Musicians Almost Absent From Community Band Participation: A Multiple Case Study

Joshua E. Long
Marist College, Poughkeepsie, New York, USA
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Abstract

Community music, activities for musicians to engage in a wide range of musical contexts (Higgins, 2012), exist when common attentiveness is shared by participants in a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Community music happens primarily in ensembles, made mostly of volunteers, and can only perform when there are active participants. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study (Creswell, 2013) is to investigate the almost absence of past participants in community bands. Six Low Active Participants (musicians who are active less than 6 months a year) were interviewed to describe their music making experiences during past community band participation. This study also included document collection and observations of both active and non-active community band musicians. Results indicated participants focus their involvement with musical engagement, ensemble appeal, organization practices, and motivating experiences.

Keywords: adult learning, situated learning, community of practice, community band, music making

³Director of Bands and Lecturer of Music, Marist College, Poughkeepsie, New York, USA

Corresponding Author:
Joshua E. Long, Marist College, Music Department, 3399 North Road, Murray Student Center, Office 4025, Poughkeepsie, NY 12601
Email: joshua.long@marist.edu

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Introduction

“Community music consists of music teaching-learning interactions and transactions that occur outside traditional music institutions like schools and university music departments” (Higgins, 2012, p. 77). Participants in such communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), engage in ensembles such as church choirs, bands, drum corps, brass bands, choruses, orchestras, and small jazz combos, to provide a service of entertainment at concerts, parades, and other ceremonial events (Veblen & Olsson, 2002). Opportunities for lifelong learners (Mantie, 2012), musician social support (Carucci, 2012), identity (Dabback, 2008), self-expressed interests (Bowles, 1991), and aesthetic responses (Ruggeri, 2003) are mediated using tools such as musical instruments within a particular ensemble environment (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

This research focused on six Low Active Participants of community music, specifically community bands. These musicians were active less than 6 months a year, according to a previous survey of participation, which suggested involvement would increase with unique repertoire performance experiences (Long, 2014). Through interviews, observations, and document collection, the purpose of this study was to investigate community band participation, under the lens of musicians who choose little involvement. The follow question was addressed: How do low active adult musicians describe music making experiences during community band participation?

Literature Review

Community of Practice

A common area of interest where individuals share the same curiosities and obtain meanings together, constitutes a community of practice. These practices exist everywhere, they are various, and individuals can be involved with several interests of a community without even
knowing. Wenger (1998) began this idea by referring to what has been experienced through mutual engagement of activities, happening inside collective exercises, such as making music in an ensemble setting. Communities of practice contain shared ideas, commitments, and memories, with the use of tools, routines, vocabulary, symbols, and knowledge, which accumulate in the community (Wenger, 1998). It involves ways of doing shared activities among members of the community.

Since a community band needs individuals to fill their woodwind, brass, and percussion sections, participants should share a common interest of performing, identity, and self-expression together. Therefore, participation in this community of practice (a community band) shares common goals, tools such as musical instruments, symbols such as uniforms, and musical knowledge accumulated from band repertoire. Higgins (2008) stated “community music grew from the general ‘attitude’ of community arts” (Higgins, 2008, p. 27). This ‘attitude’ was established from a vision of a broad community of practice, community music (Higgins, 2008), by looking at all forms of music participation. Musicians can be involved in various communities of practice, in this case both the practice of community music and community band only if participation transpires together with other musicians.

Learning occurs informally from experiences and practices, which will be furthered in the next section with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) conceptualization of situated learning. However, Boud and Middleton (2003) observed learning that occurred from interactions of others, during a workplace community of practice. This informal learning in the workplace occurred only when the group reformed together. In comparison with community bands, successful performances of repertoire will only occur if the band musicians are participating together. Therefore, a band
would need high participation to function as an ensemble, very similar to the workplace interaction research of Boud and Middleton (2003).

**Situated Learning**

Situated Learning was first proposed as a way to focus on understanding in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning (proposed as a social experience) and knowledge (a skill originating from a task) are a co-constructed process. Therefore, learning is embedded in the context. There is no way of looking at just one attribute that constitutes learning. Learning is understood after noticing what has been learned and by looking at all influences which have affected the process. Jean Lave, in particular, proposed learning takes place in all situations and experiences, specifically outside a formal classroom.

Rose (1999) focused on the teaching and learning of a concept in biomechanics of physical therapy; the frame of mind that informed concept, technique, and skill, ‘the here and the now.’ “Ortho II [physical therapy class] acquires these tools through guided and sustained practice; the students' learning is "situated," then, both in a tradition and, more immediately, in the conditions created by the instructors which enable them to develop competence” (Rose, 1999, p. 150). Learning was guided, situated, by instructors and the community of practice, to develop skills in a physical therapy setting. This learning could relate to how instructors in community band situated music repertoire concepts and technique, to progress community band performance.

Therefore, situated learning was defined by Finnegan (2007) as “looking at practice rather than formalized texts or mental structures, at processes rather than products, at informal grass-roots activities rather than formal structure,” (p. 8). Finnegan’s purpose was to witness the community music and how music making was situated. Through observation of brass band,
musical theatre, jazz, rock, pop, country, folk, and classical music, learning developed “in the context of practice and performance” situated as informal learning (Finnegan, 2007, p. 140). Each practice of community music was co-constructed in a social process of music making, constituting learning embedded in the context of musician interactions. Situated learning in this case according to Illeris (2009), was valued through particular practice situations, community music participation.

Learning in a practice is remembered through the use of tools. Learning is never facilitated through the world directly, since mediation through the world occurs with the use of tools only when participation occurs together. Lundin and Nuldèn (2007) stated, “learning is understood to be either the equipping of [police] officers with knowledge as tools for carrying out work or it is described as being socialized into practice” (p. 223). In conducting research of Swedish police officers, tools of, for example, an officer’s belt (keys, pistol, radio, car, and nightstick) were mastered by newcomers, which mediated their understanding of the community. Only through this repeated social use of tools, meaning was situated. This study revealed that the use of police tools resulted in conversations, a vital part of the community police practice understanding. Learning therefore embedded in tools, can be found in every community of practice such as community band’s mediation of brass, woodwind, and percussion instruments only during collective musician participation.

Mantie (2012a) discussed Lave & Wenger-inspired situated learning to research how music education might facilitate interactions between school, community, and lifespan engagement in adult music makers. These participants viewed their school music participation as a legitimate “induction into a ‘real’ musical practice, or rather as just another school subject taken on the path toward high school graduation” (Mantie, 2012a, p. 37). Participation in school
bands were intended for the outcome of instruction, then music learning will take place. The investigation continued further into the characteristics, attitudes, and perceptions of community band attrition. Mantie (2012a) stated, “if carryover is to be valued in music education, better theories of avocational music participation are needed” (Mantie, 2012a, p. 39). Thus, the suggestion was that students should continue to actively interact with other band practices beyond high school, since their constructed meaning happened during participation. This suggestion was the impetus, therefore, of the current investigation into why musicians may choose to be minimally involved in adult community bands.

**Method**

**Participant Profiles**

The six contributors were past community band research participants of the two-hundred-sixty-one ensemble members from Connecticut, Maine, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania *Finding Retention in Community Music Ensemble Participants* (Long, 2014), who indicated their willingness to participate in this study. Since these participants indicated low participation, communication was initiated via email to set one hour phone call interviews. Each individual expressed enthusiasm in providing their views on community band participation, often making phone calls longer than one hour.

Brief background information on each participant is provided below, including approximate age. Please note that each participant was given a pseudonym to provide confidentiality:

- **Mark** – upper 40s, non-practicing music educator, and over 20 years of community band.
- **Anthony** – upper 30s, non-music professional, and band participant through college.
- **Jane** – mid 50s, non-music professional, and years spent with community band.
• John – mid 40s, practicing music educator, and dedication to jazz community ensembles.

• Mary – upper 50s, non-practicing music educator, and over 30 years of small community ensembles.

• Louise – mid 70s, non-music professional, and dedicated to music making.

Interviews

The interview strategy was constructed by consulting Turner’s (2010) qualitative interview protocol, which explores ways to conduct in-depth conversations rather than just a question and answer format. Interviews were structured with common themed questions but were open-ended to encourage participants to provide much detailed responses and to allow the researcher to ask probing questions to follow-up (Turner, 2010). One hour detailed conversational interviews were conducted, focused on music-making experiences during community band participation. Six Low Active Participants were chosen based on their irregular participation in community bands. Results were briefly analyzed using the qualitative multiple case study of Creswell (2013). Themes emerged from the coding process and the researcher engaged in member checking (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) by clarifying main ideas, and verifying the experience with the participant after the interview process. This member checking was done to maintain accuracy of the data collected (Krueger, 2010).

Interview topics included the following: What are your priorities in life and how do community bands play a role in this plan? What appeals to you about community bands? What issues, challenges, disservices do you see with these ensembles? What would strengthen these organizations? What stopped your participation in community bands? How can the organizations help facilitate a better experience for you? Why might other musicians not participate?

Observations
Approximately five hours of observations of active community band participants, happened during four consecutive regular evening rehearsals in a middle school band room. This community band was chosen to see how active musicians interact with each other. Also, approximately five hours of observations at the home of Louise, the practicing musician but non-active community band participant, was completed. She was observed in one week, for two afternoon practice routines. For both observations, tacit patterns were the focus (Rossman & Rallis, 2003), which included space, activities, groups, and demeanor.

**Document Collection**

Individuals were explored in depth using their explanations of community band participation, and information was collected using responses and document collections of shared suggestions during the interviews. These documents included pictures, programs, awards, schedules, and audio compact disc of ensembles the participants were strongly passionate about. All documents corresponded to the community band experiences participants were sharing pertaining to the interview topics and ideas. Conversations became more detailed as participants remembered more of the experiences after looking at pictures and past performance programs.

Analysis of the documents was used to map time and space of the community of practice of community bands, since I was an insider-researcher (Kanuha, 2000). People created these documents (such as Anthony’s concert schedule) and may have kept them for the purpose of remembering the experience. For example, Louise shared a 1965 New York World’s Fair concert picture and Mark shared a 1970’s drum corps recording in Corning, New York proving their participation in the ensembles. Seeing and hearing these ensembles gave the researcher a better understanding of the communities of practice these participants were discussing, along with associating the era with which these participants were connecting. Overall, these documents gave
the researcher an understanding of the ensemble with which these individuals socialized, experienced, and interacted, along with an introduction to the other musicians during participants’ past active participation with a community band.

**Reporting of Positionality**

Since this researcher is an active community band conductor and musician, questions pertained to participants’ interest, involvement, engagement, and how they started with community bands. To get more of an in-depth understanding from the interviews (Rossman & Rallis, 2003), further questions then were geared to be more descriptive about style, appeal, and participation of music. As the interview moved forward and the context was justified, questions were then prompted to go elsewhere (Schram, 2006). Such questions emerged about audience expectations, the conductor, and the structure of the community organization itself. Each interview did not receive the same number of questions, as the researcher guided the discussion, rather than joining in (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008).

**Results and Discussion**

Through the entire interview process, participants were more than happy to share their experiences and documents via mail, email, and in person. Many of the interviews and observations, went over the scheduled time. While analyzing the interviews, observations, and documents, the following themes emerged from the data: musical engagement, ensemble appeal, organization practices, and motivating experiences.

**Musical Engagement**

During interviews, participants initiated many conversations about how they engaged with performing music. This musical engagement was realized when Jane stated, “It’s difficult for me to take my focus off my work, so music allows me to go somewhere and not have a
choice but to play music.” According to her perceptions, she gravitated to music-making as a release from reality. Music took control of her body, made her feel “good” and her stress disappeared. The researcher observed the same behavior seen during a community band rehearsal observation, when the musicians looked involved with performing. They had a peaceful expression on their face, and when the conductor gave the down beat with his baton, they responded using their instruments. Although during a past band rehearsal, when Jane felt pressured, she found herself not motivated to participate. Jane’s conversation with the researcher indicated how important these community organization opportunities were, but also described the “burdens of band;” what she perceived as pressure from the conductor and feeling guilty with being present at all events. These burdens, as Jane relayed it, eliminated her musical release.

Participant Mary defined the idea of musical engagement as being connected with the music, and “seeing a large number of players in the ensemble since it is hard to find people to participate, and yet the community expects a band to be present at events like parades.” Mary continued, “when everybody is engaged with the music, they will do the best they can.” Anthony described this engagement similarly as, “more opportunities to show off…to have some fun,” with enjoyable repertoire, many musicians, and regular concerts. An effective concert schedule was important to keep the engagement and interest of the musicians, especially when performances were held every few months. This engagement was found in a past community band concert schedule Anthony shared.

Mark explained his lack of engagement by expressing that many historical musical pieces were not taught in public schools. Since today we have numerous recordings available with technology, “any child will only like what they are exposed to. If not told how music tells a story, today [music] is junk food of the ear. Our culture has changed; people are accepting
garbage. We accept mediocre music for so long, we accept mediocre musicianship. So, audience and musicians have no interest in serious music!” This statement references popular music used in television and public school music programs, which may decline engagement or at least not provide enough understanding for a student to comprehend serious pieces of music. According to Mark, not “dumbing down music” or arranging music to be too simple, and then not “rewarding bad musicianship” may motivate more community band participation.

Another thought about motivating more consistent engagement in community band came from Louise, who stated, “knowing you are in tune, when the band sounds like it should and you know it.” Louise, who proudly showed her community band Hall of Fame awards and significant performances such as the 1965 New York World’s Fair concert picture doesn’t perform in the community band anymore. However, she was observed constantly playing her trombone throughout the day. Louise always had the instrument out of the case, with music on the stand, which engaged her music making.

Participants of this research wanted newness, low-pressure situations, social relationships, a tension release, yet seriousness in music making in band. Musical engagement was seen in a plain form of “chop time” or time “actually performing on your instrument” according to John. Although each participant was hardly involved, they eluded to music making with others, a benefit found by performing in a community band. Even Louise who is performing on her own, continued with this music making element, which could be enhanced with others. Music making was seen maximized during a community band observation when everybody was performing together, which is what Gates (1991) calls an aesthetic benefit.

**Ensemble Appeal**
Many interview discussions focused on whether participants would become more active if their community band experience became more satisfying. Questions were then focused on what attributes would make community bands more appealing. Mark suggested music repertoire was an appeal of any ensemble since “classical or mixed [music], keeps [band] interesting.” Having popular, jazz, and symphonic pieces, keeps the members and audiences interested. Here was where the band received applause, Mary described that the “thrill happens when the band marches in a parade and the people on the street cheer for us.” Sharing a recording of a drum corps marching show from 1970s in Corning, New York, you can hear the loud crowd cheering and applauding, which today still gave Mary chills, increasing the appeal of her involvement with a music ensemble.

The music camaraderie, keeping the technique or “fingers moving,” and seeing people “smile when they hear music,” was the way Anthony described an effective ensemble. This community band, as portrayed by John will “give back to the community.” Especially when this ensemble “wears the same uniform, acts the part, and are one big family,” Louise believes this band will please everybody. Louise expressed that the band was, “sort of like a military group, but more like a bunch of friends with the same respect and motivation.” As Louise shared a picture of a 1950s-group performing in a band shell when she was a teenager in the band, the professionalism from the ensemble was discussed. Louise indicated that the action of dressing in the uniform gave the participants a sense of belonging to the band, which began to provide the researcher with more information about how this uniform was appealing to participation.

However, the appeal in participating in a community band was different for everybody. Jane stated, “over the years we have made many good friends through the band. My husband has hired band members as secretarial workers in his business, we have made friends with a couple
that we socialize with outside band activities.” In other words, the social aspect of community band may have also influenced the appeal. Regardless, there is some sort of ensemble appeal, which could influence community band participation levels.

**Organization Practices**

The organization of the community band was a topic many participants mentioned, which resulted in a discussion of how the ensemble practiced. John stated, “I am a trained musician. I can read [music repertoire] once and play the concert. When music is at a level of middle school, and we have three months of rehearsals…I am bored. I want to be challenged.” He was referring to the organizational procedures where musicians were presented new repertoire for the next concert season. John found his attention and motivation for the music decreased when the ensemble spent too much time preparing for upcoming concerts. On the opposite side, Anthony disliked the “pressure of screwing up” or not playing the repertoire correctly. He referred to the pressure of being perfect, just like the conductor in front of the group, who needed to know all the musicians’ parts, to give correct tempos and good direction.

Community bands have to be organized for participants to continue supporting them. For the most part, this band was a volunteer organization and many of the participants indicated that wasting time should be avoided. For example, Jane stated, “at one point, the band would sometimes have less than 20 players at a concert. Sometimes as low as 12-15 with only one player on a part, or none in some sections. Because it is a ‘no auditions’ group, I think that some people might not take the commitment as seriously as others. During that period, the director was not a motivating leader and it greatly impacted the player participation. This led to my disinterest.” In this situation, Jane detailed a time-wasting experience since the band musicians
were missing due to organizational issues and the motivation of the director, who had a large impact on the development of the community band.

Mark shared a similar view:

“I think with any group, the leader (be it coach or conductor or even a teacher in a classroom) has to set the tone, the "mood", if you will of the rehearsals. People will do hard work, if they see a point to it, or if the leader can make the experience pleasurable (or at least not a bummer). Again, in my own case, as a conductor/teacher/pastor/manager, I personally have found the phrase "Ok, that was good, how can we make it better?" and then LISTEN and apply what others say and really make it a group effort, greatly increases participation, from even the most reluctant member. The leader has to be self-confident enough to realize that what is being said is not a PERSONAL attack, and to stop any back-biting between individuals. Yeah, Timmy the tuba player may not have bathed in a month, but during rehearsal in the group setting is no place to bring it up, stick to the topic at hand in a group setting. It can be like juggling live hand grenades, so this approach is not for the faint of heart. Unless this "good, let’s make it better" approach is done correctly, it can come across as "You’re never good enough". I think that’s why some conductors come across as dictators. Still, if people see the leader is firm, but fair, and the leader works alongside the others, give a LOT more praise than criticism, people will WANT to stick around.”

The words which were capitalized above, show what Mark emphasized as he was speaking. Mark believed that if the director of the community band approached rehearsals in such a way, this approach would create a connection among musicians. Especially since most of the musicians wanted to believe their contribution was meaningful, helpful, and needed, even though their music-making might need some work. Louise also stated something similar, in that, “when the band feels connected to the performance, there is a commitment” to the ensemble.

Along this same concept, Mary commented “I can’t stand when we have too many cooks [administrators] in the kitchen [organization]. I was in an experience where two people felt they were in control. Did not care what the rest of the group felt nor worried about working together. The best band would be one where everybody has the same ideas.” Mary continued to discuss this small participant community band, which suffered with performances due to inactive musicians. This low participation was similar to Jane’s comment above “with only one player on
a part,” when there is only one musician in each instrumental section, making performing certain musical selections problematic.

In general, this concern echoed by several participants was with organizational practices of time, commitment, preparation, flexibility, and professionalism. As John relayed, “a conductor has to be prepared for what might go wrong so I do not have to be in charge.” There also needed to be flexibility in commitment, as three participants mentioned feeling “tied down” (Anthony, Jane, and John) to the organization.

**Motivating Experiences**

Each participant was very compelled to tell their stories of past community band experiences. These conversations were centered on what experiences the subjects found motivating. Timing has been an overall concern with participation in this study. Mark reiterated his concern with timing with other commitments such as his church. He could be motivated to take the time to perform in a community band with a “performance that is not dumbed down.” During his interview, he recalled and shared concert programs from his past involvement in high school and the local community bands, which both performed challenging music; he recalled music that was “grade 4 or higher.” He was referring to most publishers who organize music into grade categories of one through six, one beginning the easiest and six being the most technically challenging. This attitude was the same as John who said that he would participate, “when I am challenged.” This challenge was also what Anthony referred to when he said, “playing music that does not drag.” However, Anthony would rather be involved with something different, a performance that was more of a “once in a lifetime” experience such as the “Willy Wonka musical band.” This involvement could be an atypical performance, something new, or possibly
an overall goal for the organization, which would push individuals to perform at their highest level.

Jane explained, “anything that creates a community of players strengthens the band. Current examples in place might be the rehearsal picnic in the summer and the winter potluck at the beginning of a new season.” Jane was referring to more social aspects of the community organization, which was of most importance to her participation. Although these motivations were more outside the practice of performing music, almost all the participants referenced (to some degree) making friends, or at least being social with others. This social support was important to many musicians especially if this encouragement was something they do during retirement.

Mary indicated, “when there is a large audience showing up for the concert…I will participate. This will only happen if we have showmanship.” Mary was referring to the entertainment aspect of the performance. Music in this case would be entertaining and this engagement will happen when the band shows off their abilities to the audience. Mary continued to reference the showmanship of the uniform, especially when she showed the researcher a picture of an old band uniform. The symbol (Wenger, 1998) of the uniform, became the visual appearance, showmanship, and presentation of the band, in some cases. This symbol was important especially when the audience respected or honored the band in militaristic uniforms.

Continuing on with the concept of an audience, Louise believed, “when my friends are tapping [engaged] with the music, they are entertained, having fun, and this is the point of a band, right?” She was referring to music as being an entertainment art form and even though other viewpoints may differ, Louise wanted to entertain the audience, especially her friends. This engagement led to a discussion of musical artists such as Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, and
Hoagy Carmichael. Louise also insisted on sharing a few compact discs with the researcher, containing recordings of the U.S. Marine Band under the direction of Lieutenant Colonel Albert F. Schoepper. She felt anybody who is interested in bands, needed to listen to these recordings.

Participants’ experiences varied from repertoire, entertainment, camaraderie, variety, and keeping a sufficient balance of challenges for both the ensemble and the music. All of these discussions led to conversations of what Jellison (2000) considers meaningful music experiences. Mark indicated, “music is not one thing. You have to have a combination of things. Not just playing the notes. I can get the computer to play the music. Without human factor, it is just notes. With music, we have to put our soul into it.” Mark was referring to music-making that is meaningful, containing musical expression from musicians, the sound observed during a community band rehearsal, and not sounds from a machine.

Overall from the interviews, observations, and document collections, results indicated participants focused their community band involvement with musical engagement, ensemble appeal, organization practices, and motivating experiences. Each participant expressed that they would not avoid returning to community bands in the future, but stated that the current experiences were not satisfying enough to participate regularly.

Conclusions and Future Research

Each participant of this study graciously expressed the positive impact community bands have on participants. The concern of low active participation in these community bands still remained, especially for Louise and Mark who were very engaged with music-making but chose not to participate in a band. The rest of the participants, (Mary, Jane, Anthony, and John) seemed to at least perform a few times a year with a community band. This lack of participation was odd, because these musicians were more than happy to discuss their music-making involvement in
community bands. This involvement may be a case of facilitating the goals of adult learners by understanding their instructional needs in a community band setting.

Even though community bands were made up of participants of all ages, these adults were generally older, therefore music learning may need to be approached in a different way. It could be the importance of the delivery system, just as much as the information being relayed and experienced by the community band participants (Fenwick, 2000).

Regardless, the idea of this form of music education remains very different than the traditional K-12 institutional focus. For example, historically there have been no mandated standards for community music organizations; just community group organizers relying on the intrinsic motivation and dedication to music from the adult learners who stay involved. The assumption was that the participants wanted to participate in a community band to satisfy their need for music engagement. Interestingly, the music engagement results of the current study were most compelling. It was fascinating how these participants held onto certain situations, and remembered experiences, which was the main motivation for their involvement in a community band. This involvement suggests their participation and learning was situated (Lave & Wenger, 1991) by the environment, conductor, the ensemble itself, the uniforms, and the instruments, the tools of such practice (Rose, 1999). Even though research has been conducted on amateur musicians who wish to engage in music for aesthetic reasons (Ruggeri, 2003), it might be useful to investigate how conductors and groups engage with music aesthetically since many participants discussed unique performances. The relationships between the thoughts and feelings of the participants while making music, represent the aesthetic responses or what musicians consider meaningful music-making (Jellison, 2000). “The act of musicking [music making]
establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies” (Small, 1998, p. 13).

This research focused on six Low Active Participants of adult community bands and through interviews, observations, and document collection. The purpose of this study was to describe music making experiences during community band participation. Looking at community bands as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), and learning as situated (Lave and Wenger 1991), has been useful in analyzing the results. Participants focused on aspects of musical engagement, ensemble appeal, organization practices, and motivating experiences. The participants relayed that playing in community bands could be an enjoyable activity and this engagement may be due to the direction and leadership of the organizations.
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