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Co-Constructive Music Improvisers: An Ethnographic Case Study

Emma Elizabeth Young

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CO-CONSTRUCTIVE MUSIC IMPROVISERS:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY

by

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Bachelor of Music Education
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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DEDICATION

For my students, past, present, and future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my deepest gratitude for Dr. Wendy Valerio, who has been my music teacher, my professor, my advisor, and my mentor during the last 23 years. I am sincerely grateful for my ongoing opportunities to learn from her.

I am fortunate Dr. Valerio guided me toward Music for People, an organization and philosophy which has fostered my growth as a musician and an educator.

I am also thankful for my family, who provided me with the first co-constructive foundations of my music education in all the music we made in our home.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this exploratory ethnographic case study was to examine music improvisations co-constructed by my elementary students and me, their music teacher. Guiding research questions were (a) How do my elementary students and I co-construct music improvisations? (b) How do I describe our music improvisations? (c) How do my elementary students describe our music improvisations? (d) How do my elementary students describe their own music improvisations? (e) How do my elementary students describe their peers' music improvisations?

I facilitated co-constructive music improvisation sessions with each music class at Coosa Elementary School for seven weeks during Fall 2020. Each student in each music class was a co-structor participant. As a complete participant observer, I considered myself a co-structor participant with students. Using emergent phenomenon sampling to select information-rich cases (Patton, 2015), I purposefully selected three video-recorded improvisation sessions and reflective discussions for data transcription, initial and descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2009), and ethnographic analysis (Spradley, 2016).

Through coding and ethnographic analysis, three cultural themes emerged: (a) fluidly adopting the roles of listener, improviser, and commenter, (b) connecting music improvisations to lived experiences and imagined experiences, and (c) being in music together. I provide rich, thick descriptions of co-structor participants' improvisations, comments, and behaviors regarding each theme.

With co-constructive improvisation, elementary music teachers may engage their students in music learning that inspires joy and enhances relationships among students and teachers. Future research regarding co-construction in music education is needed to achieve a better understanding of its effects on music learning.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“My best recommendation to music teachers of the next century is to improvise, improvise, improvise! Get rid of notation. Learn from music learning theory to teach children to make music without the aid of notation or music theory.

Follow religiously the process of the way we learn language.”

Gordon, 1998, p. 4

Since the 1994 publication of the *National Standards for Arts Education* (Music Educators National Conference [MENC], 1994), music educators and music education researchers (Berkowitz, 2009; Guilbault, 2004; Velez, 2009) have demonstrated increased interest in music improvisation learning strategies and their effects on music development and learning. Improvising merges ear training, music theory, and performance (Campbell, 2009) and allows musicians to creatively demonstrate their music learning. According to the Gordon Institute of Music Learning (GIML) (2019), improvising demonstrates a musician’s understanding of music in much the same way as the ability to rephrase a paragraph in one’s own words is a measure of language comprehension. Improvising is currently the second anchor standard in general music education in South Carolina (Adderley, Doyle, Holliday, Matson, Pendergrass, & Rivers, 2017), where I teach elementary music. Because of that, and because of personal interests, I have included improvisation in my music instruction throughout my three years as an elementary music educator.

In my experience teaching improvisation in my elementary music classes, I have found myself drawn toward the act of co-constructing musical experiences with my students. Though co-construction is becoming increasingly popular in general education (Bruner, 1986; Kuter, Gazi, & Aksal, 2012; Sert, 2015), it is less often associated with music education. Nonetheless, I find co-constructing often naturally occurs in music-making, especially in improvisation. Co-constructing is a collaborative activity in which participants seek some sort of convergence through joint patterns of awareness, “with language as the central mediator” (Reusser & Pauli, 2015, p. 2059). Music, much like language, can serve as a vehicle for co-construction. Group improvisation is often co-constructive by nature, as musicians produce musical ideas based on each other’s musical ideas. Doing so involves all the skills required in improvising, in addition to the ability to interpret and respond to others’ ideas in a social music setting.

When facilitating co-constructive improvisation in my music classroom, I am frequently impressed by my young students’ musical abilities. As a musician who did not believe she could improvise until she completed 23 years of music education, I am surprised by many of my students’ confident attitudes toward improvising. Many seem to feel unrivaled joy in presenting their improvised musical offerings. Several students have made, in my opinion, profound descriptions of their improvisational experiences. My students are seemingly developing a very different relationship with improvisation than I had as a young musician. This observation has sparked curiosity and led me to reflect on my own history as a music improviser.

Music education may begin as early as five months in utero when a typically developing fetus’s ears are fully formed and functioning (Lecanuet & Schaal, 1996).

During her pregnancy and onward into my infancy, my mother often sang me lullabies. “Stay Awake” from *Mary Poppins* (Sherman & Sherman, 1964) and “Edelweiss” from *The Sound of Music* (Rodgers & Hammerstein, 1959) were some of her favorites, along with canticles of praise from the Episcopal church we attended. Listening to her sing, I was building the first foundations of my listening vocabulary. Later, as a toddler, I began trying to sing with her before bedtime. We also sang together in the car, always tuned into the local country music station. Our favorite song, “My Maria” (Moore & Stevenson, 1996), had two vocal parts in the refrain, which, when I was older, we sang together in duet form. Looking back through the lens of a music educator, I now believe my mother was providing the first co-constructive foundations of my music education. She helped me know music as a communal activity from a young age. My social musical interactions with her, a more knowledgeable musician, surely scaffolded my musical development.

My parents enrolled me in the University of South Carolina’s Music Play classes for infants and young children at age three. These classes are focused on developing musical skills including singing, rhythm chanting, and moving (Valerio, Reynolds, Bolton, & Taggart, 1998). From then on, my formal music education continued without pause. I sang in the children’s choir at my preschool, then attended music class once weekly throughout elementary school. I began violin lessons in second grade and continued until fourth grade, when I began piano lessons. I exchanged piano lessons for organ lessons in seventh grade, played the clarinet in my middle school band, and started playing the violin again in my middle school orchestra. I gained more choral experience participating in my church’s children’s choir and, later, my high school honors chorus. At thirteen, I taught myself to play guitar with the help of YouTube videos.

In my early teens, I was fortunate to have a few musical friends who, being older, were always slightly more musically advanced than I. My friendship with them and our roles as church musicians led to many opportunities to co-construct music. I think these co-constructed experiences contributed to my music education just as much as (if not more than) my formal music training. During rehearsals, I frequently existed in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), requiring assistance with some musical tasks, but soon learning to perform them independently. For example, when I found it difficult to sing a harmonic line independently, one of them accompanied me until I felt confident alone. These friends scaffolded my musical development similarly in many areas of music, but improvisation was not one of them. When they improvised chord progressions and embellished melodies on the piano, they claimed they were playing “whatever popped into their heads.” *Why did nothing ever pop into my head?* I wondered. Each time I tried to enter their improvisations, I did not know how to begin.

I began attending the University of South Carolina as a music education major in 2013. Despite the vast musical knowledge I had accumulated both formally and informally by then, I still did not believe I could improvise. That became a problem. As a substitute organist, church ministers would often tell me to “just play something” if the offertory or communion lasted longer than the planned music. *Just play something?* My organ teachers might take such opportunities to improvise on the previous hymn, but I could never. I was in a band with members who could not read or notate music, so each time they developed an idea for a new song, they would tell me to “just make something up” to play with it. *Out of all the people in this garage, the music major is the one struggling?*

It was not until my junior year that I began reconsidering my attitude toward, and my definition of, improvising. My professor Dr. Valerio, a co-author of *Music Play: The Early Childhood Music Curriculum* (Valerio, Reynolds, Bolton, & Taggart, 1998), instructed my class of preservice teachers to sing our directions to our students in our practicums as often as we could to help our students build their listening vocabularies. For example, when teaching a song in Dorian tonality and duple meter, we might sing, “Find the steady beat while you listen to my song,” on a few notes in Dorian tonality and duple meter to reinforce information on those musical parameters. I was not the only one in my class to struggle at first, as this required developing a higher understanding of the different tonalities in order to reproduce them in sentences. As I improved, a realization struck me: *This is improvising!* Having parameters— a meter, plus seven pitches within the given tonality—made it possible for me.

I took this newfound skill into my own music classroom, improvising vocally when directing students and posing questions. In a few instances, students responded to me using their singing voice in the same tonality in which I had asked the question. Surprised and impressed, I began providing students more opportunities to improvise musical responses. We created new endings to familiar songs, improvised songs without words, and participated in group improvisations as a class. I knew improvisation was a state standard, and my education prepared me to teach these activities, but my own experiences with improvisation had kept my expectations low for my students. Their success continued, surpassing my expectations, and together we began down a path toward building a community of improvisers.

Understanding the parameters of tonality and meter is what ultimately helped me learn to improvise vocally. Eager to learn more about what might help my students and me continue growing as improvisers, I began studying the work of several music educators and researchers. I found parameters like tonality and meter are commonly used as tools for teaching improvisation (Berkowitz, 2009; Guilbault, 2004; Velez, 2009). Berkowitz (2009) compared these musical formulas with vocabulary and grammar in speech, claiming parameters paradoxically provide freedom for the improviser. Guilbault (2004) reaffirmed that idea, stating that hearing harmonic progressions alongside a melody may help children build a harmonic vocabulary which helps them improvise within a given tonality. Velez (2009) found tonal pattern instruction—a representation of harmonic function—is also associated with the tonal cohesiveness of students' improvisations.

Music educators and music education researchers often reference Kratus's (1991, 1995) stages of development related to improvisation (Biasutti, 2017; Volz, 2005). Kratus identified seven developmental levels of improvisation: Exploration, process-oriented improvisation, product-oriented improvisation, fluid improvisation, structural improvisation, stylistic improvisation, and personal improvisation. Kratus recommended music teachers identify the levels of their students to best sequence instruction. To help students advance from one level to the next, Biasutti (2017) suggested using a process-oriented approach focusing on five dimensions of improvisation. The five dimensions are: anticipation, use of repertoire, emotive communication, feedback, and flow. Burnard (2002) recommended students reflect after each improvisation. To facilitate reflection on

a group improvisation, Burnard suggested prompting students to verbally reconstruct their improvisational experiences, focusing on moments of convergence and uncertainty.

Moorhead and Pond (1941) were some of the first music education researchers to demonstrate interest in the role of instruction on children's musical improvisations. In their published study on children's improvised chanting and instrumental improvisations, they found that, with experience, children could explore melodic and rhythmic patterns in their improvisations. Since then, several studies (Guilbault, 2004; Kalmer & Balasko, 1987; Partchey, 1974) have shown positive effects of music instruction on students' improvisational skills. When the MENC pushed for the inclusion of the arts in national school standards in 1994, they included improvisation as a music standard. The MENC was successful, and the arts were included in national standards in the "Goals 2000: Educate America Act" (MENC, 1994).

Despite research on improvisation and its recognition as a national standard, improvisation is still often "relegated to a peripheral position" in music educational programs (Biasutti, 2017, p. 2). This is unfortunate because improvising provides several educational benefits by merging ear training, music theory, and performance in learning environments full of stimuli (Biasutti, 2017; Campbell, 2009). Moreover, musicians who improvise bring greater understanding through audiation to the music they listen to, perform, read, and write (GIML, 2019). Improvising can serve as an opportunity to link formal and informal learning and merge ear training, music theory, and performance (Campbell, 2009). When describing how the National Standards for Music Education (MENC, 1996) relate to the new Bloom's taxonomy, Hanna (2007) placed improvisation in the final stage under "creating" and "generating," demonstrating that improvising

requires higher-order thinking. For those reasons, several researchers (Azzara, 2002; Beegle, 2010; Campbell, 2009; Gordon, 1998) have advocated for improvisation to play a larger role in the educational setting.

Researchers have studied the educational benefits of teaching improvisation (Azzara, 2002; Beegle, 2010; Campbell, 2009; GIML, 2019) and described the effects of music instruction on students' improvisational skills (Berkowitz, 2009; Guilbault, 2004; Kalmer & Balasko, 1987; Partchey, 1974; Velez, 2009), but those researchers presented their findings solely from adult music experts' perspectives. I have often wondered about my elementary-music students' perspectives. I am curious how children experience music, specifically their own musical improvisations. Following I describe one first-grade improvisation exercise that fueled my interest in children's improvisations, how children describe their improvisations, and the improvisational experiences which may derive from co-construction.

This first-grade improvisation exercise followed a music relaxation activity, so students were spread out on the floor, lying on their backs, their eyes closed. I had led the group improvisation exercise I was about to initiate several times before, always a cappella. This time, however, I picked up my guitar and began playing a continuous four-chord progression in duple meter: Em7, Cadd9, G, D. I did this out of pure, impulsive curiosity. (Had I prepared for this lesson variation, perhaps I could have selected a key slightly more suitable for first-grade voices.) I asked students to use their singing voices and the syllable "bum" to create their own songs, this time adding that they should try to make songs that "[went] with my guitar." I demonstrated improvising

vocally within the harmonic structure I was providing with my guitar, and students soon joined me.

When I led this exercise without harmonic accompaniment, the result was usually cacophonous. My intent was not for students to produce beautiful melodies, but to help students explore the sounds of their singing voices in an informal group improvisation setting. This time, however, with my guitar accompaniment, several students were successful at creating their own melodic lines within the given tonality and meter. They confidently sang their improvised melodies independently alongside their 17 classmates and me. We were all singing something different at the same time, and I heard harmonies I never expected to hear in a first-grade class. Wanting to maximize this experience, I let our improvisations guide the dynamics and tempo in my guitar accompaniment. We made a crescendo toward a climax, then gently slowed toward an end. On my final strum, many of us ended on pitches within the tonic. Then there was silence, a rare occurrence in a first-grade class.

I was thrilled! *What was that?! How did that happen? That felt incredible!* I did my best to maintain my composure as my internal music-teacher monologue shouted in amazement.

Wait, did they just have the same experience I had? Although I feared a typical, off-topic, first-grade response, I had to know. “Quietly raise your hand if you can tell me how it felt to sing your song.”

Nobody raised a hand to tattle. Nobody asked for a Band-Aid. In fact, I found my students’ responses described an experience that may have been even more profound than mine.

“It felt like I was floating in the clouds!”

“I saw memories of past worlds.”

“It felt like I had a friend!”

“It was joy filled with *joy!*”

And thus, our fate was sealed. We were on a journey toward creating a community of co-constructive improvisers, all of us eager for our next improvisational experience.

The improvisation experience I have described is one which was co-constructed by my students and me. I did not explicitly tell my students what to sing, nor did I prevent my own musical contributions from being influenced by theirs. Instead, I gave students an opportunity to explore musical possibilities in their vocal improvisations, and I used their improvisations as a guide for the dynamics and tempo of my guitar accompaniment. We were all contributors to the final musical product. According to Young (2005), adults who scaffold children’s musicking co-constructively may often rework or repair children’s musical offerings, benefitting their music development. As a child, I felt this to be true in my musical interactions with my mother and musical friends. As a teacher and adult, I see how co-constructing helps my students play an active role in their music learning. When we are co-constructing improvisational experiences, every student seems to be highly engaged, conveniently resulting in very few behavior issues.

Intrigued by my students’ responses to co-constructive improvisation, I began searching for new ways to facilitate co-constructive improvisation in my music classes. Unfortunately, just a few weeks after the improvisation session described above, due to

the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to meet with my students again until September of the following school year, six months later.

During my time away from school, I remained dedicated to exploring new ways to improvise with my students. My thesis advisor suggested I enroll in the Music for People Musicianship and Leadership program (Music for People, 2020), an online training for facilitating group improvisation. After my first training session, it was clear to me that the Music for People organization's principles aligned with my interests in co-constructive improvisation. Each music activity we completed in the training struck me as highly co-constructive, so I was eager to incorporate them into my music education practices when we returned to school.

With this exploratory ethnographic case study, I aimed to learn more about my students' and my perspectives of our improvisations as we engaged in co-constructive music improvisation. An ethnographic case study employs ethnographic methods to examine sociocultural phenomena (Schwant & Gates, 2018). Documenting my students' perspectives in an ethnographic case study may help me understand their "social reality" when improvising (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011, p. 460). As evidenced by my first-grade students' descriptions of the improvisation exercise previously described, "social reality is an interpreted world, not a literal world, always under symbolic construction" (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p. 489). Understanding how my students interpret their improvisational experiences may help me identify their processes when engaging in the social musical act of co-constructive improvisation.

The purpose of this exploratory ethnographic case study was to examine music improvisations co-constructed by my elementary students and me, their music teacher.

Following are the specific research questions that I used to guide this study.

1. How do my elementary students and I co-construct music improvisations?
2. How do I describe our music improvisations?
3. How do my elementary students describe our music improvisations?
4. How do my elementary students describe their own music improvisations?
5. How do my elementary students describe their peers' music improvisations?

CHAPTER 2

RELATED RESEARCH

“Most learning in most settings is a communal activity, a sharing of the culture.

It is not just that the child must make his knowledge his own,
but that he must make it his own in a community of those
who share his sense of belonging to a culture.”

Bruner, 1986, p. 127

Improvisation in a Fourth-Grade Music Class

Driscoll, 2014

With the intent of improving the understanding of music learning, the purpose of Driscoll’s case study was to investigate the processes of tonal, rhythm, melodic and harmonic improvisation in a fourth-grade music class. Her documentation of instructional strategies, students’ musical offerings, and students’ improvisational experiences contributed knowledge of how students respond to improvisational instruction.

Participants and setting. Seventeen students in a fourth-grade elementary music class received music instruction for 50 minutes, twice weekly, for five weeks. Driscoll served as a participant observer, as she used multiple tonalities and a whole-part-whole teaching method (GIML, 2019) to prepare students for improvising. She also instructed students in harmonic functions by teaching them to label tonic, dominant, and subdominant functions in tonal patterns. She led a variety of improvisation exercises throughout the study,

including having students improvise a new tonal pattern in a given harmonic function and initiating call-and-response melodic improvisation between teacher and students.

Data collection, procedures, and analysis. Data included video of music instruction, written notes from the researcher describing her teaching experiences throughout the study, audio recordings of students' musical responses, and student journal entries describing their experiences during the improvisation activities. Driscoll determined students had difficulty describing their experiences in written words, so she created projection worksheets on which students could circle a picture of a face that reflected their feelings. These worksheets depicted 27 different emotions such as happy, calm, embarrassed, and irritated which students could select. Driscoll ensured students knew the definitions of all words before asking them to select one. Students then wrote a short description of why they selected that picture. Driscoll transcribed the videos using HyperTRANSCRIBE 1.6.1 software and reviewed transcriptions for accuracy. She reviewed her data to identify appropriate categorization and connecting strategies, using Maxwell's (2013) and Patton's (2002) research analysis strategies. She selected vignettes for three individual fourth grade students whose experiences intensely manifested the processes involved in improvisation learning in the fourth-grade music class.

Findings and discussion. Driscoll identified three emergent themes:

- **Theme one:** "Establishing an effective music learning environment" (Driscoll, p. 35).
- **Theme two:** "Strategy adaptations to scaffold a music skill" (Driscoll, p. 46).
- **Theme three:** "Students' shared positive experiences" (Driscoll, p. 52).

When discussing theme one, she described in detail how she cultivated a learning environment in which students felt comfortable taking musical risks. She offered insight to students' learning process in her discussion on theme two, describing the most effective ways to correct inaccurate tonal syllables in a student's improvisation. Driscoll found students demonstrated more understanding when she sang the student's chosen tonal syllables on the correct pitches rather than changing the tonal syllables to match their pitches. In her discussion on theme three, Driscoll described students' experiences with improvisation as mostly positive and highly social. She also created vignettes from three students' journal entries about their improvisation experiences:

- **Vignette one:** "It's... been... awesome!" (Driscoll, p. 55).
- **Vignette two:** I faced my fears (Driscoll, p. 57).
- **Vignette three:** I don't like improvising and I never will" (Driscoll, p. 58).

She chose those students' responses to create vignettes because they represented three unique experiences that were common amongst her fourth-grade students. As evidenced in the vignette titles, each student had unique experiences in their learning.

Relevance to current case study. Like Driscoll, I am interested in how students experience and describe their improvisations. Driscoll found her fourth-grade students had difficulty creating written reflections, so she adjusted her reflection process throughout the study. Reading about her experience with fourth-grade student participants' reflection process highlighted the importance of using reflection techniques that are age-appropriate. The students in my study will be in kindergarten through fifth grade, so I must find alternatives to written reflections. Unlike Driscoll, I intend to co-

construct most improvisational activities in my case study and document my students' perceptions of their improvisational experiences.

**The Effect of Harmonic Accompaniment on the Tonal Achievement and
Tonal Improvisations of Children in Kindergarten and First Grade
Guilbault, 2004**

Guilbault examined the effect of harmonic accompaniment on the tonal achievement and tonal improvisations of young elementary music students. The results of her experimental study offer insight to her students' improvisational processes.

Participants and setting. Participants were students from four intact kindergarten music classes and four intact first-grade music classes. There were 68 students in each grade level. Guilbault provided music instruction to each class.

Data collection, procedures, and analysis. Guilbault administered *Intermediate Measures of Music Audiation* (IMMA) (Gordon, 1984) to each student prior to beginning treatment and found there were no significant differences between the experimental and control group in either grade. Guilbault provided music instruction to every group for 25 weeks, basing her instruction on Gordon's (2003) music learning theory. Kindergarten classes received 30 minutes of music instruction twice per six-day cycle, while first-grade classes received 40 minutes of music instruction three times per cycle. Improvisation activities included singing a new ending to a familiar song, same/different activities, and conversational improvisation. The control groups completed every activity a cappella, while the experimental groups listened to a root-melody accompaniment with 80 percent of songs. Instruments used for accompaniments included "bass xylophone and

metallophone; alto xylophone and metallophone; voice recordings; live vocal performance; and piano” (p. 69).

After 25 weeks of instruction, Guilbault used an Olympus Voice and Music DM-1 Digital Voice Recorder to record each individual student’s post-treatment a cappella singing performance of two criterion rote songs and an improvised ending to an unfamiliar major-tonality/duple-meter song without text. Three independent judges blindly rated the students’ performances according to a five-point tonal achievement scale and a five-point improvisation rating scale. Guilbault (a) conducted a two-way analysis of variance to examine the effects of using a root melody accompaniment on students’ abilities to sing tonic, dominant, subdominant, and cadential patterns accurately within the context of a song, and (b) conducted a two-way analysis of variance to examine whether hearing a root-melody accompaniment influenced students’ tonal improvisations.

Findings and discussion. Guilbault found no significant interactions or differences between the treatment group and control group for tonal achievement ratings in the context of songs; however, students in first grade generally scored higher than students in kindergarten. In the tonal improvisation section of the post-test, the experimental group received significantly higher improvisation ratings than students in the control group. Again, students in first grade scored higher than students in kindergarten. Guilbault concluded that hearing a root-melody accompaniment with songs may help students build a harmonic vocabulary which helps them better understand the musical context in which they are improvising. She attributed differing scores between age groups to maturation and difference in the amount of music instruction time.

Relevance to current case study. Like Guilbault, I am interested in teaching tools which help students improve their improvisational skills. Her research highlighted the benefits of using a root-melody accompaniment with song instruction. I already incorporate root-melody accompaniments in some of my song instruction, and I will continue to do so during this case study. Guilbault's students performed solo improvisations to receive their final ratings in her study, but I am interested in solo, small-group, and whole-group improvisation. I am curious if a root-melody accompaniment can provide a similar foundation in group improvisations.

Co-Constructing Music in a Reggio-Inspired Preschool

Westlake, 2015

Westlake visited Project P.L.A.Y. School to understand the process of co-constructing music in a Reggio-inspired preschool. The Reggio approach is a style of teaching and learning based on the philosophical tenets of the infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy (p. 3). The Reggio approach informs interactions among teachers, children, and families as a community. The community views children as competent learners who actively co-construct their learning. In that community, teachers are researchers and co-constructors of knowledge, and the environment is also considered a teacher. Reggio-inspired teachers promote the idea that children express their learning in a hundred languages, which include writing, painting, drama, and music. Westlake specifically asked, "In this preschool, what processes do children use to make their music learning visible and audible?" (p. iii).

Participants and setting. Participants were 13 children between the ages of two and a half and five years old, and six adults. Of the children, four were boys and nine

were girls, all regular attendees of the Project P.L.A.Y. School in Elkins Park, PA. Adults were two Project P.L.A.Y. School teachers, one volunteer, and three researchers, including Westlake. All six adults were rarely present at the same time. Like Westlake, the other two researchers were interested in co-musicking with children; however, they completed their research separately from Westlake. Westlake visited Project P.L.A.Y. School once weekly for one and a half hours during the children's free play time, during which she acted as a musical play partner with the children.

Data collection, procedures, and analysis. Throughout her three months of visiting Project P.L.A.Y. School, Westlake served as a co-musicker. According to Westlake, a co-musicker looks for musical elements in children's play and, drawing on their experience with children, finds ways to use those elements to scaffold music interactions. Acting in this role gave her an influence on the emerging music processes, though she aimed to let the children take the lead in their musical creations. She documented musical interactions with her iPhone, taking photographs and recording audio and video for as long as each interaction lasted. She also kept a journal in which she recorded observations immediately after each visit, referring to her photos and recordings for additional memory support. She included some transcriptions of musical interactions in her journal. At the end of her visits, she transferred all documents to her computer and arranged them in chronological order. She then interpreted the data through coding. Coding illuminated seven themes, which Westlake labeled *processes* (p. 33).

Findings and discussion. The seven processes Westlake identified were instrument exploration, vocal exploration, singing, expressive movement, notation exploration, staging shows, and musical conversations. In her descriptions, Westlake

included specific stories from her interactions with students that represent each process. She found many of those processes emerged simultaneously, as students played instruments as they staged shows or sang in musical conversations. Westlake, like Young (2005), determined that adults who scaffold children's musicking co-constructively may often rework or repair children's musical offerings.

Relevance to current case study. Like Westlake, I intend to co-construct music with my students. Westlake's experiences as a co-structor provide a guide for me as I begin my study. She let students be music leaders, building on their ideas and scaffolding their learning by contributing her own musical knowledge to each experience. I plan to do the same in engaging in co-constructive improvisation with my students. Unlike Westlake, I intend to explore the student co-structor participants' perceptions of their musical contributions.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

“The most fundamental issues that face music educators concern an improved understanding of the improvisation process and the inclusion of improvisation in comprehensive music education curricula.”

Azzara, 2002, p. 182

Music setting. I have provided all music instruction at Coosa Elementary School, Beaufort, SC, since Fall 2017. During that time, I have enjoyed developing a music culture with the students. The instruction I have provided has been predominantly based on Gordon’s (2012) music learning theory. Gordon recommended engaging students in multiple tonalities and meters as well as tonal pattern and rhythm pattern repetition, recognition, creativity, and improvisation. In January 2020, I began incorporating more improvisation activities into my lessons. Those improvisation activities included creating new endings to familiar songs, improvising musical conversations, and improvising vocally to harmonic progressions.

In September 2020, I began the Music for People Musicianship and Leadership online training (Music for People, 2020) where I learned several co-constructive improvisation activities which I felt aligned with the purpose of this study. Musical conversations, singing over drones, and an adaptation of the 5Rhythms® movement meditation (Roth, 1998) were three improvisation activities which lent themselves

especially well to co-construction. I incorporated those activities into my music lessons October-December 2020. Engaging in those activities often inspired my students and me to create other, similar improvisations.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students attended school on a complex schedule September-December 2020. Students attended school two days per week in small groups and received 45 minutes of biweekly music instruction from me with their grade-level classmates. Each class I taught during that time comprised approximately 7-12 students. In those small classes, my students and I had unique learning experiences that allowed us to interact with each other one-on-one more so than I have experienced in typical larger classes. During that time, I increasingly adopted a conversational approach with my teaching style and allowed my students to influence the direction of our lessons.

Complete participant observer. I was a complete participant observer in this exploratory ethnographic case study. A complete participant observer studies “a situation in which they are already [an] ordinary” participant (Spradley, 2016, p. 61). I am a South Carolina-certified music teacher in my fourth year of teaching music at Coosa Elementary School. As a complete participant observer, I engaged in co-constructive music improvisation with each music class that I regularly teach, kindergarten through grade five (Spradley, 2016). I considered myself a co-constructor with student participants. I had an established relationship with most student co-constructor participants prior to this study, having taught many of them since they were in pre-kindergarten or kindergarten.

Student co-constructor participants. Each student in each Coosa Elementary music class was a co-constructor participant. Student co-constructor participants and I

each fluidly adopted a variety of roles during improvisation sessions, including listener roles, improviser roles, and commenter roles.

Sampling. Using emergent phenomenon sampling to select information-rich cases (Patton, 2015), I purposefully selected three video-recorded improvisation sessions with minimal interruptions and detailed student written and spoken reflections for data transcription and analysis. Following are descriptions of each of those three improvisation sessions. The total number of participants in the three improvisation sessions was 26.

**Improvisation Session 1 - The Wave: An Adaptation of the 5Rhythms®
(Roth, 1998)**

Seven kindergarten student co-structor participants and I performed an improvisation exercise based on the 5Rhythms® movement meditation practice (Roth, 1998). The 5Rhythms®, Flowing Staccato Chaos Lyrical Stillness®, are experienced through improvised movement and dance. According to the 5Rhythms® philosophy, each of those rhythms is a state of being. Together, the 5Rhythms® create “a map to everywhere we want to go, on all planes of consciousness” (Roth, n.d.)

I first participated in an adaptation of the 5Rhythms® in a Music for People online workshop. My group leader, Mary Knysh,¹ referred to it as *The Wave*, acknowledging the arc of emotion portrayed when performing the 5Rhythms® consecutively. In the workshop, Mary invited us to perform *The Wave* as a musical improvisation exercise. During the exercise, a leader played improvised interpretations of

¹ Mary is the founder of Rhythmic Connections and a primary teacher for Music for People, an international organization. Mary is a prolific musician, pedagogue, and author who presents throughout the world (Knysh, 2021).

the 5Rhythms® on his or her instrument, fluidly moving from Rhythm® to Rhythm® without speaking. The other participants and I followed the guidance of the leader, participating in each Rhythm® with our own instruments, also fluidly moving through each without speaking. We repeated the activity several times, exploring different ways to lead and signal to other improvisers when it was time to move our music onward to the next Rhythm® until we arrived at Stillness®.

The selected improvisation session with kindergarten co-structor participants was my first experience introducing the 5Rhythms® in the form of The Wave to very young students. Quite unsure of how the activity would be received and interpreted, I chose different labels for each of the 5Rhythms®, labels to which I hoped young students would be able to relate. The labels I chose were *Flowing Along*, *Trouble Arises*, *Chaos*, *Resolution*, and a return to *Flowing Along*. While describing those five sections to my students, I also drew an illustration of the activity on the board in the front of the classroom, presented in Figure 3.1.

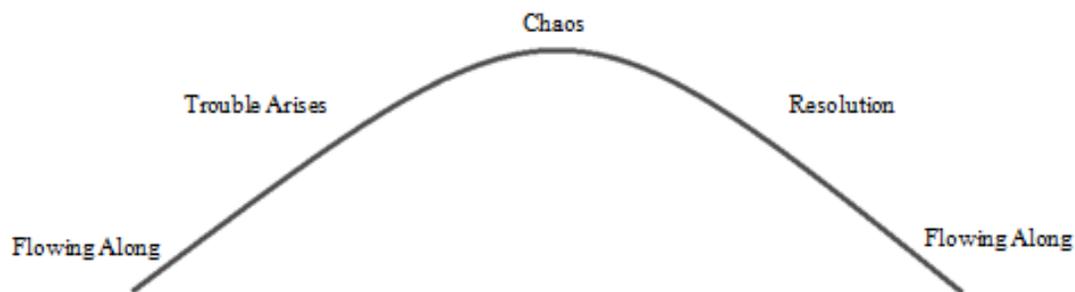


Figure 3.1 Illustration of The Wave

I described Flowing Along as a moment in which “everything is going well.” I explained Trouble Arises might refer to the discovery of a problem, a problem which would worsen as we approached Chaos. I described Chaos as the feeling of “losing control” in a moment when “everything is happening at once.” Our Resolution was the beginning of “solving the problem,” and our return to Flowing Along meant our problem had been solved and we could return to “enjoying our day.”

Student co-structor participants and I participated in three cycles of The Wave. Each time, I improvised on an electric keyboard while students improvised with their voices and body movements. The first cycle, I instructed student co-constructors to follow my keyboard music and listen for cues that it may be time to move on to the next section. After a brief discussion following the first cycle, it was clear students had successfully interpreted my shifting tempos, dynamics, tonalities, and rhythms as the cues I had intended. The second cycle, I invited student co-constructors to play a role in performing cues, telling them I would listen and watch for signs they were ready to move on to the next section. The third cycle, I invited student co-constructors to be leaders, and I followed their cues. Each cycle was followed by a brief reflective discussion regarding student co-structor participants’ and my perceptions of our experiences.

Improvisation Session 2 - Musical Conversations

Seven second-grade student co-structor participants and I engaged in several rounds of musical conversations. In a musical conversation, one uses his or her singing voice to communicate, singing made-up syllables rather than real words. When engaging in musical conversations, I encouraged student co-structor participants to “borrow

musical ideas” from whomever was singing to them, allowing other co-structor participants’ improvisations to influence their own improvisations.

In the beginning of this improvisation session, I selected pairs of students to engage in musical conversations. Later, I began selecting trios, in which I also participated as an improviser. During trio musical conversations, we ceased taking turns in a predictable order and instead “passed” the conversation to whomever we desired within the trio after singing our response. To pass the conversation, we pantomimed throwing a ball to the person whom we wanted to respond. In several rounds, the end of a musical conversation was determined when co-structor participants’ singing dissolved into insuppressible laughter.

Improvisation Session 3 - Singing Over Drones

Twelve third-grade student co-structor participants and I engaged in several rounds of singing over drones. For each round, I selected one student co-structor participant to play drones on a xylophone, and one-to-two student co-structor participants to improvise using their singing voices. Drone players played a single pitch on the xylophone, allowed that pitch to resonate for one full cycle of their breath, then played another pitch. Between pitches, singers sang short vocal improvisations. The drone player decided when each round was over by raising both arms after playing their final pitch, signaling the singer or singers to sing their own final pitch. We paused for reflective discussion after each round.

Physical setting. Each music class improvisation session took place inside students’ homeroom classrooms or in an outdoor setting. To further prevent the spread of COVID-19, were not allowed to leave their classrooms during the school day except for

outdoor activities. In each classroom, students sat in chairs behind their own desks or tables, separated from other students by either plexiglass partitions or six feet of space. Students also wore face masks.

Concerned about teaching in classrooms other than my own spacious music room, I created an outdoor music class setting behind the school playground. In this space, I placed seating mats for students in a large circle. Each student stood or sat on their individual mat six feet away from their neighbors. My students and I enjoyed several music classes in this outdoor setting, however, due to myriad distractions, none of the video recordings from the outdoor settings were selected as an information-rich improvisation session.

Data collection and sources. I collected all data as regular practice in my classroom. According to the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board, that type of action research project was not subject to the Protection of Human Subject Regulations in accordance with the Code of Federal Regulations 45 CFR 46 et. seq.

Data comprised improvisation video-recordings, class discussion video-recordings, improvisation audio-recordings, class discussion audio-recordings, student projection sheets, student reflective worksheets, student drawings, and my video-recorded observations. I collected those data October 26-December 11, 2020.

I video-recorded improvisation sessions using a GoPro HERO7 camera placed on a desk or table at the front of the room. To support the video data, I audio-recorded each improvisation using a Zoom H2n Digital Portable Recorder.

After each improvisation session, I led student discussions based on two-to-four prompts I provided with the intention of helping student co-constructor participants

reflect on their processes and improvisations. Following are examples of prompts to which student co-structor participants responded.

- What did you notice about this improvisation?
- What (if anything) did you like about it?
- What (if anything) did you dislike about it?

Following improvisation sessions with grades kindergarten through second, I provided each student co-structor participant with a blank sheet of paper. Students drew a picture which described their experience during the improvisation session. I interviewed each student about their drawing and invited them to explain what they drew and why they drew it. I audio-recorded all student interviews.

Following improvisation sessions with grades three through five, I provided each student co-structor participant who engaged in improvisation with a projection sheet to triangulate their reflection process, presented in Appendix A. According to Patton (2015), projection techniques allow participants to respond in ways other than answering questions and can be especially useful when interviewing children. Projection sheets contained a list of 25 emotions student co-structor participants could select to describe their experiences. I ensured student co-structor participants knew the definitions of those words before asking them to make their selections. I provided each student co-structor who did not engage in improvisation with a reflective worksheet on which they described their experience as a listener. I present the listener reflection sheet in Appendix B.

Immediately following each music class, I recorded a video of myself speaking about my observations during the improvisation session. My observations include my

perception of student engagement, student musicianship, and my own thoughts and feelings. I later transcribed those videos.

Data analysis. I used emergent phenomenon purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) to select three improvisation sessions for ethnographic analysis (Spradley, 2016). Using a critical incident case study approach, I determined each of those three sessions to be self-contained descriptive units of analysis. After each improvisation session, I transcribed video and audio recordings to create a verbatim record of spoken words. I used initial coding to identify processes which may have arisen during each improvisation session. Initial coding is “intended as a starting point to provide the researcher with analytic leads for further exploration” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 81). During a second round of coding, I performed descriptive coding on all data to summarize the basic topics in each session (Saldaña, 2009, p. 70). I present my codebook in Appendix C.

After coding the data, I used Spradley’s steps of ethnographic analysis (2016): (a) domain analysis, (b) focused observations, (c) taxonomic analysis, (d) selected observations, and (e) componential analysis.

Credibility. Data comprised multiple sources, including student co-creator participants’ drawings and written reflections. To ensure I understood what student co-constructors were drawing or writing, I led brief interviews with each student co-creator as they completed their drawing or written reflection. During the interviews, I asked each student co-creator to provide a short, verbal explanation of their drawing or written reflection.

Alli Johnson (pseudonym not preferred) served as an external reviewer and secondary analyst (Patton, 2015). Alli is a fellow licensed music educator with two years

of music teaching experience. She is a graduate assistant completing her master's degree in music education at the University of South Carolina. She has also completed Professional Development Level I with the Gordon Institute for Music Learning. Alli reviewed my data and analysis, then provided feedback which included her thoughts and interpretations that helped me finalize my interpretations.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

“Learning and teaching should not stand on opposite banks and just watch the river flow by; instead, they should embark together on a journey down the water.

Through an active, reciprocal exchange, teaching can strengthen learning and how to learn.”

Malaguzzi, 1993b, p. 83

Domain Analysis, Taxonomic Analysis, Componential Analysis

When performing initial coding and descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2009), I identified several processes and topics in each session that I used to inform a domain analysis (Spradley 2016). In my domain analysis, I identified several cultural domains, referred to by Spradley as “cover terms” (p. 89). I then identified smaller categories, or “included terms,” within each domain. Cover terms and included terms are linked by “semantic relationships,” such as “ways to” or “types of.” These components of a domain analysis are shown in Table 4.1.

I then selected domains for taxonomic analysis. With taxonomic analysis, I searched for patterns in co-structor participants’ improvisations, behaviors, and perspectives to represent observed cultural patterns (Spradley, 2016). The three domains I selected for taxonomic analysis were (a) ways to co-construct music improvisations, (b) ways to describe music improvisations, and (c) kinds of co-structor participants. In Figures 4.1-4.3, I present taxonomies for each selected domain.

Table 4.1 Domain analysis

Included Terms	Semantic Relationship	Cover Terms
Singing songs we know		
Singing original ideas		
Responding to what we hear		
Playing or singing random pitches	is a way to	co-construct music improvisations.
Playing or singing purposeful pitches		
Singing differently than planned		
Misinterpreting directions		
Describing feelings		
Describing images		
Describing songs we know		
Describing with musical terms	is a way to	describe music improvisations.
Describing familiar experiences		
Demonstrating		
Reenacting		

Included Terms	Semantic Relationship	Cover Terms
<u>Listener</u>		
Silent listener		
Improvising listener		
Commenting listener		
<u>Improviser</u>		
Singer		
Imitating singer		
Echoing singer		
Singer of new ideas	is a kind of	co-constructor participant.
Body percussion player		
Xylophone player		
<u>Commenter</u>		
Emotions describer		
Music describer		
Image describer		
Experience describer		
Judge		
Director		

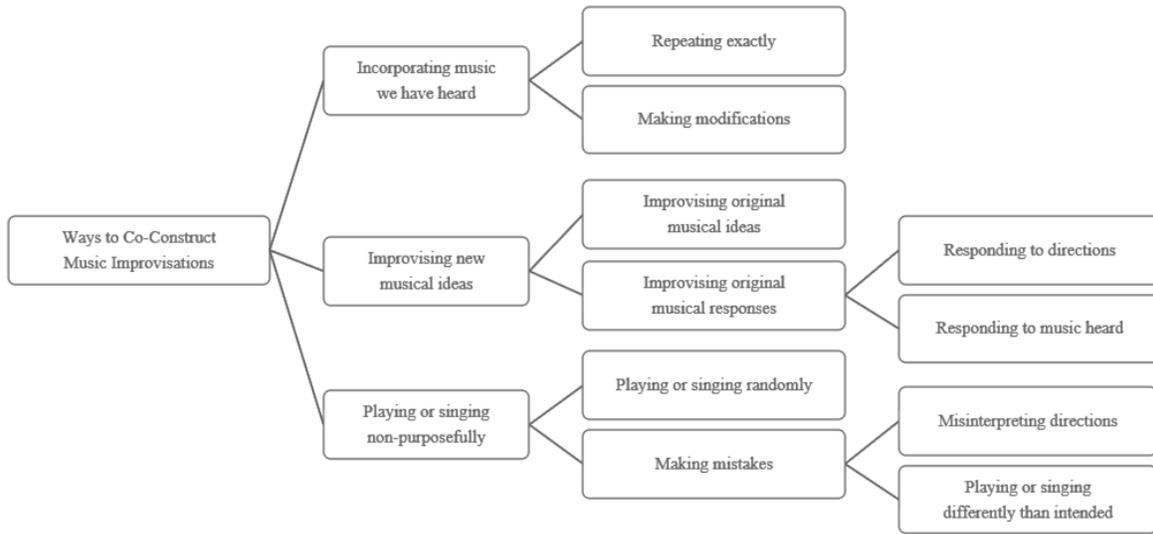


Figure 4.1 Taxonomy 1

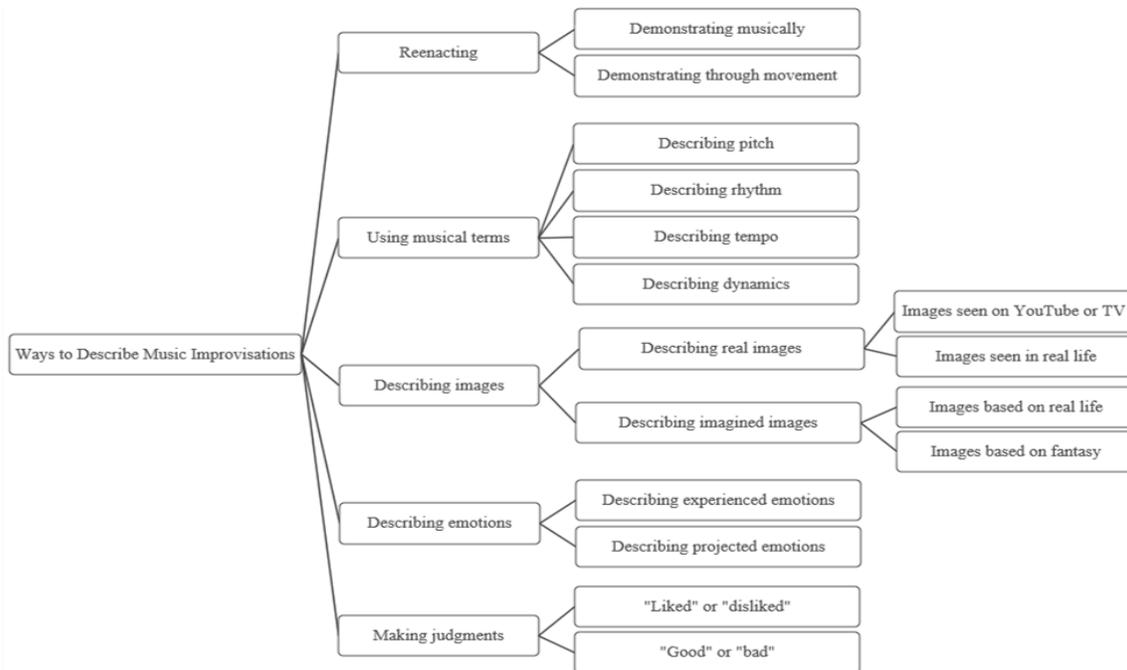


Figure 4.2 Taxonomy 2

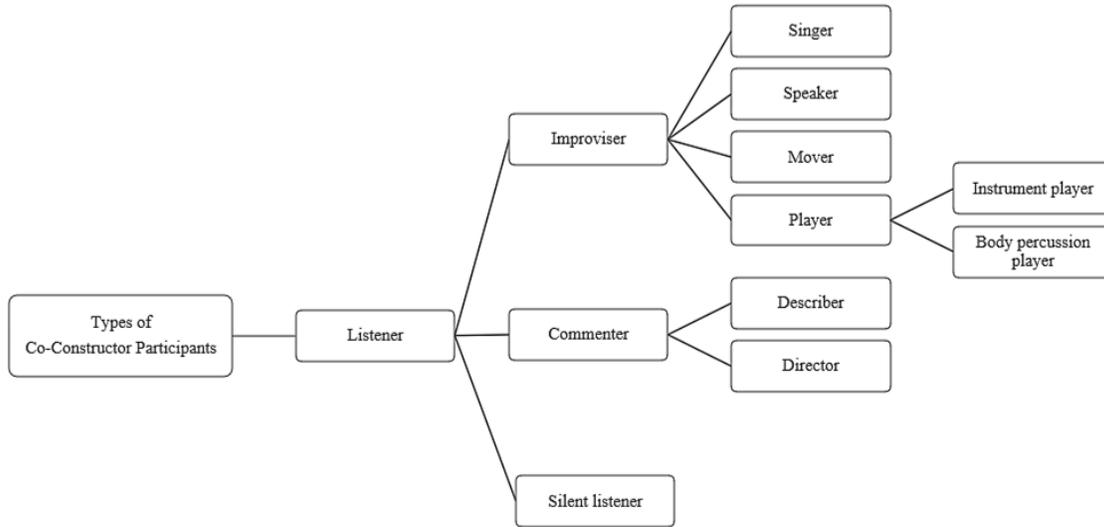


Figure 4.3 Taxonomy 3

I repeated the steps listed above several times throughout data collection and analysis to inform selected observations (Spradley, 2016). Making selected observations allowed me to identify contrasts within domains. I examined those contrasts in a componential analysis. To make a componential analysis, I prepared a paradigm worksheet. Paradigm worksheets, shown in Tables 4.2-4.4, show dimensions of contrast.

Table 4.2 Paradigm worksheet 1

Types of Co-Constructor Participants	Dimensions of Contrast		
	Listener	Music Maker	Describer
Improviser	Yes	Yes	Sometimes
Commenter	Yes	Sometimes	Yes
Silent Listener	Yes	No	No

Table 4.3 Paradigm worksheet 2

Ways to Co-Construct Music Improvisations	Dimensions of Contrast	
	Involves Engaging with Other Co-Constructor Participants	Based on Music Heard
	Incorporating music we have heard	Yes
Improvising new musical ideas	Sometimes	Sometimes
Playing or singing non-purposefully	No	Sometimes

Table 4.4 Paradigm worksheet 3

Ways to Describe Music Improvisations	Dimensions of Contrast			
	Uses words	Uses music	Uses emotion	Uses imagery
Reenacting	No	Sometimes	Sometimes	Sometimes
Using musical terms	Yes	No	No	No
Describing images	Yes	No	Sometimes	Yes
Describing emotions	Yes	No	Yes	Sometimes
Making judgments	Yes	No	Sometimes	Sometimes

Cultural Themes

After performing domain, taxonomic, and componential analysis, I searched for cultural themes which may represent co-constructor participants' experiences when engaging in co-constructive music improvisation. According to Spradley (2016, p. 141),

“every culture is a complex pattern.” Cultural themes are components of the pattern.

Following are three cultural themes which emerged among co-structor participants.

1. Fluidly Adopting the Roles of Listener, Improviser, and Commenter
2. Connecting Music Improvisations to Lived Experiences and Imagined Experiences
3. Being in Music Together

Theme One: Fluidly Adopting the Roles of Listener, Improviser, and Commenter

In each of the three selected improvisation sessions, student co-structor participants and I fluidly adopted three primary roles: listener, improviser, and commenter. Each co-structor participant adopted one or more of those roles during their improvisation session, and several co-structor participants adopted multiple roles simultaneously. Following I describe those three roles.

Listener Roles

All co-structor participants were listeners. After each round of improvisation, all listeners were given the opportunity to describe their experiences listening. Two co-structor participants in *Singing Over Drones* chose to be *silent listeners*. Silent listeners did not improvise or share any comments, but their body language suggested to me they were actively listening throughout the duration of the improvisation session. Silent listeners focused their gaze on the improvisers when they were improvising and turned their heads toward the commenters when comments were being made. Like other co-structor participants, silent listeners participated in written reflection following their improvisation session. Their written reflections indicated they were engaged in their improvisation session by including feelings they experienced while listening. One silent listener wrote, “I felt happy.” Another silent listener wrote, “[Listening] felt really calm.”

Improvising listeners were listeners who also engaged in improvising. In Musical Conversations, improvising listeners demonstrated their listening by echoing improvisations from their peers. Sometimes they would echo their peer’s improvisation precisely, and sometimes they would improvise a variation. In Figure 4.4, I present an excerpt from a musical conversation during which three student co-constructor participants demonstrated their listening by engaging in imitation.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for three participants: Bella, Jasmine, and Lucy. Each system consists of three staves, one for each participant. The first system shows Bella starting with 'Du du du du du', followed by Jasmine with 'Du du du du du.', and Lucy with 'Hm hm hm hm hm hmm... mm mm.'. The second system shows Bella with 'Ba ba ba ba ba.', Jasmine with 'Ba la ba ba ba.' and 'Ba ba ba ba.', and Lucy with 'Ba bum!'.

Figure 4.4 Musical conversation with imitation (excerpt)

Commenting listeners were listeners who demonstrated their listening by commenting on improvisations during reflective discussion. Commenting listeners could also be improvising listeners, sharing their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of their own improvisations. In Singing Over Drones, one improvising listener commented on a mistake she felt she had made during her improvisation. She explained she was trying to match a high pitch she had just heard from the xylophone, but heard herself accidentally

sing a low pitch. She said, “I was confused, and then I was like, hmm, I was trying to sing a high note but I somehow sang a low note.”

Commenting listeners also described the improvisations they heard from other co-creator participants. In a reflective discussion between cycles of *The Wave*, a commenting listener demonstrated his listening by saying he heard my keyboard start “getting louder” during *Trouble Arises*. Another commenting listener said she heard me “go crazy” on my keyboard during *Chaos*. Commenting listeners also described their perceptions of improvisations, as did the commenting listener in *Musical Conversations* who described her peer’s improvisation as “hilarious.”

Improviser Roles

Improvisers were co-creator participants who engaged in improvisation through singing or playing. In *The Wave*, improvisers used body percussion and their singing voices. In *Musical Conversations*, improvisers used their singing voices. In *Singing Over Drones*, improvisers played the xylophone or used their singing voices. Each co-creator participant in each improvisation session was given at least one opportunity to be an improviser. Co-creator participants who did not choose to improvise were listeners, commenters, or both.

In *Singing Over Drones*, several co-creator participants informed me they wished to be an improviser *only* if they were selected as the xylophone player. Due to class time restraints, those co-creator participants were not all able to be improvisers. Some of those co-creator participants expressed disappointment and frustration on their projection sheets that they were unable to be improvisers in the manner they desired. Only two co-creator participants in *Singing Over Drones* were willing to be singing

improvisers, so they were both given several opportunities to explore that role. In their reflections and projection sheets, the two singing improvisers described experiences of confidence and success during their improvisation session. When I asked one why she felt confident, she replied, “I said to myself, I can do it!”

In *Musical Conversations*, five student co-creator participants chose to be improvisers. The five improvisers excitedly expressed their desires to improvise in nearly every musical conversation, which led me to increase the number of participants in each conversation from two to three. I also adopted the role of improviser, engaging in two of our musical conversations. In this improvisation session, improvisers sang original melodies as well as variations on melodies they already knew or had heard from their peers.

In *The Wave*, all co-creator participants chose to be improvisers in all rounds of improvisations. Student co-creator participants improvised with body percussion and their voices while I improvised on my electric piano keyboard. As we progressed through three cycles of *The Wave*, student co-creator participants contributed louder, more frequent improvisations. In our third and final cycle, I invited student co-creators to be leaders. I told them I would be listening and watching for signs they were ready to move on to the next sections, and that I would do my best to move with them. Following I describe how student co-creator participants and I adopted improviser roles during this cycle.

To begin our improvisation, I invited student co-creator participants to take a breath with me, then, after our exhale, I said, “Begin flowing along.” Several student co-creators hummed gently and swayed side-to-side, and I entered by playing legato

arpeggios in C major on my keyboard. One student co-creator's voice moved to the forefront, singing the following pattern:  A few seconds later, I heard feet begin to shuffle, and I began including pitches in my keyboard music that did not belong in C major. One student co-creator began a sliding, humming sound which increased in pitch and volume as our improvisation escalated in *Trouble Arises*. I played random, fast trills, which some student co-creators imitated in their humming voices. At the peak of *Chaos*, student co-creators mostly abandoned their vocal improvisations in favor of wild, fast movements and laughter as I played cluster chords as quickly as I could. I slowed down for a brief moment, and when student co-creators did not slow down with me, I rejoined them in *Chaos* for a few more seconds. Finally, student co-creators began sliding their voices downward in short "Ahhs." I began the descent with them, slowing down and incorporating less and less dissonance as we moved through *Resolution*. Student co-creator participants became quiet as I neared the cadence that would return us to C major and mark our return to *Flowing Along*, then rejoined me with loud, joyful noises when I restarted the arpeggios I had played in the first section. This time, I tried playing the arpeggios less gently and more triumphantly. One student co-creator followed an ascending melodic line I played, climbing the C major scale with me singing, "La, la, la, la, la, laaaaa!" Another sang, "Ding! Ding! Ding!" Our improvisation ended with a C major glissando from me, and one final "Ding!"

Commenter Roles

Commenters actively participated in reflective discussion following each round of improvisation. Commenters described improvisations in several ways. Some commenters

reenacted portions of improvisations by demonstrating how an improviser moved their body or how they used their voice. In *The Wave*, one commenter informed me that he had been “doing the acting, like this!” and proceeded to show me how he had waved his arms wildly during the Chaos section. In *Singing Over Drones*, one commenter described her improvisation as sounding like *Jingle Bell Rock* (Helms, 1957), then sang the part of the song which she was describing.

Most commenters used words when describing and discussing improvisations. Common words included terms often used to describe music, such as “high,” “low,” “loud,” “soft,” “fast,” and “slow.” Several commenters related improvisations to experiences and imagined images, often projecting emotions on the music they heard. In *Singing Over Drones*, one commenter described his peers’ improvisation by saying it sounded sad, “like it could be at a funeral.” In *Musical Conversations*, one commenter said an improvisation sounded like “a nice moment.” Commenters also described how improvisations incited emotions within them, such as the commenter who told me he “felt sad” during the Chaos section of *The Wave*.

Imposing judgement on improvisations was another way commenters shared their experiences. This occurred most often among the kindergarten co-structor participants. Commenters said they “liked” or “did not like” certain sections, or that a section was “good” or “bad.”

Some commenters assumed the role of director. This was especially true for one co-structor participant in *Singing Over Drones*. In his comments, he made several suggestions for the player and two singers. One of his suggestions was to allow one singer to sing first, and then have the second singer echo her. The singers followed his

suggestion, and after listening, he determined it might be helpful if the xylophone player also echoed each of their xylophone pitches as the second singer began her echo.

Interestingly, the xylophone player misinterpreted the suggestion and played the same pitch throughout the entire round of improvisation, which, unlike any of the previous improvisations, provided a tonal center for the singers. I perceived that tonal center to assist the singers in creating melodies.

Theme Two: Connecting Music Improvisations to Lived Experiences and Imagined Experiences

When describing improvisations, co-creator participants often referenced experiences they felt related to the music they heard. Those experiences comprise both true, lived experiences, and imagined, occasionally fantastical, experiences. I noticed students procured these types of descriptions whether or not they were prompted. For example, prior to beginning our warm-up activity preceding Musical Conversations, I was tuning my guitar, strumming an A minor chord to check my tuning. One second-grade student blurted, “That sounds like... [battle] music when someone dies!”

I began asking co-creator participants, “What were you thinking about during that improvisation?” Some responses were, “A little garden with a fountain,” “There was a music box playing,” and “It felt like there was a creeper on my head!” A “creeper,” as all elementary school teachers should know, is a villainous mob in the video game Minecraft (Persson & Bergensten, 2011). I found interactions with the digital world were common experiences referenced by student co-creators. During Musical Conversations, elements from two songs student co-creators found on YouTube, *The Witch Doctor* (Bagdasarian, 1958) and *The Chicken Wing Beat* (Desktop, 2020), made

recurring appearances. Following a musical conversation in which I participated as an improviser with two other co-constructor participants, Lizzie (pseudonym) and Joseph (pseudonym), one commenter said, “I noticed you guys were singing that song from YouTube.” That was a surprise to Lizzie and me, but not to Joseph. He began singing, “I told the witch doctor I was in love with you!” Several students began exclaiming, “Oh yeah!” “*That* song!” Joseph had sung a motive from that melody during our musical conversation, and Lizzie and I had unknowingly improvised several variations on it. An excerpt from this musical conversation is presented in Figure 4.5.

Joseph Ee oo oo ah ah tang tang wad-a-wad-a-bing bang.

Ms. Young Bang bang wad-a-wad-a bong bong bong bum bum ba da dee da dee.

Lizzie

Joseph

Ms. Young Ba da bee ba ba

Lizzie Da boo bee ba bee ba-da-la-da-ba-da - bla bla ba ba ba ba bla ba ba ba

Joseph Ah ee ah ee yah!

Ms. Young ba ba ba-di la di la-ba ba, ba ba ba da ba ba!

Lizzie Haaa - yaahh.

Yah - oo WOAH!

Figure 4.5 Musical conversation based on a motive (excerpt)

In another musical conversation, the same commenter from the previous scenario identified another song from YouTube, *The Chicken Wing Beat* (Desktop, 2020).

Something similar had occurred, in which one improviser stated the melody of the song using different words and syllables, leading the other two improvisers to incorporate it into their improvisations, too. When asked what she was thinking about during that round, the first improviser said, “I felt like there were actually chicken wings and I was singing around them!” In her reflective drawing of our improvisation session, she drew a picture of herself saying, “Yay!” next to a piece of chicken.

Connections to imagined experiences were prevalent in student co-creator participants’ reflective drawings. One student co-creator in *The Wave*, who described her overall experience improvising as “happy,” drew a picture of herself singing to the sun. A student co-creator who adopted listener and commenter roles in *Musical Conversations* drew a picture of his classmates performing on a stage as rock and roll band members. He included himself in the audience, with a speech bubble that said, “Let’s go baby! I like it!” Another student co-creator in *Musical Conversations*, an improviser, drew a picture of himself captaining a magical boat flying through a colorful sky.

Not all connections to lived and imagined experiences were as light-hearted as those aforementioned. In *The Wave*, kindergarten co-creator participants and I found ourselves in a discussion about our experiences with death. When introducing *The Wave*, I said, “Our wave is going to have five sections. Our five sections are going to tell a story we often experience in life.” I began drawing my illustration of *The Wave* on the board, and continued, “In the beginning, we’re going to be *Flowing Along*... when everything is

good. Don't you have some good days? When everything is going right?" A student raised his hand, and when I called on him, he said, "My mom died, actually."

As you might expect, his comment took me by surprise. I began carefully expressing my sympathy, unsure of what I could say to provide him comfort. Was he informing me that the "good days" I was describing did not, in fact, resonate with him? Attempting a compassionate response that would bridge his remark back to The Wave, I explained that we do not always feel like we are in Flowing Along. In fact, sometimes we feel as though we are in one of the subsequent sections of The Wave, Trouble Arises, or, if the trouble escalates, perhaps even Chaos.

I continued adding to my illustration on the board, but before I could finish introducing the next section, another student blurted, "My dog died!" I expressed my apologies for her loss and suggested she, too, may be able to identify with the sad, confusing, or angry feelings I thought the top of The Wave might represent. This was taking the metaphor of The Wave further than I had intended, especially with students so young, but I continued. By the time I had introduced all five sections of The Wave and completed my illustration on the board, four more kindergarten students had stopped me to tell me their experiences with death.

Still unsure of the best way to respond, I challenged student co-creator participants to create music for The Wave which "sounded like" their feelings, then mentally scolded myself for giving such a vague directive. If they were confused by what I thought was vague, they did not show it. They nodded, and soon confidently joined me in improvising three cycles of The Wave.

As we moved through those three cycles, each punctuated by reflection and revision, it felt as though I grew more connected with student co-constructors. We brought to light experiences to which many of us could relate, then created a representation of those experiences with our music improvisations. After each round, students appeared delighted to report that yes, they, too, had noticed the shift from Flowing Along to Trouble Arises, from Chaos to Resolution, and so on, based on musical elements like dynamics and tempo which we implicitly employed in our improvisations. Students showed special affinity for the transition from Chaos to Resolution, which many of them referred to as “the part when it got better.” There is something naturally enjoyable, I think, about witnessing chaos settle into order. Perhaps that is because we have all experienced chaos in some form, and thus understand the significance of its exit and the relief which follows. I enjoyed creating a musical representation of this ubiquitous process with my students and experiencing it with them, in music.

Theme Three: Being in Music Together

In my observations recorded after each of the three selected improvisation sessions, I reported noticing strong levels of engagement from student co-constructor participants. Many student co-constructors volunteered to participate in improvisations and reflective discussions not only willingly, but enthusiastically. Their written and illustrated reflections provide further evidence of their engagement, detailing specific thoughts and feelings they experienced during improvisation sessions. Strong levels of engagement contributed to a feeling of togetherness between co-constructor participants.

As a co-constructor participant in each of the three selected improvisation sessions, I felt uniquely connected to other co-constructor participants, especially when

improvising with them. When we improvised together, we engaged in the unique experience of communicating with each other nonverbally. In *The Wave*, co-constructors communicated we were ready to move forward to a new section by changing the rhythms, melodies, dynamics, and tempos in our improvisations. In *Musical Conversations* and *Singing Over Drones*, co-constructors communicated by creating new improvisations which were based on each others'. Student co-creator participants in *Musical Conversations* delighted in translating their nonverbal musical communications to each other during reflective discussion. One claimed she had been inviting her classmates to go to the movies with her, and another flattered me by declaring she had been singing, "Ms. Young is the best."

Student co-creator participants often documented togetherness in their reflective drawings. Lizzie chose to document the musical conversation during which she, Joseph, and I improvised variations on Joseph's motive from *The Witch Doctor* (Bagdasarian, 1958). She drew three happy faces, labeling each with one of our names. She also included a heart, a rainbow, and the word "joyful." A commenting listener in the same improvisation session drew a picture of herself listening to Joseph sing, with the caption, "I thought [Joseph's improvisation] was very silly!"

Being in music together often meant laughing together. Loud, dramatic improvisations were most likely to inspire laughter. As I recorded in my description of our third and final cycle of *The Wave*, laughter was the dominant sound emerging from student co-constructors during *Chaos*. In *Musical Conversations*, student co-constructors grew increasingly dramatic in their improvisations. Some impressed me by demonstrating a clear understanding of how to make their improvisations both musical and comical. By

incorporating their original musical ideas with imitation of previous improvisations, and presenting their improvisations with confidence and appropriate emotion, those improvisers provided listeners with entertainment and amusement.

Often, it was the same student co-structor participants who engaged in the most laughter-inspiring improvisations. As I noticed this, I wondered if it would spark jealousy among other student co-structor participants. In my previous teaching experiences, I have witnessed instances of students competing for laughter and attention. Based on my data and observations, that did not occur in any of the three selected improvisation sessions. On the contrary, student co-structors seemed to naturally fall into roles which suited them. This was true in listener roles, improviser roles, and commenter roles. In their reflective drawings, two commenting listeners in *Musical Conversations* drew themselves smiling while listening to their classmates sing, suggesting they enjoyed their roles as listeners. In their reflective worksheets, some listeners in *Singing Over Drones* expressed relief they were able to listen rather than sing. One wrote that they enjoyed the improvisation session “because [they] didn’t have to sing.” The two singing improvisers in *Singing Over Drones* expressed happiness that they were able to be improvisers multiple times. When asked why she was happy, one of the improvisers responded, “Because I love singing, so I sing a lot.”

To student co-structors and me, being in music together meant being strongly engaged, communicating with each other through music, enjoying laughter, and adopting roles in which we felt comfortable. Throughout this study, I became increasingly comfortable adopting my role as fellow co-structor. In the words of Malaguzzi (1993b) which I used to begin this chapter, becoming co-structors compelled my

students and me to leave the opposite banks on which we had been standing as students and teacher and jump into the river which flows between. By boldly exchanging and sharing our musical ideas through co-constructive improvisation, we began our “journey down the water” (p. 83), growing stronger in music together.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

“It is through others that we develop into ourselves.”

Vygotsky, 1981, p. 161

Overview of the Study

Purpose and guiding research questions. The purpose of this exploratory ethnographic case study was to examine music improvisations co-constructed by my elementary students and me, their music teacher. The guiding research questions were:

1. How do my elementary students and I co-construct music improvisations?
2. How do I describe our music improvisations?
3. How do my elementary students describe our improvisations?
4. How do my elementary students describe their own improvisations?
5. How do my elementary students describe their peers' improvisations?

Method. In this exploratory ethnographic case study, I utilized participant observation, emergent phenomenon purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015), initial and descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2009), and Spradley's (2016) ethnographic analysis steps to explore co-constructive music improvisation with elementary students. As a complete participant observer, I facilitated improvisation sessions and considered myself a co-creator with student co-creator participants. Data sources comprised improvisation video-recordings, class discussion video-recordings, improvisation audio-

recordings, class discussion audio-recordings, student projection sheets, student reflective worksheets, student drawings, and my video-recorded observations.

I purposefully selected three information-rich improvisation sessions for data transcription, coding, and ethnographic analysis. I utilized initial coding to identify processes which may have arisen during each improvisation session, then followed with descriptive coding to summarize the basic topics in each improvisation session (Saldaña, 2009). After coding, I followed Spradley's steps of ethnographic analysis (2016): (a) domain analysis, (b) focused observations, (c) taxonomic analysis, (d) selected observations, and (e) componential analysis. With those steps, I described the social musical act of co-constructive improvisation. I provided thick, rich description of co-constructive improvising by analyzing cultural themes.

Findings

Cultural domains. I identified three cultural domains regarding co-constructive improvisation: (a) ways to co-construct music improvisations, (b) ways to describe music improvisations, and (c) types of co-constructor participants. Ways to co-construct music improvisations included incorporating music we have heard, improvising new musical ideas, and playing or singing non-purposefully. Ways to describe music improvisations included reenacting, using musical terms, describing images, describing emotions, and making judgments. Types of co-constructor participants included listener roles, improviser roles, and commenter roles.

Cultural themes. I identified three cultural themes regarding co-constructing music improvisations with my elementary students. Those themes were:

1. Fluidly Adopting the Roles of Listener, Improviser, and Commenter
2. Connecting Music Improvisations to Lived Experiences and Imagined Experiences
3. Being in Music Together

During each improvisation session, student co-creator participants and I each fluidly adopted one or more of the following roles: listener, improviser, and commenter. Listeners actively listened to improvisations and reflective discussions. Improvisers engaged in improvisation through singing, performing body percussion, or playing a xylophone. Commenters described improvisations through words, music, and images. Co-creator participants often engaged in multiple roles simultaneously, as improvising and commenting usually required actively listening to other co-constructive participants.

Co-creator participants frequently connected music improvisations to lived experiences and imagined experiences. The lived experiences student co-creators described include interactions with computer games and YouTube videos as well as real-world experiences like losing a loved one. Imagined experiences co-creators described include descriptive images such as captaining a magical flying boat and singing to the sun.

When co-constructing improvisations, co-creator participants were strongly engaged in music together. During each improvisation session, each co-creator participant adopted the role or roles in which they felt comfortable. Improvisers had the unique experience of communicating with one another nonverbally, through music.

Communicating through music often inspired laughter among listeners, improvisers, and commenters. With co-constructive improvisation, I developed stronger relationships with my students.

Implications of the Findings

Implications for future research. When I began this study, I had only recently started my journey with music improvisation. With each co-constructed music improvisation with my students, and with the Music for People Musicianship and Leadership training (Music for People, 2020), I gained more passion and confidence toward improvisation. When reflecting on the three selected improvisation sessions, I recognize certain musical moments and reflective comments on which I could have invited students to expand, if, perhaps, I had been a more experienced improviser. When facilitating *The Wave*, for instance, I was admittedly more focused on my own piano keyboard improvisation than I was on my students' improvisations. When listening to the audio-recording of that session, I began to realize how students and I were responding to each other with our music. For example, in one section, several students had been imitating my fast keyboard trills with their singing voices. Had I recognized and verbally acknowledged that during our session, I wonder if I could have furthered our discussion or enhanced future improvisations. Additional research performed by experienced improvisers may increase understanding of how children engage in co-constructive improvisation.

Music education researchers who engage in co-constructive improvisation with their students may ultimately emerge from each improvisation session as more experienced improvisers. With co-construction, students and teacher scaffold each other's

experiences as they develop skills and knowledge. The educational benefits of co-construction have become increasingly utilized in core-subject education, (Hardman & Hardman, 2016; Kuter, Gazi, & Aksal, 2012; Leu, Templeton, & Yoon, 2016; Sert, 2015), and the Reggio Emilia Approach (Malaguzzi, 1993a) specifically acknowledges the benefits of co-construction in the education of young children. Malaguzzi wrote, “Children’s... co-construction of knowledge with others... supported by interactive experiences constructed with the help of adults, determine the selection and organization of processes and strategies that are part of and coherent with the overall goals of early childhood education” (p. 12). Despite being utilized in core subjects and early childhood education, co-construction has entered the music education pedagogy, but remains peripheral (Tomlinson, 2013, Wiggins, 2015.) Future research is needed to examine how co-construction affects music learning.

This study was limited because I explored co-constructive music improvisation with only three small groups of students in kindergarten, second grade, and third grade. Future researchers should examine music co-constructors in other age groups and group sizes. This study was also limited because I examined co-construction in only three types of improvisation exercises. Future research involving other types of improvisation exercises would expand the body of knowledge regarding co-constructive improvising.

Implications for elementary music teachers. By co-constructing music improvisations, elementary music teachers may engage their students in music-learning that inspires joy and enhances relationships among students and teachers. Co-constructing improvisations with my students has revealed my students to me as highly creative and capable musicians. Although I did not formally assess their skills during

improvisation sessions, I believe my students far surpassed the improvisation standards set for their experience levels in the South Carolina College- and Career-Ready Standards for K-12 students (Adderley et al., 2017). Standards are categorized as “Novice,” “Intermediate,” and “Advanced,” and each level contains three subcategories, “Low,” “Mid,” and “High” (p. 216). “I can perform an improvisation on a given motive” is a standard indicator categorized as “Advanced Mid” (p. 217). In Musical Conversations, several second-grade students performed improvisations on motives from songs they learned on YouTube. “I can improvise responding to aural cues” is an indicator categorized as “Advanced High.” Seven kindergarten students improvised responding to aural cues when transitioning through the five sections of The Wave. By facilitating co-constructive improvisation in their music classes, elementary general music teachers may find their students capable of exceeding expectations set by state standards.

Recognizing my students as highly creative and capable musicians has compelled me to offer them greater opportunity to influence our music classes. My students increasingly contribute to music in ways they choose, and each contribution is significant, whether provided through music-making, giving feedback or suggestions, or simply listening and smiling supportively. I enjoy observing students adopt roles in which they exude confidence, and I am inspired when I see and hear a timid listener bravely step into the role of improviser for the first time.

Co-constructing music improvisations with my students feels like a genuine and expressive means of engaging my students in music-learning. My students and I have delighted in communicating with one another through music. As Darling stated in the Music for People Bill of Musical Rights (2019), “Musical self-expression is a joyful and

healthy means of communication available to absolutely everyone.” As an elementary music teacher, my goal is to make musical self-expression accessible to each of my students, inviting them to experience and enjoy it with me and with each other. For music teachers who share that goal, I recommend exploring co-constructive music improvisation.

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APPENDIX A

SAMPLE IMPROVISER PROJECTION SHEET

1. Circle all the emotions you felt while improvising today.

Pleased	Happy	Embarrassed	Proud	Uncomfortable
Shy	Tense	Relaxed	Confused	Calm
Confident	Excited	Sad	Self-conscious	Uneasy
Curious	Irritated	Weird	Bored	Playful
Joyful	Anxious	Comfortable	Normal	Annoyed

2. Now, choose one or two emotions you felt the *strongest* while improvising today.

Write them on the lines below.

1. _____ 2. _____

3. Why did you feel that way?

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE LISTENER REFLECTION SHEET

1. Circle all the reasons you were a listener today.

I wanted to improvise, but I did not get a turn.	I did not like the activities we were doing.	I did not want people looking at me or listening to me.	I did not think I would be good at it.
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2. Is there any other reason you did not improvise today?

3. Describe how it felt to be a listener today.

APPENDIX C

CODEBOOK

Teacher Comments:

Directive

Prompt for reflection

Opportunity for student choice

Responses to Improvisations:

Musical description

Emotional description

Imagery description

Connection to known song

Expression of approval

Expression of disapproval

Response to description

Other Comments:

Expressing willingness to improvise

Expressing unwillingness to improvise

Off-topic