

Gender and Jazz: The Experience of Young Women in Jazz Education

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Abstract

The number of young women who participate in instrumental high school jazz education programs peaks in middle school, then drops throughout the high school years.

While this disparity is well documented, efforts to understand and address the issue have lacked the perspective of the young women themselves.

This qualitative research study, based on in-depth interviews with 16 female instrumentalists taking part in high school jazz education programs (in different regions of the US and Canada), examines ‘band culture’ from their perspective.

The result is a portrait of their experience and an analysis of key issues relevant to the challenge of creating jazz education environments that sustain and support all students.

Introduction

Young female instrumentalists represent roughly half of all musicians participating in middle school jazz education in U.S. schools. By the end of high school, female instrumentalists typically populate less than one-third of secondary jazz education programs.

A study of thirty-nine New Jersey high schools found young women made up 48% of all students participating in instrumental music (band) programs, but only 26% of high school jazz ensembles (McKeage 344).

The trend of declining participation by young women in jazz instrumental programs continues into college. A study of one mid-western university found 60% of their undergraduate music majors were women, while women made up only 20% of the college’s instrumental jazz ensembles (McKeage 344).

High School Jazz education programs revolve around Jazz Big Bands. Jazz Bands are typically made up of 15-20 students, led by a director. Bands rehearse and perform music popularized by composers of the 1940's and 50's, 'big band' era, such as Duke Ellington and Count Basie, and to a lesser degree the work of contemporary composers. Bands are made up of 'sections'—typically (but not always) five saxophone players; four trombone players; 3-5 trumpet players; and a rhythm section composed of piano, drums, guitar, and upright bass.

Most high school jazz band students begin playing instruments in elementary school, often in fourth grade, when most instrumental music education is first offered as an elective. Jazz Band programs, where offered, usually begin in middle school. These programs play a significant role as 'feeder programs', to the larger, more advanced, high school jazz programs. Middle school programs introduce music students to the concepts and skills needed to take part at the high school level.

Once students reach high school, placement into jazz band is determined through an audition process. Large schools, with well-established programs, may have multiple jazz bands, with students placed according to skill, seniority, and the instrumental needs of each band.

Taking part in a high school jazz band requires a considerable commitment of time and energy, often daily rehearsals; regular performances; traveling to take part in jazz festivals; independent practice; and separate 'section' rehearsals. Most students also take individual private lessons and participate in music opportunities outside of school as well.

Learning to improvise, the spontaneous creation of melodic phrases over the 'chord-changes' of a tune, is an important and challenging part of learning to play jazz. It requires a thorough understanding of music theory, strong technical skills, and a high tolerance for

visibility and failure. Being selected to 'solo' on a tune is a highly coveted and prestigious role within high school jazz big bands.

Jazz band festivals, where bands compete, judged by a panel of professional musicians, are a priority in the schedule of most high school jazz programs. These festivals, held throughout the U.S. over the course of the school year, are one of the primary motivational devices employed within jazz education. They are an opportunity to perform and compete, as well as an educational forum for guest artists to conduct clinics, provide critiques, and perform themselves. The high point of each festival is recognition of the festival winners, with a few student performers also receiving individual awards and recognition as 'outstanding soloists'.

One of the most prestigious of these Jazz Festivals is Essentially Ellington, led by Wynton Marsalis, which takes place at Lincoln Center in New York City each Spring. High school jazz bands from around the country submit recordings to a blind jury process. 15-20 bands are chosen to travel to New York to take part.

Jam sessions are also an important institution within jazz music. Typically held in less formal settings like a restaurant or jazz club, musicians take turns improvising and collaborating, rotating in and out as the jam proceeds.

This qualitative research study looks at the experience of young female instrumentalists active in high school jazz band programs. It is an effort to create a portrait of their experience, in their own words.

The study is based on in-depth interviews with 16 female instrumentalists. Each interview, 40-60 minutes long, consisted of open-ended questions, beginning with, ‘Tell me about your experience playing music?’

Interviews were transcribed, after which an open coding strategy was applied to distill emergent categories and themes.

Literature Review

Existing literature surrounding young women in jazz education consists primarily of literature-based and quantitative studies. There is work focused on the experience of female jazz musicians in college; the experience of educators; and historians’ perspectives on why so few young women play jazz. These studies examine barriers to women’s participation in jazz education; the experience of women in jazz education; and the cultural and historical forces which discourage women’s participation.

Barriers to Women Participating in Jazz Education

The primary instruments that make up jazz ensembles—trombone, trumpet, saxophone, drum set, bass—have long held the connotation of being ‘masculine’ instruments. This has resulted in young girls not choosing to play these instruments beginning in late elementary school, when the decision to play an instrument is usually made, resulting in a lack of female participation in jazz bands once they reach high school (Steinberg 41-42).

Feeling an instrument is, “not for them”, is also associated with an apprehensive attitude towards improvisation once young girls reach middle and high school jazz band. This apprehension appears to have a relationship to the frequency with which male and female students take solos when participating in jazz festivals at the middle school and high school level (Steinberg 41-42).

Encouragement of young women’s initiative and independent thinking by parents and teachers has been shown to have a significant positive impact on the confidence and motivation of young women who pursue male-dominated fields such as math, science, and sports (Higham & Navarre 49).

Societal pressure to be perceived as “feminine” poses a significant challenge to young women pursuing achievement in male-dominated fields (Higham & Navarre 49).

Being perceived as “feminine” is important to young women in adolescence and plays a role in their “fitting in” and being accepted among their peer group. Improvisation can be perceived as an activity that poses potentially negative social consequences for girls (ie; not ‘feminine’). This results in they’re being less motivated to learn improvisation relative to their male peers (Wehr-Flowers 340, 346).

The Experience of Young Women in Jazz Education

Social forces which effect young female instrumentalists’ experience of jazz education, and more specifically, the acquisition of skills necessary to improvisation and soloing, is

examined in Erin Wehr's study, *Understanding the Experiences of Women in Jazz: A Suggested Model*. Wehr breaks these social forces into three categories: tokenism, stereotype threat, and self-efficacy (Wehr 476).

Tokenism describes the effect of female stereotypes. Based on a women's sexuality, these stereotypes create pressure on young women to conform to stereotypical norms, and to give up their individuality, in order to be accepted. (Wehr, 477).

Stereotype threat is the fear of confirming a negative stereotype and associating oneself or one's group with that stereotype (Wehr 479). As a minority in jazz education settings, young women fear confirming the stereotype women can't play jazz, or can't play their instruments well. This pressure and anxiety further discourages their participation. (Wehr 480).

Self-efficacy is the process of evaluating one's ability to be successful at learning jazz. (Wehr 480). Wehr finds a connection between how girls perceive their likelihood of success playing jazz, within a male dominated environment, and a diminishing motivation to continue.

A low sense of self-efficacy, combined with fear of confirming negative stereotypes, accompanies a male dominated learning environment for young women in jazz. This creates difficult conditions for young women to feel successful and remain committed to learning in. Low self-efficacy in girls is magnified by the male domination of many social contexts within jazz education (Wehr 480).

Comparing female and male participation at regional middle school and high school jazz festivals, Steinberg describes how male domination is reflected in clinicians initiating interactions with male students more often than female students; as well as how male students

consistently answer questions directed at the entire group more often than girls (Steinberg 46). Steinberg also found this pattern in the distribution of solos within festival bands, with male soloists featured significantly more often than their female counterparts (Steinberg vi).

Cultural and Historical Forces that Discourage the Participation of Women

In Eric Teichman's, *Pedagogy of Discrimination: Instrumental Jazz Education*, Teichman discusses gender discrimination within jazz education as it is currently practiced (Teichman 202).

When most people think of jazz instrumentalists, they think of jazz musicians like 'Bird' and 'Dizzy', while only female jazz vocalists, such as 'Ella', are remembered on the same level. This creates a false narrative that there are few significant contributions by female instrumentalists (Teichman 205). This narrative can be found for many students on the walls of jazz education classrooms, where posters of the, all-male 'canon' of jazz instrumentalists, are often found. (Teichman 205). The overwhelming majority of figures considered culturally significant to the development of jazz are men. With women's contributions to jazz represented as supporting roles to the central male 'pioneers' or not considered at all. The lack of acknowledgement of women's contributions historically acts as a discouraging force to their participation in the present.

Tammy Kernodle's research, *Black Women Working Together: Jazz, Gender, and the Politics of Validation*, looks at how women are perceived historically and where this perception is disengaged from the reality of female musicians' legacy.

Kernodle discusses jazz scholarship and criticism, examining how commonly women are represented in light of their collaboration with husbands and male peers, disregarding their significant musical accomplishments alongside other women. (Kernodle, 29). This depiction presents women's musical achievements as dependent on support or collaboration with male musicians. (Kernodle 29).

Kernodle also discusses how competition among male jazz musicians is represented as empowering, and a key to their musical development. When female jazz musicians are examined using this same lens, the narrative becomes one where there is "one female creative voice that survives and earns a place in the historical narrative" (Kernodle 29).

The traditional analysis of jazz history leaves out the role of sexism entirely, making it seem, women's rare inclusion is proof the historical record is not sexist, but merit based (Tucker qtd. In Kernodle, 29).

Method

Problem Statement

Fewer young women participate in instrumental jazz education at the secondary level than do young men. While this disparity is well documented, efforts to understand and address the issue lack the perspective and experience of the young women taking part in these programs.

Understanding the experience of young female instrumentalists is necessary to building coherent proposals that will effectively address gender disparity in Jazz Education.

Data Collection

I conducted in-depth interviews, via Zoom, with 16 female jazz instrumentalists currently, or recently, participating in high school jazz band programs. Interviews were 40-60 minutes in length, recorded and then transcribed. These interviews were based on a list of open-ended questions.

My goal was to hear, in their words, their experience of jazz education, and to gain an understanding of what was most important and relevant from their perspective.

Interview participants were young woman between the ages of 14 and 18; in high school currently or having graduated in the past year; and participating, or having participated, in a high school jazz ensemble as an instrumentalist.

These criteria assured participants' experience in high school jazz band would be recent enough to reflect the current environment. I had originally planned to include middle school female jazz instrumentalists, as well as middle school and high school band directors, but realized, as my project evolved, this was far more than I had time and resources for—so I adjusted my project accordingly.

After receiving IRB approval, I began recruiting participants in July 2020, using snowball sampling—emailing my recruitment letter to band directors I knew through my professional network.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic I was limited to recruiting virtually. In response, I adjusted my recruitment strategy, employing my public Instagram page to invite people who met

my criteria to contact me. This also allowed for people interested in my study to help get the word out.

Participants were required to submit an Informed Consent Form (signed by a parent or guardian if under 18 years old) prior to the interview.

I conducted interviews during July and August of 2020. Each interview began with background questions: the participant's age; instrument; where they lived; and musical history. I then continued with open-ended questions, exploring their experience in jazz education, beginning with—"Tell me about your experience playing music".

Data Analysis

Each interview was recorded, transcribed using Otter, and reviewed for accuracy. Transcripts were sent to each participant for member checking to ensure I captured what they wanted to say. I applied an open coding process to each transcript throughout the data collection process. Through the coding process I developed categories and themes based on the data. I utilized the qualitative research software Dedoose throughout the coding process. Early interviews were coded first, facilitating the identification of early categories and themes. Codes were eliminated, revised, and refined, over the course of transcript analysis, based on an evolving identification of key themes.

Positioning Myself in the Study

I am a 20-year-old female jazz trumpet player studying Jazz Performance at the Boyer College of Music at Temple University, Philadelphia. I am one of five female instrumentalists currently studying Jazz Performance in a program of over a hundred students at my university. Coming up through middle and high school instrumental jazz programs, I noticed fewer and fewer women continuing each year. This appeared to be an accepted attribute of jazz band culture—young women electively walking away from one of the great musical opportunities available to them—and no one questioning why.

I began to wonder, what is it that makes jazz education increasingly unappealing to young women in high school? What is the difference in their experience and the experience of young women who continue? Why are these questions not being asked? Why aren't the young women themselves being asked?

I have an obvious potential bias as a researcher looking at the experience of young women in jazz education. A challenge to my potential bias is that I am not looking to describe my own experience. I have sufficient data to do that already. What I don't have sufficient data to write about is the experience of a range of young women—instrumentally, geographically, and to a limited degree ethnically.

I am from Seattle, Washington, where a very strong high school jazz band scene has developed over the past 40 years. Nearly every high school in the region has a competitive jazz ensemble. There is a very active and energetic community of support for jazz education in Seattle. My experience exposed me to many programs, their directors, and the student instrumentalists that make them up. It was this broad exposure to jazz education that brought the

issue of gender inequity in jazz education to my attention, and so too, the possibility that the challenges and struggles I faced weren't mine alone, and perhaps not mine at all.

Since beginning college, I've had the opportunity to talk with many female musicians about their experience of high school jazz band. Alongside my own experience, these conversations became the impetus to record and communicate the experience of young women, and to create research that might provide a resource for educators and the wider jazz community going forward.

Limitations of the Study

From designing the project to writing the final paper I spent a year on the project. The scope of time I spent on this project is less than other published research projects and so my subject may not be as deeply or as thoroughly examined.

I was responsible for all of the interviews. Since I only speak English I was unable to interview non-English-speaking participants.

My position in the study as a fellow female jazz instrumentalist, only a few years older than my interviewees, provided familiarity with my research topic and knowledge of the environment they were describing. I am close enough in age to my subjects that they felt safe speaking to me. That same familiarity may have also led me to assume I understood things I didn't, hear things differently than they intended, or, not ask questions because the subject was one for which I held an emic perspective.

Because of the COVID pandemic I was unable to gather additional data from classroom observations. I also lacked time and resources to interview directors, parents, and male jazz band members. As a result I was unable to hear possible alternative explanations for what was described by my interview subjects. However, the goal of my research was to represent the young women's experience, not seek to validate or invalidate their objectivity.

My sample size of sixteen interviews may limit how generalizable my study is to a wider population. There are also significant issues (class, race, other gender identities, etc.) that may have also had a role in their experience of jazz education, and might have surfaced, had my sample size been larger and more diverse, or, if the focus of my interview questions had addressed these variables more directly. However, these were issues that were not raised in response to my open-ended questions.

I only interviewed people who volunteered to be interviewed. The collection of young women I interviewed could skew toward those that felt particularly disgruntled, and so may not be reflective of the general population of female jazz instrumentalists who make up high school jazz bands.

I only interviewed young female jazz instrumentalists who are still playing. I didn't interview anyone who had electively quit playing. My research cannot account for what makes so many young women quit jazz band.

Results

Origin Stories

The young women I interviewed had all been introduced to Jazz Band in middle school. Middle school introduced Jazz Band as an elective. Some had begun individual piano instruction much earlier, and by high school, everyone had access to individual private instruction on their primary instrument.

When I asked Stella how she came to be a part of Jazz Band in middle school she described it this way.

“I just decided that that would be something fun to do. And then I guess after playing in that, I just kind of fell in love with jazz. and I started practicing my instrument a couple hours every day.” — Stella

Her initial decision to try jazz band because it looked ‘fun’, led to Stella ‘falling in love with jazz’ and a deeper commitment to the discipline and practice it demanded. Some version of this story was nearly universal among the young women. Jazz was something they ‘fell in love with’; it became a music ‘they loved’; and it was a ‘community’ that inspired and ‘pushed’ them to want to be better.

“I think the biggest thing that's pushed me with it is that I just love it so much, like I have never found any other outlet of music that makes me feel the way jazz does, I guess like, it really is just my favorite style of music to listen to, to play, like it's just, it legitimately is just my favorite thing to be a part of. . . “ — Lauren

Jazz and jazz band was Lauren's 'favorite thing to be part of', like all of the girls I interviewed, jazz band was a community she cherished and described as integral to her motivation to continue and want to be better. Lucy describes it in nearly identical terms.

“ just being in the community and having fun with these other people, being able to play really fun music . . . that's what's kept me in the ensembles every year . . .and I guess motivated to be better.” — Lucy

Jazz was fun to play; music that inspired effort and dedication; and music created in the context of a community of shared experience and the special bonds that grew from the experience.

These themes were primary sources of inspiration for every young woman I interviewed. They made up what Natalie called, the best part of her education.

“. . .it's just like, been probably like the best part of like, my education and everything . . . has just been music and being in that kind of program where it's like, you have such a community around you”.—Natalie

Band Culture

I had initially thought the young women I interviewed might be reluctant to talk openly about the social dimension of their experience with someone they didn't know. Instead, in response to my first open ended question —tell me about your experience playing music? every young woman I interviewed, raised the social dimension of their experience. What several of the young women referred to as 'band culture'. This topic was spoken about at greatest length and in greatest detail, in every interview. It quickly became apparent that the social dimension of jazz

band had a significant impact on their experience, both from the standpoint of what they loved, and perhaps equally, what was most challenging.

*“ . . . band culture in general, like I've really enjoyed being a part of that . . . I have a lot like . . . finding friends within band . . . like I have a lot of friends within jazz band . . . and like that kind of bond that we have, that also kind of, that encourages me to continue. It might not like be the driving factor, but knowing that, like, there are people that I know and that I love, like doing this as well, like, it makes me really happy to be a part of it.”—
Margo*

What Margo refers to as ‘Band culture’, makes up the rich social dimension of jazz band. She describes the role these relationships play in her motivation and the sense of community she cherishes being a part of, then notes, “it might not like be the driving factor”—acknowledging, as important as it is, her commitment to the music and to being a musician, is primary.

Navigating Band Culture

For all the women I interviewed, their love of jazz, jazz band and band culture were integral to their motivation, and to what made jazz band a cherished community. And, each in turn, also spoke of band culture, as Denise did—as an environment and experience—“complicated to navigate at times”.

“I don't know, it just feels really complicated to navigate at times, because there's people from lots of different, like, you know, friend groups . . . and there's definitely cliquy-ness . . . and I don't know . . . it's kind of hard to define . . . but there's definitely kind of a lot going on, and really, ideally, it

would be more about the music than the different social dynamics, but in practice, it just isn't really like that.” — Denise

Denise’s frustration, expressed as a wish jazz band ‘would be more about the music’, and less about the ‘social dynamics, characterized a conflict I found across the interviews I conducted—a conflict between the social and musical dimensions of jazz band.

What I also found across their interviews was a struggle to define what made the experience of jazz band culture ‘complicated to navigate’. There was uncertainty and ambiguity in their efforts to make sense of their experience. Denise’s experience of conflict, between her love of the music, and the culture of jazz band, was not at all uncommon, nor was struggling with how to put it into words.

Despite this challenge, all the women I interviewed, spoke with an unexpected eagerness about their love of jazz band, jazz music, and jazz band culture. They were animated by the idea someone was interested in hearing about their experience as women—a viewpoint they were not accustomed to being asked about.

“I was really excited when I heard you were going to do this because I felt like . . . people will actually hear like, there's this reality of struggle that goes on, like, I've heard very few girls in jazz that have gone their whole careers not wanting to quit at least once . . .” — Ella

An Unacknowledged Conflict

An almost universal expression of this conflict (between their love of playing jazz and their experience of band culture) was described by Zoe as feeling like you belong to something

and are not supposed to be there. Or as she distilled it—a feeling of “otherness” —that accompanies being a female member of jazz band.

“ . . . just like, the feeling of not being welcome there sometimes, or like, going out to festivals, and like, getting weird looks when I was the only female drummer there . . . I don't know . . . yeah, just that feeling of like . . . I'm not really supposed to be here or like . . . the otherness . . . I don't know.” — Zoe

Zoe’s experience of ‘otherness’, was mirrored in some form across all of the interviews I conducted. Denise, using almost identical language, spoke of her experience of band culture and how feeling like, ‘I was not supposed to be there’, affected her musically.

“ . . .the culture has a lot of problems, like it . . . yeah . . .it's often been hard to feel like I had a place in it, and to feel like I was supposed to be there . . . or like I was . . .I don't know . . . it just hasn't always felt the most supportive in some ways . . . like, it's a pretty competitive program, which I don't mind competitiveness inherently, but like it's just hard for me to find my place and to feel confident in my playing.”—Denise

The significance of ‘otherness’ became even clearer after one outstanding young woman instrumentalist described how constantly feeling ‘unwelcome’ had made up her decision not to study music in college, and instead pursue a field she felt would be less socially daunting for a woman—engineering!

Otherness

Given how consistently I found expressions of ‘otherness’ across their interviews, and how often the young women associated it with struggling musically, I decided to look carefully at what aspects of their experience they associated most closely with it.

One dimension of this was isolation, ‘I was the only girl in my section’, or some variation of this, was a nearly universal description of their jazz bands.

“I think just being a woman, it's just like, there's no one else there . . . you know, like, this year . . . I was like the only girl in the saxophone section . . . so I felt like . . . and again, I'm like, I'm like, a freshman . . . I'm like five foot two . . . I'm like, I mean, I just feel like, so I literally feel small, you know, like, it just kind of happens.” – Mia

Mia emphasized the isolation she experienced being one of only a few women in an otherwise male dominated band,—‘it’s like there's no one else there’. But she also highlights the diminished social status that accompanied it. ‘I’m five foot two . . . I literally feel small’. She concludes by saying, ‘it just kind of happens’—implying her experience of being both isolated and diminished in significance, are both common and inevitable experiences that accompany being a female member of jazz band.

While their experience of ‘otherness’ could simply be the result of being one of a small number of females in a male dominated institution, (all but one of the young women I interviewed were part of high school jazz bands with relatively small numbers of female instrumentalists), it was the sense of diminished social status that accompanied it—‘literally

feeling small’, as Mia put it—that made me suspect there was more to look at than young women simply feeling out of place.

An Assertive Social Neutrality

Their perceived lack of social status reinforced the isolation experienced by female band members. It took different forms, and was described in different ways, but what was consistent across them was an assertive social neutrality maintained by male members of the band toward female members.

Struggling to make sense of why she feels ‘separate’ in jazz band, Denise describes this assertive social neutrality as boys, ‘not caring’.

“it's not that they're antagonistic towards me, but it doesn't really feel like they care that much . . . which could definitely just be me . . . I'm not the most talkative person . . . I don't always make an effort to talk to people . . . but generally it just doesn't feel like there's much interaction at all . . . like, people will talk to me if you know, there's a part that we're talking about articulations . . . or sometimes we'll make jokes or you know, things like that, but generally I feel a little bit separate . . . but I don't know what that's due to”.—Denise

While Denise’s lack of social initiative likely does play a role in her absence of interaction, it was finding descriptions of similar dynamics across all of the young women’s accounts that led me to conclude Denise’s struggle was not entirely personal—but a reflection of a larger social phenomena within band culture.

The young women struggled to make sense of this experience, questioning whether it reflected a personal shortcoming, or, as one young woman put it—something, ‘that, shouldn’t get to me’.

The Role of Cliques

Hannah describes band culture as ‘socially competitive’, ‘cliques’ forming around the ‘better’ players, but excluding women regardless of their skill.

Cliques played a similar exclusionary role in the account of every band’s culture. Since ‘cliques’ formed around the more musically accomplished, or senior, male members of the band, not being welcome in these groups was experienced by female members as an active effort to deny them status—both musically and socially. Hannah described the connection between this exclusionary behavior and her conclusion she was “worse” musically.

“ . . . like, everyone talked down to me . . . and for a while I couldn't figure out why . . . I just was like, "Oh, I guess I'm just worse than everyone else", . . . but after a while, I kind of realized that it was like, they just don't like me . . . and that wasn't, .it wasn't because . . . I don't think it was my fault, I think it was just them being like cliquey guys, because none of the girls were ever mean to me, none of the girls were ever cliquey at all or competitive. It was just kind of like, the girls doing what they want, and then the guys like, not just like, being competitively cliquey, but also just socially like talking down to me and like, holding me to a higher standard that they weren't holding each other to.”—Hannah

She went on to describe raising the issue directly with one of the boys and then with a male educator.

“ . . . then when I would like bring up like, ‘Hey, you're doing this to me’, they'd be like, ‘Oh, no, those are my boys, like they wouldn't do that, those are just my boys’. And then being told that whole time, whenever that happened, whenever I talk, to like, an actual educator about it, they would just be like, ‘Oh, if they don't like you, then you can just make up your own clique’. Like just put yourself against them, and then that'll make it better . . . and I was like, ‘No’ ”.

Hannah’s efforts to address a problematic aspect of band culture with a director was met with the director’s inability to view the problem from the young women’s perspective. In this case, a director implying the problem could be solved, if only the young woman would assimilate to the dominant male culture of the band.

Judged for Being Female

Yet another characterization of the assertive social neutrality acted out toward girls in this context was being ‘judged’. This wasn’t being judged musically, but a sense of being judged because you were female.

“Oh, it's so judgy. I feel like I get judged all the time . . . I mean, I don't really care . . . it's all good but like . . . it's like . . . there's like a pyramid, there's literally a pyramid. It's like the top is like, like all these, like the lead players are all guys and then, like on the group-chat, even it's like if you say something, they'll all be like, "um, what?". Like, oh I don't know they're just so . . . they're so judgy . . . and it like, I don't know, I feel like it doesn't

really get to me at this point, or like any of the other girls, but they definitely like, are like, yeah they're like very cliquy in a way, which is kind of stupid, it shouldn't really matter, but yeah.”—Natalie

Natalie saying ‘it doesn't really get to me at this point’, and later, ‘it shouldn’t really matter’, speaks to the reality that it does matter, and that it does have an effect. The effect is the imposition of doubt—‘am I good enough?’ Natalie’s experience of feeling judged because she is female imposes doubt in her status as a person, in her status as a musician, and whether she is someone who ‘belongs’ in the band. The underlying message is clear, ‘you don’t belong’—no matter how hard you work, you will not be seen as ‘one of us’, or ‘good’, because you are female.

Avery spoke of the isolation this judgment imposed, how “alone” it left her feeling, and how being judged for being female caused her to question her competence as a musician.

“I felt so alone when, you know, things were happening to me. I was like, you know, nobody understands, and then I found out that literally everybody else has the same experiences. So, once I realized that it was a, you know, that I, you know, didn't necessarily suck, but that it's a thing to be this awful to women because they're women . . . it's like . . . you know, I mean . . . it helps to talk about it . . .and it helps to connect.”—Avery

Again, as Mia had earlier, Avery makes clear her experience is common, a part of what comes with being a female member of jazz band, when she says, ‘literally everybody else has the same experiences’.

To play and perform jazz at an accomplished level requires a high degree of competence, confidence, collaboration, and visibility. To do so while doubting whether you belong, certain you will be judged, not on the merits of your effort, but in order to diminish your standing socially and your worthiness musically, is truly a daunting challenge.

This is a struggle Mia, a 15 year old saxophone player, recognizes as she watches the young women a grade above her.

“In the grade above me, there's like, all these . . . all these girls that were in the grade above me were amazing . . . like, perfect human beings. But like . . . I don't know . . . I just felt like, they were trying, like, we were all trying so hard, like, we were trying . . . and like . . . in the band, there's just . . . you know, like it wasn't even about playing, I think we were just all so unsure of ourselves, and I know that they were all terrific players, we all had terrific tone, we knew our stuff . . . you know . . . but there was just, there was some connection missing . . . and I think it was just because, we didn't . . . we were so scared of what other people thought of us, you know, and I'm so scared of that . . . and it's really . . . it's affecting how I play”.

Mia goes on to make a case for why equity and respect should be as integral to jazz education curriculum as Basie and Ellington are to big band repertoire.

“When you're in a band, if you don't know anyone, it's hard to make good music, because you can't . . . you can't communicate with each other without saying explicitly what you want . . . when you're playing, you need to be able to know . . . to kind of mind read . . . you know, kind of, kind of like, become one thing . . . or else we're just gonna sound square . . . Like we all need to feel it together, we all need to communicate to each other . . . too each other through the music that we play.”

Discussion

To my surprise, once I began conducting interviews, I found the young women eager to talk. Many openly expressing their happiness someone was “finally” asking about their experience, and listened.

Partly I was surprised because of advice I had received before I began my study. The prevalent view being how challenging it can be interviewing young people. Instead I found them eager and excited to talk, some arriving to the interview with a list of things they wanted to be sure they didn't forget. I think knowing I was also a female jazz musician helped facilitate this, as I was only a few years out of high school myself, and genuinely interested in hearing what they had to say.

In each interview I initially asked how they got started playing music, collecting what I came to call their ‘origin stories’. A set of themes emerged almost immediately. They began playing their instrument in fourth grade, through elective instrumental music education programs in their school. They had chosen an instrument found in jazz ensembles, so either a rhythm instrument (piano, drums, guitar, bass), or a horn (trumpet, trombone, saxophone, clarinet), and they were introduced to playing jazz in middle school, the point at which jazz band is typically introduced in schools.

Early introduction to their instrument, combined with having chosen an instrument found in jazz ensembles, were likely key pre-conditions to their experience of middle school jazz band being something that ‘looked like fun’. My hunch too was that their early introduction to

instrumental education played a role in finding jazz music, and being a part of a jazz band community, compelling.

While I was unable to interview young women who had not continued playing into high school, my interviewees did provide antidotal information on students who had begun playing their instrument in middle school, and then elected not to continue into high school. A not uncommon sentiment reportedly expressed by young women electing not to continue into high school was feeling, 'too far behind'. Unfortunately, I was unable to confirm which aspects of their experience had played a role in their decision not to continue.

I used the first open ended question of each interview, 'Tell me about your experience playing music?', to gain a sense of which topics were of greatest significance to them. I analyzed the order in which topics were raised, the amount of time spent on each topic, and how they assigned significance to the topic.

The initial themes that emerged were related to their love of jazz. These themes were consistent across all the interviews I conducted: It was a community they loved; it was music they loved playing; and it was a challenge they were inspired to meet because of the immense personal reward they felt from their efforts. As well it was a musical tradition they were proud to be a part of and a genre they came to appreciate the history and traditions of.

The theme the young women I interviewed spent the most time on in response to my first opened ended question was the social dimension of their experience. They spoke about being a part of a community where they felt a special bond forged through their common effort as young jazz musicians.

They described how being ‘a part of’ of this community was inextricable from their experience playing the music—it was integral to their motivation; to what they loved about jazz band; and what they found the most challenging aspect of the experience.

The young women’s attempts to describe the social dimension of jazz band was complicated, characterized by a struggle to explain what they thought was going on, and then immediately expressing doubt in their conclusions.

I interpreted this to be a reactive response to being female and questioning the dominant culture of an institution, in particular when that institution is made up of a significantly greater numbers of boys than girls (in all 16 of the bands these young women were part of, boys outnumbered girls significantly, and all 16 of the bands were directed by men.) They were also critiquing a culture they clearly cherished being part of, ‘the best part of her education’, as one young woman described it. Yet it was also the aspect of jazz band culture they were most interested in speaking about and the aspect least acknowledged or addressed openly within that same culture.

They described jazz band culture, as ‘male dominated’, a term introduced by more than one woman. Several themes emerged in analyzing what made band culture male dominated in their experience.

The overarching of these was what the young woman characterized as an experience of ‘otherness’, a sense of not belonging to something you’re simultaneously a part of. There were many iterations of this concept. ‘Feeling I’m not really supposed to be here’; ‘It was hard to feel like I had a place in it’; ‘Feeling of not being welcome there’; ‘Feeling you don’t belong’; ‘I feel a little bit separate’. Some iteration of this theme was found in every interview. Its consistency

suggests a significant uniformity of jazz band culture despite the wide geographical representation of bands the young women participated in.

Looking closely at how these young female instrumentalists made sense of this experience of ‘otherness’ led to several contributing themes.

Social isolation was one. Being one of a small number of women who make up most bands often led to women being the only female in their section. And even in bands with a slightly greater percentage of women, no one reported their band having more women than men.

This sense of isolation was further reinforced by the existence of ‘cliques’ within jazz band. ‘Cliques’ most often formed around the ‘better’ male players, but rarely if ever included female players (instrumentalists), regardless of their skill. Within jazz band, these groups were always male, reinforcing the sense of social isolation and diminished social and musical status experienced by female members.

Women instrumentalists perceived male band members maintaining an assertive social neutrality (my term) toward female members. There were different iterations of this which seemingly described the same phenomena—boys ‘not caring’; being ‘socially competitive’; and women band members ‘being spoken down to’. Cliques were also experienced as an expression of this—membership inferring an elevated social status within the larger group, so exclusion, by default, implying the opposite. Clique membership, being either male, or conferred by a male, and associated with the ‘better’ players, also implied status within jazz band was gender specific, as was being ‘better’ musically.

Another overarching aspect of ‘otherness’ in the young women’s accounts was being ‘judged’. It was another theme I found across most of my interviews. This judgement was

different than the meritorious judgement expected in a competitive musical environment. In this case they were using the term to describe an inequity—the sense they were being judged because they were female. It was judgment un-tethered to merit—it was simply judgment being applied by one group to another group based on their gender.

For these young women the social dimension of their experience of jazz band conflicted with the musical dimension. They openly expressed their love of jazz band, and ‘band culture’, while simultaneously experiencing this same culture as one that left them feeling unwelcome and on their own. They spoke clearly of the inhibiting effect band culture had on their sense of belonging, confidence, and competence both socially and musically.

The experience of conflict, between their musical aspirations, and the inhibiting effects of band culture, was raised in some form in every interview, and was the topic they spoke about at greatest length. Despite its significance, no one reported ever having had the issue addressed by a male band director. This lack of acknowledgement leaves young women struggling to make sense of their experience, prone to doubt their own perception, and vulnerable to assuming the struggle they face is the result of not being ‘good enough’, or a personal failing, rather than the effect of systemic cultural conditions faced by female instrumentalists in jazz band culture.

Potential Implications

The effect of women’s social isolation within jazz bands, compounded by an active, unacknowledged, and possibly unaware, effort to diminish women’s self-efficacy musically, needs to be considered as a problem as significant to a band’s ‘performance’ and success as the consistency of its’ rhythm section.

The goal of making jazz education accessible and positive for everyone needs consideration informed by the experience of young women and understood as a systemic cultural challenge that requires an open and transparent effort to acknowledge and address it.

While it may be tempting to view the obstacle to gender equity as a particularly problematic program, a difficult director, or indifferent and challenging individuals, the real challenges are likely cultural and systemic in scope and will not be solved by assigning blame to individuals or individual programs.

Perhaps just as importantly is recognizing the value of asking young women directly about their experience. How is jazz band going for them? What would they be interested in seeing change? These simple questions can provide an important contradiction to the isolation young women experience in jazz band, and what can look like an unacknowledged acceptance of anti-female bias and sexism as norms of band culture.

One of the takeaways of my research was how useful it seemed to the young women I interviewed to be asked about their experience—and then listened to with intent. While my research question was not focused on the role of listening as a potential tool in addressing educational inequity, it was clear throughout my interviews, being asked opened ended questions about their experience was, by itself, a surprisingly effective ‘step’ in the right direction. I found myself wondering—what if this kind of listening was included in jazz band teaching on a regular basis? What would change in the culture of jazz band? How might this idea challenge expectations of what happens in a “traditional” jazz band experience?

Going forward, I think similar qualitative studies looking at the experience of female students who electively dropped out of jazz band after middle school, or who left high school

programs, could help further inform our understanding of the issues most effecting young women's participation in jazz education.

I also think looking at parallel fields, such as STEM fields and sports, where the challenge of addressing gender equity is being studied and addressed, could provide perspective on what has been effective, and what might be adapted to high school jazz education programming.

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