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## Experiences of Middle School Band Directors

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### Abstract

Middle school band is an important part of an instrumental music program in the united states. For some, this is where learning begins, while others are building skills toward proficiency. However, in a growing push for accountability, it is important to understand what is being taught in these classrooms and why. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of performance-based middle school instructors and whether creativity and context, both historical and cultural, fit into that teaching pedagogy. Interviews were conducted with four middle school band directors from Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Findings indicate that these middle school band directors are aware of the things that they are not teaching in the rehearsal setting but lean on general music to fill in the gaps in student learning. They also feel that their hands are tied in their ability to do more due to limitations of time and scheduling as well as performance requirements. The themes identified through the interview process were: (a) student/teacher rapport' (b) pedagogical implications; (c) curriculum goals; (d) performance goals; and (e) challenges and limitations. Teachers expressed that they feel trapped between what they should teach and what they can accomplish in their schedule. Teachers also expressed a desire to expand learning experiences for students, but feel that they are caught in the middle of administrative and parental expectations and a lack of support. As many schools eliminate general music for an elective-based teaching model, ensemble teachers should focus more on a holistic teaching model.

*Keywords:* middle school, instrumental music, creativity, band director experience

## Introduction

Allsup and Shieh (2012) remind teachers that "Music teaching is more than the teaching of sound and sound patterns alone- that there is something non-neutral about music that requires our moral engagement" (p. 51). If music is more than notes on pages, Rolle (2017) questions, "What is to be done? Which issues are to be taught? What music should be performed? What are the musical experiences that we want to enable the students to have" (p. 96)? In a world of growing cultural diversity, it is essential for teachers to understand that their musical choices impact students on multiple levels.

### Middle School Band

Middle school band is of critical importance to the performance-based teaching model in U.S. schools. Middle school presents a time when students are transitioning from learning the fundamentals of an instrument but are far from being proficient. The central focus of literature related to middle school is related to student experience including Clementson (2018) who examines flow experience<sup>1</sup> in the middle school music program. A smaller amount of literature is focused on the focus of teaching practices. Of this literature, there is a significant amount focused on young teachers and teachers in urban schools (Baker, 2012; Bell-Robertson, 2014; Fitzpatrick, 2012; Miksza & Berg, 2013).

The position in which middle school band has been situated varied from school to school. Glover (2015) focused his research on instructional time concluding there was a possible correlation between quality instructional time and retention. Glover's findings suggested that the more time a student has engaged with their music teacher the more likely they will continue their

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<sup>1</sup> Flow experience is based on Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's theory of intrinsic motivation and enjoyment. The idea is that students experiencing flow are both appropriately challenged and highly engaged to the point where they may lose their sense of time. (Clementson, 2019).

participation. Scheduling and school-wide curriculum planning was also a focus of research, highlighting the importance of music and the struggle to create a schedule that worked for all teachers (Bondurant, 1956; Hinckley, 1992). Standerfer and Hunter (2010) focused their attention on lesson planning, and stated that a "music curriculum does not fit into this traditional lesson planning model" (p. 25). These articles highlighted the struggles that many teachers incur with the administrative end of teaching music. Many teachers struggled to give the time and attention their students need when they are required to fit themselves into a structure that was not necessarily adaptable.

The need to teach musical concepts through band rehearsal has been the focus of a handful of studies including Blocher, Greenwood, and Shellahmer (1997), Ihas (2011), Singletary (2006), and Tan (2017). These studies, which focused on both middle school and high school instrumental music teachers, concluded that the teaching of concepts was not done often, but occurred at a higher frequency at the middle school level. The findings in these four studies highlighted the importance of teaching concepts and the need for a greater focus on concept teaching in the developing instrumental rehearsal.

### **Alternative Pedagogies for Instrumental Music**

As schools became more diverse and band programs struggled with time and retention, some teachers have begun to look beyond the traditional rehearsal format to support student engagement. Beyond the traditional rehearsal format, authors have also suggested a plethora of best practices to create a more holistic and democratic classroom, including aural learning, critical theory, and Comprehensive Musicianship through Performance (Garofalo, 1983; Sindberg, 2006, 2012). Norgaard (2017) and Running (2008) suggested possible ways that improvisation can be incorporated into the large ensemble. Researchers have also focused on the

use of composition as a way of supporting their students music learning beyond the recreation of the music they are given (Hickey, 2009; Koops, 2013).

As teachers, we have long known that our students come to us with primarily informal music learning. Exposing students to aural learning has also been connected to music learning at home for some. Encouraging students to learn by ear helped bridge the gap in their musical learning by making connections to what they are already learning at home. Mills and McPherson (2015) reminded us that aural learning was essential to school music programs both culturally and pedagogically. *Hear, Listen, Play (HeLP)* was a handbook to assist classically trained music teachers to facilitate informal music learning in the music classroom (Green, 2013). Ear players did much better in their average score than did the control group and teachers reported growth in student confidence (Baker & Green, 2013). From a cultural perspective, aural learning was a natural form of music learning. Learning, however, was not complete until the student was able to be innovative within the confines of the given work (Schippers, 2010). This practice of learning by ear was contrary to theories that stress the importance of "sound before symbol" or "rote before note." However, Lind & McCoy (2016) suggested that by learning aurally, students were able to find a deeper understanding and a connection between the elements of music they experienced every day, not just the limited notes they were capable of reading.

Some teachers chose to approach music education in their classroom through critical pedagogy. Critical Pedagogy was a pedagogy that aimed to promote freedom, equality, and democracy. It historically has been a pedagogy that valued what students already know and aimed to work through dialogue between teachers and students to support learning (Giroux, 2010). Abrahams (2007) began this approach with a set of questions a teacher should have asked themselves before approaching a new unit: "Who am I? Who are my students? What might they

become? What might we become together (p. 229)?" This approach to teaching was one of exploration, of problem posing, and dialoguing. Hess (2017) studied the teaching of four music teachers. These teachers invited their students to learn to play an arrangement of a "traditional "Mandarin" folk song. Instead of having students learn to play a piece the teacher engages them in dialogue to better understand where the piece originated from. They were also invited to problematize its' use through themes of exoticism and nationalism.

Comprehensive Musicianship has been both a pedagogy and a practice whose core goal was that "all music students should be taught the entire scope of what music is and to just certain things about music" (Sindberg, 2006, p.46). An application of this pedagogy, entitled Comprehensive Musicianship through Performance (CMP) evolved from the original concepts of the Comprehensive Musicianship model. This model (CMP) was a guide for teachers to help create a curriculum that goes beyond the notes on the page. The five components of the CMP model were Selection, Analysis, Outcomes, Strategies, and Assessment (Sindberg, 2012). The use of CMP required teachers to go beyond the performative aspect of the large ensemble by using a more student-driven lens that allowed for multiple view points from both students and teachers (Sindberg, 2006).

Repertoire was the vehicle that ensemble directors used to teach music. For some band directors, the music chosen determined how the curriculum was approached. For the Comprehensive Musicianship through Performance model, repertoire was the keystone of the pedagogy. Sindberg (2012) explained that, "The music presents the problem, the solutions develop musicianship" (p. 10). Howard (2001) also highlighted the importance of repertoire selection in the middle school in his dissertation. He concluded that for the specific level of proficiency at the middle school, there was a higher focus on the ability and limitations of the

students when choosing the music than on any other factor. However, students entered school music programs with a knowledge of music that was often overlooked by some music teachers. In addition to methods and pedagogies like CMP, culturally responsive pedagogy supported teachers and students as they navigate their collective musical knowledge.

Geneva Gay (2018) defined culturally responsive pedagogy as a way of approaching curriculum and teaching that creates encounters that were more relevant and thus more effective for student learning. The goal was to “get teachers to connect with students’ cultures and to help students connect with their cultural and social identities in ways that learning in any subject is made more effective and relevant” (Abril, 2009, p. 79). To be engaged in culturally responsive teaching was to bridge the gap between school and home cultures (Lind & McKoy, 2016) which validated the knowledge that students bring into a music classroom (Smith, 2016). This importance was also highlighted in the works of Martinson (2011), Whiteside (2013) and Pawelski (2013), focusing on understanding cultural barriers, motivation, and social justice. This research emphasized the importance of teachers getting to know their students for successful understanding and learning.

### **Problem and Purpose Statement**

Heuser (2015) stated: “the educational culture to which I belonged held deeply ingrained beliefs and expectations having little to do with the educational needs or musical interests of young people” (p.220). Often a band rehearsal, regardless of the age group, resembled the community band rehearsal from a century ago (Battisti, 2018). Additionally, much of the research was focused on how to make what was already learned, better (Rush, 2006), or new ways of conceptualizing the instrumental music space (e.g., culturally responsive teaching, world music pedagogy, comprehensive musicianship). However, to understand how to better inform

pedagogical suggestions in teaching training and professional development, researchers must first understand what has been going on in the classroom and why it was happening.

Despite research that suggested best practice in instrumental music and music education Heuser (2015) stated that, "although there is an evolution in the field of music education, instructional practices within large ensembles seem to remain with few exceptions, static" (p. 228). The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of middle school band directors and their ability to infuse creativity and context, both historical and cultural, into their teaching pedagogy. Research questions employed for this study were:

1. How do teachers negotiate pedagogy, curricular foundations and performance demands?
2. Where do creativity and historical and cultural context fit into the middle school music curriculum?
3. What is the effect of school environment and policies on the middle school band?

## **Research Design**

### **Research Approach**

Following the guidelines in Creswell (2017) the study employed a phenomenological approach. I interviewed four middle school band directors that currently teach in New Jersey and Pennsylvania following the interview procedures outlined in Kvale (2008). The four teachers interviewed were all women with a minimum of ten years of experience. For this study pseudonyms were used for anonymity: Angela, Jessica, Sarah and Melissa. The demographics of their positions range from rural Pennsylvania and suburban New Jersey and Pennsylvania, ranging in diversity with the New Jersey schools representing a more diverse population of students. All interviews were semi-structured in which an interview protocol was designed to



facilitate the interview, but questions were open-ended so that each participant could answer freely based on their experience. During the beginning stages of the research design process, a set of themes were drawn up to facilitate the flow of the interview: introduction, teaching experience, cultural context, creativity, historical context, challenges, ideals, and a closing. Interview questions related to each research question were arranged within each theme to guide both the researcher and the participant through the interview process. The interview protocol was never followed precisely during the interview process but allowed for me, as the researcher, to ascertain that, and all interview questions were asked and answered.

### **Data Collection**

Prior to and during the interviews, participants were presented with informed consent and willingly agreed to an audio recording of interviews and the use of findings for the academic setting. Interviews took place at times and places that were most convenient to the participants. Melissa's interview, conducted over FaceTime, was the only one not completed in person. She was at home and tried to find a quiet place after lunch that was away from her children, who did make a cameo during the interview. I met Angela in her office at school during the late morning after school had ended for the year. Jessica and Sarah's interviews were conducted in public coffee shops in the morning before they had to get home and back to their roles as mothers. Interviews varied in length from forty-eight minutes to seventy-two minutes. There was also the time before and after interviews to establish rapport and collaborate as colleagues. The interview protocol can be found in the appendix.

### **Plan for Analysis**

As the interview protocol was designed for the flow of the conversation and the comfort of the participant, questions did not line up chronologically, but organically. Therefore, analysis

of interview data began by matching research questions, and sub-questions, to the interview questions. Coding of the interviews began while editing each transcript; keywords were jotted down, and quotes that stood out were highlighted. Upon a second, keywords and themes were identified for each participant separately. These keywords and themes common to all four interviews were then pinpointed from each separate list.

These themes were then matched to the research questions. At this point in the analysis process, it was discovered that the initial research questions were limited to the themes that had emerged. While still answering the central research questions, sub-questions were reworked to reflect the interviews' emergent themes better and more fully answer the purpose of the research. Quotes that stood out in conjunction to themes were entered into an Excel worksheet and organized separately for each participant and theme. Quotes were sorted by theme and then by research question to check for connections and disagreements. Participants were also asked to member check the analysis, allowing for stronger reliability to the conclusions.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As a former middle school band director, I was torn between what I wanted to teach and when I ended up teaching my students. It was frustrating to me that I had to make decisions based on factors beyond my control. With a background in ethnomusicology, I wanted to have my students explore their music more deeply through active listening and meaningful discussions regarding the contextual framework of the piece. I found that I was doing more in my general music classes but failed to find the time and space during large group rehearsals and small group lessons. I also wanted to explore a more culturally diverse body of repertoire, but again found myself lost in a sea of literature that was primarily Eurocentric. Through this research, I sought to discover whether other middle school directors were also facing similar challenges.

Entering this research as an insider, I carried with me many assumptions. I assumed that I knew what a rehearsal should look like. I also assumed that all teaching participants thought deeply about their teaching; however, they may lack either the ability or desire to incorporate creativity and contextual pedagogies into their teaching. As both a researcher and an insider to the profession, I had to work to keep my questioning open to interpretation and allow the participants to freely answer each question in the manner that fit them best. I also had relationships with each of the participants ranging from a friend to teacher to colleague.

### **Participants**

As this study was conducted while school was not in session, I had to rely on contacts I had or those for which I was able to get contact information. I reached out to over ten middle school band directors, both men and women, within driving range that were identified on their schools' websites as teaching middle grades. After receiving little response, I widened my search to include others that were further away, no more than 75 miles, that I knew may be more accessible. Participants were four female band directors who were middle school teachers at the time of data collection. They all had been teaching for more than ten years, and, while it was not part of the parameters for the research, all held a master's degree. Melissa worked in a rural school in which she taught fourth through eighth grade in the same building and then traveled to teach high school orchestra. Jessica taught in an intermediate model which only consisted of fifth and sixth graders. Sarah taught in a traditional middle school, grades six through eight, but as one of two band directors, she only focused on sixth grade beginning band. Angela began teaching in her district in the traditional middle school model, but traveled between a seventh grade and an eighth-grade building at the time of data collection.

### **Interview Portraits**

**Melissa**

Melissa was a White woman in her mid-thirties. A trombonist by trade, she taught both band and strings in a 4<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade middle school and high school orchestra. She held a B.S. and Master's in music education from two different schools in the Northeastern United States. In her second teaching position, she taught in a rural school district equidistant from two large cities. The instrumental program was a pull-out program with a rotating small group lesson schedule and a fixed ensemble schedule. She continually encountered conflicts with other teachers in her building about the schedule and struggled to see her students consistently. While almost half of her students were eligible for free or reduced lunch, the socioeconomic status of her district has improved over the past few years. Although the district was predominately White, Melissa celebrated her students and their cultures.

She has been able to grow her program over the past years, but worried that any more growth would require more time, space, or another teacher; all of which was beyond her district's ability to provide. She struggled with her teaching schedule, one that did not allow for travel time required to arrive on time for her next class. She felt that the lack of support and understanding by her administration has limited what she was able accomplish with her students. She knew her kids and was proud of the music community they had established within the school. Students were supported in their musical endeavors and found that the band room was a safe, drama-free place to relax.

**Jessica**

Jessica was a White woman in her late thirties. A trombonist by trade, she had a B.S. in music education and a Master's in school leadership and administration. She had been teaching music for twenty years, starting in a more urban school district, at the time of data collection. She

taught fifth and sixth grade in an Intermediate School building. She taught band and lessons as a pull-out program, and also taught an after-school advanced band and jazz band. The school district was suburban and was very culturally diverse with a large population of Asian and Indian students. The district also had a high socioeconomic status, one of the highest in the state. She was one of five music teachers in her building and had a healthy working relationship with the teachers in music throughout the district.

Jessica's district was aware of the problems with the pull-out program and only allowed students to be pulled out of physical education once a week for lessons. Ensemble class was also a pull-out and did affect the core classroom teachers. However, with over half of the grade level taking an instrument, both band and orchestra students were pulled out of regular class at the same time in order to keep classroom disturbances to a minimum. She struggled most with the support and understanding of the importance of her program. She continually worked to educate administrators, faculty, and parents of the benefits of playing an instrument. Her training as an administrator gave her an interesting perspective of what was happening in the school and how music fit into the curriculum of a well-rounded student.

### **Sarah**

Sarah was an Asian-American clarinetist who was currently teaching in the same school from which she graduated. She had a B.A. in music and a Master's in music education. She started her teaching career in an urban school before returning to teach beginning sixth-grade band. She taught a pull-out program with a rotating lesson schedule once every six days and half-period band classes. Sarah also taught general music and piano to seventh- and eighth-grade students, respectively. Her district was predominantly White with a high socioeconomic status. She was aware of a small percentage of students who were eligible for the free and reduced-

lunch program and did what she could to accommodate students with socioeconomic difficulties in her program.

Sarah also worked with the high school's marching band as a visual and music technician and directed the woodwind choir. She was aware of the expectations of the high school director as well as those of the other middle school director. She struggled with the fact that they were not in line with each other. She gave a solid music foundation to her students that they can take with them as lifelong musicians.

Knowing that her students were on the older end of beginners, Sarah had a desire to arrange music that was more appropriate for their playing level. She also focused on creative teaching practices, and gave her students different kinds of activities to work on theory, rhythm, and note reading skills. She struggled with a schedule that was not accommodating to her program, as it required her to pull students out of tested subjects, which caused tension between her, the faculty, and the parents. She loved her students and had many ideas to push the program forward further.

### **Angela**

Angela was a White woman in her late fifties. A clarinetist and jazz saxophonist, she had a B.S. and master's degree in music education. She has been teaching for thirty years, twenty-eight of those at her current position. She balanced her life with her partner, his kids, and being a Zumba instructor. She taught in a suburban district that has had a population boom in the past ten years. Angela taught seventh and eighth grade, splitting her week equally between the two buildings where the students were housed. She also directed a middle school jazz band and marching band, which met after school and on Saturday mornings respectively. Also, she was the music department chairperson. Angela was constantly aware of her students' playing abilities

when they entered seventh grade and what skills they needed before entering high school band. The focus of Angela's program tended to lean toward technical skills and music theory concepts.

As an experienced teacher who has worked within a pull-out program for twenty-eight years, she has seen the deterioration of this model in her school. The added pressure academically on the students as well as other extra-curricular demands meant that she was constantly losing time with her students. She encouraged them to explore their interests, but knew that it was to her program's detriment at times. She worked within the time constraints of her program and her students by constantly teaching them how to practice smarter, not longer.

### **Results**

The results of this study were analyzed by first coding the interview questions, in Appendix A, to the research questions: (a) how do teachers negotiate pedagogy, curricular foundations and performance demands?; (b) where do creativity and historical and cultural context fit into the middle school music curriculum?; and (c) what is the effect of school environment and policies on the middle school band? After this initial coding of the four interviews, common themes began to emerge. Upon a second round of coding those themes were identified as: (a) student/teacher rapport; (b) pedagogical implications; (c) curriculum goals; (d) performance goals; and (e) challenges and limitations. These themes could be found, to some extent, in each of the four interviews. Interviewees were invited to member-check these findings for validation.

#### **Student/ Teacher Rapport**

Rapport was important to the middle school band directors who were interviewed for this study. Melissa spoke of a "band culture" where her students found a place to belong in the band room:

I liked that they think the room is a safe place. You always have those kids that are like 'so and so's really bugging me today, I cannot eat lunch with them. Can I just sit in here? I just need to get away from the drama today.' I'm like, yes, anytime. We are your sanctuary. I don't let drama in here.

This highlighted the relationship between the teacher and student, and the students and their peers in the ensemble.

Especially when focusing on the socioeconomic status (SES) of the students, these teachers were aware of their students' needs and were willing and able to accommodate them. While every teacher had a stock of instruments to lend to students, it was Melissa who saw the most significant impact of her support for her students that needed help.

Because I have quite a few kids who wouldn't be able to be in music right now. They are some of my strongest kids. It sucks. I've been to some of their houses....I will help them as much as they need. For example, I have extra lesson books too, that I usually [give out], there from the kids that leave them behind every year, or they grow out of them.

Culturally, teachers were less aware of the background of their students, but felt that they lacked time to address that more. Jessica, teaching in the most diverse school, talked about getting to know her students. She stated, "I like to get to know my students and if you talk to your students, which is really nice about the small group lesson model." She also worked to understand cultural background, and in particular instrument choices. For example, Jessica indicated, "Apparently, there is some male Indian God that plays the flute. So, there are a lot of boys who want to play the flute from that culture."

These teachers tried to give their students not only an education in music, but also an experience in a program at a critical time in their social development. When talking about the



awards displayed throughout her band room, Angela stated, "What's important is the experiences that they had. That's what I think those resemble or represent, not the ratings that were achieved."

### **Pedagogical Implications**

When speaking about creativity or a cultural context in their rehearsal each teacher had a different understanding on how to answer. Sarah chose to reflect on her teaching:

I think there is a lot of the creativity, it's the type of profession that we're in. It just lends itself towards being very creative. And we're lucky that it's not being a tested subject, at least as of yet. There's a lot more leeway in terms of what we can do and what we can teach our kids. So I try to be flexible. For instance, I like to arrange different things for the kids.

Jessica, thinking more with regard to having the students compose or improvise, stated:

One of the misnomers, I think, about instrumental music is that in order to be good at an instrument is you have to be creative. I actually think when you're teaching an instrumental music program, you're actually teaching analytics and not so much creativity because it's all reading and mathematical analysis.

However, they all deferred to the general music curriculum to validate the lack of these practices in their teaching. These activities ranged from culturally responsive teaching to composition.

Melissa stated:

I know in general music class they have music shares and at the end of the semester they do have music around the world, like a musical passport. And the Bulgarian kids this year especially have reached out to our music teacher, and asked if they can do some in some stuff from their country. They gave him like the most popular artists and their favorite

things, and he worked it in. Then he made that one of the countries on their stop, and it meant a lot to them, they loved it, and they really shared with the other kids.

Sarah, when asked if her students ever get to do any creative projects stated:

I've always wanted to do more of that. And I do a lot of that, I would say with general music because there's time and we have a 40, 45 minute period, so we're able to do more. For example, I may give them the basics of rhythm and pitch and then they can come up with their own compositions. In the past I've done it with groups or with partners.

Implications of improvisation and its relevance in jazz band was also noted in three of the four teachers (Sarah did not teach a jazz band). Melissa spoke about how her students were learning to improvise and the challenges they found in that freedom:

A lot of these kids are just getting their toes wet with the style. We don't do a lot of improvisation as far as like making up their own stuff. They don't know chord changes. We're learning; we're learning the blue scale. I'll say, 'go up and down, pick a couple notes,' that kind of thing. But they get really nervous with that. It's just that fear of failure is so and like looking dumb in front of your friends. The biggest thing we do with that is we'll take the written solo, and we'll just play it until they know it and get bored and then when they make a mistake I'll say, that was great. Do that again, that mistake was good.

Angela, after having a hard time answering the question for her band program deferred to her jazz programs stating:

The most straightforward answer is with my jazz ensemble, because of the improvisational component. Some of them take to it like a fish takes to water, and others fight it tooth and nail. I like to expose all the kids to it no matter what their comfort level and tell them, 'look, you have a vocabulary. I'm giving you a scale. The vocabulary of

eight notes or not even, it could be five or six notes, and all you gotta do is just take one note, take one or two notes and just start exploring. If you use the notes that fit in there, it's going to sound good. You can hit a note, and you can hold it. I don't care what you do I want you to try.'

Historical context of the music was the one thing that teachers said happened during the large group rehearsal. Although Jessica was the only one that planned this as part of her curriculum:

We do a pretty cool thing to fifth-grade bands are all named after classical composers.

The 6th-grade bands are all named after modern composers. We start band right away by the way, and the very first lesson is you learn about your composer and listen to some of the pieces that you're a composer wrote and kind of gives their little group and identity.

The other three teachers used historical context more anecdotally. Melissa stated that it was not on purpose.”

So if there's a story behind it, I definitely more of an anecdotal thing, like if we need to, like I can tell they're losing focus, I'll bring them back in, and I'm like hey, let's have storytime real, let's talk shop and not, you know, super formally at all.

Sarah also followed this same line of thought in that it was "kind of giving them a frame of reference.”

While incorporating these strategies into the rehearsal proved difficult for these teachers, they did discuss encouraging student-led groups in whatever endeavors they wished to pursue.

Angela talked about her low winds:

The component that I really liked was when my low wind players, I didn't have a lot of them, but they were a cohesive group. They were like, 'we'd like to put a small ensemble

together.’ I said that they would have to find a piece and after you find the piece you're going to have to prepare it on your own. I didn't think it would get off the ground because eighth graders, you know, as excited as they can be if there aren't grades involved and know they end up, you know, their mind goes to something else. Well, they decided, ‘nope, we're going to do this.’

Melissa told a story of a flute player who composed her own song for her gifted class:

But you could tell she like took ideas from all the songs we played this year. She took inspiration from things. It was so cute. That's awesome. Yeah, that was definitely like an on her own, no pushing for me. But I definitely celebrated it and was like, ‘oh, this is cool. Everyone come check this out.’

The teachers also commented on creative decision-making. They all talked about their desire to have their students not only understand what they were playing, but also why and how those choices impacted the piece. Jessica referred to this as “the instruction feedback loop” in which students and not just teachers evaluate their playing and make decisions on how to better their playing.

Overall, a lack of time was mentioned as the cause of the absence of the practices discussed above. Melissa said, “I don't have the time for it. Actually, I would love to do something at the end of the year if we ever had an early enough concert.” This was echoed by Jessica who commented that, “We don't have a lot of time. It's all going to be targeted time on task.”

### **Performance Goals**

Repertoire selection has been the cornerstone of any performance-based program. The musical concepts taught during a rehearsal have usually been based on the music in front of them (Blocher et al., 1997; Ihas, 2011; Tan, 2017). When discussing how they selected music

Angela stated that:

If I don't enjoy it, they're not going to enjoy it. And why do I say that? Because it can't spend two, three, four months on a piece, there is no way in the world my kids are going to be able to do it because I've got to be. I'm not gonna say the cheerleader, but I've got to be the motivator.

Jessica had a more formal approach to the selection, stating, "So we have something old, something new, something borrowed and a March." Sarah, with her beginner band, focused lessons less on genre and more on basic musical concepts:

Usually, it's something that's very basic that has a whole notes, half notes, quarter notes at that point for the winter concert and maybe not so much more than quarter notes and quarter rests. We keep things very basic. I tried to pick stuff that is very easy, but at the same time something that gets their attention.

Ultimately, repertoire selection was made with the final performance in mind. Often pedagogical decisions were made with that end goal in mind as well. Angela vocalized this dilemma, stating that she often focused on what students would be able to perform for the next performance rather than exploring a more culturally diverse repertoire, "Because I am performance-based unfortunately, you know, . . . the concerts are the end goal." Jessica also wished she was not as pressured to put on a concert, expressing, "We could just do so much more and connect the dots more because we wouldn't feel . . . so forced to rehearse. We have to

rehearse; we have to play . . . [because] they're fifth and sixth-grade students.” She knew that one goal was the concert, but there was also a larger goal for her students that she considered:

The concert is great and it's a wonderful way to celebrate their learning, but whatever we're doing for the concert should be ultimately about what they're learning and kind of moving them along the curriculum to get them to hook up to where we need them to be to enter the seventh-grade program.

### **Curriculum Goals**

All the teachers interviewed had one eye on the future of their students. They were always focused on what their students needed to know for the next school. Sarah noted meeting with the high school band director often, indicating, “So we talked a lot about what his expectations are for his program, and I see what he's doing with his kids, and I try to make sure that they're ready, you know, musically, like fundamentally, to go into that next level.” Angela, in her extensive time at this district (28 years), has seen her fair share of high school band directors come and go. The newest director had lofty goals for the high school and has been successful in achieving them, so Angela was keenly aware of the need to prepare her students:

I always wanted my kids to be able to seamlessly enter into ninth grade and be able to quickly adapt and jump right into the flow of things at the high school level. Because I don't feel like I'm preparing my kids well enough for them to come into ninth grade with a base knowledge, I feel like I'm failing them and I feel like I have my hands tied now more so than.

While concert goals and preparation are at the forefront of their curricular agendas, establishing foundational goals for success in high school are a key factor of the band directors' ultimate curricular decisions. Sarah, the band director teaching beginners only, stated, “It's just

laying the foundation, the basics such as how to sit up straight, you know, proper breathing, how to hold the instruments right way and just very fundamental things that need to come first.”

These fundamentals, for Sarah also include rhythm.

I try to do fun things with that because I feel that if they don't get it from me, if they don't get proper learning. Learning how to count, for instance, quarter notes, eighth notes, even simple things like that rests. They're not gonna learn it all that much at the middle school level.

Tone quality was mentioned by all of the directors who taught beginners. Jessica said, “So we talk a lot about the clarinet, [does it] sound like a party horn or does it sound like a traditional clarinet sound.” Whereas Angela, who taught more of a mid-level student focused more on music theory, expressing, “I get so excited when I can actually discuss music theory with my kids in their band lessons. I like to challenge their brains, know when their brain starts smoking.”

These middle school band programs were shaped by a variety of goals including foundational curricular goals and performance goals. The teachers tried to balance what their students needed to know with what the repertoire encompasses, and tried to fill in the discrepancies as they went. However, other factors that were out of their control limited what the teachers could have taught their students, time being the primary factor.

### **Challenges and Limitations**

A middle school band schedule can vary from school to school. The participants for this study all utilized a pull-out based program. Often teachers struggle for validation and student accountability because as Angela stated: “There are no grades given, there are no credits offered for participation.” It was also common that there was not a representative of the music

department as part of the scheduling process (Hinckley, 1992). For example, Sarah affirmed that “you're at the mercy of your administrator's scheduling.” Furthermore, many of the participants commented on the fact that the schedule was not made with them in mind. Jessica stated that large ensemble rehearsal was a matter of contention with the classroom teachers, “But that's why they pushed the band to Mondays and Fridays, because then it could remain in the day but you could say to the teachers [that they] will have a concession because they're not seeing them as much.” Melissa struggled further: “It was awful. It was 30 minutes literally start to finish, and it was put right up against my high school rehearsal which is four miles away.” Within the schedule, time was the most important factor to the teachers interviewed. Talking about her rehearsal schedule, Sarah stated, “I'd have band class that's about 22 minutes long . . . we don't have enough time.”

All the participants, when asked about creativity or historical context responded that time was the reason they did not do as much as they would have liked. Jessica stated that she “just need[ed] more time,” and Melissa avowed “I don't have the time for it.” Angela mused, “I wish we could spend more time.” Often it did not matter what they wanted to do; they simply did not have the time to teach everything.

There was an overwhelming agreement that participants lacked the support needed for their program from parents, teachers, and administrators, causing more profound animosity throughout the school building. Melissa discussed the struggles of their lessons program by commenting that, “We have a new principal in the last few years. He's been really anti-lessons . . . and a lot of the staff don't really care either.” In response to building climate and support Jessica vented:



We have teachers that tell parents at back to school night that if your kid is in band, they will fall behind in their class and the administration does nothing to quell that, which is really unfortunate. We need to be supporting this program and what this program does for kids. We have a great program, but we fight every day for that program.

Sarah summed up her feelings by stating that they, as music teachers, by stating that they were “considered low priority by some, you know, that's the kind of mentality, and no one ever says that out loud, but that's the way people are kind of viewed sometimes [in] the building.”

### **Discussion**

Findings indicated that these four middle school band directors were aware of the things that they were not teaching in the rehearsal setting but lean on general music to fill the gaps. In answering the first research question, teachers in this study have found that balancing pedagogy, curricular foundations, and performance demands tends to be challenging. The teachers were acutely aware of what students needed to know to be successful in their school’s music programs, but the teachers also understood that part of their job was to simply foster a love of music and everything music has to offer. For these teachers, creativity and historical and cultural context did not fit into the middle school band curriculum. They may have sprinkled in a fun fact about a piece, however, they relied on general music classes to round out the curriculum for students.

The effect of school environment and policies on the middle school band was one of struggle for the teachers in this study. They knew that their programs were important but continued to have to advocate to parents, teachers, administrators, and communities. They were mindful of the lack of awareness their administrators and staff seemed to have as to the

importance of music in students' lives, and they were frustrated that despite efforts, stakeholders' opinions have not been swayed.

The participants also felt that their hands were tied in their ability to do more due to limitations of time and scheduling, as well as performance requirements. Research studies have also found that time and resources are common reasons teachers used to explain why they did not include more creativity into their band programs (Hopkins, 2015; Koops, 2013; Menard, 2015; Stringham, 2016). Teachers wanted to be more culturally responsive; they wanted to give opportunities for creative expression; but the reality of the school-day schedule determined what courses were taught, when, and how. Heuser (2015) supported this conclusion when he stated, "Those wanting to transform large ensemble teaching may need to move beyond writing about possibilities and actually partner with teachers in schools by engaging them in projects that might allow practice to catch up with theory" (p. 229).

### **Conclusion**

The data from this study suggested that these middle school directors were in a precarious position trying to balance their desired pedagogy, foundational curricular demands, and performance demands. They also faced a multitude of challenges with lack of support and a schedule that did not work well for their programs. The participants were also aware of the gaps in knowledge and time, however, they felt unable to add more to what they were already doing. This study demonstrated that the teachers relied on general music class to "fill the gaps" pedagogically both creatively and contextually (historically and culturally). They displayed frustration in the lack of support from their schools' staff, administrators, and parents. For example, Jessica stated, "[They have a] lack of understanding of the importance of what it is that we do. It's probably one of my primary frustrations, and that's across the board. That's parents,

that's administration, that's other teachers in the building.” The teachers interviewed in this study spent additional time fighting for their program that they could have been spending teaching their students.

The lack of research that focused on middle school band was already a call for more studies similar to this one. Echoing Heuser (2015), as educators and researchers, we need to bridge the gap between theory and practice in the transitional level. The teachers in this study felt trapped between what they should teach and what they could accomplish within the timeframe of their schedules.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol

Objectives	Questions
Introduction	Thank you for sitting down with me today. The purpose of this project is to get a sense of what instrumental music teachers are doing and how creativity and cultural and historical contexts fit into real-life teaching practices. Do you have any questions before we start?
Teaching Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you tell me about your teaching? What do you teach? How long have you been teaching? Where did you go to school?</li> <li>• What does a day look like for you?</li> <li>• Tell me about your students.</li> <li>• What is the SES demographic of your school?</li> <li>• How does you and/or your school address SES for your program?</li> </ul>
Cultural Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the cultural demographics of your school?</li> <li>• What is the role of music in the cultural identity of your students?</li> <li>• Do you feel that your program supports your student's cultural identity?</li> </ul>
Creativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you consider to be creative practices in your ensemble?</li> <li>• Can you describe some creative activities that you have done in with your ensembles?</li> <li>• Do you have students compose for class?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ If so, can you tell me about a composition project?</li> <li>○ If not, can you tell me why?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Do you ever have students improvise?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ In what ensemble? Why?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ If not, Why?</li> </ul>
Historical Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How do you choose the music that is performed in your class?</li> <li>● Do you ever have class discussions about the music? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ If so, can you tell me more about that? What does it look like?</li> <li>○ If not, why?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What are you most proud of in your teaching?</li> <li>● Is there anything that frustrates you in your teaching? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Can you tell me more about that?</li> </ul> </li> <li>● How does your teaching reflect your training?</li> </ul>
Ideals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What would your ideal classroom look like?</li> <li>● What would your ideal schedule look like?</li> <li>● Would you include creative assignments in that classroom? If so, how. If not, Why?</li> <li>● Would you include historical contextual assignments or discussion in that classroom? If so, how. If not, Why?</li> <li>● Would you try to work in more ways you be culturally responsive? Why or Why not?</li> </ul>
Closing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Is there anything you would like to add to what you have said?</li> <li>● Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about that I have not asked?</li> </ul>