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QUARTERLY

Reviewing Engagement in the Middle School Band

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Abstract

The instrumental music program, commonly called "the band", is comprised of students from all parts of a school population. Engagement strategies to reach all students need to be reviewed, revisited, and modified, even in the ensemble-based class. Action steps to engage more students more often should be employed in the music room, modified as necessary. Therefore, it is important to know what engagement in a classroom means.

Introduction

In schools and school districts throughout the country, student engagement is a prominent goal toward achieving student success (West Branch, 2017; Fredricks et al, 2011; MDUSD, nd). The author's former employer lists among the weekly focus areas, "All classrooms should have in evidence students engaging in at least two of the 4 Cs of collaboration, creativity, communication, and critical thinking" [2] (Preparing 21st, nd). This article discusses the meaning of engagement in education, its importance, and its relevance to band classes.

Background

After many years of service and scholarship, the author has come to support the position that visual and performing arts classes, specifically the school bands, must coexist as both an artistic experience, with a focus on aesthetics and musicianship, and, importantly, as a utilitarian, academic support experience. The classes cannot exist as only one or the other, but as both, simultaneously. As schools differentiate ways to engage students in the general academic classroom, primarily around math and language, so should music teachers reflect on our approaches to engage band students differently.

The author, as practitioner, has considered students in their school bands as inherently engaged in learning. That is not necessarily so. As established through various agreements around engagement, addressed later in this article, it is more than just doing. In a traditional band setting, students sit in their sections and rehearse as a full ensemble, with various levels of enthusiasm and attentiveness, for the duration of the rehearsal. The expectations and demands of teachers and students have changed, including the way content is delivered and received. The band, often long standing institutions within the institutions, should also address ways to encourage greater participation from the school population.

"Music educators cannot sit by unconcernedly, during these times of enormous and rapid change, content to know that the scale still numbers 12 half steps and concert A is 440" (Kaplan, 1966, p. v). Kaplan's emphatic statement from 1966 resonates with this author.

How are issues in music education addressed when it is acknowledged that music is part of our lives in different ways and serves different purposes (Väkevä & Westerlund, 2007)?

Engagement

For decades, it has been widely agreed that engagement in schools refers to students' behaviors with which they intensely apply themselves to learning. Attributes of students' willingness and desire to participate play a role, but contemporary perspectives on engagement include students' abilities to persevere through challenges over sustained periods of time (Fletcher, 2015; Loveless, 2015; NSSE, 2013; Strong, Silver, & Robinson, 1995). Fletcher (2015) adds that successful educators create conditions within classrooms that allow opportunities for students to engage. Through academic challenges, collaborative activities, and meaningful relationships and interactions with the teacher and adults, students are likely to feel supported and will participate willingly in the learning activities.

Art and Science of Teaching

Prominent scholar, Robert Marzano's published works include *Art and Science of Teaching* (2007). This author participated in various Marzano professional development workshops with his former employer [3]. From the teaching and learning perspective, an impacting component of the Marzano research is in student engagement toward learning. The author identifies three Marzano strategies (physical movement, enthusiasm for content, and mild competition) and the use of these in his large ensemble classes. A former middle school student, Dailey, provides examples of how these strategies were implemented and realized within the band class. The practice of implementing the recommended strategies has yielded positive results in general classrooms; how are these implemented and experienced in the band room?

Physical movement

An argument could be made that playing musical instruments is itself a physical activity. While it is, this author also has students move to various areas in the room and throughout the building. The small amount of time to get elsewhere and to set up and organize within small groups changes the pace, briefly requires full body engagement, and contributes to collaboration and problem solving. Dividing the large ensemble by encouraging similar and dissimilar groupings to practice at various spaces within the room is a disruption involving the act of moving about the room, but it also adds to the students' autonomy over how and where they engage in their student-led practice (Kooistra, 2016). Sectional rehearsals are common; however, even sectionals tend to be highly teacher directed. The author's weekly "Wednesday split" was the opportunity for students to decide where they go, whom they go with, and what their area of practice will be.

Demonstrate enthusiasm for content

Tone, demeanor, and exaggerated behaviors enhance critical situations and content areas. Marzano (2007) and Brophy (2010) clarify that this intense enthusiasm refers to teachers' means to identify why, to state their reasons as interesting, and emphasize the importance of the topic. They add that enthusiasm does not equate to "pep talks or unnecessary theatrics" (Marzano, p. 113). An example of the attempts to be enthusiastic and extensive in the teaching/learning dynamic are identified by student Dailey in this way:

He (band teacher) always seems eager to learn new things, even though he's the one that's teaching us the new things. I knew he was interested in what we were doing by the way he walked into class every day. He had the biggest smile and was always kind and caring to every student. I don't know how he did it, but he made us actually want to learn more and more about music and its culture.

In an open invitation to a recent cohort of students, responses to a questionnaire about their perceptions included that the teacher's level of enthusiasm gives them "energy to play" and motivates some "to do better and work harder". One student added that, "Because of him [teacher] being enthusiastic, we are able to play good songs" and another added, "While he

is enthusiastic it is fun to play because it is very exciting and gives me more enjoyment of performing.”

Inconsequential competition

Another recommendation is of inconsequential competition. By having small groupings and combos play for each other within the large ensemble setting, students are likely to experience camaraderie that is supportive, but also the pressure of performing in front of one's peers is an example of forced attention (Marzano, 2007).

For those students who participated in the questionnaire, this topic of competition elicited discrepant responses. It was generally acknowledged that the teacher does not encourage or focus on competition; however, there were different levels of thought about it. For example, some noticed his interest to “encourage us to be the best we could possibly be and help us for the future” and for the band to be “supportive and fun and not too obsessed with competing” and “more focused with everybody doing their best and helping everybody else to get better.” However, there were responses that suggest the teacher should analyze and reconsider to meet those whose motivations are more competitively driven. One student feels that “there is not competition to move up and get better parts” because “people who don't deserve the parts can just take them.” While the author has a rebuttal to this, the student's response warrants consideration and will be addressed for future planning. Others felt the lack of focus on competition, both internally among each other and externally against other groups, results in individuals not practicing as much.

Importance of engagement

The National Survey of Student Engagement (2013) in mathematics suggest that self-reported high engagement is not an indicator for high achievement; however, high engagement is an indicator for school connection. Engaged students are more likely to stay in school, to learn skills around problem solving, and to acknowledge a sense of belonging to the school community. These positive factors contribute to higher graduation rates and generally higher grades. Low engagement tends to be prevalent in higher poverty communities, increasingly evident as students move through the system and into higher grade levels (Fredricks et al, 2011).

An axiology in the author's program design places importance on new strategies for a changing sociology and reflects his values to the process of music education; specifically, being cognizant of the ways these values influence the development, process, or conclusion to the implemented operational behaviors (Tomar, 2014; Hesse-Biber, 2010; Engle, 2009; Ponterotto, 2005).

Enacting a praxial music education

Public schools are collections of people, reflecting the plurality of our communities. With over six million students enrolled in California public schools [4], a philosophy on music education must consider the many avenues to engage students. Elliott (2005) promotes the idea of music praxialism, based in “music action rather than aesthetic reception” (Bradley, 2012, p. 421). The ways we do music education deserve fresh approaches to engage students in ways that may attract more participants, provide academic support, and address and reinforce concepts of music within unique contexts.

Elliott's (2005) and Elliott and Silverman's (2012) work around praxial music education, with its acknowledgment of societal pluralism, has influenced this author to plan for actions that include deviations from aesthetic-centric practices in his ensemble-based classes. Using the band as the formal organization of students to create class period X, the author's professional growth has been to honor the standard elements and methods of tone production, intonation, balance, blend, and understanding of notation while also strategizing to provide students some time during our class periods to explore personal interests, tutor each other, and co-create through performing and/or writing. While the former provides a

foundation of technical proficiency to engage in formal music-making with a common language, the latter provides opportunities for individuals to self-direct toward addressing the 4 Cs of 21st Century learning [5] - collaborate, communicate, create, and think critically (Preparing 21st, nd).

The band continues to be a primary format for secondary music education in the US. Yet, a focus on finite production has altered the discourse of band participation from being viewed for its intrinsic value to that of the band serving a purpose toward something greater. This approach to music education creates a dichotomy that pits the praxis of band against its purpose, historically, and that the current practices favor a kind of musicality and relationship to music, with a focus on the large ensemble, over alternatives. Teachers should approach the band with different foci and strategies, and accept and expect different outcomes. There is a delicate balance between serving students' and communities' interests and of "fulfilling a composer's intent" (Mantie, 2012, p. 113).

Mantie (2012) further criticizes the structure of school bands for its evolved design over time toward specific musicality to the exclusion of alternatives. The author supports this criticism as it influences students' interests in performing, but also as it affects music education on a larger scale. Students must be considered for their growth potential as a band student and not for the interpersonal enjoyment through the participation. The sentiment continues to be explored, as evidenced by Gibson (2016), who identified that band teachers, in general, were not "doing enough to engage students in the band activity" (p. 35), resulting in increased attrition, especially at the middle school level.

Schewe (2016) reminds us that phenomena, like engagement, are changing states of being and are affected by various environments. The development of engagement strategies should be goals toward the motivation of students. Marzano (2007) encourages action steps to promote physical activity, to challenge students' thinking, and to stimulate attention. The large ensemble is not the only means of teaching and learning, and in some scholarly writing, it is suggested that the focus of large ensemble instruction is detrimental to individual musicianship and growth, hence to the music education profession (Kooistra, 2016; Mantie, 2012).

Conclusion

Engagement means students are task-doing but also that they sustain their activity through various challenges and through problem-solving, decision-making, and strategizing. The author encounters colleagues who eschew school wide teaching strategies as not intended for or useful in the band room. The author encourages colleagues to acknowledge everyone's evolution, including teachers in the band room, and try reaching students in ways that may seem different. As Reeve (2006) suggested, "when engagement is characterized by the full range of on-task behavior, positive emotions, invested cognition, and personal voice, it functions as the engine for learning and development" (p. 652).

Endnotes

- [1] This article extends previous discussions as published in the US-China Education Review (2017), doi: 10.17265/2161-623X/2017.06.002.
- [2] This is listed on the weekly staff bulletins. Author used as a reference, PHMS bulletin, March 7-March 10, 2017.
- [3] Art and Science of Teaching professional development workshops were held at the Mt. Diablo Unified School District Pleasant Hill Education Center (June 12, 2015) and at the Willow Creek Center (September 14, 2015; November 17, 2015; and January 26, 2016). The author participated in these workshops as a member of the school leadership team.
- [4] According to the California Department of Education website, CalEd Facts reported 6,226,737 students enrolled in the state's public schools during the 2015-16 school year in grades K-12, including ungraded programs.
- [5] <http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/A-Guide-to-Four-Cs.pdf>

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