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# “Playing jazz is what she does”: The impact of peer identification and mastery experiences on female jazz pupils’ self-efficacy at Improbasen

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This article is a conceptual analysis of the concepts of *enactive mastery experience* and *vicarious learning experience* from Albert Bandura’s socio-cognitive theory, applied to the empirical case of the Norwegian learning centre *Improbasen*. I outline some historical and socio-psychological contexts that posits jazz practice as a masculine stereotyped activity, to indicate various mechanisms that may cause a low self-efficacy for playing jazz in girls and non-binary children. When presenting the empirical case, I highlight the learning center’s strategies to promote gender equality. Finally, I discuss theoretically how these strategies may strengthen self-efficacy in children, relating them to experiences of mastery and vicarious learning. In conclusion I suggest that a diverse learning environment that facilitates peer identification works better for all genders than, when iconic male jazz musicians are treated as models for learning.

## KEYWORDS

self-efficacy, jazz improvisation, gender, peer learning, children

## Introduction

Jazz has been called a hegemonic masculine space (Annfelt, 2003). This refers to two interrelated aspects, namely both the statistical imbalance of men being in the majority (McKeage, 2014) as well as the dominance of a heteronormative masculine discourse (Borgström Källén and Lindgren, 2018). The latter implies how gendered discourses and stereotypes (the “femininity” and “masculinity” binary) afford different roles for different genders, where the feminine discourse is seen as subordinate to the masculine (Green, 1997; Onsrud, 2010; Borgström Källén and Lindgren, 2018). Both aspects have bearings on jazz education on all levels. Male jazz students overall are in majority (McKeage, 2014), and even young children internalize gendered discourses (Green, 1997; Hallam et al., 2008). Female music students who play jazz at the level of upper secondary school often quit jazz when reaching higher education (McKeage, 2004, 2014, see also next section). It follows that the jazz community needs to look at how the

statistical imbalance may be rectified and how gendered discourses may be subverted in order to encourage a maintained jazz interest in female and non-binary music students, especially instrumentalists. Since early phases of learning, identification and socialization are often pointed to as crucial for pursuing a musical career (Hargreaves et al., 2016), there is a need to investigate children's learning in jazz, which has been given little attention in previous research (Johansen, 2021).

The causes behind a lack of a balanced gender representation as well as the prevalence of gendered stereotypes in jazz are manifold, and to address them all falls outside the scope of this article. Instead, I will narrow this article's focus by starting from Wehr's (2015) claim that when girls and non-binary students avoid or withdraw from jazz improvisation at a young age, it is caused by lower self-efficacy and higher performance anxiety in these students compared to boys. She further suggests that such psychological experiences stem from being in a minority position and being tokenized. Building on Wehr, the point of departure for this article is to discuss how possibilities for social gender identification as a precondition for self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) may prevent such a negative development in girls and non-binary students.

By using a previous ethnographic case study of the Norwegian learning center Improbasen as an example (Johansen, 2021), the article is a conceptual analysis of empirical data through the lens of Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy. I will particularly employ the concepts of *enactive mastery experience* and *vicarious learning* through peer identification.

Improbasen offers jazz tuition to children instrumentalists (Johansen, 2021), and one of its main objectives is to contribute to a better gender representation in the jazz field overall and in instrument division of labor. It is this dimension of the practice that I am going to address in this article. Improbasen's gender strategies are unconventional compared to common music tuition for children or jazz education. Girls are always in the majority,<sup>1</sup> and pupils are normally assigned non-stereotypical instruments by the teacher.<sup>2</sup>

1 Although I do not wish to contribute to a narrow binary conceptualization of gender, I will mostly use the gender categories "girls" and "boys" respectively, when I refer to empirical data from the study of Improbasen. Firstly, all the children who participated in my study were labelled as either girls or boys by themselves, their parents, and/or the teacher. Secondly, the discourse through which participants (pupils, parents, and the teacher) at Improbasen presented its practice employed a binary construction of gender.

2 It is important to note that Improbasen's priority is tuition for instrumentalists, and only rarely offer lessons for singers. As I will come back to later, this has a particular bearing for gendered roles in jazz. Although a feminist analysis of jazz culture's affordance for singers' status and roles is important and has been done (see Pellegrinelli, 2008), it falls outside the scope of this article.

Whether these easily observable strategies in a single teaching practices contributes in fulfilling the goal of a generally more balanced gender representation in the jazz field is a complex question and difficult to establish empirically. However, a theoretical analysis and discussion of gender-relevant aspects of Improbasen as a learning environment for children may deepen an understanding of *why* these strategies may work, and *how*. My argument will be grounded on the assumption that a gender representation that subverts the traditional male dominance creates possibilities for peer identification and vicarious learning among girls and non-binary learners, and thus serves as a condition for building self-efficacy.

## Naturalization of jazz as a masculine space

In general, female and non-binary musicians have been under-represented in jazz study and performance (Annfelt, 2003; Tucker, 2004b; Wehr, 2015), and as stated, this is reflected in jazz education as well. McKeage (2014) problematizes what she observes as a huge gender imbalance in US higher jazz education, which may be traced to what Wehr (2015) describes as a dramatic attrition rate for girls playing jazz in secondary and upper secondary levels in United States schools. Generally, this situation has long been the same in the Nordic countries (Björck and Bergman, 2018; Onsrud et al., 2021). There are several historical factors contributing to this that seem to reinforce each other.

Green (1997) establishes how gender stereotypes may be seen as overlapping with properties associated with various musical roles. In jazz, women's participation has often been limited to taking roles as singers and piano players or both (Oliveros, 2004). According to Green (1997), these roles confirm feminine stereotypes, by their connotations to emotional content in music *via* song lyrics, the body ("nature"), and the domestic sphere, respectively. Conversely, the cultural image of an ideal jazz musician, with this role's connotations to individuality, non-conformity as a core trait of creativity, and technical and cerebral mastery (technology and "cultivation"), confirm masculine stereotypes (Green, 1997; Annfelt, 2003; MacDonald and Wilson, 2006; Teichman, 2019). Thus, a male identity is naturalized as more fit to perform jazz, and female or non-binary identities are seen as natural disadvantages.

Such stereotypes are often repeated in language about jazz used in media and historical accounts. This language is often described as "a masculine space" – which permeates the ways in which jazz is spoken about and, importantly, defined" (Raine, 2019, p. 190). One example is how Gioia (2018) in *The History of Jazz* describes Delta blues as male and "classic blues" as female, continuing to a characterization of Delta blues artists as authentic and independent while the classic blues artists are depicted as

commercial, dependent on songwriters, instrumentalists and agents, and their song lyrics are sexual<sup>3</sup>.

Research indicates that children are aware of and choose instruments that conform to gendered stereotypes in music from an early age, and this awareness therefore affects their opportunities for learning (Conway, 2000; Hallam et al., 2008; Borgström Källén, 2014). The instrument distribution in the Norwegian School of Music and Performing Arts (SMPA) shows a clear gendering not only of instruments, but also of the genre area instruments are associated with: on the instruments flute and vocals, on which tuition traditionally follows a western classical teaching culture, girls make up 90% of the pupils. On typical band instruments with which rock, pop and jazz commonly are taught, such as drums, bass and guitar, there are 90% boys (Taule, 2017).<sup>4</sup> Green's (1997) study confirms that genres are highly codified as gendered: western classical music and "school music" (often overlapping, given w. classical music's historical dominance in educational institutions) are seen as "music for girls" by children, while rock music (often informally learned) is seen as more suitable for boys.

To a certain degree, children choose instruments and consequently genre according to gender stereotypes. But this does not necessarily mean that they are excluded from participating in music activities with other instruments or genres. Nevertheless, breaking with gendered expectations potentially holds a risk of negative social sanctions (Butler, 1997). Historical accounts of professional jazz musicians' trajectories confirm overt hostility and bullying by male musicians toward female instrumentalists in particular (Björck and Bergman, 2018; Van Vleet, 2021). According to Caudwell (2012), the emergence of the bebop era (1940s) involved a shift from emphasizing the ensemble and the collective toward the individual musician and attention to complex improvised solos, and thus establishing a hierarchy among players and a "machismo individualism" (Caudwell, 2012, p. 395). Caudwell (2012) states: "This shift is something that male instrumentalists experienced. (...) [I] t is instrumentalists such as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Dexter Gordon, Miles Davies [*sic.*], and John Coltrane (and later Sonny Rollins) who are notorious and made legendary for the sounds they produced (p. 395)." Thus, the way jazz history is told tend to center around the lives of particular, iconic Great Men (Tucker, 2004a; Whyton, 2006; Wilf, 2014).

3 By combining the characteristics *commercial*, *sexual*, and *inauthentic* (or *fake*; as opposed to their authentic male counterparts), Gioia efficiently draws on the female archetype of a prostitute (Kimbell, 2002). From a gender analytical perspective, it is therefore interesting to compare Gioia's characterisation of blues lyrics as "sexual" with Davis' (1998) analysis of the same; she points out how blues performance became an eligible site for expressing women's experiences, including those of sexual harassment and rape.

4 This study utilized the binary categories "girls" and "boys."

Women instrumentalists who wanted the opportunity to express themselves in jazz around the emergence of be-bop were policed by male band members (Caudwell, 2012). Trombone player Melba Liston recalls how she was scared to record in studio with Dexter Gordon's band during the 1940s and 1950s, because she had never hung out with them on jam sessions (Placksin, 1982), and how Dizzy Gillespie had to defend her place in his band against condescending comments from the other (male) band members, when they could not play her music (Heble, 2000, in Caudwell, 2012; Van Vleet, 2021). Trumpeter Clora (Bryant) found herself the only woman on jam sessions, since other female musicians avoided attending them (Townsend, 2000, in Caudwell, 2012). Experiences of a competitive and exclusionary "machismo individualism" (Caudwell, 2012, p. 395) on jam sessions are not limited to United States culture during the 1940s and 1950s, nor to women players (Teichman, 2019). A second year Scandinavian male jazz student interviewed in 2009 experienced jam sessions as a male chauvinistic arena (Johansen, 2011):

The first week when I moved here I went to a jam session, and was totally psyched out. It was just shit. (...) [A] jam is like this male chauvinistic... comparing size thing [laughs]. (...) If you play like shit, you won't get to go and have a beer [with the others] afterwards.

Such experiences, often connoted to playing solos in a bebop idiom may be tied to Wehr's (2015) finding that when girls quit participation in jazz school ensembles, the tendency correlated with an increased expectation to improvise solos in ensembles. Wehr (2015) suggests several explanations for girls' attrition from jazz playing, such as tokenism and the stereotype threat (p. 4), which is often an effect of being put in a token role, and refers to the fear of confirming a negative or unwanted stereotype. The feeling of social discomfort leads to withdrawal from the activity, which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, since it "inhibits the experiencing of the multiple, small successes ... that build self-efficacy" (Wehr, 2015, p. 11).

Based on a series of large-scale studies in the United States (Leslie et al., 2015; Storage et al., 2016), the researchers coined the concept *The Brilliance Trap* (Cimpian and Leslie, 2017). The concept entails the notion that the more an academic discipline places value on being "brilliant" or "genius" to succeed in that field, the fewer women and African-American people will occupy leading positions in this discipline. Conversely, fields where a discourse of "brilliance" is less salient have a more equal representation. The researchers suggest that the cultural expectation of "brilliance" and "genius" is so strongly associated to the image of a white man that women and United States ethnic minorities develop a lower belief of future mastery in such fields and avoid them (Cimpian and Leslie, 2017)—hence, they are "trapped" by perceptions of brilliance.

As shown, gendered musical roles have particularly limited the participation and expressive freedom of women and other

musicians who do not conform to the masculine (or macho) stereotype in jazz (Teichman, 2019). Given jazz history's emphasis on the iconic (male) "genius" (Tucker, 2004a; Whyton, 2006), the notion of the Brilliance Trap may contribute in an understanding of how women and non-binary musicians are discouraged and thus indirectly excluded from jazz. Although an absence of women in jazz is shown to be a myth (Myers, 2002), the historical exclusion and historiographical erasure of the women who have been active (Tucker, 2004b) have contributed to both an *actual* and *perceived* lower number of musicians with female and non-binary identities in jazz.

Consequently, there is a lack of female role-models for newer generations of jazz musicians (Tucker, 1998; McKeage, 2014). This lack reinforces the image that the ideal jazz musician confirms masculinity and the naturalization of boys and men as more fit to play jazz, mechanisms that turn female musicians away. It is therefore a self-fulfilling prophecy and cycle that seems difficult to break.

## Self-efficacy: Enactive mastery experience and vicarious learning experience

As stated, this article starts from the problem raised by Wehr (2015) concerning how girl jazz students develop a negative belief of efficacy in jazz improvisation. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is "not a measure of the skills one has but a *belief about what one can do* under different sets of conditions with whatever skills one possesses" (Bandura, 1997, p. 37, italics added). Self-efficacy is seen as central to learning and development, since it affects motivation, effort, and perseverance with an activity. For example, a person may have high abilities in a certain activity, but if they believe they are less capable both motivation and the work invested in this activity will most likely be negatively affected. As a result, their actual performance will suffer. A person's efficacy belief is shaped within situational conditions (pp. 42–43). They may have low self-efficacy in doing a certain task in one context and perform poorly, but perform the same task well in another context where the person has a higher self-efficacy stemming from sociocultural norms and attitudes (pp. 188, 423).

Among such cultural norms, several studies have confirmed that self-efficacy is related to gender. Bandura (1997) states that "boys tend to inflate their sense of competence, [whereas] girls generally disparage their capabilities. (...) The more strongly girls adopt the stereotypic feminine gender-role identity, the more they underestimate their capabilities" (p. 430). Nielsen (2004) studied higher music education students' self-efficacy and found that male students had significantly higher self-efficacy than female students, although this varied with study program. Hendricks (2014) found that the self-efficacy of music students in a project youth orchestra playing western classical repertoire increased in the time period between an audition that placed them in a top or

lower level orchestra, and the first rehearsal of the project. The exception to this pattern was the group of female students who were placed in the top level group; between the audition and the first rehearsal their self-efficacy dropped. Hendricks explains this finding to the effect on female students when they perceive high expectations from the environment. However, even these students' self-efficacy increased after some practice and experienced mastery of the repertoire.

This effect may be directly related to the emphasis socio-cognitive theory places on *experience of enactive mastery*, which is the most important and evident source for self-efficacy, according to Bandura (1997), especially if a person experiences mastery by overcoming obstacles or resistance. Bandura depicts *vicarious learning experiences* as another important source, which involves transmission of competencies through comparison with others. In the light of my account of how jazz culture constitutes particular socio-historical contexts for learning from a gender perspective, I am specifically interested in exploring the impact of modelling and social comparison on female and non-binary students' learning in a male dominated jazz world. Hence, I will focus on Bandura's concept of *vicarious learning* as a source for self-efficacy.

A vicarious learning experience may take place when a person observes performance modelled by others, through a social comparison with the models. Vicarious learning involves more than simple mimicry of action; through observation the learner may pick up rules, concepts and situated strategies for problem-solving (Hanken, 2017) that they may transfer to new situations (generative learning).

A precondition is that the learner is able to imagine oneself in the observed situation, so *identification* with the model is crucial. The greater similarity a person feels with the model, especially in terms of age and gender, the greater impact the vicarious experience has on their self-efficacy. Conversely, if the learner lacks identification with the model, the learning outcome and impact on their self-efficacy is inhibited (Johansen and Nielsen, 2019). For example, children will often compare themselves to peers in search for verification of their own level of performance (Bandura, 1997, p. 173). However, gender has an even bigger impact on a person's self-efficacy than age in vicarious experiences, especially if the activity itself is "stereotypically linked to gender" (p. 98).

As shown in the previous section, jazz performance is heavily linked to a stereotyped male identity. Following from the mechanisms of vicarious learning experience, we have a socio-psychological explanation for why young learners' encounters with and internalizations of jazz culture's norms and "celebration of genius and the extraordinary events of jazz history" (Raine, 2019, p. 190), lead boys to develop a higher self-efficacy from the outset, while girls and non-binary students are easier turned away from jazz performance. This leads to the important question of how educational practice may support the development of children's self-efficacy regardless of their gender.

## The case: Improbasen

As mentioned in the introduction, I will use the case study of the Norwegian learning practice Improbasen (Johansen, 2021) to provide an empirical context for the conceptual discussions. Improbasen is founded and led by saxophonist and pedagogue Odd André Elveland. The center offers instrumental jazz improvisation tuition to beginner instrumentalists between the ages of 7 and 15, on instruments such as saxophone, piano, drums, bass, guitar, trumpet, and vibraphone. The pupils receive weekly 60-min individual lessons, and participate regularly in concerts around Oslo, arranged by the center. Improbasen also organizes collaborative projects with children from all over the world, such as the Nordic countries, Austria, Portugal, Switzerland, Venezuela, and Japan. In Norway, Improbasen is acclaimed for its high levels of skill among even young children, as well as its international interaction with jazz playing children from all over the world.

From 2015 to 2016, I conducted an ethnographic trailing research study of Improbasen, following 10 of the pupils closely; three boys and seven girls. The teacher and the parents of the selected children signed an informed consent before participating. I observed the children on lessons, group rehearsals, concerts and tours, and made several interviews with them, Elveland, and some of the parents. As part of the trailing research methodology which emphasizes continuous feedback from the researcher (Baklien, 2004), interviews with Elveland had the character of professional, critical discussions of his practice. The teacher and parents were given opportunity to read through selected quotes or passages where participants were mentioned, on behalf of themselves or their respective child. The diversity of the data material required holistic analyses where narratives (Riessman, 2011) crystallized from interpretive themes (Graue and Walsh, 1998) were used as both a method for analysis and presentation (See Johansen, 2021 for more information about methodology).

### Improbasen as gender activism

When Elveland began teaching, he did not think about gender balance and recruitment. But he experienced an eye-opener after talking to a former female student of his, a wind player, who had attended the music program in upper secondary school. To Elveland's pleasure, this student was completely absorbed with playing jazz, and frequently attending jazz concerts in a big city nearby. In this particular conversation, she had told Elveland that she never got any recognition for playing jazz at this school. The boys had gathered to play in jam sessions, and she was never invited along to play with them. Later, Elveland happened to talk to the program leader at the same school, and mentioned that he had heard that many students there were interested in jazz. In response, the leader started to list all the male students he could remember who played jazz. Elveland recalled (Johansen, 2021, p. 58):

I waited for him to mention one more name, but he didn't. 'Oh yes, then it is [name of wind player] who plays a little jazz,'

he finally said. I was shocked. 'She played a little jazz.' Her whole life is jazz. It is what she does!

After the encounter with this teacher, Elveland decided to make recruiting female instrumentalists Improbasen's main objective. In his experience, the way the teacher had overlooked and minimized the female student's ability was representative of how girls were treated by teachers or facilitators in general, where boys were given much more support and attention. In order to recruit girls and keep them, Elveland stated that the gender distribution in itself was important: «If the percentage of boys is higher than 50%, the girls will quit» (Johansen, 2021, p. 57).

### Instrument choice

Elveland mostly steered the choice of instruments for the children, partly based on which instruments he needed to form functional bands. He also deliberately tried to avoid stereotypical instrument assignments. He told me that boys often were attracted to drums and bass when they started, but he steered them away from those instruments. On one occasion, a female bass pupil struggled with playing the bass and asked if she could sing at a concert instead, which Elveland refused. He did not explain it to her, but told me that he did not want girls to give up too easily when they experienced challenges. Switching from playing bass to singing would have been an easy, and stereotypical, way out for girls, he claimed.

### Musical interplay across borders

The children frequently play in ensembles at concerts, where the form of tunes is improvised.<sup>5</sup> Although all the children get to play solos, the emphasis is not on the individual child's performance, but on shared, implicit codes for ensemble playing in jazz, such as signs for turn-taking and various templates for interplay in the drum and bass section to shape the performance of a tune (see Johansen, 2021, for detailed accounts of these templates).

As mentioned in the introduction, Improbasen often initiates and organizes international projects with children from other countries. They then travel to Norway to play in Improbasen's yearly festival Kids in Jazz, or Norwegian children travel abroad on tours. They have been to Iceland, Italy, and Japan, among other places. The mentioned shared codes for interplay enable the children to play together with jazz playing children from other countries, often without much rehearsals, and often without being able to communicate with each other verbally.

### A pedagogy of mastery

The explicit pedagogy at Improbasen is mainly centred around teaching the children how to improvise solos on chord sequences

<sup>5</sup> Improvised form refers to the order and number of solos between the tune's "head" played at the beginning and end, and how the head is played (rubato or in time).

typical for jazz standard tunes. During the pupils' weekly lessons, they are drilled in the chord scales of the tunes they learn. Phrase by phrase, they learn a new tune by ear, repeated in a call-response passage from the teacher's to the pupil's instrument, until the child knows the tune by heart. Following this process, the teacher plays a chord and its corresponding scale, one by one. If a chord has the duration of four beats, it is played ascending and descending. If it lasts for two beats, it is only played ascending. This way, the child implicitly learns the tonal/harmonic shifts anchored to its place in the form, that is the chord sequence. "Knowing a tune" for them means to know how to play the melody and to improvise on the right scale note, but it also means to feel the form and "know where they are."

This pedagogy is criticized for emphasizing "right and wrong" notes and inhibiting children's spontaneous creativity. For a more detailed discussion of learning structured material as a basis for developing creativity, see Johansen (2021). For the purpose of this article it suffices to state that while this criticism is important to consider, for children who are in early stages of learning to master an instrument, a clear tonal system learned by ear combined with immediate improvisation give the children extensive experience of variation with the material. In general, this pedagogy facilitates structural understanding and technical confidence to improvise on the repertoire they learn. One parent compared their observations of what their child developed with their own experiences when they were younger (p. 183):

I also want to say about the pedagogy, the way I see it, that joy of creating that you want children to experience. ... I get tears in my eyes when I think about how [Odd André] does that. Because it's special. I played in a big band when I was young, and I never learned to *live* in the improvisations. He is so concrete, and then gives them so much freedom.

Because this parent had not developed the self-efficacy to improvise with the same sense of freedom they ascribed to their child, the recognition of the child's experience of mastery through concrete guidance was probably even more salient to the parent.

Another parent connected the pedagogy of technical mastery in improvisation to gender (p. 57):

Especially as a mother of girls, I have to say that getting girls in on those conditions is fantastic. It really moves me. To make girls understand that they can do other things than the traditional girl stuff, and be taken seriously in everything with technique, for example.

This quote reveals that the mother is aware of how instrumental technique is coded as masculine, and different from "traditional girl stuff."

### Children's expressions of self-efficacy

Most studies that report and compare people's self-efficacy are based on surveys and statistical methods. In the study of

Improbasen, I had qualitative conversations with children to grasp their subjective meaning making within the jazz improvisation activity generally.<sup>6</sup> I did not specifically study their self-efficacy, and I therefore cannot postulate firm *measures* of their degrees of self-efficacy. However, the way they articulate the things they know and think about playing jazz, may be seen as an expression of acquired knowledge built on experiences of mastery, and thus provides a window into their beliefs about their own capabilities.

A conversation with the 12-year-old piano player Elisabeth showed her confidence related to the important skill of "knowing where you are" in the form of a tune, even if it looked like she had lost where she was:

So, I play, and then I might come out, but that is because I don't have time to take the next chord. But I know where I am, really. So then I just think a little bit, wait, and then I come in again (Johansen, 2021, p. 121).

Sara, a 7-year-old drummer, explained how she knew when to shift from rubato playing on her drum-set, which involved exploring different sounds she could create (a style she called *plinky-plonky*), to a swing feel with a set time within the same tune:

Sara: When Odd-André starts to play like softer, then I must start the plinky-plonky.

Guro: And how do you know when to start to play swing again?

Sara: When he plays like ... louder, in a way.

Guro: So you just hear it?

Sara: Yes, it's the hearing that's most important (p. 73).

I asked Sigrid, a 10-year-old who played the violin, what she was thinking about when she improvised. She said: "I do not think, sort of, I just do it... I do not think it is difficult to not think about improvising when I improvise (...). So for example if I improvise (...) I can think 'yikes, that was ugly,' I can think that, without playing mistakes, sort of" (p. 74).

The 10-year-old drummer Inger expressed an experience of overcoming stage fright after having successfully played a drum solo at a concert:

It was really fun. I had dreaded the drum solo, because I had no idea if it was going to go well, but then it did go well when I played. (...) *Dahoud*, one of the songs, went really well. (...) I guess [the concert] today was better... I did more different things in my drum solo (p. 68).

<sup>6</sup> All names used in this section are pseudonyms.

The bass player Anne, said in an interview when she was 11 that she thought professional jazz musicians improvised much faster than children, and that they have a much better imagination, which make them improvise better. However, she could recall a time when she was pleased with her own improvised ideas, and explained that it happened once when she played a solo over two choruses of a tune: “So then I had to figure out something different [the second time]” (p. 76).

The saxophonist Christine, 13 years old, explained the importance of phrasing with a good rhythm, and then went on to talk about the importance of note choice: “[I]f you sort of [manage to] create a melody out of those notes, then it just sounds... so good! So, when I really manage that, then sometimes, when I hear myself, I go like ‘wow, that sounded really nice’, then I feel that it’s a good improvisation” (p. 77).

Several pupils connected experiences of joy with performing on concerts. Anne said she thought concerts were more fun because she then had to “shape up to not make mistakes, and then it becomes very good” (p. 67). She added that playing with others was another factor that made concerts so fun, a point repeated by Hannah, an 11-year-old sax player: “Because it sounds better when you practice and play together” (p. 67). Helene (12 years old) on guitar and Christine (13 years old) on sax both stated that on concerts, they enjoyed listening to the other children’s solos, and were inspired from this.

Looking at how children distinguish between what they think is a good or less good improvisation may provide insight into what they perceive mastery to be about. For example, children connected a “bad” improvisation to be about losing where you are in the form or making “ugly” note choices. Mastery to them, on the other hand involved knowing where you are, improvising with variation, and combining notes into nice melodies. All of these descriptions were based on actual, enactive experiences, and the children were assertive about knowing when they played well and when they felt they did not. It is therefore noteworthy that, if we see these utterances as expressions of self-efficacy, their descriptions appeared neither over- nor under-estimated, but *realistic*. According to [Bandura \(1997\)](#), realistic self-efficacy beliefs are the most robust.

## Contexts for identification: Canon or community of children?

Elveland rarely talked about jazz history or famous performers in lessons, so the pupils did not get the music they played contextualized in terms of social and cultural history.<sup>7</sup> For the children, jazz was something children played; the regular pupils at Improbasen, and children from other countries they met through Improbasen’s international activity.

<sup>7</sup> Although he often suggested jazz recordings to listen to at home, the performer(s) of these recordings were rarely highlighted.

Elveland had observed how the children could nurture a jazz interest in each other. Lena, a 14-year-old Austrian drummer, had visited Kids in Jazz 2 years before, and Lena’s visit made a clear mark on one of the Norwegian drummers as well, Andrea (who was 13 years old at the time):

Odd André: On the festival the year after, I saw that Andrea had picked up things from Lena, quite obviously.

Guro: Yes, Andrea told me so herself, she is aware of it.

Odd André: Yes, her parent said it too, that her comping with brushes was directly learned from Lena. Andrea had asked her to show her. It’s important to create those connections, so they have something to build their interest on further on. It’s a funny thing, this, that if they know someone from Austria who plays jazz, then it becomes a little bit more important.” (p. 147)

Elveland also commented on the commonly advised practise of listening to well-known, “great” performers, but noted that Christine, then 15, seemed more interested in Akira, a 16-year-old sax player from Japan:

I gave Christine a sound clip with Chet Baker. But I think she got much more out of listening to a recording of Akira that I gave her. We worked a lot with articulating what she heard in Chet Baker’s playing. But she surprised me, because she had a lot more opinions about Akira’s playing. Christine liked Akira’s nuanced use of attacks and the notes Akira ends her phrases on. And I don’t think it is because Akira plays the sax. It’s rather because she is a human being that Christine knows and has had nice experiences with (p. 148).

Elveland presented the thought that this had to do with gender:

I think it is a girls’ thing. Boys often want to listen to Charlie Parker and Jan Garbarek and God. While girls. ... it doesn’t matter who it is, as long as they get to know what they need. Doesn’t have to be a famous person (p. 148).

While this remark may be seen as essentialization of girls’ and boys’ learning preferences, Elveland’s observation of gender differences may resonate with a common emphasis in jazz research. [Berliner’s \(1994\)](#) descriptions of informal learning among North American jazz musicians, almost exclusively male, may illustrate what [Wilf \(2014\)](#) calls a monolithic, admiration-based culture, exemplified in this quote: “Just as [learners’] early idols had learned from numerous mentors, aspiring musicians learn to re-create faithfully discrete bundles of traits and concepts from a succession of idols” ([Berliner, 1994](#), p. 136). However, if there are gender differences in how young people seek knowledge,

I suggest, in accordance with Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, the possibility for *identification* is a more plausible reason for this difference than how learners perceive the model's status.

## Summary and discussion

In the presentation of the case of Improbasen, I showed several examples of strategies for enhancing children's self-efficacy. In the following, I will summarize these strategies in five main points, and discuss them critically.

First, the distribution of girls and boys, respectively, was given explicit emphasis. As shown, Elveland had a goal of an even distribution, but I observed that when pupils were gathered at events arranged by Improbasen, girls were in the majority. According to Bandura (1997), the effect of gender stereotypes on self-efficacy is dampened in learning environments where there is more diversity among participants. Thus, the notion that jazz is *not* gendered becomes normalized for the children. The chance for girls to find someone they identify with at Improbasen is greater, strengthening their possibilities for vicarious learning. The question remains how a learning environment dominated by girls is experienced by boys. The empirical data show no signs of boys feeling marginalized or tokenized, supported by the facts that all children interacted and played with each other in breaks across gender categories, and that there was and still is a high number of boys who want to attend Improbasen. Theorizing further on boys' possibilities for identification with musicians of their gender, these possibilities will always be strong if turning to the wider social, cultural and historical context of jazz. However, when boys relate to both this wider context as well as their "local" learning environment at Improbasen, they too will most likely experience a dampened stereotype effect (Bandura, 1997) due to the diverse representation.

Second, gender stereotypes such as instrument roles are actively subverted by the fact that in most cases the teacher chooses the instrument for the pupils. He deliberately assigns non-typical instruments to girls and boys. Seeing female peers playing the bass, drums and guitar (or males playing the piano) will most likely resist the common instrument stereotyping in these children, thus normalizing that instruments are not gendered. The example with the female bass player who struggled and asked if she could sing instead, which Elveland refused, is interesting. Objectively speaking, it is not necessarily *easier* technically or musically to sing than to play the double bass as both depend on experience and learning, so the incident may be interpreted as the pupil having developed a low self-efficacy for one thing and a higher for the other rooted in internalized gender stereotypes. Elveland's rejection of her wish was perhaps harsh, but his intention was to scaffold an experience of overcoming an obstacle in her learning process. Building on Bandura (1997), such experiences are powerful sources of a positive self-efficacy. Hypothetically, if he had given in, she would have been denied the possibility of that outcome. Nevertheless, it is important to point

out potential gender stereotyping from the teacher when he claimed that boys preferred to learn by copying "masters," which he contrasted with his perception of girls preferring to focus on "what they need to know." In addition to the essentialism conveyed in these statements, they hold a potential devaluation of boys' preferences. This is problematic from an ethical point of view, given how unconscious bias from a teacher may be picked up by pupils and influence their learning negatively, connected to what Bandura (1997) frames as the *social persuasion*-source for self-efficacy.

Third, the pedagogy is oriented toward individual aural mastery of musical material such as chords and scales and the system that connects them within functional harmonic theory; technical mastery of an instrument based on a solid ear-hand coordination; abilities necessary for ensemble playing (such as knowing where you are within an improvised form) and codes for interplay (such as improvised tempo shifts, turn taking, and comping); and repeated experiences of trying out these skills through solo improvisations. As such, what the children practice come close to Bandura's (1997) account of *generative skills*:

In many activities (...), skills must be improvised to suit changing circumstances. In generative skills, appropriate subskills are flexibly orchestrated to fit the demands of particular situations (...) under varying circumstances. (...) Once they learn the rules, they can use them to make decisions and to generate courses of action in new situations they encounter that go beyond what they have seen or heard. Generative skills provide the tools for adaptability and innovativeness (p. 440).

Fourth, learning through observing models in Improbasen happens primarily between peers, rather than modelling from Great Jazz Male Performers. If a person's self-efficacy is high from the outset, then observational learning is efficient even if the model is perceived as at a more competent level (Bandura, 1997, p. 101). The impact of using more competent jazz musicians' practice and performance as models may be more important for boys if they easily identify with this masculinity. However, if one is unsure of one's own capabilities, observing an activity from models who are perceived as having a similar identity and level (or even lower level) is more impactful. As we saw, children at Improbasen are eager to learn directly from each other or indirectly by observing each other receive instruction and hearing each other play. The advantage when observation and modelling between peers are made possible may be greater for girls and non-binary children, since they have a higher risk of experiencing the stereotype threat and intimidation because of their gender. The effect of gender stereotyping is eliminated or reduced by a diverse cohort of peers that has a majority of girls. So while the vicarious learning value for girls is strengthened, it is not reduced for boys.

Fifth, and this point is a continuation of the fourth one: when I interviewed children about what playing jazz



improvisation is about, they revealed a lot about their current knowledge on the matter. None mentioned factual cultural-historical knowledge about stylistic developments and “periods” (such as “swing” and “be-bop”), or famous master performers. This was part of the pedagogy, with the reason that Elveland had experienced that very young children are not interested in this kind of knowledge. Not only does it create a learning environment where children learn to think of jazz performance as a natural activity for children to do with their peers. Another and perhaps more accidental result is that by not contextualizing jazz practices to the children, I suggest they are “protected” from encountering the exclusionary features of jazz in terms of normative gender stereotypes, and therefore this protection may have a positive impact on their self-efficacy. A critical engagement with jazz history, including both its creative developments as well as its exclusionary sides, is important for young learners to be able to situate themselves in a wider, cultural context. My suggestion here is to consider the potential positive impact on learners’ self-efficacy to engage in an instrumental practice in a learning environment of peers they can identify with, before they reach a higher level of maturity ready to learn about the social and cultural history of jazz.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have aimed at showing the significant role self-efficacy plays for learning and development, and how gendered jazz practices and discourses may have afforded female and non-binary learners with a low self-efficacy for pursuing jazz performance. Despite this dismal history, I have shown an attempt to contribute to breaking the vicious cycle and self-fulfilling prophecy, exemplified in the case study of Improbasen and its gender related strategies. The study has clear limitations given its single case, but I claim that it is possible to extract some key points that may be tried out in other contexts, through a theoretical discussion of how these strategies may work in favor of supporting the development of self-efficacy in jazz. The strategies and features I have pointed to are: the distribution of genders in favor of girls; a non-stereotypical instrument distribution; a pedagogy of individual and group mastery of jazz improvisation; a learning environment that fosters vicarious learning where the risk of gender tokenism is reduced; and “protection” from learning how historical jazz practice is connoted to a stereotypical masculinity.

At Improbasen, the children are not socialized into the hierarchical canon of “Parker, Garbarek, and God,” to paraphrase

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Elveland. Instead, they get to build repeated enactive mastery experiences of generative skills and develop a realistic and robust self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) with rich opportunities for vicarious learning from their peers, *before* they encounter and learn about the exclusionary history and practice of jazz.

However, instigating these strategies requires an active commitment and sometimes a controversial reinforcement of them; such as insisting on the gender distribution even if boys are filling up the waiting list, rejecting some children’s instrument requests, and avoiding contextual knowledge of jazz history. Given how children as young as 6 years old internalize gender stereotypes (Storage et al., 2016), and given the detrimental effect this socialization may have on girls’ and non-binary children’s self-efficacy in jazz (Bandura, 1997), I hold forth that such firm strategies are necessary to—in the longer run—offer equal opportunities for all genders in jazz.

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