Music Educators’ Understanding and Expressed Opinions of U.S. Copyright Law: A Pilot Study

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Music educators in the United States are charged with the responsibility to observe copyright laws, yet with continued developments in technology, it is becoming more convenient to violate copyright laws. Penalties for copyright infringement are severe, with potential consequences for those who breach copyright and those whose work is violated. Unlike other educators, music educators are uniquely positioned to encounter copyright issues on a regular basis due to advances in music notation software, copy machines, and other digital tools designed to create and distribute music. Although issues related to copyright law are relevant to music educators and their careers, few studies have examined this population’s perceptions of copyright law. The purpose of this pilot study was to investigate music educators’ understanding and expressed opinions of U.S. copyright law.

In-service music educators (N = 50, 22.52% response rate) completed a web-based survey instrument to assess their attitudes toward copyright law, knowledge of copyright law, and preparation/training for understanding copyright law. Respondents were sampled from a regional area email database maintained by a NAfME state affiliate in the Midwestern United States. Respondents reported a mean of 20.45 years of teaching experience (SD = 12.29), with a range of 2 to 51 years of experience. Primary teaching areas included general music (n = 37), band (n = 24), choir (n = 22), orchestra (n = 1), and guitar (n = 2). (The sum exceeds the sample size because respondents were allowed to choose all teaching areas that applied).

Results indicated a positive attitude towards copyright law and a belief that music educators should understand copyright law. Despite these reported attitudes, respondents estimated that 68.38% of music educators photocopy copyright-protected sheet music without permission, that 45.23% of music educators post video or audio recordings of copyrighted music on the internet without permission, and that 35.15% of music educators distribute copyright-protected sheet music through digital means without permission.

In terms of knowledge of copyright law, significant differences were observed among respondents’ ratings of various aspects of copyright law, \( F(3.17, 155.34) = 20.31, p < .001, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .29 \). Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparisons indicated a significantly higher reported knowledge of public domain than all other aspects, including fair use, history of copyright laws, legal issues surrounding music copyright laws, and penalties for copyright infringement \( p < .001 \). Majority of respondents (63.27%) indicated completion of zero courses devoted to music copyright laws in their undergraduate degree, and 79.59% reported that preservice music teacher training prepared them to understand music copyright laws “not at all” or “not very well.”

Results suggest that these music educators support copyright laws but do not understand certain facets of these laws. Furthermore, they reported negligible preservice preparation in this area. Given the severe consequences associated with copyright infringement, music teacher educators may consider incorporating this topic into their courses to a greater extent because arming preservice teachers with this knowledge could impact the success and longevity of their future careers. Implications for music educators and music teacher education curricula will be discussed.

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