usual in music methods courses at universities, where students begin to learn how to organize a lesson, that students plan lessons addressing specific standards (e.g., standard 1 or 3). Many teaching materials, starting with textbooks, implement standards in a similar way, specifically naming the standards covered in a two-page lesson plan. While it seems to be simple to address the standards in a general music class in elementary school where various musical activities such as dancing, singing, listening, drumming might take place, it seems to be rather unrealistic to expect a choir director or a band leader preparing their ensembles for important competitions to use precious rehearsal time for learning something about the relationship between music and the other arts. This is an example for implementing National Standard 3 in high school choir rehearsals, relying on the achievement standards:

“3. Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments:

- Analyze given melodies. Discuss and demonstrate techniques that may be employed to alter melodies (augmentation, diminution, addition of neighboring and passing tones etc.). Have students improvise melodies and variations using these techniques.
- Provide students with the chord sequence or a ground bass for a section of choral repertoire. Encourage students to improvise a melody over the chord structure explaining that some notes will sound better than others. Allow students to perform their improvisations“ (Swiggum 1998, 30).

The same fact concerns general music education in middle or high school where usually only rehearsals are taking place. However, teaching materials on the implementation of standard 4 (composing) specifies the way these standards can be assessed in schools:

“Content Standard 4: Composing

Achievement standards 4a (grades 5-8):

Students compose short pieces within specific guidelines, demonstrating how the elements of music are used to achieve unity and variety, tension and release, and balance.

Assessment task: The student is asked to

- a) compose a theme with 3 variations

- b) explain in simple terms how each variation achieves unity with the theme and how it achieves variety
- c) cite one example of how tension and release and balance are achieved in the theme or in a variation.

Any melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, or electronic instruments may be used. The piece is to be written out by the student, using notation sufficiently precise to allow the performer(s) to reproduce the piece accurately in subsequent performances“ (Rinehart 2002, 37).¹³

Although these teaching materials present excellent ideas, these activities are rarely going to happen due to lack of time and equipment. There is also no information about how many music educators or school districts and schools actually own MENC publications on teaching strategies or use the lesson plans provided in such journals as the Music Educators Journal (MEJ).

Teaching materials and achievement standards are a starting point for assessment and giving grades. There are various assessments methods that can rely on the achievement standards and specific activities proposed in the teaching material. Some general ways of using these information to grade student performance are in elementary schools for example evaluation sheets, seating charts or score sheets. In secondary schools, self-assessment, oral presentations, individual meetings, evaluating tapes of student performances or audio portfolios can be successful ways to give students the grades they deserve in music education (Brasher et al. 1999, 26-31). Although, from a German point of view, these methods do not seem to be extraordinary, for American music teachers, they provide a framework for grading students in a more appropriate way, even if teachers see their students only rarely or do not know them very well, particularly if they are part of a big ensemble.

A most important matter regarding the National Standards is the fact that expectations of achievement are now obvious for everybody. Paul Lehman points out: “Students will be aware of what they are expected to know, how they are to be assessed, and what criteria will be used to judge their achievement“ (Lehman 2000, 95). Students are now aware of the National Standards and the knowledge and skills they asked for so that they can work on those competencies even by themselves. Furthermore, they are able to understand the teachers’ grading.

In general, research on the implementation of the National Standards indicates that they are realized at least to a certain degree. However, there are still many problems concerning the National Standards in American music education.

How to make the National Standards for Music Education more effective

There are many ways to improve the implementation of the National Standards in American schools. First of all, it is necessary to implement the Opportunity-to-Learn-Standards. In surveys, teachers always emphasize that they do not have enough time, space or equipment to teach the National Standards adequately. The Opportunity-to-Learn-Standards are the first step in making the National Standards work. If they are not implemented it is very difficult to teach the skills and knowledge the standards ask for.

Second, it is necessary to redefine the goals of music education. The National Standards call for comprehensive musicianship and for a training of the various musical roles and intelligences,

¹³ In the teaching materials published by Carol Rinehart, a student’s composition follows the description.

not just the role of the performer, but also the listener and composer. This fact should be acknowledged particularly in a new concept of general music education. The National Standards also aim towards life-long musical activity, no matter if as a musical amateurs, aficionado or professional. In this way, the National Standards might help solving one of the biggest problems of American music education, the fact, that most American students stop making music after graduating from high school.

All these aspects lead to a new orientation of general music education. Bennett Reimer (2003, 240-298) is right when he states that redefining general music education in terms of comprehensive general music programs and comprehensive specialized music programs is necessary. The National Standards call for a change of the American music education system because general music education needs to be emphasized much more, especially in secondary schools. In elementary schools, it would be necessary that more music specialists teach music education and not the classroom teachers. Where music education is officially a mandatory subject by law as it is the case in elementary schools in many states (e.g., Texas), this should be realized in schools.

Furthermore, it is necessary to educate the public about the goals of music education. School boards, principals and parents should realize that music education is about much more than successful competitions or recitals. Music education should aim towards comprehensive musicianship and performing with understanding, which the National Standards emphasize.

Additionally, a revision of the National Standards might be necessary in terms of a critical examination. When the National Standards were first introduced, many music education professors refused to teach them in their classes, because it was obvious that there were strong political forces behind the development, particularly the development of the achievement standards in terms of making standards measurable and easy to assess, sometimes even ignoring the nature of aesthetic experiences. The members of the committee that developed the National Standards even confessed the political pressure (Benedict 2003, 110-131). The first steps towards a revision of the National Standards were done by the MENC National Executive Board which started an online review of the National Standards. Until August 31, 2007, the MENC website included an online form with the following question: "Do you believe the National Standards should be revised and if so, how?" Although this was a very short survey and only small comments were expected, it was at least a first attempt to involve the public and every American music teacher in the discussion of the National Standards.

Finally, more research on the implementation of the National Standards is needed, especially research conducted by teachers, because they know the best what must be changed in order to implement the National Standards more successfully and to improve music education in American classrooms.

Visions for the Future

If the National Standards would be taken seriously, they would mean a change of the music education system in the United States, but politicians and administrators still fail to realize these consequences of the National Standards. It cannot be sufficient to develop standards and teaching materials, if the system of music education makes it almost impossible to implement them.

If the National Standards would be implemented, this could also significantly change the musical culture in the United States, because many students would have access to making music and musical training. In the end, this would not only concern American schools and students, but the whole society could be affected by those changes. The ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl writes:

“The Standards seem to have the purpose of changing musical culture very substantially. To the side of the ethnomusicological mind interested in broadening musical understanding by providing intercultural and multimusical experience, and by looking at music as an aspect of culture, the establishment of the Standards is a promising development. To the other side [...] their implementation will provide a fascinating study of transmission and cultural change, to be compared with the many other different ways in which musical culture has been transmitted and changed by human societies. The Standards intend to make available to all children of America the broad range of musical involvements this culture provides, so that all may be full members of their country’s musical community“ (Nettl 2000, 182).

But the ideal of comprehensive musicianship, which the National Standards promote, should not only be restricted to schools, but concern all kinds of musical activities, also private music lessons. If all ways of making music would aim towards a broader musical understanding, performing with understanding and comprehensive musicianship, being a musician would be the most natural and common thing, which would in the end make the National Standards unnecessary.

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