'Wanna race?': Primary student preference for competitive or non-competitive singing games

J. C h r i s t o p h e r R o b e r t s
3112 S. Washington St., Seattle, WA 98144, USA

cr777@uw.edu

This study compared primary student preference for competitive and non-competitive singing games. Students in three intact classes of second graders (n = 65) and three classes of fourth graders (n = 67) at one school in the USA served as subjects. After playing a pair of games, one competitive and one non-competitive, over the course of five classes, students anonymously named their preferred game and reported reasons for their preference. Results indicated that the students significantly preferred the competitive game, regardless of grade level or gender. The most common reason students provided for their preference was the higher level of kinaesthetic activity.

An emphasis on the inclusion of children's voices into music education curricular experiences has intensified in recent years. This has manifested itself in research on children's musical experiences outside of the typical school day (e.g. Lum, 2008; Campbell, 2010), as well as studies of their perspectives on the current curricula within music education (e.g. Bowles, 1998; Roberts, 2015). Out-of-school musical experiences addressed have included issues such as the role of popular music (Bickford, 2013), karaoke (Young, 2012) and musical play (Marsh, 2008). Typically, children have found their school-based musical endeavours to be disconnected from their out-of-school musical experiences. Children's attitudes towards their in-school music education classes have been found to be positive in the lower primary school levels, but to decline as students age (Haladyna & Thomas, 1979; Ruismäki & Tereska, 2008). These negative attitudes have been shown to be particularly true of boys (Eccles *et al.*, 1993; Phillips & Aitchison, 1998). In a bid to make school music experiences more relevant to all children, calls have been made to bridge the gap between the experiences that children have out of school and their in-school ones.

In many children's lives outside of school, competition plays a large role. Children act as participants in activities such as team sports and dance competitions, and as observers of phenomena such as reality television shows and professional sports. Competitive experiences for children are becoming more common; Friedman (2013) noted that throughout the second half of the 20th century, the prevalence of competition in the lives of children in the USA has expanded, including a greater number of children of increasingly younger ages. Children often select the extracurricular activities in which they participate (Freidman, 2013), and the pervasiveness of competition in their after-school experiences suggests that this may be an experience that children find enjoyable and motivating.

One element of children's out-of-school musical lives that has a long history of scholarly investigation is the singing game (e.g. Gomme, 1898; Opie & Opie, 1988; Marsh, 2008). Many singing games contain an aspect in which one player wins and another loses (Marsh, 2008). As a practising primary school music teacher in the USA, I often de-emphasised competitive singing games, concerned that the students' self-esteem would suffer. However, given the prevalence of competition in the lives of the children that I teach, it is conceivable that it could be motivating for them. This study investigated primary school students' attitudes towards competitive and non-competitive singing games.

Competition and music education

Research and advocacy concerning competition within music education has focused primarily on festivals common for music students at secondary levels, or auditions for placement within an ensemble. Rationales for competition in secondary music programmes include increasing student motivation (e.g. Austin, 1988; Sheldon, 1994; Conrad *et al.*, 2001; Stamer, 2004; Rohrer, 2012), improving group camaraderie (Stamer, 2004; Rohrer, 2012) and providing opportunities for outside evaluation (Conrad *et al.*, 2001; Stamer, 2004; Rohrer, 2012), all of which may lead to improved musicianship (Hurst & Ramsay, 1991; Stamer, 2004; Rohrer, 2012). On the other hand, it has been noted that competition in music can be damaging to students' self-esteem (Miller, 1994; Conrad *et al.*, 2001; Rohrer, 2012), and that contests among secondary ensembles can engender a focus on winning at the expense of quality music-making (Sheldon, 1994; Stamer, 2004; Rohrer, 2012). In one study that chronicled students' opinions (rather than the perspectives of music educators), secondary school students confirmed that they find the competitiveness of band festivals to be motivating (Gouzouasis & Henderson, 2012).

One study investigated primary schoolchildren's attitudes towards competition. Austin (1988) conducted an experiment with fifth and sixth grade band students (ages 10–12 years), in which half of the students received contest ratings and written comments, while the other half received comments only. When asked if they would choose to compete for ratings in the future, a significant number of students answered affirmatively. As ratings can be seen as an indicator of competition, the finding suggests that competition may have been a motivator for these students. No research was found concerning competition in the general music class. The extant literature on student preferences towards competitive experiences in music education, while minimal, suggests that primary students could conceivably view them favourably.

Competition: gender, culture and age

When exploring the nature of competitiveness in children and youth outside the field of music education, a robust set of literature has compared the experiences of boys and girls. Most studies have found competitive dimensions to be more prevalent in boys' stated preferences and lived experiences than those of girls. For example, when provided with a choice, boys aged 8–19 were shown to be more likely than girls to elect to participate in a competitive maths tournament (Sutter & Rützler, 2010). In the primary school classroom, girls have been found to display higher levels of discomfort with direct

competition (Berenson *et al.*, 2002) and to be less likely to engage in it (Weinberger & Stein, 2008). Interpersonally, competitive elements have been shown to be more common in middle school boys' friendship than in those of girls (Hartup, 1992; Schneider *et al.*, 2005), with extrinsic goals such as winning more important to boys (Patrick *et al.*, 1999; Hibbard & Buhrmaster, 2010). In the context of informal musical play, boys have been found to be more likely to play games characterised by overt levels of competitiveness, such as chase games (Merrill-Mirsky, 1986; Minks, 2008; Marsh, 2008). While exceptions can be found (e.g. Dreber *et al.*, 2011), most studies suggest that competitiveness has come to be viewed as a masculine trait.

Social role theory offers one lens through which to view the gendered experiences of competition (Eagly, 1987; Bosak *et al.*, 2012). It proposes that many behavioural differences between males and females develop as perceivers observe groups of people in specific roles. When one gender is over- or under-represented relative to their numbers in the general population, stereotypes concerning gender-appropriate activities and traits emerge. For example, the greater prevalence of women as the stay-at-home parent causes social perceivers to believe that females are inherently more communally oriented (Bosak *et al.*, 2012). In the USA, where the current study was undertaken, the most visible manifestation of competition lies in professional sports, a field that is dominated by men. By noting the gender discrepancy in the population of competitive athletes, social role theory would posit that children develop beliefs that competitive sports are more appropriate for males. This belief regarding competitive sports transfers more broadly into a trait, and competitiveness becomes seen as a masculine attribute.

In the view of social role theory, then, gender norms are context-specific, arising out of the specific patterns within different societies (Wood & Eagly, 2002). With regards to competition, most studies have shown boys to act more competitively than girls, but the finding has not been universal. Males have been found to be more competitive in most studies, such as those performed in Israel (Gneezy & Rustichini, 2004), Austria (Sutter & Rützler, 2010), Tanzania (Gneezy *et al.*, 2009), and among Mexican American and European American children in the USA (Strube, 1981). Conversely, females were found to act more competitively than males among the Maori in New Zealand (Thomas, 1975) and the Khasi in India (Gneezy *et al.*, 2009). In Sweden, boys and girls were equally drawn to competitive experiences (Dreber *et al.*, 2011). These discrepancies have led to suggestions that gender-based stereotypes of competitiveness differ across countries.

Age is another variable that affects children's interactions with competitive activities. In school and extracurricular settings, experiences with sports grow increasingly competitive as children grow older, as informal games in which a score is not kept give way to contests with winners and losers (Friedman, 2013). As students age, it is believed that they develop the maturity and experience to be able to respond to losing in ways that are socially acceptable (Darst & Pangrazi, 2006). In children's musical cultures, too, older children have been found to engage in competitive singing games in their free time, while ceasing to perform non-competitive clapping games more common among their younger peers (Koops, 2013). Despite the challenges of negotiating the emotional disappointment that comes with losing, it has not necessarily followed that younger children prefer less competitive activities. Sutter and Rützler (2010), for example, found that preschool-aged children are equally as likely to select competitive experiences as children between the

ages of nine and 17. Although competition becomes more common as children grow older, children of a variety of ages have been found to favour competitive experiences.

Primary schoolchildren's preferences for music class activities

Researchers have explored children's attitudes towards music class and the specific activities within it, considering issues such as student age and gender. As primary school students grow older, research has consistently indicated that positive attitudes towards music class and its constituent activities decline (Haladyna & Thomas, 1979; Vander Ark *et al.*, 1980; Eccles *et al.*, 1993; Bowles, 1998; Phillips & Aitchison, 1998; Siebenaler, 1999; Ruismäki & Tereska, 2008). This is a cause for concern. If students do not enjoy their experiences in upper primary school, a period when music education in the USA is mandatory for all students, they may be less likely to register for music classes in later years, when they become elective (Harackiewicz *et al.*, 2002).

Studies have shown that girls generally hold more favourable attitudes about music class and musical experiences than boys do (Haladyna & Thomas, 1979; Vander Ark *et al.*, 1980; Crowther & Durkin, 1982; Eccles *et al.*, 1993; Phillips & Aitchison, 1998; Ruismäki & Tereska, 2008). Further, as primary students grow older, the gender gap in positive attitude towards music class has been found to widen, with boys developing increasingly negative attitudes (Nolin, 1973; Vander Ark *et al.*, 1980). For example, in a study of song preference, Siebenaler (1999) documented a more significant decline in attitude among boys than girls from third through to fifth grade.

Determining specific classroom experiences that students find interesting may be a way of reversing this declining trend in overall attitude towards the music class (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). Activities that have been found to hold high favourability ratings among primary students include playing instruments (Murphy & Brown, 1986; Bowles, 1998; Killian & Basinger, 2004), observing visiting performing artists (Bowles, 1998) and working with a partner (Bowles, 1998). Some research has found singing to be the favourite activity (Vander Ark *et al.*, 1980; Bowman, 1988), or that children at least like to sing (Mizener, 1993; Bowles, 1998), while others indicate that children (particularly those in upper primary) dislike singing-based activities (Phillips & Aitchison, 1998, 1999). The preferences for music class activities have generally held true for both boys and girls. One exception has emerged with singing activities, which have been viewed particularly negatively by boys (Nolin, 1973; Mizener, 1993; Phillips & Aitchison, 1998). This is consistent with Green's (1997) views on gendered musical meaning, in which singing is an activity that has come to be viewed as a feminine music-making experience. Combining a trait that has been seen as masculine (competitiveness) into an activity viewed as feminine (singing) may be a way to facilitate more positive reactions by boys.

Several researchers have addressed children's attitudes towards games in the context of children's music classes. In a study of students in kindergarten through to fifth grade in the USA, Bowles (1998) found that playing musical games was among the most desired activities across all grade levels, although it is unclear whether these games included singing games. Others have looked specifically at singing games or songs with movement. Moore (2002) found that songs with more movement elicited less off-task behaviour and more enthusiasm by four- to seven-year-olds. Similarly, Mizener (1993) reported that

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third- to sixth-grade students would rather play games in which they 'get up and sing and dance and move around the room' rather than 'sit or stand at our places and sing and do motions' (p. 240). This result suggests that students prefer activities involving a high degree of active, physical participation, a characteristic of many singing games.

It appears that no study has explored children's attitudes towards competitive singing games. Some music educators caution that competition can negatively impact students (e.g. Rohrer, 2012), but given the widespread presence of competition in many children's lives, it is conceivable that children would find competitive singing games particularly enjoyable. By many accounts, boys are more drawn to competitive ventures than girls are, so it may be a particularly effective way of stemming the declining attitude of upper primary boys towards the general music class. The research questions were as follows: Do primary school students prefer competitive singing games to non-competitive ones? Do upper primary students and boys prefer competitive singing games at a greater rate than lower primary students and girls?

Method

In order to better understand primary schoolchildren's preferences for competitive or non-competitive singing games, this study surveyed fourth graders ($n = 67$) and second graders ($n = 65$) from one school in the Pacific Northwest region of the USA. Four singing games were selected based on musical and extramusical similarities, two for fourth graders and two for second graders. The major difference within each set of games was that each round of one game ended with a winner and a loser, and the other did not.

Surveys have been the most common way that preference has been examined in music education. Researchers have stressed the importance of simplicity when using surveys with children (Borgers *et al.*, 2003; Bell, 2007), so a two-question format was utilised. The first question asked the students to name one of the two games as their favourite. Such forced-choice questions have been used in order to 'require respondents to make an explicit judgment' about an issue (Dillman *et al.*, 2009; p. 130), an appropriate approach when seeking to identify preference between two activities. In addition to the forced-choice question, the survey included an open-ended question in which students were asked to provide reasons for their preference. This particular mixed method survey was chosen in order to incorporate both the quantitative component, which can 'provide a general picture of a research problem' (Creswell, 2012, p. 515) and the qualitative one, to 'refine, extend, or explain the general picture'.

I was the students' teacher as well as the researcher. The teacher–student research paradigm poses potential problems with regards to the power differential that exists between the researcher and the researched (Wyness, 2006). Trustworthiness issues can emerge, in that children may be more likely to provide answers to questions that they believe will please the researcher. A number of methodological choices were made to address this issue. First, I told students that there were no correct answers. Second, the forced-choice question format caused the students to prioritise one of the games. Had the students rated each game independently on a Likert-type scale, they could conceivably have rated both games more highly, in an attempt to provide answers they perceived to be teacher-approved. Third, I emphasised to the students that they were the experts about children's opinions, and that I

would share their viewpoints with other teachers in a bid to include their perspectives into music classes (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

Chicken in the Fencepost

Game: Formation: Two concentric circles of unequal size, holding hands, with a stuffed chicken in the middle. Two students stand outside both circles. While two students ('chicken-hunters') hide their eyes, the teacher chooses one pair of people in each circle to be the doors that open at the end of the song. The class sings the song, while the two circles move in opposite directions. At the end of the song, the circles stop moving, the doors open, and the two chicken-hunters scramble to be the first one in the middle to grab the chicken.

Tideo

Game: Formation: A double circle of players, partners facing each other. Each time the students sing the word 'pass', they step one person to their right. Each time they sing 'Ti-de-o', they patsch their legs, clap their hands, and pat both hands of their partner. When they sing 'jingle at the window', they jump in a circle, ideally moving 360 degrees without touching the ground. Alternatively, they 'wring the dishrag', in which two players raise their joined hands, then turn towards each other, ducking under their hands and turning in a full circle.

Figure 1. Singing games for fourth graders.
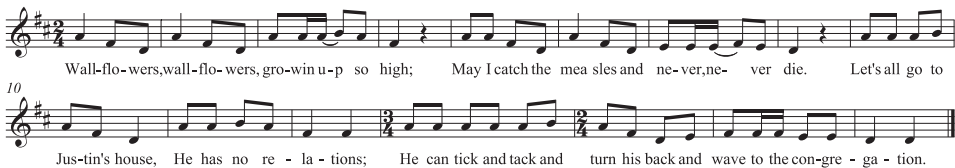
Materials

Four singing games were selected, two for fourth grade and two for second grade. The two fourth-grade games were *Tideo* and *Chicken in the Fencepost* (see Figure 1). They are of similar range (*Tideo* an octave, *Chicken in the Fencepost* a ninth). Both are in major keys, with pentatonic scales (*Tideo: drm sl d', Chicken in the Fencepost: s,l, drm sl*). Both songs fall in duple meter, and have the same rhythmic elements (quarter notes, paired eighth notes, and groups of four sixteenth notes). Although *Chicken in the Fencepost* contains two characters, a chicken and Josey, the texts of each song have no clear meaning, and there is no narrative or specifically gendered character to whom students might relate.

Cut the Cake

Clap your hands to - ge - ther, Give your-self a shake! Make a hap-py cir - cle and then you cut the cake!

Game. Formation: Standing circle. One player ('the cake-cutter') walks around the circle, while the rest of the class sings and acts out the movements specified in the text. On the words 'make a happy circle', the students in the circle join hands. At 'cut the cake', the cake-cutter stops walking and brings his hands down, karate-style, between two players in the circle. Those two players race in opposite directions. The first one back to his/her starting place is the next cake-cutter. Repeat.

Wallflowers

Wall-flo-wers, wall-flo-wers, gro-win u-p so high; May I catch the mea-sles and ne-ver, ne-ver die. Let's all go to

Jus-tin's house, He has no re - la - tions; He can tick and tack and turn his back and wave to the con-gre - ga - tion.

Game: Formation: Standing circle, hands joined, one child in centre. All walk around in a circle. The child in the centre is named in bar 10, and acts out the text in bars 13–16, generally by kicking as high as possible.

Figure 2. Singing games for second graders.

The two second-grade games were *Cut the Cake* and *Wallflowers* (see Figure 2). They too are of similar range (an octave and a sixth, respectively). Both are sung in major keys, with a similar range of solfege notes (*Cut the Cake: drm(f)sl d'*, *Wallflowers: drm sl*). Both songs are in duple meter, but *Wallflowers* has a measure in 3/4 time towards the end of the song. Rhythmically, *Cut the Cake* consists of quarter notes, eighth notes and quarter rests, while *Wallflowers* contains more syncopation and is sung in a more rhythmically free style. Textually, the two songs differ considerably. The words in *Wallflowers*, an Irish song, refer to a measles epidemic in which many people died. The song uses the death theme playfully, with text that describes the freedom children would experience if their family members died. *Cut the Cake*, on the other hand, has no narrative, but is a more straightforward action song in which the text dictates the movements that students perform.

In both sets of games, the major difference lies in their competitiveness. In *Chicken in the Fencepost*, which the fourth graders played, two players vie to be the first one to the middle of a double circle to grab a stuffed chicken. In *Tideo*, on the other hand, no one wins or loses. Students must try to complete a move that can be somewhat physically challenging (jumping 360 degrees without touching the ground), but there is not a built-in rivalry to the game. In the second-grade game *Cut the Cake*, two players race around a circle in opposite directions, resulting in a clear-cut winner and loser. In *Wallflowers*, however, individual students stand in the middle of the circle, kick as high as they can at a specific time in the song, then sing the name of the next student they want to replace them.

Table 1. *Student preference for competitive or non-competitive singing game, by gender and grade*

	Competitive game			Non-competitive game		
Grade	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Fourth grade	29	32	61	6	0	6
Second grade	23	29	52	2	11	13
Total	52	61	113	8	11	19

Procedures

The two fourth-grade singing games were taught to the three classes of fourth graders. Familiarity with song material has been found to affect preference (Gregory, 1994; Siebenaler, 1999), so both games were played during five different class periods. Research has suggested that children prefer songs with faster tempi (LeBlanc & Cote, 1983), so the songs were sung at the same tempo (quarter note = 80). In order that the songs would be sung within a comfortable range, *Tideo* was performed in D major and *Chicken in the Fencepost* was sung in G Major. Pedagogically, students had derived rhythmic patterns from both songs in previous classes, and *Tideo* had been examined for its melodic patterns, specifically the high do, a note the students had not previously learned.

The two second-grade games were taught to the three classes of second graders (*n* = 65). Both games were played during six different class periods. They were sung at approximately the same tempo (quarter note = 72), in keys that would promote comfortable singing (D = do). Rhythmic or melodic concepts had not been derived from either game; they had been used solely as singing games. In *Wallflowers*, individual students were given the opportunity to sing measure nine alone.

On the final day of the game, the students entered the class and played each game for approximately five minutes. The order of the games was randomised among classes. On a questionnaire, students identified themselves by gender, named one of the two games as their favourite, then listed the reasons for their preference. Students were instructed not to discuss their answers with other students.

Results

The surveys were tallied by preference for game type, and then analysed to determine statistical significance using a chi-square statistic for goodness of fit. Overall, the students grade significantly preferred the competitive game to the non-competitive one, χ^2 (1, *n* = 132) = 66.94, *p*<.05. Of the 132 students who answered the surveys, 113 listed the competitive game as their favourite (*Chicken in the Fencepost* for fourth grade or *Cut the Cake* for second grade), while 19 students selected the non-competitive game (*Tideo* or *Wallflowers*). See Table 1.

Using a chi-square statistic for independence, the surveys were then examined for difference by grade level. The fourth and second graders' opinions towards competitive

and non-competitive games did not significantly differ, χ^2 (1, $n = 132$) $= 3.26$, $p>.05$. Older students did not prefer the competitive game at greater rates than the younger children. Again using a chi-square statistic for independence, the surveys were analysed for difference by gender. The gender of the students did not significantly interact with their preference for game type, χ^2 (1, $n = 132$) $= 0.11$, $p>.05$. Both boys and girls preferred the competitive game.

When survey results were organised by the intersection of grade and gender, all student groupings showed the competitive game as the preferred activity. However, a chi-square statistic for independence indicated that preference was not independent of group, χ^2 (3, $n = 132$) $= 12.2$, $p<.05$. While in second grade, 11 of the girls named the non-competitive game as their favourite, in the fourth grade no girls preferred the non-competitive game. In second grade, two boys preferred the non-competitive game, and in fourth grade, six boys named the non-competitive game as their favourite activity. All six male fourth graders came from one of the three classes. In the other two classes the boys were unanimous in preferring the competitive game.

The free responses, none of which were more than two sentences long, were analysed using both the prefigured category of competition as well as emergent ones (Creswell, 2012). Following open coding, in which all possible themes were identified, the openly coded answers were refined through closed coding (Emerson *et al.*, 1995), in order to narrow the answers into themes. Other than the issue of competitiveness, the other major theme that emerged as a reason for students' preference was the level of kinaesthetic activity.

Discussion

Significantly more students preferred the competitive singing game to the non-competitive one. Additionally, the preference for the competitive game was not dependent on either grade or gender. When asked to provide reasons for their choice, however, competition did not emerge as the top reason. For fourth graders, the most commonly given reason was the higher level of action or athleticism they experienced in *Chicken in the Fencepost*. For example, individuals preferred it 'Because I like being active and running'; 'because you get to dive for the chicken'; '[because] we get to walk fast and *Tideo* your [sic] just jumping and clapping hands'. Interestingly, the boys who chose *Tideo* (the non-competitive game) as their favourite gave similar reasons: for example, 'I like to jump and do a 360'; 'More exercise and more singing'; 'It's more active. Spin! Clap!' This finding echoes Moore's (2002) research with slightly younger children, which found that four- to seven-year-olds preferred songs with more action to songs with less action. Mizener (1993) also found that students in upper primary preferred games with more activity, and Roberts (2015) determined that increased kinaesthetic activity elicited interest in classroom activities.

The fact that so many students mentioned the level of activity is notable because *Tideo* appears to contain more movement across all students in the class. In *Chicken in the Fencepost*, two children race, but the rest of the class walks in a circle, holding hands. In *Tideo*, all students perform a hand clapping pattern, switch partners, move around the circle, attempt to jump 360 degrees without touching the ground, and perform a somewhat challenging movement called 'wring the dishrag', in which two players raise their joined

hands, then turn towards each other, ducking under their hands and turning in a full circle. It is possible that merely watching the racers run provides all players with the feeling that they have been active. Also, if the game is played six to ten times per class, one-half to two-thirds of the students are afforded the chance to act as one of the 'chicken-hunters'. Running even one time may leave students feeling that they were highly active.

Fourth-grade students also mentioned the competitive aspect as a reason for choosing *Chicken in the Fencepost*. Individuals wrote that they like the game '[because] it is more fun to see who wins in the end'; 'because in *Chicken in the Fencepost* we are actually going for something'; and 'because you race'. While the competitive aspect seemed like the most obvious difference between the two games, only four fourth graders referred to the competitiveness as a reason for preferring the game. No fourth-grade students mentioned the degree of competition as a negative attribute. One girl also mentioned excitement: 'Because I like the exitment [sic] and its fun to wack [watch?] boys crash through walls and get concushons [sic].'

Of the 52 second graders who preferred the competitive game, both competition and movement were the major reasons provided by the students. Eight students gave almost identical answers: 'because I like to race'. Students mentioned higher levels of physical activity: 'because it's more active'; '[because] you get to run and also sing!'; and 'because it is much more funner [sic] than *Wallflowers* because in *Wallflowers* you just kick and wave'. Three students also mentioned the subject matter of the text in *Cut the Cake*: 'because cake is good'.

Thirteen second graders preferred the non-competitive game, but clear themes for their preference did not emerge during the coding process. One student mentioned that she liked the non-competitive game 'because you get to call someone yourself'. She enjoyed singing the solo, and choosing the next player in the game. The most notable reason came from a student who did not like the competitiveness of the other game. She wrote that she would rather play *Wallflowers* ' . . . because in cut the cake it is not fare [sic] that some pepel [sic] lose'. This was the only comment from any student who expressed a dislike for competition. For other students who mentioned racing or competition, it was a positive attribute.

While it has been cautioned that competition within ensembles at the secondary level may negatively impact students (e.g. Rohrer, 2012), the results from the current study do not suggest that primary students find this to be an issue, at least in the context of competitive singing games. It may be that the potential damage to students' self-esteem is more a concern of adults than children. Additionally, some forms of competition at the secondary level, such as competing for seating in a secondary ensemble, may be seen as a more 'high stakes' endeavour, with the results impacting individuals' experience for an entire school year. In a primary school singing game, the loss is short-lived, with a new round of the game occurring immediately. It bears noting that the open-ended question was phrased in such a way that students may have been prompted to provide a positive response (i.e. 'Tell why that game was your favourite'), which could discourage negative comments. However, given that 86% of all children in the sample selected the competitive singing game as their favourite, this form of competition does not appear to be bothersome for most children.

Age did not significantly interact with preference, with both second and fourth graders preferring the competitive game. Although physical education literature has suggested that younger children may be less able to cope with the losing that can come as a part of

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competitive experiences (e.g. Darst & Pangrazi, 2006), the difference between second and fourth graders did not occur. A follow-up study with kindergarten children could determine whether this equal interest in competitive singing games applies to younger students as well.

Gender played no difference in terms of preference, with both boys and girls preferring the competitive game. While research has suggested that boys are more likely to act competitively than girls (e.g. Schneider *et al.*, 2005), girls were just as likely as boys to cite competition as the major reason for their preference. Further, among the fourth-grade girls, the degree of preference for the competitive game was higher than the boys. While the fourth-grade boys preferred the competitive game overall, it was the fourth-grade girls who were unanimous in their preference.

Social role theory perhaps offers insights here. While the broader US culture provides more examples of men acting in competitive situations, changes have occurred in recent decades. Title IX, the 1972 law in the USA that mandated equal allocation of financial resources at the college level to sports teams of men and women, has led to a greater visibility of women's competitive sports. This has trickled down to younger ages, with competitive girls' teams spread throughout the country and in the greater metropolitan area in which the children live. Male athletes still dominate newspaper headlines, but there may be enough inroads made by women in competitive roles to lead to increasingly positive attitudes towards competition by girls. In addition, activities that have traditionally been viewed as feminine, such as cooking and dancing, have been transformed in some situations from cooperative ventures into competitive ones, through reality television shows and after-school experiences for children. The incorporation of competitiveness into conventionally feminine activities may be changing stereotypes within the USA.

The experiences of students in the particular school may also play a role in their attitude towards competitiveness. The school has a long tradition of successful extracurricular competitive sports programmes, exclusively competitive in nature. The sports teams are single-sex, and boys and girls participate in equal numbers. The success of the teams is often highlighted at the school, with announcements on the intercom lauding their latest wins. The teams begin in second grade, and it is plausible that the students in kindergarten and first grade are socialised into the competitive atmosphere, with the children developing a belief that competition is neither masculine nor feminine. Green (1994) noted that musical experiences operate as a 'cultural artifact within a social and historical context' (p. 99); the immediate social context for the particular children under study – both the boys and the girls – may have been especially competitive.

In addition to influences of national culture and school culture, it is conceivable that issues of culture operated at the classroom level as well. Working in the context of an primary writing class, Nolen (2007) found that the students' interest in reading was influenced by the social context of the classroom, through the relationships that developed between the children. When filling out the survey, the children in the current study were directed not to discuss their answers with each other, but consensus can emerge in a particular classroom of students. LeBlanc (1982) noted that ' . . . opinions of the peer group . . . [can] influence the musical preference decision' (p. 31). Perhaps this explains the fact that the six fourth graders who chose the non-competitive game as their favourite singing game were all boys, and all from the same class. Using a broader sample of students might negate the potential effect of classroom culture on the study.

Suggestions for future study

Social role theory suggests that stereotypes about masculine and feminine activities develop due to the over-representation of men and women in particular roles (Eagly, 1987). Most prior studies found that boys acted more competitively than girls – but not all. For example, Dreber *et al.* (2011), working in Sweden, found that boys and girls competed equally in tests of physical activity. They noted that gender equity in Sweden is among the highest in the world, and suggested that this contributed to the response of the students: relatively equal representation of men and women in a range of social roles may minimise gender differences across a variety of situations. The current study took place in the USA, a country that was recently ranked as 20th out of 142 countries on a gender equity index (World Economic Forum, 2013). Conceivably, broader issues of gender equity may apply to issues of competitiveness specifically. Replicating this study in other countries could help determine its generalisability.

In addition, the current set of students also came from one school, an institution with a particularly successful after-school competitive sports programme. School culture can influence the types of musical play that occur (Soccio, 2013), and a school in which collaboration is stressed over competition (such as a Waldorf school) might conceivably produce students with different perspectives on competitive games.

While the games were selected for the degree of their competitiveness, the children identified the level of kinaesthetic activity as the main reason for their preference rather than the presence of competition. In attempt to tease out the relative importance of movement and competition to children, future study could compare two games, one without competition in which the children move a great deal, and another in which children remain sedentary but winners and losers emerge over the course of the game.

I chose to use a forced-choice question format rather than a rating scale in order to ask students to make an explicit judgement about the two games, and also to minimise the chance that they would rate both games highly in an attempt to please me, an authority figure. While the students overwhelmingly selected the competitive game as their favourite, the forced-choice format does not allow the ability to assess the degree of preference. Future studies could employ rating scales to assess the extent of their inclinations. In addition, the open-ended question could be posed in such a way that children are asked to describe reasons that they do not like a game. Conceivably, some of the children who select the non-competitive game as their favourite would be more likely to comment on their dislike of competition. Qualitative studies, using interviews and other forms of data collection, would also allow for more in-depth explorations of attitudes towards competition.

In a bid to increase student interest in the music class, primary music educators should consider incorporating competitive singing games into the curriculum. In addition to creating an enjoyable atmosphere for students, singing games can be used to address common curricular goals, such as isolating musical material from the games to teach music literacy skills. As the educational community struggles to connect with today's diverse student body and ignite within each young musician a passion for musical participation, it is imperative that music educators consider their musical preferences as we make curricular decisions. Prior research has suggested that students enjoy games in music class (Bowles, 1998) and games with higher activity levels (Mizener, 1993). The current study extends this

research, suggesting that students enjoy competitive games significantly more than non-competitive ones. The inclusion of competitive singing games in the primary general music curriculum may represent a means for engaging students in meaningful music-making experiences that they themselves value as fun and exciting.

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J. Christopher Roberts is an Affiliate Assistant Professor at the University of Washington. He holds research and clinical interests in world music pedagogy, children's musical cultures and the nature of children's interest in school music.